

**WORRY****MATTHEW 6:25 – 34**

by Elaine Poproski

Every time I have ever read these verses, not just this week, but *ever*, they've always made me uncomfortable.

*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?*

Of course life is more than food and the body is more than clothing! But that doesn't negate the very real needs of food and clothing. It's hard to believe these words were spoken by Jesus, of all people. He knew the very real challenges of poverty and injustice. Some of those who heard him teach were hungry – not just a bit peckish, or hungry because they'd skipped a meal, but genuinely, chronically hungry. Some of the people who heard him teach didn't know how they were going to clothe their kids appropriately or get shoes that fit. How could Jesus be so glib about it all? And it doesn't get better as we read further.

*Look at the birds, they don't sow or reap or gather into barns, but your heavenly Father feeds them. Look at the lilies in the field, they don't toil or spin, and yet no one is clothed as beautifully as them. So don't worry about what you'll eat or what you'll drink or what you'll wear. Your heavenly Father knows you need all these things. And as much as he cares about birds and flowers, he loves you even more.*

Sometimes we're so familiar with something in the Bible, that it's hard to question it. Of course God loves me – loves you. Of course God will take care of us. But can you imagine the reception you'd get if you walked up to someone shivering on the street, worried that if they fall asleep they won't wake up, and saying to them, "Don't worry. God makes sure birds are safe in the cold. He'll take care of you. He loves you." What a thoughtless, dismissive thing that would be to say! That person's concern is real and realistic. People in our city who sleep on the streets, and in parks, and ravines are in real danger of freezing to death. This past Christmas day, a person in Toronto was found frozen in their tent, after failing to find any available indoor shelter.

I think one of the most important things we can do when we read the Bible is question what we're reading. I'm not suggesting that what we read isn't true or reliable. I'm not suggesting that Jesus didn't say that God knows what we need or that he can be relied on to feed us and to clothe us. But I do think too many of us sometimes read the Bible – passages like the one we're looking at today – without truly understanding what's being said, especially when the words seem straightforward. We assume we understand. When the meaning seems obvious, we don't see a need to dig deeper. But then something happens that doesn't fit with what we assume the Bible is saying, and we don't know what to do with that. We call this dissonance.

In music, dissonance refers to notes that don't fit together – they sound off. When notes fit, they're called consonant notes and they sound like this: *[play consonant notes]*. Compare that to when notes don't fit – when they're dissonant – they sound like this: *[play dissonant notes]*. We do need to note that in music theory, it's far more complex – we learn that culture affects what we hear as dissonant and what we hear as consonant. But most simply, consonant notes sound like they fit and dissonant notes sound to our ear like they don't fit.

Dissonance isn't just a music thing. It's a thinking thing as well – a belief thing. We call it cognitive dissonance. It's when what we think or believe about something doesn't fit what we experience. Have a listen to this little song that was created by a teacher to help his high school students understand cognitive dissonance: *[play video]*<sup>i</sup>.

Sometimes we Christians experience cognitive dissonance when what we understand the Bible to be saying doesn't fit with our experiences in life. For instance, we might understand the Bible to be telling us that God rewards obedience with health and long life. But then the most faithful Christian we know gets cancer and dies before they reach 60. Or we might understand the Bible to be telling us that we don't have to worry about anything because God will take care of us, and then we lose our job or another nation starts dropping bombs on us or a person freezes to death overnight because there's no room in Toronto shelters or warming centres. This is dissonance.

Musicians use dissonance to create tension in their music. But if they just use dissonant notes and chords – if all they do is create tension – most of us find the music hard to listen to. We need that tension to resolve. Here's an example of a piece of music that doesn't resolve: *[play video]*<sup>ii</sup>. Do you feel the tension building in that music? We need that tension to be released. We need the dissonance to be resolved. In music, this often happens when a dissonant chord moves to a consonant chord. Listen to a few examples of what that sounds like: *[play audio]*.

