Stop the Worry Habit

Luke 12:22-23, 31

22“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 31But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. 34For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

These are familiar, often read verses from the Bible. But just as often we dismiss them because it is impossible to comply; it is difficult to stop worrying.

At the human level, worry is part of our DNA; it is partly responsible for why we have survived and why we continue to evolve. We all experience worry; we are not slackers or spiritually inept because we worry. We worry because we have bodies. We are human beings; hard-wired for a certain degree of attention to threats. Worry directs our attention to things that could harm us.

Did I leave the stove on?

Many of our worries can be alleviated by our direct attention to them. Check the stove. Worries that can be addressed are not problems unless we don’t attend to them, and then dwell on them. Other worries cannot be addressed at all, and our thoughts are better off redirected toward something more pleasant.

Am I going to get the job?

Not much can be done until the call comes and more information is obtained. It is a waste of time and emotional and mental energy to worry about such things. It is a waste of emotional and mental energy to worry about most hypothetical things that perhaps could happen, but most likely will not.

Today the word worry refers to feeling anxious or distressed, troubled and uneasy. The origin of the word came from the 16th Century Old English work *wyrgan*, which meant “to strangle”.

This meaning is pertinent today. Worry that strangles us is unnecessary and distracts us from what is important in life, which is the work God wants to do through us.

Why would the Christ address the disciples about worry? Well, it must be that worry was a problem. They worried about food, drink, clothing, and their bodies. Pretty much all the things we worry about still. Today it seems we’ve added hundreds of more things to that list of worries.

The solution the Christ offered was to change our thinking by seeking first the Kingdom of God. By changing our thoughts we change what our treasure is. Our treasure is what we place great value on. When we direct our concern away from materialism and toward God’s goals for us, then we are on track to change the world.

So worry is a complex, paradoxical emotion: it can make us miserable, and it can ensure our survival. It becomes a challenge when our worry goes beyond the normal concern and reasonable motivation to protect ourselves and our loved ones and moves into the obsessive, strangulating fear that many of us at times entertain.

Some questions to ask ourselves in moments of contemplation:

Do I worry about things that are not real or immediate threats?

Am I more anxious than relaxed?

Am I more unhappy than happy?

Do I have difficulty enjoying myself because I worry so much?

Am I unwilling to take reasonable risks?

Do my worries interfere with my normal activities?

If we can answer “no” to those questions, then our worrying is probably of the healthy and adaptive sort. If “Yes” is the answer to most of the questions then our worrying may be unhealthy and maladaptive and some steps may be in order.

First of all, address the cause of our worry. If we know what causes us to worry – what it is that we don’t want to happen to us – then face it, address it, and stop thinking those thoughts. It is not our present circumstances, nor something that may or may not happen to us in the future; it is the thoughts we are thinking now. We are the cause of our fear.

So when we feel fearful, we can become still, relax, take a few long, slow, deep breaths, and change our focus to the exact opposite of our worry. We don’t have to fight anxiety, and fear; remember, in most instances they are there as pointers, teachers, and aids in our survival. We can observe the worry and where it is pointing and think about the opposite.

If we have fears about losing our job, we focus on being competent, doing a good job and being respected and rewarded accordingly. If we worry about finding the right life partner, we focus on being loving, accepting, appreciative, and congenial.

Fear is fed by our thoughts, and taking our thoughts away from fear starves it. Fears often have their roots in regular worrying, which then progresses to the point where it becomes fear. So to eliminate this happening we eliminate worrying.

Here are some ideas:

It is sometimes helpful to repeat a phrase or a word that points our thinking in the right direction. “The Light of God surrounds me,” works just fine. Any positive phrase can help.

“Keep a giggle in it.” We get very serious and stressed when we’re worrying and thinking negative thoughts. Think of something funny to change the energy, or do something fun like going to a movie or having a night out with friends. We try not to allow our worry to have power over us and strangle us.

Fun is one of the most honest and reassuring feelings. It always acts as healing balm, restoring our sense of balance. Our situations always seem different and less stressful after a time of fun. And we don’t have to spend money to have fun. Fun is possible in almost any situation. Play with our kids and do something outrageous. Go to the park and roll around on the grass. Spend an afternoon reading in the sun.

It is good to remind our self that the negative thought we are thinking is “only a negative thought.” It has no power other than what we give it. Negatives gain momentum from our repetitive thinking of them. Stop it!

The distinguishing characteristic of worry is always future orientated. When we worry, we direct our attention on something that might happen but hasn’t happened yet. We might think that we are worrying about the things that are happening right now, but on closer inspection it is in the future; it is always about the future. Knowing this takes away some of worry’s power.

We might try tracking our worries. What are we worrying about? What are our common themes? The more light we shine on our worries the less power they have over us.

Concern and worry are different. Concern about the different aspects of our life and what may or may not happen is valid and beneficial. It allows us to view our life and to be proactive in making positive choices. This is a very constructive process. Worry, on the other hand, is focusing on what could go wrong. It has no positive aspect to it. Not only are we focusing on this negative outcome but also we are giving it energy.

Recognize that there is a cost of worrying. It causes stress and affects our thinking, decision-making abilities, and our health. Second, it attracts the very things we are dreading. Worry has no value, is counterproductive, and is not worth the time or effort.

We can attempt to put a lid on the catastrophic, worst-case-scenario type thinking that attracts our thoughts when we are worried. God is working to make all things good for us; trust that whatever we are facing is part of God’s good plan. What we can change, let’s change. What we can’t change let it go.

Many cultures share the sentiment of the Christ not to worry.

The phrase “No worries” is a ubiquitous Australian expression. In Hawaii, there is a gesture called “the Shaka”. It means to hang loose, be cool, chill out, no worries. In Swahili there is a phrase made famous in the Disney movie Lion King...*Hakuna Matata*. It means no problems, no troubles, no worries. The Japanese use the expression: Shoganai, which means, “It can’t be helped; just accept it; move on.” Thailand says, “Mai pen rai”, meaning don’t worry; it’s no big deal.

‘Not to worry’ is a universally embraced concept that most people accept as important, and then strive their entire life to implement. It is my prayer that through the trust we place in God and God’s plan for us that we can hear the words of the Christ and live those words: Do not worry. Seek the Kingdom of God first and all things will be given to you.

Let us pray….