



November 23, 2014
Rev. Dr. Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The Revolutionary Disciple: Faith-full Matthew 6:25-34

Cyndi and I got a wonderful surprise Friday. Our son Cooper came home from Whitworth five days earlier than planned. He worked everything out and arranged a ride home. I was surprised how excited this made me. I suppose it is as simple as this: not only do I love my son, I like him. I think he's fun. I enjoy being with him. And the fact that he wants to come home early says, to our delight, that he wants to be with us, too. Now, I'm not deluding myself. I realize that every extra day here means one more of mom's home cooked meals. My grocery bill is going to skyrocket this week. But I will happily foot the bill because he is my beloved son and I'm so glad to have him home.

As I thought about this, my mind returned to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching us what it means to be his revolutionary disciples. What I had not noticed, though, was how often Jesus refers to our relationship with our Heavenly Father. In Matthew 6 alone, we find the word "Father" ten times! Jesus seems to be saying that when we live his way and obey his teachings, even when it goes absolutely counter to our culture, one of the greatest blessings is this: we grow closer to God. Who doesn't want a more intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father?

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you — O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about

tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Did you notice the very first word of this passage: "Therefore..." What do you do when you find a "therefore" in the Bible? You figure out what the therefore is there for... look at the context. The context is Jesus' teaching on money. We looked at this last week. He warns us not to hoard our wealth because it will all rot away, and we won't take a dime with us. Instead, he says, "Invest your treasure in the work of the kingdom. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

In other words, if you are not investing generously in the work of the Lord, it probably suggests that in your heart, you don't really care about that work. Let someone else foot the bill. I asked a simple question last week: if the only evidence someone had was your checkbook register, would anyone have a clue you are a Christian? Where you put your money is a sure way to know where your heart already lives and a way to train your heart where you want it to go. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, too.

Then Jesus speaks of a battle between two gods: the Lord Yahweh and the Lord Mammon. "Mammon" means "wealth". Jesus says it is impossible to serve both gods. If we love Lord Mammon—if we live to consume more and more, if we can never utter the words of contentment which are (what?) "I have enough"—then we are in bondage to this abusive god. And it is impossible for us to love the true God who is worthy of our love. This week is Black Friday, and the name is appropriate! As we flock to the temples of commerce early enough to beat out the other worshipers and credit-card our way into deeper debt, we might want to remember what a liar Lord Mammon is. He promises everything but takes it all.

After last Sunday, a friend said, "You should have mentioned Financial Peace University! There are people who want to give but don't know how to get out of debt!" Absolutely right; a missed opportunity! 400 of our people have gone through FPU, and it is transforming lives! Another friend teased, "You blew it; you should have sent the offering plate around after the sermon. You would have gotten a bigger haul." I said, "This is not about one offering; it is about shaping the hearts of disciples for the long haul. Raising up true followers of Jesus who are generous."

Anyway, that's what Jesus is referring to in today's text. "Therefore because my disciples have hearts that give generously to the things God cares about ...therefore, because my disciples reject Lord Mammon and love the only God worthy of their love... therefore, I have some life-changing advice for you." What is that advice? Three words: Do not worry. Do not worry. "Do not worry about your life." That is a command of Jesus. How many of you disobey that command? I do. As I've shared before, I think anxiety is one of my spiritual gifts. When I get

anxious about something, I grind away on it to the point that I can't sleep. I am not proud of that. In fact, I confess to you: it is sin. It is one of my abiding sins.

So every time I read this passage, it is like one long confession of sin for me. Because that word "worry" haunts me six times in this short passage. Do you know what the Greek word for "worry" is related to? The original word for worry refers to choking or strangling. [Dallas Willard, *Conspiracy*, 209] Can you think of a more apt image than this? The feeling that you are being choked, strangled... unable to breathe because the cares of this world have their fingers around your throat.

Let me say this as clearly as I can on this Thanksgiving Sunday: Jesus talks turkey with us about money—not to make us feel bad, not to guilt us into putting more in the offering plate. He warns us about money because when it owns us instead of us owning it, this is what it does. It chokes us. It strangles our souls. If Mammon is your god—if you hoard your resources, if you have not learned to give, if your heart has an obsession with possessions—then this is what you get for your troubles: choking, strangling worry.

Jesus' stern command is this: "Do not worry about your life..." He goes on to give examples, some of which are more relevant than others. Most Americans don't know much about being hungry. In fact, we are fat. We could use less food while our third-world brothers and sisters could use more. As far as worrying about what we drink, I suspect our Canterwood families who had to boil their water for two weeks to kill E Coli, have a newfound empathy for the billions of people who always drink filthy water.

But this matter of worry about what we wear, of how we look, how we present ourselves—this is a quintessentially American obsession. I met with a young woman this week who said, "I don't like my body" and she went on to tell me exactly the things that were wrong with it. It was painful to listen to. We look at the air-brushed pictures of super models and hate ourselves by comparison. What we can't fix with fad diets or plastic surgery we will cover with beautiful clothes.

But Jesus says, "Stop worrying about your life! Stop obsessing. Trust God!" And then, he gives examples. What about the birds? They don't worry and God takes care of them. Aren't you worth more than a bird? It is worth noting that the bird may be the hardest working of God's creation. Sparrows are constantly on the move... kind of like Deb Robertson with feathers. Jesus isn't saying, "Don't work hard." But he is saying, "Don't be strangled by your labor. Trust God."