When we experience cognitive dissonance, just like with musical dissonance, we need that dissonance to be resolved. One of the ways we resolve dissonance is by changing the thinking or belief we started with. This seems the most straightforward. I believe something, experience disproves what I believe, so I change what I believe. It's straightforward. It's logical. But sometimes, the thing we believe is so important to us that we will not – we perhaps cannot – change our thinking on the matter. When COVID was at its worst in our country, countless stories were told of people who were literally dying from the disease in hospitals, while at the same time denying that the disease was real. Their belief that the disease wasn't real was so important to them, that even while the disease was killing them, they could not change that belief. They had to find some other way to resolve the dissonance.

Sometimes, we resolve dissonance by reframing our experience to make it fit what we believe. For instance, if I believe that God rewards obedience with health and long life, but then the most faithful Christian I know gets cancer and dies before they reach 60, I could say, "Maybe God doesn't reward obedience with health and long life. Maybe I've misunderstood the Bible on that point. Maybe I need to re-examine that part of the Bible." But if I'm not willing to question what I think or believe, if I'm not willing to question that God rewards obedience with health and long life, then maybe what I do to resolve the dissonance, is tell myself that the faithful Christian I know must not have been as faithful as I thought – they must have had some disobedience I wasn't aware of.

When we read the book of Job, we see this a lot in Jobs' friends attempts to help. At one point, one of his friends says this to Job: *If you are pure and upright, surely then God will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place.*<sup>iii</sup> The assumption, of course, is that Job must not be nearly as righteous or faithful as everyone thought, because God doesn't let bad things like this happen to good people. Job's friend couldn't even entertain the idea that maybe God does

sometimes let bad things happen to good people, so he had to reframe Job's experience. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Job must not be a good person.

Sometimes, when there's a gap – dissonance – between what we believe and what we experience, we resolve it by adding in another thought to bridge that gap. For instance, if I believe Jesus said that we don't have to worry about anything because God will take care of us, and a person freezes to death overnight in their tent – clear evidence of someone not being taken care of – I might add the thought that Jesus was only talking to Christians, and probably that person wasn't a Christian, so Jesus' words don't apply. It doesn't mean I don't think the death was tragic, but it's no longer inconsistent with what I believe the Bible says. Or I might add the thought that God takes care of us through each other. So it's not that God didn't take care of this person, it's that the rest of us didn't take care of this person. We add a thought to bridge the gap – to resolve the dissonance.

Sometimes, the way we resolve dissonance is to trivialize it. Maybe you're a really smart person, and then you fail a test. You could say to yourself, "Hmmm, maybe I'm not as smart as I thought I was," or you might reframe the experience and say to yourself, "That test was unfair, the teacher asked all sorts of things that weren't on the study sheet," or maybe you add something to bridge the gap – "I wasn't feeling well when I took that test; I should have stayed home and asked to take it another day." Or you might trivialize the dissonance itself by saying, "I didn't really care about that test anyway; it's no big deal."

I started all this talk about dissonance by saying that I think one of the most important things we can do when we read the Bible is question what we're reading. That kind of questioning can be scary. We worry sometimes that if we question what we're reading in the Bible, we'll lose our faith – it won't stand up to scrutiny. But what if what we're questioning isn't the Bible so much as it's our interpretation – our understanding – of what we're reading?

I told you at the very beginning of this sermon, that these words of Jesus from Matthew 6:25 – 34 make me uncomfortable. That's because I experience dissonance when I read them. It sounds like Jesus, the man who loved people like no one before or since has ever loved, the man who showed extraordinary compassion and mercy, especially toward the poor and the sick... it sounds like he's saying, "Don't worry. God loves you. You'll be fine." Even though he knew full well that lots of them wouldn't be fine. I know I'm not the only person in this room who feels the dissonance here. So, what do we do about it?

