

FEAR NOT: Five Questions for Fighting Anxiety

What Must I Believe?

Matthew 6:25-34

Mark Vroegop

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 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? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:25–34).

When I talk about grief, I often say, “Grief is not tame.” Just as the hymn writer said, “When sorrows like sea billows roll...” when sadness invades your life, it comes in waves. It rolls in and sometimes with great force. Or sometimes it feels like a tsunami or a high-tide storm. Grief is unpredictable.

I think fear has the same characteristics. Fear is not tame. But it’s a little more challenging because we tend to give grieving people more grace than fearful people. And we tend to view grief as complicated, but we don’t always have that view of fear.

For example, if you are friends with a person who has suffered a big loss, you might be inclined to give him or her a lot of grace for an uncharacteristic response to a situation. You might think, “They’re grieving. Let’s give them some grace.” But we don’t typically do that as quickly with people who are fearful. I don’t think we say, “They’re fearful. Let’s give them some grace,” as often as we do with grief.

Let me give you another example. We’re less inclined to question someone’s sorrow but quick to question someone’s fear. I think we are not as quickly inclined to say, “Just stop being sad,” as we are to say, “Just stop being fearful.”

And that view and response to fear has led some of you to be really hurt by people. You might feel uncared for, disrespected, and even treated with disdain. The resulting shame has caused you to be very cautious—maybe even defensive—about talking about your fears.

The other issue is that fear is more complicated than grief. There's more agreement about what is sad than what is scary. There are clearer lines of causation in relation to grief. While it's true that people can grieve differently and over different issues, it seems that the difference is wider when it comes to fear.

Let me give you an example etched in my mind to illustrate this. After the loss of our stillborn daughter, my wife and I struggled with different kinds of fear. Sarah was particularly fearful that something would happen to our other three children. The innocence of our previous life was shattered by loss, and it was deeply jarring. Throughout Sarah's pregnancy with Sylvia, Sarah was worried. I kept saying, "I'm sure everything's fine." But what do you say when it turns out that everything isn't fine? What do you say when your worst fear happens? This tension was scary to me. How do we live with this tension and reality? It was a frightening thought for me.

Sarah and I had the same experience—the loss of a child—but our battles with fear looked different. Sarah was fearful that we weren't being fearful enough whereas I was worried we were being too fearful.

A few weeks after the funeral, there was a huge snowfall in Michigan. We lived in the country on an old apple orchard. The snowplows for country roads use enormous funnels attached to the front of salt trucks, and they can throw snow over twenty feet in the air. Well, one day the three boys were making snow forts in the ditch by the road where there was lots of great packing snow. Sarah and I were in the house when we heard the rumble and grinding sound of an approaching snowplow. The sound immediately triggered layers of fear in Sarah.

See, when Sarah was a small child, her dog Codie had been killed by a snowplow on a country road. Normally, when I hear a plow, I think of how cool it is that it can throw snow over small trees. But, when Sarah hears a snowplow, she remembers a tragic event in her past. So, when the snowplow rumbled down the road that day, historical fears and a very near-term fear ran through her mind. She bolted for the door and started yelling for the boys to come back. However, the noise of the plow was too loud. I joined her in shouting, "Boys, come to the house!" But they couldn't hear us.

We ran toward the road as massive amounts of snow crested over the treetops. It looked like a blizzard. We kept yelling louder and louder. We were so afraid. And through the falling snow, our three boys emerged in their snowsuits completely covered in snow. They were cheering, "That was awesome! Mom and Dad, did you see that?" And all Sarah and I could do was hold them as they looked at us with confused faces.

Our family shared the same experience—a snowplow in Michigan. But it didn't land on us the same way. Depending on our background, it was a very different perspective. We had very different emotions.

Fear is not tame. And it's not the same for everyone.

A Caution

Why have I taken so much time to introduce this sermon? Because I want to approach this message with a degree of caution. This is our third week in talking about fear as we are asking five critical questions:

- Who's in control?
- What is fear?
- What must I believe?
- How do I pray?
- What should I think?

Our first message laid the foundation about the issue of control and God's sovereignty. During the second week we tried to understand the nuance of fear as something that controls us too much. I tried to show you the difference between good fear and bad fear.

This week our text is from Matthew 6, and it relates to the issue of what beliefs are underneath our fears. It's an important issue, but we need to tread carefully.

On one hand, we need to examine our fears through the lens of what we're believing when we are fearful or even what levels of unbelief are behind our fear. But, on the other hand, we must be sure that we're not giving simplistic answers to complex fear by simply saying, "Just believe." Or, worse, "Repent of your unbelief!" I'm trying to keep us out of both ditches and extremes.

