

Regulating the Pressure
Matthew 6:25–34; Philippians 4:4–9
Sunday, October 9, 2022

Let us pray: Silence in us any voice but yours, that we might hear your word and, trusting in your goodness, live in ways that glorify you, in Christ. Amen.

So the word that we have from both Jesus and Paul today is, “Do not worry about anything.” Amen.

If only it were that easy.

I read a couple of articles this past week about anxiety and mental health. One of them was based on a survey that said 90% of Americans believe there is a mental health crisis in the U.S. today. It said that the Covid pandemic has exacerbated numerous social stressors, and over a third of adults identify personal finances, current events, political events, personal relationships, and work as major sources of stress. Over 20% of adults describe their mental health as only “fair” or “poor,” and I guarantee you those numbers are actually higher, because there is still such a stigma attached to admitting that you have a mental health problem, especially among men. A third of all adults said they felt anxious “always” or “often” over the course of the past year. And yet, of all the people who are experiencing mental health problems, 60% of them say they *have not been able* to get the help that they need, because there simply aren’t enough therapists available to meet the demand.¹

¹ This entire paragraph draws from <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/05/health/cnn-kff-mental-health-poll-wellness/index.html>

The other article got even deeper into those statistics, breaking them down by gender and age. I'm not going to throw any more statistics at you, because I actually hate sermons that do that. I can sum it up for you like this: a lot of people are dealing with serious problems related to stress and anxiety, and most of them aren't getting help. Those are your friends, your neighbors, your family members, your kids' (or grandkids') teachers, and your pastors.

So I want to start by saying that what I'm going to talk about today is not at all a *substitute* for professional mental health help. If you are struggling with anxiety – which *a lot* of us are – start by talking to your doctor. Even if you can't get in to see a therapist yet, there are medications that can significantly help with anxiety. It might take a little time to find the medication that works for you or for that medication to kick in, but stick with it.

You can always come talk to me or Ridgley, and we can help you with the *spiritual* aspect of it, but we know our limitations. We are not doctors or professionally trained therapists. We are going to encourage you to talk to your doctor. God has given human beings brains that understand science and can create medicine to help us when we are sick. It is not unfaithful to take advantage of that. It's a gift from God. If you have cancer, of course I am going to pray for you and talk with you about where God is in the midst of that, but I'm also going to tell you to go see a doctor for treatment. And mental health issues are no less real or serious than cancer or Covid any other “physical” illness. The spiritual and the medical are not competitors, they are complimentary. You need *both* in order to be whole.

So, that being said, let's talk about the spiritual aspect of anxiety.

About a year ago, Jen and I found water in our basement. Not a *lot*, but you never want to find *any*. It was coming from our hot water heater, but we had no idea exactly where or why. So we called someone to come look at it, and he said that when water comes from the street to your house, it comes with a lot of pressure. There is a pressure regulator on the pipe right where the water comes into the house that is supposed to help alleviate some of that pressure, take it down to a manageable level. Well, our pressure regulator had stopped working. So water was coming into the house with all this pressure, and the water heater couldn't handle it. There is a pressure *release* valve on the water heater that blows a little water out when the pressure gets too high, and that's how the water got on our floor.

But as he was telling us how there was nothing to regulate the pressure that was coming in, and only so much pressure can build up before it has to somehow come out, I'm standing there thinking, "Are you talking about the *water* or *me*?" Because if we lose the ability to regulate the pressure of stress and anxiety in our lives, it's only a matter of time before something blows. And if you remember, a year ago right now, it was only a matter of time for *me*.

Jesus says in this reading from Matthew, "Do not worry about your life," and Paul says to the Christians in Philippi, "Do not worry about anything." The word that Matthew and Paul both use there is the Greek word *merimnate*, and it gets translated elsewhere as *anxious*. "Do not be *anxious* about your life," "Do not be *anxious* about anything." Anxiety is defined as "anticipatory fear of a future problem."²

I want to stop right there for a moment. "Anticipatory fear of a future problem." There are sometimes when we *know* that something bad is going to happen in the future. If I keep driving

² https://mindessential.net/anxiety-statistics#What_is_Anxiety

my car toward the edge of the Grand Canyon, there is *going* to be a problem. But that's not what anxiety is about. Anxiety is about the *what ifs*. It's about the things that we can't possibly know if they're going to happen, but *what if they do?* It's not about anticipating the *actual* future, because none of us can actually *do* that. It reminds me of a line at the end of the movie *Back to the Future III*, when the scientist who invented time travel says, "Your future hasn't been written yet. No one's has. Your future is whatever you make it. So make it a good one."

Anxiety is not about anticipating the *actual* future, because the *actual* future hasn't been written yet. Anxiety is about anticipating an *imagined* future. It's about living so much in an imagined future that you begin to act out of fear *now*. And whether it's based in reality or not, *fear* is real.

So Jesus and Paul are both saying here, "Do not live in fear of an imagined future." Do not live in fear of the *what ifs*. *What if I get sick? What if this person I love gets sick? What if I don't have enough money? What if I don't have enough time? Are my kids safe? Is my job secure?* And there is no way we can possibly know what's going to happen in the future, but that doesn't make the fear that we feel any less real. Anxiety is being so fearful of an imagined future that it affects the way we live *now*.