What about clothes? Does Jesus teach us that we ought to dress in burlap? No, he celebrates beautiful things. How many here have ever visited Paradise during wildflower season? That's all you need to know that God loves beauty. Jesus is not saying, "Don't dress beautifully; don't enjoy beautiful things." He's saying, "Don't be strangled with your concern about your appearance. Trust God."

And when we don't—when we worship Lord Mammon, when we worry about our labor, worry about our living, worry about our reputation and appearance—do you know what Jesus calls us? Little-faiths! ³⁰ “Oh you of little faith!” That's a churchy translation. The actual word—and it is a word that Jesus made up—is “little-faiths.” I almost hear him poking at me. Every time he sees me worrying about this thing or the other, I hear him saying, “Mark Little-faith Toone”, how long must I put up with you!”

But behind this gentle chide lies a very serious discipleship issue: functional atheism. When we who claim to be followers of Jesus do not trust him enough to believe that he will provide for our needs in every way, then we are functional atheists. We don't really believe God is trustworthy. We don't really believe God is capable. We don't really believe God loves us and will care for us. And we don't really believe the incredible promise that comes in verse 33. “Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Some people aren't generous, because they don't want to be generous. They want to spend everything on themselves and really don't care enough about the work of Jesus to inconvenience or impoverish themselves in the slightest. If that describes you, I pity you. You have a dangerously hard, selfish heart that is far from God, because God is so generous. But more people here, I'll bet, don't give because they are afraid. They worry. They are strangled with the anxiety that God cannot be trusted, so they cling to every cent, they rob God of his tithe, they let others pay the way, they ignore the hungry and poor of the world—because if they give away too much, they don't believe God can make up the difference. At the heart of it, much stinginess in the church can be explained by one thing: we are afraid because we are functional atheists. We don't really trust God.

So for those of us who are worrywarts—whether about money or relationships or kids or global warming or global cooling or whatever—what do we do about it? It's simple and hard. Jesus says, “Don't!” “Don't worry.” “Don't worry about your life.” Could it really be that easy? I guess so; Paul picks up the same theme in Philippians 4:6: “Don't worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests to God.” This may sound simplistic, but it works. There is a point where worry slips his boney fingers around your throat and, at that point, you have two choices. You can play along; begin to grind away over that anxiety; spin out possible scenarios, imagine horrible conversations or horrible consequences, put your mind into the spin cycle, or you can follow the command of Jesus and say one thing to yourself: “Don't worry!” “Don't do it! Don't go there! Don't think like that.”

I've been practicing that this week. I am concerned about Ellis and Rachel White's visa situation. We are working hard trying to convince our authorities that the Whites are not terrorists. But there is only so much I can do, and when I've done

it, I find myself still wanting to worry. And this week, every time I started, I told myself: "Don't! Don't go there! God is in control; you've done all you can. Don't worry. Leave it in God's hands." And so far it's working! And if it works for me, it can work for anybody. What's our one word command when worry starts to hover around our brain? "Don't!"

But this is not just about mind over matter. What I am really saying when I shout "Don't" to worry is this: "Father, I know you love me. I know you love this church. I know you are great and powerful and good. I know that you know what I need to live and that I can trust you to provide it. So rather than focus on all the things that cause me anxiety and turn me into a worrier or a fretter or a hoarder, I will turn my heart to you. I will focus on you. I will seek first and always your kingdom, your will, your purpose and trust that you will care for the rest." In the end, that is what it means to be a revolutionary disciple of Jesus... to trust in the goodness and nearness and kindness and greatness of our Heavenly Father more than anything else. So do you?

For weeks, we have listened to Jesus teach us about what it means to be his disciples. Now, if you are really not serious about being a disciple of Jesus, then all of this probably sounds like static to you. You won't be interested. And I'm sure there are some here today who have not yet decided that they want to follow Jesus.

But if you do long to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus, then surely he has prompted you to do something about it during this series of sermons? That's what this Covenant Card is about. It offers suggestions about areas you might want to consider dealing with: Maybe a relationship that needs patching up, maybe workaholicism that needs to be confessed and controlled, maybe sloppy worship habits that always find something else more important to do on a Sunday morning, maybe prayerlessness or neglect of the Bible that you want to do something about. Maybe the Holy Spirit has convicted you to forgive your enemy. Maybe the Holy Spirit has convicted you to stop being such a cheapskate. Maybe the Holy Spirit has convicted you to stop worrying or to serve, or to go on a mission, or tithe, or fast regularly, or make a disciple, or share your faith at work or school.

In a moment, we are going to have a time of silence and you will have the chance to make a covenant with the Lord; a firm resolution that, with his help, you are going to change something about your behavior. Write it down; be as specific as possible. Then, put it in the envelope, seal it, and write your address on the front. Then, when you are ready, come up and place your Covenant Card in one of these purple baskets. You don't have to impress anyone but God. No one will read them; no one will know what you have written. In three months, we will mail these back to you as a reminder and a checkpoint for how you are doing in your own covenant commitment to Jesus

If you would like to receive a blessing of your covenant commitment, the pastors will be up front and in the middle upstairs to offer one to you.

Please, don't waste this moment. Whatever the Holy Spirit is stirring you to do, obey him. He will give you the strength to do it, and you will be blessed to know that you have taken one step closer to being a revolutionary disciple of Jesus Christ. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteous... and all the rest will be added to you as well."

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. On a scale of 1-10, how much do you worry? How has it caused your problems in life?
 2. Pastor Mark says that, at its core, worry is unbelief. Do you agree?
 3. Worry seems to be tied in Jesus' teachings to material things and money. In your case, have those been a source of anxiety for you? What steps does Jesus suggest to us to help us overcome our anxiety?