Westlake Church Lausanne

Ambition and the Abolition of Anxiety
Matthew 6:25-34

On the surface, it's pretty obvious what this passage is about, isn't it? Jesus uses the same word 6 times, to drive the message home: v25, "do not be anxious"; v27, "which of you by being anxious…"; v28, "why are you anxious?"; v31, "Do not be anxious…"; v34, "do not be anxious…" and v34 again, "Tomorrow will be anxious for itself." So that's the point of what Jesus is saying here: – I want you to live a life free of worry, so don't be anxious.

But is that really right? I mean think about it: that would be like you visiting a doctor and telling him about all the aches and pains you've got, everything that's wrong, and him telling you, "well, don't be unwell, don't ache, don't be in pain, be healthy!" You'd be sat there thinking, 'but you haven't told me what's wrong with me, you haven't made a diagnosis!' You need the doctor to tell you what's causing the problems don't you. You need him to tell you what the root problem is. Treat that and then the aches and pains will disappear.

And that's just what Jesus does here. You see, anxiety and worry are just symptoms of something more fundamentally wrong with our hearts. And Jesus says it's to do with our ambition. In fact you can tell that from the very first word of the passage: Verse 25, "Therefore". Therefore, what? What has Jesus just been talking about that he links worry and anxiety to? Well, if you were here last week you'll know he's been talking about where you lay up treasure, where your treasure is, in heaven or on earth, because that's where your heart is, and whether it's God you serve or money.

And now he tells us that it's how you answer that, what the ambition of your heart is, that will determine the anxieties of your heart.

Ambitious for Stuff

When you were a kid, what did you want to be? What was your ambition in life? One of our girls wanted to be a missionary train driver. Her older sister had already bagged the missionary pilot job, so obviously the next best thing was being a train driver for Jesus.

The problem is that when we're young our ambitions can be sweet and innocent like that; but as we get older other things start to take over. Money plays more and more of a part in our lives, and our ambitions increasingly become linked to what we can have, or buy, or enjoy with money. There's the better car, or bigger house, or more exotic holiday, and that promotion's interesting because it comes with more pay. And our ambitions tend to what we can do, or buy, or pursue with money.

Now, of course, that wasn't what the people Jesus was originally speaking to were struggling with, was it. Look at v25, "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." For them, their anxieties over food, and drink, and clothing were worries about survival, about not having enough of basic necessities. For us, it's about

having too much, about not having the right thing, or the latest thing. They would have been concentrating on their apparent lack, whilst we're concentrating on our plenty. And yet, the result is exactly the same.

Make material security, or material comfort your ambition and it won't be long before anxiety starts taking ground in your heart. It doesn't have to be extravagant, or costly, it just has to have you at the centre: your security, or comfort, or provision or power. Make money and stuff your God, where you get your significance and security from and you will end up serving it. And then, you'll never have enough, or look good enough. And you'll start worrying. Anxiety will start rising. You'll be looking to see what others have got; and you'll wonder if your car is still good enough; or your clothes cool enough; or your dinner fine enough; or your holiday different enough. Make money and stuff your god, Jesus says, and anxiety will start eating you up.

And allowing that to happen is wrong for two reasons, Jesus says. Firstly, **it fails to understand your heavenly Father's care, or your value**.

Verse 25: "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Now, the advertising agencies would have you think that the answer to that is 'no', wouldn't they? Food, drink, clothing, add to that gadgets and cars, and a fit body, and that's life in the 21st century West – the pursuit of stuff. But deep down, Jesus says, you instinctively know that life is so much more than this. If you can just get above the cloud of materialism and getting that clouds your view, you know something else matters more. And so, instead of looking *for* those things, Jesus says we need to look at some other things: v26, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow not reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value that they?"

Now, ever since the Garden of Eden, you and I have been tempted to think that we're like God, and we want to be number one, and have everything revolve around us, meeting our needs. And we think we either know everything, or can fix everything, or control everything, and anxiety comes when we realise we can't and don't. But what Jesus is saying here is that the other extreme is also true. We're not God with the power to control everything, and money and stuff can never give us that, but neither are we sparrows, neither are you a chance bit of grass blowing in the breeze. In fact, Jesus says, you are of so much more value than a bird, and if God their creator cares for *them*, won't God your heavenly Father care for *you*? And if he clothes the grass and flowers of the field, which are more stunning in their beauty than King Solomon in his pomp, won't he care for you?

