

Letting Go of Worry

It's almost impossible for me to hear this passage from Matthew and not think of a song by Bobby McFerrin called *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. Released in 1988, it made you want to kick your shoes off, lie in the sun, and sip something cold.

*Here is a little song I wrote; You might want to sing it note for note; Don't worry be happy
In every life we have some trouble; When you worry you make it double; Don't worry, be happy.....*¹

In 1988, I was finishing a master's degree in education. Two years before I had quit my teaching job so I could study full-time. The previous year, I was working three part-time jobs and had moved back in with my parents after living out on my own for 8 years. In the fall of 1988 – soon after the Bobby McFerrin song became popular – my father underwent major surgery at the Mayo Clinic for cancer and began radiation. I recall doing a lot of worrying back then.

On the other hand, two of my nieces and one of my nephews were born in 1988. Two of my three employers offered me full-time jobs and I became the assistant manager at the bookstore where I ended up working for 18 years. I became a member of a church family that was quite influential in my journey to becoming a pastor, and, at the beginning of the next year, I moved into my own apartment. There were a lot of things to be happy about during that time as well.

Thirty-five years later, in 2023, how does the message to not worry and be happy sound? Telling people today not to be anxious about anything is like telling people not to breathe. It's almost ridiculous. What would we do with ourselves if we didn't worry?

As a culture, we're anxious about everything. And, if we aren't, we have a 24-hour news cycle; knowledgeable authorities with conflicting reports about every aspect of life; a multitude of self-proclaimed experts claiming to know the truth about every subject; and pundits from all political stances to help us along. There's plenty to worry about. What is there to be happy about?

Let's travel back 2000 years and look at Jesus' message as recorded in Matthew 6. In verse 25, Jesus says "*Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life.*"² Whenever we encounter the word "therefore" we should wonder what has come before it; we wonder what the word "therefore" is there for.

This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount.³ Topics Jesus covered leading up to these "don't worry, be happy" instructions include: The Beatitudes; being salt of the earth and light of the world; obeying and fulfilling the law; anger and reconciliation; adultery in our hearts; divorce; let your yes be yes or your no be no; do not retaliate, instead publicly expose the unjust authority; love your enemies; give alms, pray, and fast, but don't make a show of it; store up treasures in heaven not on earth; make sure your inner light is healthy; don't think you can serve two masters: God and wealth. Most of these topics sound like ones that could generate some worry. And yet, all these teachings provide the basis for the "Therefore, don't worry" section.

The larger question that looms over our passage is found a few verses earlier. It's a question about what rules a person's life. "*Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"⁴

These verses deal with the details of what a person sees as treasure. They also question what a person does with their treasure. The warning here is against hoarding material things against an unknown future. Collecting treasure that lasts involves the sharing of resources with those in need – not only material resources, but also time, energy, love, and support.

¹ [Bobby McFerrin - Don't Worry Be Happy \(Official Music Video\) - YouTube](#); [Don't Worry, Be Happy - Wikipedia](#)

² Matthew 6:25, *Common English Bible*

³ Matthew 5-7

⁴ Matthew 6:19-21, *Common English Bible*

The next verse builds on this theme and sets the stage for the rest of the passage. “*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*”⁵ Two masters make competing demands. You cannot put complete trust in both God and wealth. It’s impossible to follow them both. Ultimately, what treasure holds your heart – worldly possessions and wealth or service to God?

This brings us to the instructions concerning worry. They connect with the teaching about trying to serve two masters, because anxious thoughts and worry split a person’s attention. The worries Jesus lists relate to the basics of human life: food, drink, and clothing. Jesus makes the case that worrying today only brings more worrying tomorrow, thereby creating an endless cycle of having to divide one’s loyalties between trust in God’s faithfulness and a fretful concern about life.

The problem is not that a person needs all those things. The problem comes when people worry about them to the point that God is pushed out of the picture. The teaching in this passage is about worry: anxiety, fear, fretting, fussing. It’s not telling us not to plan, not to be responsible, not to care. It’s not encouraging us to have a completely laid back, “whatever” attitude. (Sorry, Bobby.)

Notice the priority listed in Verse 33. “*Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*”⁶ Most translations use a stronger, more active verb – seek or strive for the kingdom of God. It’s not “sit back and wait,” but strive, seek, pursue, desire, and endeavor to make God’s work a priority. This isn’t a call to carelessness or irresponsibility or indifference to human need. The warning is against a slavish, anxious, worried life, especially in service to wealth.

The opposite of worry, fear, and anxiety is faith – or better still – trust. If we were to trust God as simply and completely as it appears the birds of the air and the flowers of the field do, we wouldn’t be consumed by worry. We would still have responsibilities but would not be overly anxious about them. Our priority is to what God considers good. Having our priorities and desires aligned with God’s desires plus trusting God to help us live by them frees us from being anxious, worried, and fearful about what will happen next.

This isn’t a simple task. As in many of his teachings, Jesus appears to set an impossibly high standard. For some of us, the task of not worrying is much harder than it is for others. But even for those who deal with overwhelming anxiety, these verses can be a source of hope. In the long view, it’s things in God’s kingdom that really matter. The most important treasure comes from helping, loving, supporting, and serving each other. The ability to do these things comes from our trust in God and being part of God’s kingdom.

Think about the beatitudes, which begin Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. One way to approach them is as a description of things the way God wants them to be; as a description of who God wants us to be and the work in which God calls us to participate. The word *blessed* could also be translated as *joyful* or *happy*: Happy are those who are poor and humble before God, for theirs is the reign of God. Happy are those who are deeply saddened to the point of action, for they will be comforted. Happy are those whose wills are surrendered to God, for they will inherit the earth. And so on..... (Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is God’s version of *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*.)

Many of you are aware that one of my nieces born in 1988 died in a car crash when she was 16. A tragic death like that helps – actually, forces – a family and a whole community to realize that it’s not the worldly treasures that matter, but the relationships and the godly treasures that are the most important. Seeking first the kingdom of God doesn’t guarantee worldly wealth. It doesn’t guarantee that great losses and tragedies will not occur. However, it does give us a rock to hold on to and a place to put our trust when the storms of life come.

Perhaps the song we sang earlier in this service, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, is more in keeping with the Matthew passage than Bobby McFerrin’s.

Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ Matthew 6:24, *Common English Bible*

⁶ Matthew 6:33, *Common English Bible*