

**“Worry Workout”**  
**Text: Psalm 139:1-12; Matthew 6:24-34**  
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*“And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Matthew 6:27*

The Sermon on the Mount is the most prominent set of Jesus’ teachings in the New Testament. A lot of people who have trouble accepting the idea of Jesus as Messiah or Savior or Son of God are perfectly happy with the notion of Jesus as teacher. What a great model leader he was, they say, how compelling, the lessons he taught. They are right of course, though I am not sure just how many admirers of Jesus’ pedagogy have actually read his teachings. I suspect that even fewer actually try to line up their lives according to his tutelage. In fairness though, hardly anybody does.

Read the Sermon on the Mount and you will be confronted with admonitions that are hard to swallow, ethics that are hard to follow, and a worldview that runs just as counter to our culture as it did to the culture of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago.

For instance, *Blessed are the meek*, Jesus teaches, *for they will inherit the earth*. Will they now? The meek inherit the earth?

*If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away*. Now that’s a surefire way to get yourself locked up in the insane asylum.

*If you even look at another person with lust in your heart, then you need to pluck out your right eye*.

These would be called extreme teachings by anyone’s judgment. Their purpose was to instigate extreme makeovers. Those who heard the teachings were, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be transformed in their lives, their identities, the way they imagined the world. Jesus did not mean literally go cut your hand off. What he meant was: this is serious business. His teachings were intended to help people understand how to live the good life intended by God, and in every age the good life intended by God is a life marked by humility, fidelity, and integrity.

A few years ago, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a profile of a large American family who had decided to live in a countercultural Christian way. The Scheibners home-schooled their children. They bought all their clothes from consignment shops, trying to keep at bay that demon of acquisition. They even told their teenagers that they could not put any Leonardo DiCaprio posters on their bedroom walls. (Now that’s extreme, don’t you think?) They lived lives that can only be described as being at odds with their culture. (2)

To be sure throughout the ages, there have been many countercultural movements identified with Christianity. Some have led people to saintliness; others have become

cult-like, even demonic, as current news stories from the state of Texas have recently reminded us. But here's the question: Ought not all human beings who claim to follow Christ, whether conservative or liberal or somewhere in between, live in some way that distinguishes us from the culture of which we are a part? Miroslav Volf is a wonderful and important contemporary theologian. He writes, "We are drowning in a flood of consumer goods. . . .drenched in showers of media images. . . .We have lost the vision of the good life, and our hopes for the future have been emptied of moral content." He singles out the mainline church for particular criticism saying that we appear to be incapable, in this modern day, of producing an alternate set of values for participants to live by, and as beacons of light for the rest of the world. "If we can neither state what the gospel is with its compelling demands, and if we have no clear notion of what constitutes the good life God would have us live, then we are more or less going to be floating along like jellyfish with the tide." (3)

Whoo! Jellyfish with the tide... But, in the Sermon on the Mount, it was no one less than Jesus who said *You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor then it's good for nothing. You're supposed to be the light of the world. Don't put your light under a bushel.*

We have a calling to be God's peculiar people. I've always loved a sentence from the writings of Flannery O'Connor: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." We are not to be float-along jellyfish. We are to be shaped by the teachings, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the society to which we have been called to serve. We are the body of Christ here and now.

Transformation was what Jesus was after. Just about all of us in modern society could use a little transformation, particularly and specifically in terms of the text that I have just read this morning. We could all benefit from the "do not worry" teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. *Don't worry about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall wear.* Twice Jesus says it, and then concludes with one more admonition against anxiety: *Don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.* Today's troubles are enough for today.

Contemplate the lilies, and learn how to live.

Until I spent this past week wrestling with the text, it had never occurred to me that worry was actually a moral issue. I say that because Jesus issued a commandment against worry, and all of a sudden I had something new to worry about. I violated the commandment probably 60 or 70 times in the course of three or four days. Some of you by nature are serene and irenic. I must say I'm the worried type. You name it, I'll worry about it. I worry that I'll be late, and that I will be early. I worry that I will die. And then I worry that I might live so long that I'll run out of my retirement income and then be in a pickle. I worry about all the things our society ought to worry about - terrorism, the crisis in the housing market, the cost of gasoline, which has such a negative impact on the people who can least deal with negative impact.

I worry also about my cholesterol level. The other night, I became worried that Al and I were using out-of-date bottles of salad dressing and jars of mustard. At 11 p.m. I cleaned out the refrigerator, and then I couldn't sleep because I thought it was so wasteful to have bought all that stuff and then thrown it away in a world of need.

The worry of which Jesus spoke was a special kind. He was addressing the particular worry about material things. He had just finished talking to the rich, the wealthy in the crowd. Some of them had made money their master, or Jesus would not have said, "You cannot serve God and wealth." He was simply stating a fact: you cannot love money or what you can buy with it with all your heart and mind and live the good life that God intend. It's just a simple thing. Whenever an institution or an individual or a nation comes to believe it's all about money, inevitably the moral compass will go haywire. It is a danger for us all, wealthy or not.