Now, to be clear, Jesus is not saying three things. He's not saying you don't have to go out to work, is he? He's not saying, you sit there and take it easy, don't you worry about finding a job, your father will bring the bread home for you. He's talking about sparrows, he's not talking about some overweight green parrot sat

in a gold-plated cage hand fed pumpkin seeds by its owner. Sparrows still have to go out and find their food, they still have to work – but they don't toil.

And Jesus is not saying don't plan. Birds still build nests, and they migrate to escape the winter. But planning for the future and worrying about the future are two very different things. Planning trusts God: that tomorrow will come, that his promises are steadfast. Worry doesn't trust God, it thinks he'll be unreliable tomorrow, that his promises are shaky, that he will not work everything for my good.

And neither is Jesus saying you will be free of trouble. Today has its troubles Jesus says in v34. Even though your Father clothes them, the grass still dies he says, and even though your Father cares for them, elsewhere Jesus says that the sparrows still fall to the ground. So to be free of *worry* and free of *trouble* are not the same thing. Rather, you know that when the day of trouble comes, your life, and the life of your family, is in the hands of your loving heavenly father. And that's not fatalism, it's faith.

And so Jesus says to us, v30, "O you of little faith." Don't you know your heavenly Father, don't you know how dependable he is, don't you know how valuable you are to him? You don't need to find your security, or your significance, in stuff.

But the second reason anxiety is wrong is that **it doesn't work.**

You see, when you worry about something, what are you hoping is the outcome? You hope that somehow your anxiety will waft forward into the future like a magic mist and make the future better. That somehow my life will improve, either good things I *want* to happen *will* happen, or bad things I *don't want* to happen *won't* happen, if I just worry about them enough. But listen to what Jesus says, v27: "Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to the span of his life?" You think that by worrying about food or drink or clothes that will make you more healthy? No it doesn't, Jesus says; it just makes you more sick! Worry doesn't lengthen your life, it shortens it. So it's not that worry is neutral, it actually does the opposite of what you want. You think it will make you *more* happy, but in fact it makes you more miserable. Especially when you worry or fuss about stuff.

I clearly remember the evening when I realised that Su, my wife, was different, at least when it comes to shoes. We were at a wedding reception. And we were chosen with a few other couples to take part in one of those Mr and Mrs games. Su and the other wives were sent out of the room, whilst me and a couple of other guys were asked questions about them in front of everyone else. Then they were let back in and we got scored on how well we knew our wives. And one of the first questions was 'how many pairs of shoes does your wife own?' And I sat there counting, on the fingers of one hand: well there are her blue ones, and her black ones, and her white ones, that's three, and her trainers, that's four and her

walking boots, that's five. But then I sat there, gobsmacked, as the other guys said 20, or 30 at least! 20 or 30! I mean where do you put them all?! I had absolutely no idea that was even possible. Now, just imagine if we had come home that night and Su had started fretting about her lack of shoes and said, 'darling, every other woman has at least 20 more pairs of shoes than I do, I need more shoes.' Would she be a happier Mrs Slack if she went out and bought them? Maybe, momentarily, but feed the monster of our wants and the monster grows. We are more happy for a time, but then it wanes, and we need the next thing to make us happy. The monster of want never has enough.

And so being anxious for stuff because we don't have, or being anxious for stuff because we want more, never gives you what you want, which is that inner sense of peace and happiness. Rather it robs you of that.

And so Jesus says that you and I, as his followers, are to be different. Verse 31-32, "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*." So Jesus has already told us in chapter 6 that we're not to give like others – to be seen, or pray like others – to be heard, or to fast like others to be thought well of, but now he says 'and also don't be anxious like them'; don't seek what they seek; don't let their ambition for stuff be your ambition for life.

Ambitious for God

Verse 33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." So there is one way you can live, there is one thing you can be ambitious for, and it's what most people pursue, and it's material comfort or security. *But*, Jesus says, *but*, don't you live like that. Replace the pursuit of materialism, and the anxiety that it brings, with the pursuit of God's kingdom – of his rule and righteousness. And throughout the Sermon on the Mount we've seen how Jesus is calling his followers to live counter-culturally, and if that was true anywhere, it's true here in the accumulation of stuff. And as we saw, this passage begins with that 'therefore' in v25. *Therefore*, if you have decided to lay up treasures in heaven, not on earth, if you have decided to serve God, not money, then behave like this: Don't seek after stuff, don't be ambitious for more, seek after God, be ambitious for his kingdom.