Matthew 6:25-34 is one of the most important passages on anxiety. But you can also terribly misuse it, so be careful with this text. There are biblical truths here that we need to hear, but we need to use them wisely.

Nine Questions to Ask

In light of that, I want to give you nine questions for you to ask yourself about fear that relate to what we believe when fear and anxiety come our way. Think of them as diagnostic questions to ask yourself.

You might wonder "Why ask questions?" Well, because I think asking questions about our fears is probably a better first step as it allows for more tentativeness and a better application of nuance.

Here's your assignment: As I walk through this text quickly, you need to determine which questions are most helpful for your fear(s) in light of what we learn from Matthew 6.

1. Am I allowing this to control me too much?

The first question should sound familiar because we covered it before. But it's an important one to ask often because sometimes fear is simply the result of allowing something to have too much power in our lives.

Matthew 6:25 begins with the word "therefore." This verse is an implication of verse 24 when Jesus cautioned about serving money instead of serving God. What does that service look like? Control. Interestingly, Jesus immediately applies this concept to worry and anxiety.

Money gives us options for control. And with options comes the ability to limit your exposure or your need to think about what you will do. The word "anxious" means to be concerned with, meditate upon,

or care about. It's not a bad word by itself. Anxiety only becomes sinful when it is applied inappropriately or in a way that is out of control.

Jesus says, "...do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on" (v. 25). Wait a minute! Think about food, water, and shelter (clothing)—those are pretty important. These are things that we must think about. I'm glad my wife thinks about what we are going to eat.

Jesus clarifies with the statement "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" That's the key. Worry and fear become problematic when I start believing that the sum total of my life relates to food, drink, and clothing. As important as they are, I could allow them to control me in a way that isn't helpful. So, you have to ask yourself, "Am I giving this thing—as important as it is—too much control?" Underneath this question is a belief issue. Do I believe that this thing, whatever it is, deserves this much time, effort, thought, etc.?

2. Am I forgetting God's love for me?

To reinforce this point, Jesus uses an example from nature. He points to the birds, "...they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns..." (v. 26). Jesus is trying to help us see something basic to the created world that we might miss.

Sometimes anxiety causes us to have tunnel vision. Our fear causes us to only see what's missing, what's scary, or what makes us nervous. We can live as if we believe one thing but not another.

Jesus continues in verse 26, "...your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus is not just saying that we are worth more than birds. He's trying to remind us that we have a loving heavenly Father who is going to take care of us. Jesus appeals to the promise that God cares for his children.

The pressure of circumstances can sometimes cause us to wonder, "How does this fit with God's love for me?" Maybe there's something in your past that's tempting you to believe God doesn't love you. Or maybe you tend to need more evidence of God's love.

One of the many reasons I love the lament psalms is because they acknowledge the reality of hard questions, but they also remind us that God is full of steadfast love (see Ps. 13). Sometimes winning the battle with anxiety and fear means doubling down on my belief that God cares for us.

3. Am I trying to fix something beyond my ability?

The next question relates to whether you are worried or fearful about something beyond your ability. Sometimes we worry because we are seriously trying to control something that we simply cannot control. Sometimes worry stems from our desire to fix something that we can't fix. Some situations are so broken, so complex, or so challenging that they will break you if you try to fix them.

In verse 27, Jesus asks the question about whether you can add a single hour to your life. Other translations refer to not being able to add about eighteen inches to your height.

There are some things in life that are divinely designed to be out of your control. They are regular reminders that you are not able to manage and change everything. Let me be a bit personal here. This is where my personality and ministry can be a really bad combo. If you like to fix things, dealing with broken, sinful people with a lifetime of complex problems can lead to a lot of anxiety.

Worry feels like you are doing something. Worry is what fixers do when they can't fix a person or situation. You think about a fix. But it never comes. My problem is that I usually come to the right conclusion—"I can't do this"—after I've tried everything else.

Underneath is a belief issue. I think I can fix a lot more than I really can. And worse, I like to fix things.

4. Am I starting to doubt God's character?

Jesus provides another illustration in verses 28-30. He points again to nature but this time to the lilies of the field. Instead of being overly concerned about appearance, Jesus is calling for his followers to again be reminded of God's character.

Jesus wants us to consider the beauty of how the flowers of the field are arrayed. They grow because of the provision of a good God. They are beautiful because of the glory God gives them. But they are lovely because of the grace of God, not because of their effort. God is the one behind what we see when we behold beauty in creation.