A few weeks ago, Al and I went to dinner with friends. Over dinner, they told us about the new television set they had bought for their den. They described its attributes in glowing details. Now, Al and I have a perfectly good television set in our den. But I actually found myself asking Al on the way home if he thought we should be thinking about buying a new TV. That's just to show how deep it goes, this whatever it is in us that wants things. Now, things are not bad. Unlike some of the other religions of the world, Christianity does not suggest that we should not care about things in the material world. We believe that God is incarnate in the material world. Material things are not bad or good. It's when you become addicted to them that they can wreak havoc with your life. That happens when we worry that maybe someone else is getting ahead of us. I'm already working on a sermon for this fall on how to reclaim a "philosophy of enough". We simply cannot be addicted to things and the accumulation of money and serve God as we are meant to serve God.

It is the rare person who is not caught up in all of this. We love God, and we love mammon. We pray our prayers, and we pour over our catalogs, although these days there is not as much money to buy what we want to buy when we look through those catalogs. I love what novelist Benjamin Cheever wrote so candidly about himself, "As a materialist I know no shame. I can wake up in the morning tasting despair air and conclude that the only thing for it is that I need to go out and buy something." He goes on to say, "I love God too. I stand up in church and say, 'I believe in God the father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.' Who is my master? Who has authority over my life?" (4)

A plaque in the window of a gift shop read, "Being rich is not a sin. It's a miracle." Being rich is neither a sin nor miracle, anymore than acquiring and having things is a sin or a miracle. It is sinful when our things, or our lack of things, or our money, or our desire for money come to consume our time and our energy and shape the values by which we live, when we use our resources for the self alone, without concern for the needs of others and for the larger good.

One day, you and you and I are going to wake up in heaven, and we will find ourselves with nothing to show for ourselves. Absolutely nothing to show for ourselves. God will not care whether we are wearing a diamond tennis bracelet or not. All we will have to

offer is the way we lived our lives, whether we cared for and helped others with whom we shared life. Jesus' teaching about this was the clearest of all his teachings: *As much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.* (5)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against worry. This teaching was not directed to the rich, who would have enough groceries to eat and clothes to wear. No, he was speaking to those whose resources were not securely in place. His followers, for the most part, would have fit into that category. At this time of economic uncertainty, a lot of us would fit into that category as well. I cannot imagine a more encouraging word to hear today than that God can be trusted to give us what we need, to get us through each day. *Consider the lilies. They neither toil nor spin, but I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.* Let the flowers teach us how to live. Contemplate the fact that God provides what they need. Are you not of more value than they? This is not figurative language here. This is real, down to earth language. If you think you have nothing behind you, or beneath you, or in front of you, you are wrong. You are surrounded by the everlasting care of God. One way or another, you are going to make it, through the grace of God. As long as God wants you to be here, you're going to make it.

And who, by worrying, can add one day to your life? You can lose a lot of days by worrying. I have known people who worried themselves to death, just miserable all the time. You can ruin the days of the people around you who have to listen to you worry out loud, but worrying does not change how long you will live, except to reduce it, never to add to it. I'm not saying there are not issues and matters we should worry about. If you hear your child coughing in the night, you had better worry enough about it to get up and do something. There are plenty of things we ought to be worrying about. I learned this week that the state of Georgia spends \$1 billion a year on incarcerating prisoners - \$1 billion a year. We should be worried about and doing something about it. Worry can awaken conscience and lead to action that is essential for the well-being of people and for communities. Sinful worry is the kind of worry that paralyzes and leads to more worry. It eats up energy. That's the kind of worry Jesus was opposed to.

I love a little saying I came across a couple of years ago – “Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere.”

I'm not suggesting that these are easy times. I'm not even saying that any day now everything is going to be all right. Jesus was realistic about that: “Tomorrow will have worries of its own.” That said, the future is in the hands of God. It hasn't happened yet, and so there's no sense in spinning out negative scenarios that haven't even taken place. It's an enormous waste of time. Jesus said, “Strive for God's kingdom and for God righteousness, and everything will fall into place.” It never fails.

Trust in God is what distinguishes dedicated disciples from spineless jellyfish. Trust is what distinguishes those who transform situations from those who float along in the same old, same old sea of worry.

Some years ago, the great Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Psychiatric Clinic was asked a question in a gathering:.. Someone stood up and said, “Dr. Menninger, what should you do if you think you're going to have a nervous breakdown?”

He answered, “Lock your house. Go across the road, and do something for somebody else.” (6)

And so sisters and brothers, what I hope you'll do is take the good doctor's advice and the teachings of our Savior to heart, and when you get back home from doing whatever you can do to help somebody else, read your Bible, turn out the light and go to sleep. (7)

Happiness comes not in what we have, but in recognizing the essential giftedness of life. Consider the lilies, and relax.

(1) The title of a column in *Christian Century*, 2/26/08.

(2) Miraslov Volf, “Floating Along?” *Christian Century*, 4/5/00.

(3) Ibid.

(4) *New York Times Magazine*, 12/7/97.

(5) Matthew 25:45.

(6) As told by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer's Almanac*, July 22, 2008.

(7) Marty.