But what does that kind of ambition look like? Well, firstly, it's going to be an inner attitude. In the Beatitudes Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt 5:6). So to seek God's kingdom and his righteousness is to want it. That in your inner, heart list of priorities, God's concerns become your concerns, and his character shapes your character. That rather than seeking to build your kingdom, your desire is increasingly focused on his.

Secondly, it will affect what you pray. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus tells us, "Pray then like this… "Your kingdom come, your will be done"" (Matt 6:10). That rather

than our praying being focused on us, and what we want for ourselves, and on our anxieties, we're praying for the extension and the growth of God's kingdom and righteousness in our lives, in the lives of those we love and in the life of wider society.

Thirdly, it will affect how you use your resources of time and money and skill. To seek first his kingdom and righteousness means that you'll work, whenever and wherever you can, for the justice and reconciliation that God seeks. It will mean that as individuals and as a church we'll give priority to the extension of his kingdom through evangelism. It will means that when you consider your next job move the increase in salary you'll get will not be the defining feature, rather what does God want, how can I serve him, how can this be used for his glory and the extension of his kingdom, will be the kind of questions you'll ask. Not, 'how much more will I get?' And you'll determine where you go based on where you can serve the best.

Now, all that does *not* mean that Jesus does not care about our material needs. The whole point of this is that God does care, so you don't need to drive yourself into the ground to get. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus tells us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). Here in v32 Jesus says, "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." And then, v33, "all these things will be added to you." But when he does add them, it will be because the order of priorities in your heart is right. It's God you're seeking, not stuff, and when stuff comes your way, you won't be holding on to it for your glory, you'll use it for his.

But if seeking after stuff leads to anxiety, strangely enough, seeking God's kingdom will treat your heart's tendency to worry. It will give you a peace and a poise about life because you're not constantly after the next thing, because you're not running frantically on the hamster wheel of getting. Listen to how Paul puts it in Philippians: 'Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus' (Phil 4:5-7).

So why does Paul link your *reasonableness*, or in other translations your *gentleness*, with anxiety. Because when you're worried, when you're not at peace, when you feel things are running out of your control, you tend to take it out on others, don't you? You're gut-twisted about something, life isn't going the way you want, you're not getting what you want, you feel out of control, and it starts eating away at you and you find yourself beginning to turn on others. You're grumpy, or you're snappish, and they might try and say something nice, but you bite back. So it's not just you who gets churned up by your anxiety and worry, those around you do too.

And Paul's answer is: the Lord's at hand. He's nearby. He's closer than all this other stuff you worry about or fear. So don't be anxious, rather talk to him, roll your anxieties on to him, let him do the burden bearing for you. And as you thank him for his closeness and his protection and his provision, peace will fill your heart, Paul says. The day of trouble may still come, but God your heavenly Father is closer than the trouble.

But how can you know that? How can you know your Father cares? What evidence is there to switch from ambition one, the accumulation of material comfort and security, to ambition 2 and the joyous pursuit of God's kingdom?

Christ Seeks and Cares for You

Ask yourself, what did Jesus seek? What was he ambitious for? Listen to what he says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). He is the only one who has ever lived perfectly for God's rule and righteousness, the only one who has sought God's kingdom without mixed motives. But what did that look like for him? What shape did that take? Well, in Luke 19, Luke recounts the story of how a chief tax collector called Zacchaeus, caught and trapped in this ambition for more, a man just like us, had his life transformed by Jesus. And at the end of it, Jesus says, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

So why should you seek his kingdom? Because he came to seek you, in all your lostness, in all your running after material comfort or security, in all your anxiety, he came to seek you and save you.

And to do that, he gave his life for you. Jesus says here that the grass dies and is thrown into the oven; well at the cross he threw himself into that fire for you. Sparrows fall to the ground, he says, and he fell to the ground, not for his lack of faith and wrong ambitions, but for yours. And you can know your heavenly Father cares for you, because he so loved you he gave his Son for you. And if he did that for you, do you think he'll abandon you in your day of trouble? No – you are of more value than birds, because God gave that which is of infinite value, his beloved Son, to make you his son and his daughter.

So, which ambition are you going to live for? What are you going to spend your life seeking after? Financial comfort and security, and the worry that it brings? Or the kingdom of God, and the peace that surpasses understanding?