Jesus drives home the point in verse 30. If God provides such beauty to the flowers of the field, which are of far less value, will he not provide for you? But then he adds something, "...O you of little faith." He adds this here because underneath this kind of worry is a lack of faith in God's character. We can start to doubt his character with worry, fear, and anxiety.

Don't make the mistake of thinking this issue is just about clothing. I'm sure your closet is full and very few of us ever worry about having clothes to wear. The issue here is glory and beauty. You may not worry about clothing, but you may worry about what people think about your clothing because of what it says about you. Or maybe it's your job, your grades, a school you want to get into, a friend group, a spot on an athletic team—whatever relates to what gives you glory.

Sometimes fear and worry can lead us to become sinfully angry with God as we start to accuse him of forgetting about us or abandoning us. Are you starting to doubt God's character?

5. Am I acting like a non-believer?

The next diagnostic question builds on the previous issue related to faith. Verse 31 cautions about saying, "'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" because this is the way the Gentiles live. It's what they seek after.

When Jesus uses the word “Gentiles” here, he’s referring to people who are not believers. In other words, people who don’t know God’s character, who haven’t trusted him, who haven’t tasted of his goodness and grace—what other option do they have?

Worry, fear, and anxiety can cause us to act like people who don’t believe. It can cause us to talk like people who don’t believe. It can cause us to create environments filled with the air of unbelief because fear and anxiety are contagious.

If you are not yet a believer, this may be a good place for you to consider the beliefs that are underneath your worry. I hope this will push you to turn to Christ. And if you are a believer, I hope this will push you to remind yourself that underneath some fears is a belief system that sometimes can look like you don’t believe what you believe.

6. Do I believe that God knows what I need?

The next question comes out of the second half of verse 31, “...your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” This surfaces another kind of trust issue. This text tells me that one way I can fight against worry is by trusting that God knows what I need.

This is not an easy truth to believe, especially when life is hard. But I’ve found it helpful for battling my own fears and worry to say, “Lord, apparently you believe this is what I need right now. I don’t like this. I wish it wasn’t here. But you have plans I can’t see.” Sometimes I pray that over a schedule that’s too full, a problem that is too complex, a difficult person that I don’t know how to handle, or a series of events that feel overwhelming.

I have to remind myself that my life is in the hands of God.

7. Are my priorities in the right order?

Verse 33 is so important. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...” The idea is not simply first in order but first in importance. Worry and fear can reveal what we really love. Another question to ask is “What does my worry reveal about where my priorities are?” Sometimes we are fearful and worried because we are pursuing the right things but in the wrong way. In other words, we are not living by belief and trust, we are consumed with a passionate focus to fix the problem, stop the pain, or manage the challenges.

Sometimes we don’t ask the question, “How is God using this to shape me, change me, and grow me into the likeness of Jesus?” To be honest, we might not even want to ask ourselves that question. And sometimes we don’t even realize that we are living this way. This diagnostic question can help us consider if we are living with the right priorities.

It might also be helpful to ask yourself if you are seeking the right things.

8. Can I trust God to provide?

Verse 33 also contains a promise, "...and all these things will be added to you." This is not a promise that you will get everything you want. It's a promise that we can trust God's ability to provide for us. It's what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9:8 as it relates to generosity:

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (2 Cor. 9:8)

Sometimes worry and fear can make you less generous. Sometimes worry and fear can make you a workaholic. Sometimes worry and fear can make you a nasty, cutthroat, and mean person. And we have to ask ourselves, "Can I trust in God's ability to provide?"

9. Am I living emotionally ahead of God's provision?

I know this list is long, but please don't miss this last point. It's one of my most favorite concepts in the Bible. Verse 34 commands us not to be anxious because tomorrow has enough trouble of its own. Now, this doesn't sound like a very comforting promise. Imagine if I tried to encourage my wife by telling her not to worry about tomorrow because it's going to be hard. Doesn't sound very encouraging, does it?

But this passage is saying that there is a divinely allotted amount of trouble in each day. There's grace for whatever we face, but we don't have tomorrow's grace for today. If we live ahead of today and live in tomorrow, we are trying to live emotionally ahead of what God has provided for us.

One of the keys to winning the battle with worry is learning to live by faith on today's grace. We need to learn to live with the grace we are provided today—to approach life with a faith commitment to live day-to-day trusting Jesus.

Fear, worry, and anxiety are not tame. It's not as simple as saying, "Just believe." But, at the same time, there are beliefs underneath our fears. And one strategy for winning the battle with anxiety is simply asking yourself this question: "What do I need to believe?"

So, let me invite you, right now, to consider this:

- What has you worried or fearful?
- Is there a belief underneath?
- What is God calling you to believe today?

These questions won't solve all the problems, but they are a good place to start.

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