

Anxieties, Concerns, and Priorities

To say we live in anxious times is a gross understatement. Although we all know that there is certainly nothing new under the sun, (people have worried about the same basic things we do since the dawn of time; e.g., plagues, governments, wars, weather, natural disasters, etc.), we also can't help but look around at the events and conditions we're currently facing and feel anxiety like we've never known before. And for everyone who says they're not anxious, *save it*. If you wear the flesh of Adam and Eve, then you have things that make you anxious and cause you to worry and stress. You may not be anxious about the same crazy things as your neighbor, but you're still anxious about something... probably many different things. I don't know how you couldn't be.

And at this point we could easily turn this into a whole lesson on anxiety. Lord knows we have more than enough material to work with. Besides that, Jesus Himself uses the word "anxious" six different times in these eleven verses, so it's not like we'd be forcing the theme. *This text is filled with anxiety!* And yet... that's really not what this lesson is all about. "*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.*" Sure, we could spend all day (and then some) talking about all our anxieties and fears, but to all of it our Lord commands, "*Stop being anxious. Seek first God's reign and rule and His justification.*" That's really what this is all about—priorities—seeking *first* the reign and rule of God; seeking *first* His righteousness; His justification.

So... what are your priorities? That's what this all boils down to. If you're honest, you will confess that even the basic things you are so anxious about; e.g., clothing, food, money, do often wind up taking center stage in life. These last six months have shown, without a doubt, that some of our anxieties and fears have taken *absolute control*; control of our economy, our health care system, our education system, and even our lives of faith. *Our anxieties and fears and worries have come to dictate everything.* Now, before I go any further, I do need to make clear that there is a difference between faithful concern and unfaithful anxiety. You are expected to be concerned about all the gifts God entrusts to your care, including the gifts of health, wealth, and life. We are not to simply drop the reins and throw caution to the wind, doing whatever we want, fully expecting that God will cover us in our selfish stupidity. You are not to put God to the test. You are expected to be a good steward/manager. You should be concerned. However... you are not to be *anxious* over such things.

What's the difference? In a nutshell, it comes down to a simple First Commandment issue. *Merimna-ō*—the word we translate as "anxious"—is heavily freighted with the language of doubt and unbelief. "*O ye of little faith.*" That's not a compliment. That's a problem. *Merimna-ō* carries with it the

meaning of having your thoughts and cares *consumed* by something other than God. ***Simply put, whatever makes you anxious has become your god.*** It's your chief concern/worry. Anxiety winds up *de-throning* God. We wind up serving the gods of our anxieties rather than the one true God. These last six months are prime example. And we're all guilty of it. We all have our anxieties. We all have things that we put before God. **It's not a debate.** You can justify your particular anxieties all you want, but that still doesn't make it right. "*Do not be anxious. Seek first the reign and rule of God and His righteousness*" is cut-and-dry. Your Lord leaves you no wiggle-room. If you're honest, you will confess that you don't trust in God above all things all the time. Neither do I.

It really is so very simple; so very cut-and-dry. This is why our Lord uses such *elementary examples* to make the point. "*Consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field. Does not your heavenly Father provide in super-abundance for them?*" Take a look outside of yourself for a moment. Just consider the little sparrows of the world. Consider the lilies of the field...the grass! Just look at how well-provided for and beautifully-arrayed God makes field grass! You are of so much more value! You are the **only** creature in all of creation that God created in His own image and likeness. You are the **only** creature in all of creation that God Himself breathed His life-giving breath into. Everything else was simply spoken into existence. Not man, though. God Himself formed man with His own hands, and then God Himself gave divine CPR to that lifeless clay, breathing His own Holy Spirit of life into His hand-made creation. If the birds of the air and the grasses of the field are treated so well by God, ***doesn't that kind of put things in perspective for you?***

Consider, also, Jesus' statement on ***anxiety and the span of life.*** "*Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to your span of life?*" We know the answer. If anything, the reality is ***tragically opposite.*** Anxiety doesn't add a single hour to our lives, but it can certainly cut our lives short. People get so worked up over retirement accounts and gluten and masks and social distancing/quarantining, only to keel over dead from an aneurysm or a heart attack brought on by ***stress/anxiety.*** This is why our Lord ends this discourse by warning about not being anxious about tomorrow. "*Sufficient for today is its own trouble.*"

