



“Chill out! Wake up! Aim high!”
Matthew 6:24-34
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
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A colleague has a cartoon taped to his kitchen cabinet. It pictures a man sitting up in bed, scribbling on a note pad, and talking on the phone. The man is saying to a friend, “When I can’t sleep, I find that it helps to jot down my anxieties.” However, it’s not simply the pad he uses. As you look at his bedroom walls, every square inch is covered with scribbled worries – war, recession, poverty, killer bees, aging, calories, sex, radon gas, and every worry you can imagine.¹

It strikes a chord with most people. If you cannot rattle off at least a dozen worries, you must not be paying attention because there are countless concerns to raise your anxiety level.

Yet, in this morning’s passage, Jesus counsels, “Chill! Relax. Don’t worry.”

I find myself arguing with Jesus. His advice makes a nice sound byte, but seems naive. Come on, “Do not worry about your life?” Jesus, be realistic. If you have no anxiety about failing, you won’t push yourself to succeed. “Have no anxiety about tomorrow?” How can we not? Concern about your future prompts you to make the right decisions *now*.

At first glance, I was ready to take a pass on this text. I did not want to try to defend words of Jesus that seem untenable. If we are compassionate, we are bound to worry about people who have mental illness or no home or a troubled child. If we strive for justice, we are bound to worry about people who are mistreated or neglected. Jesus’ statement: “Do not worry about tomorrow” conflicts with his other admonitions.

But, of course – hyperbole! Jesus overstates his message to grab our attention. When he said, “Do not worry about your life,” he certainly did not mean: “Live however you wish.” When he said, “Do not worry about tomorrow,” he was not saying, “Do not plan for the future.” Instead, I think what he may want us to glean is, “Do not become so anxious about the future that you are worthless in the present.”

Have you ever been so anxious or fearful that you were unable to sleep or think straight? You could not figure out your next move because you were so worried about tomorrow’s test or the cost of a car repair or someone’s opinion of you or that you cannot possibly complete your task by the deadline?

If we had the opportunity to push Jesus on this, I think he would tell us to find perspective. Too often, we let our worries overwhelm us and they become much grander than they are. Our blood pressure rockets out of proportion to the problem.

How do you handle your worries? Do you have a good strategy for keeping a balanced perspective on your anxieties?

Some baseball fans remember a dramatic moment years ago between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Cincinnati Reds. By the way, only men can remember this event. Women shake their heads in amazement that we men can recall what happened on third down and eight when we were seniors in high school but cannot remember to take the trash out Thursday evening because garbage day is Friday. I'm sorry, but men cannot help it if we have a special place in our brains that stores this vital sports information.

Anyway, the baseball game was on the line. There were two outs, and the bases were loaded with Reds slugger Tony Perez at the plate. Tug McGraw was on the mound with a slim, one run lead. He had two strikes on Perez when he suddenly stepped off the back of the pitcher's mound and seemed to be meditating. The crowd wondered what was going on, but after a few awkward seconds, he stepped back up on the mound and hurled the pitch that struck out Perez.

In the locker room, sportswriters crowded around McGraw's locker to ask what he was thinking before that last pitch. They wondered what inspirational thought he had conjured up. McGraw answered, "I simply invoked the frozen snowball theory." Every face had a puzzled look. Then McGraw explained. "Scientists have proven that 10 million years from now the sun will burn out and the earth will become a frozen snowball hurtling through space. And when that happens, nobody is going to care whether or not I got this guy out."

That's one way to put your current worries into perspective. Step back and look at the big picture. Today, say to yourself, "Thanks be to God, I do not live in Libya."

Sometimes it is difficult to maintain perspective when our problems are severe. When we worry that our marriage might dissolve, or the pathology report will deliver bad news or our job might be eliminated, it is difficult to think of much else. But, if we are honest with ourselves, many of us let our anxieties govern too much of our time. We worry about concerns that are minor in the scheme of things or we spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about things that are beyond our control.