We do the only thing that makes sense. We go back to the words Jesus spoke, we read them again, we listen for what we missed. And we perhaps change our thinking – our interpretation of these words. We allow ourselves to be flexible enough to think that maybe our belief or our interpretation of what we're reading isn't quite right. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 6:25 – 34.

<sup>25</sup> *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"* <sup>26</sup> *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"*

Look at the second half of verse 26. It reads, "...and yet your heavenly Father..." Think about what that means. Jesus is referring here to the same God who created the earth and the heavens and all that is in them, as our Father. He's not talking about some earthly example of parenthood that may or may not have been positive. He's talking about our heavenly Father, who is the personification of love itself, who cares enough about the birds to make sure they have food. Are we, his beloved children, not of more value than the birds? Jesus continues:

*<sup>27</sup> And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?*

This is the clue we've been looking for. It's such a little sentence. It's such an obvious truth that it's easy to ignore – it's easy to forget. This statement reminds us that Jesus isn't talking about poverty in this passage; he's not talking about justice. He's talking about worrying. He's not talking about whether or not we have food. He's talking about *worrying* about whether or not we have food. Does the worrying help? Does the worrying provide food? Does the worrying extend your life?

He goes on:

*<sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*

Do you remember what he said just a few verses ago? He called God our heavenly Father. Which means we are his beloved children. He asked, Are you not of more value than the birds? Are we not of more value than the lilies?

*<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For it is the gentiles [that's a word that meant everyone else – everyone who wasn't part of God's people] who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

There's that title again: our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father who loves us beyond anything we can imagine knows what we need. Our heavenly Father who feeds the birds and clothes the lilies of the field, knows what we need.

Yes, but... I hear that frustrating *but* creeping into my mind. It's the *but* of dissonance. Yes, this heavenly Father who loves us knows what we need, *BUT* we have lots of experiences of not having what we need. And if it's not us who don't have what we need – it's someone else.

Let's keep reading.

*<sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Back in verse 27, Jesus asked which of us can add a single hour to our lives by worrying. It's a rhetorical question. The answer is, of course, none of us. Worrying doesn't accomplish anything.

It doesn't put food on our tables or clothes on our backs. All it does is monopolize our brains. It takes our thinking hostage. It saps us of energy and creativity. And so Jesus suggests, how about, instead of worrying, which doesn't actually do you any good whatsoever, you focus on the kingdom of God and on God's righteousness. How about, instead of going around and around in circles of worry, you stop and hear God say, "Be still and know that I am God."<sup>iv</sup>

Stop. Be still. Know. Remember who God is. He's our heavenly Father. He is love. He is our refuge and strength.

Stop. Be still. Know. Remember who you are. You are God's beloved child. You are so precious to him that he refused to allow anything, even death itself, to stand between you and him.

Stop. Be still.

<sup>33</sup> *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

<sup>34</sup> *So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*

Jesus knows all too well the things about which we worry. At no point is he suggesting that these troubles and concerns aren't real. At no point is he being glib or uncaring. He wants us to be free of the stranglehold of worry. He wants us to know the peace that is trust in God.

Sometimes I worry about our future as a church. Sometimes I worry about all the things that have to fall into place for us to be a financially stable church in the future. And into that worry, I hear God speak:

*Stop. Be still. Know that I am God.*

I hear Jesus speak:

*Do not worry... Your heavenly Father knows you need all these things.*

And I remember that all I have to do is take one step at a time. All I have to do is this one next thing that God has set before me. I don't have to worry about what comes next. God will tell us what's next when it's time to take that step. Worrying accomplishes nothing. Instead, I will seek God's kingdom and his righteousness. I will be still and know that he is God.

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<sup>i</sup> In this sermon, we watched the first part of [this video](#) only, ending at the 1:18 point.

<sup>ii</sup> This example comes from the later part of [this video](#), beginning at the 8:54 point.

<sup>iii</sup> Job 8:6.

<sup>iv</sup> Psalm 46:10.