This all goes right back to seeking ***first*** the reign and rule of God and His righteousness/justification. We get so worried and anxious about things like elections and vaccines and even sicknesses that could possibly land us in the hospital and cause us prolonged suffering. We get so anxious about things we can't even control; things that ***might*** take place days, weeks, and months down the line. ***What about today?*** You don't know what today holds. You don't know what the next hour or even the next ten minutes hold. "*Seek first the reign and rule of God. Seek first His righteousness/justification.*" I can't help but think of the parable of the guy who had so much stuff to worry about, that he took it upon himself to build bigger barns and silos. "*Fool! Tonight your soul is demanded of*

you.” What are you going to give right now in exchange for your soul? God doesn’t take IOUs. God doesn’t deal in the currency of *mammon and anxiety*. Seek first God’s reign and rule and His righteousness.

And that’s where our focus needs to be: *First and foremost on the righteousness of God*. That life-saving, life-giving Divine righteousness took on the very flesh of man in order to redeem man. Just look here [*the crucifix*]! *Here is God’s remedy to all your anxieties and worries and cares and concerns!* Here is God’s payment for sin, in full. Here is God’s unconditional and incomprehensible love for you, nailed to a cross and pierced with a spear... sacrificed for you.

And make no mistake: Jesus, as full man, was *greatly concerned* about all this. “*Father, if there is any other way, take this cup from Me.*” As full God, Jesus knew what the wrath of God against sin meant. He knew what it entailed. Still, in spite of the fear and concern, He prays, “*Nevertheless, Thy will, not My will, be done.*” And it was. In spite of all the impending suffering and sorrow, Jesus sought *first* the reign, rule, and will of His God and Father. He lowered Himself to even the lowliest of men. He made Himself last, because this was the good and gracious will of His Father. And when the good and gracious will of His Father was completed, He cried out in victory, “It is finished!” mere moments before commending His spirit to His heavenly Father and peacefully falling asleep in the hands of His God and Father. *Christ died in total peace!* The cup of suffering and wrath had been consumed in full, all the bitter dregs and lees included. No anxieties. No more fear. No more wrath. It is finished. All that remained was a joy and a peace that surpasses all human understanding; a joy and a peace that is known only in Christ Jesus.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: This is our reality right now! In spite of all the anxiety-producing things in our lives, we, by virtue of our baptism into Christ, are fully and completely redeemed. “*Why are you so anxious about what you will wear?*” Through Holy Baptism, you have been clothed in the all-availing righteousness of Christ. Honestly: Is there anything more important? We have the Father’s mercy, grace, and peace, the currency for this transaction being Jesus’ own crucified body and blood; *the very same body and blood He so richly and abundantly nourishes you with today*. Let that sink in for a moment. Here in your midst is the reign and rule of Almighty God! Here is the righteousness of God, for you! Just one little crumb; just one little drop contains the super-abundance of God’s grace, mercy, and peace for all eternity. This is the overflowing abundance of love and peace your Lord fills you with in His holy meal. “*Why are you so anxious about what you will eat or drink?*”

Kind of puts everything else that makes us anxious in proper perspective, doesn’t it? *It should*. Again, no one is telling you to drop the reins on life and not be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to you. All God says is *keep it in*

proper order. Seek **first** His reign, rule, and righteousness. Hold fast to the fact that He is working all things for the good of those who love Him. This means that no matter how bad things may get in life, you belong to Him, and He is working all things for your good. Whether you live or die, you are resurrected and alive in Christ...and the best is yet to come! To live is Christ, and to die is gain, right? ***Well then why are you so anxious?***

You know...all this talk of God's Gospel goodness and providence and grace makes me very anxious...***anxious in a good way.*** I'm anxious to get home to heaven. I'm anxious to get to Holy Communion. I want this gift; this peace; this blessed assurance! I hunger and thirst for this righteousness. How about you? Let's call it a day, and let us seek the ***first and most important things***—God and His righteousness—seeking and finding Him right where He tells us to look; right where He Himself is holding out these gifts of life, love, and peace to all who will receive.

May this Christ-centered reality drive away all your sinful anxieties. May it give you peace, and may it guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, for better, for worse, richer, poorer, in sickness, in health, now and into all eternity.

AMEN