I suspect all of us would benefit from beginning each day by praying Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time..." Doesn't God want us to focus on those things we can influence but to release the things that are beyond our control?

When our anxieties mount, our outlook plummets. When our worries control us, we view everything in a negative light. We don't have enough money, we lack genuine friends, our work is meaningless, no one cares, our faith is futile, and on and on. In today's passage, Jesus provides wise counsel for keeping things in perspective.

He says, "Wake up! Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. Shake yourself from your slumber and look around! Be mindful of the beauty and the blessings that surround you.

Our secular culture shapes us in ways that cause us to overlook the intricate wonders of the world. Our society's focus on possessions and status blind us to the beauty of God's creation. How many amazing sights do we miss each day because our attention is riveted on the trivial?

Poet Wendell Berry writes:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.²

When we wake up to the elegance and the miracle of God's creation, it gives birth to a grateful heart. Gratitude to God for this enchanting world is the supreme anxiety antidote.

Finally, Jesus instructs us to aim high. He says, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you." Jesus gives us the key to understanding his advice in the verse that opens the passage. He says, "You cannot serve two masters. Make a choice: Trust wealth or trust God."

A cartoon shows a man lying on the couch in a psychiatrist's office. The doctor says, "Let's see if I have this right. You're spending the best years of your life doing a job you hate so you can buy stuff you don't need to support a lifestyle you don't enjoy. Sounds crazy to me."

Tony Campolo tells of a church deacon who was falling down on the job. He missed most of the diaconate meetings and when volunteers were needed he never stepped forward.

One day his pastor called and said, "Our youth group leads worship at the local nursing home once a month and they need another adult driver. Could you help us out?"

The deacon was far from enthusiastic, but agreed to drive. When the day arrived, the deacon drove four of the youth to the nursing home, went into the room where the service was held but stood in the back with his arms folded while the youth led worship. About halfway through the service, someone started tugging on his arm. He looked down to see an elderly man in a wheelchair with disheveled clothes and white, uncombed hair. The elderly man was reaching out his hand to the deacon, so the deacon took hold of the man's hand and the older man held onto his hand for the remainder of the service.

The next month the same thing happened. The deacon drove the youth to the nursing home and the elderly man in the wheelchair came to the service and held the hand of the deacon. It happened the next two months as well.

But the following month, the elderly man did not show up for worship. The deacon asked one of the aides, who said, "He's in his room. Go down the hall, third door on the right. He's in the process of dying. He's unconscious, but it would be nice if you would go down and say a prayer."

The deacon had never done anything like that and he felt uncomfortable praying in front of others, but he didn't want to stand there making excuses, so he went to the room. There were tubes and wires and machines all over the place. The elderly man was lying in bed, eyes closed and not moving. He looked dead, but the deacon could see that he was still breathing, so he took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man into God's heavenly kingdom. When he finished the prayer, the elderly man squeezed his hand and the deacon was surprised

that he had been heard. Tears began to run down his cheeks, so he made a hasty exit. As he stepped out of the room, he bumped into a woman. She said, “He’s been waiting for you.”

The deacon mumbled, “What do you mean?”

She said, “Before he became unconscious, my father told me that once a month Jesus came to this place. He said, ‘He would take his hand and hold it for a whole hour. I don’t want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.’”³

Do not fret over minor matters or things beyond your control, behold the marvels of the world and seek the values of God’s kingdom. Your anxiety will melt, your heart will swell with gratitude, your life will fill with meaning and you will discover the assurance that your ultimate destiny is in God’s hands.

NOTES:

1. Daniel B. Clendenin, “Don’t Live Like a Pagan Gentile,” on *The Journey with Jesus* for February 27, 2011.
2. Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, © 1998.
3. Tony, Campolo, “Becoming What God Intended You to Be,” on *30 Good Minutes*, January 25, 2004.