But that word *merimnate* that Matthew and Paul use has another meaning. It is made up of two separate Greek words, *merizo* which means, "to divide," and *nous* which means, "the mind." To worry, to be anxious, *merimnate*, means, "to divide the mind." When Jesus tells us not to worry, he is literally telling us not to divide our minds. Worrying splits our minds, our time, our energy, and our focus between today's reality and tomorrow's fears. Part of our mind is focused on the *now*, and the other part is focused on the *not yet*; the *what if*. The result is *half-minded living*.

We can't focus our minds or time or energy on the things that require our focus *right now* because part of us is worried about what *might* happen in the future.

So Jesus talks about *birds* and *flowers* and says, "They don't worry about what they're going to *eat* or what they're going to *wear*. They belong to God. God takes care of them. God *provides* for them. *You* belong to God, too, and God will provide for you." I think that is *part* of how we can deal with anxiety when it comes, by reminding ourselves over and over and over, "I belong to God. God will take care of me. God will provide."

What Jesus is doing here is un-dividing our minds and drawing us back from an imagined future by grounding us in a present reality. *I belong to God. I belong to God. Yeah, but what if...? No, I belong to God. God will provide.* You're anxious about a health situation, test results? You belong to God. God will provide you with everything you need to face that. You're anxious about not having enough money? You belong to God. God will provide you with what you need to do what God is calling you to do. You're anxious about this difficult conversation you have to have with someone? You belong to God. God will provide you with everything you need to have that conversation. It *might* blow up in your face. But you belong to God, and God will provide when *that* happens, too.

Paul follows up on this in Philippians. He uses that same word, *merimnate*, when he says, "Do not worry about anything, do not *divide your mind* about anything, but pray about everything." When you start to worry and get divided between now and the future, ground yourself in a present reality by praying. Prayer is talking to God, listening to God, being present with God, and being aware of God's presence with you. And it is in that time together with God that you can be reminded that you belong to God and God will provide. We have to create intentional

space in our lives where we can be reminded of that. Which means we have to be intentional about prayer. Prayer cannot just be reactionary, in response to whatever situation pops up. It can *be* that, but it can't *only* be that. Prayer also has to be *preparatory*. By engaging in regular practices of prayer, God prepares our hearts and minds to face whatever situations come faithfully.

Prayer is like the pressure regulator on that pipe. It doesn't *stop* the pressure from coming in, but it makes it manageable. Prayer will not get rid of our anxiety, but it will make it a little more manageable and help us to keep going in the midst of it. There are other things that do that, too: exercise, therapy, medication. They won't *stop* the pressure and stress and anxiety from entering our lives, but they'll make it more manageable.

A year ago, I had nothing regulating the pressure and stress and anxiety in my life. I wasn't praying. I wasn't exercising. I wasn't talking to anyone about it. I wasn't taking any medication. And like with that water heater, only so much pressure can build up before it has to come out *somehow*. For me it came out in the form of panic attacks, over-functioning, trying to control *everything*, trying to make everything around me *perfect*. Which is impossible. Which only fuels the anxiety.

When I was able, through your incredible understanding and grace, to step away on a three-month medical leave, I recognized the *lack* of those things in my life; the lack of a pressure regulator. So I was very deliberate about adding those things to my life. And one of the things that I did was to be intentional about a daily practice of prayer. Every morning, I spent time with God – talking to God, listening to God, reading scripture, sitting in silence simply *being with* God. Every day. Even when I didn't feel like it. Because that's what a practice is, right? You

don't always feel like practicing basketball or soccer. You don't always feel like exercising. You don't always feel like practicing music. But it's in those times when you are intentional about doing it anyway that you grow.

When I came back at the end of that three months, I have been intentional about setting aside time each day to continue that practice of prayer. Because what I found was that it is the most important thing that I do. Spending time in prayer nurturing my relationship with God is the most important thing that I do, and I think it's the most important thing that *you* can do, too. Without a healthy prayer life, I cannot be the husband or father or pastor that I want to be. Everything else in my life flows from my relationship with God. Everything else in *your* life flows from your relationship with God. Because if you are not in communion with the God who created you, then how are you going to know who you're supposed to be and what you're supposed to do?

Prayer can take many forms. It might look different for you than it does for me. Paul doesn't tell us here *how* to pray. He just says, "With thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Well, there are a lot of ways to *do* that. But what he says next is, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Sometimes those things are hard to find in our lives. Sometimes it feels like everything is hard, everything is going wrong, and there is nothing excellent or worthy of praise. But maybe Paul isn't telling us to think about our own lives.

Because what is *always* true? Jesus Christ is. He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." What is *always* honorable? Jesus Christ is. What is always just? Jesus Christ is. What is

always pure? Jesus Christ is. What is always pleasing? Jesus Christ is. God says, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” What is always commendable? Jesus Christ is. What is always excellent? Jesus Christ is. What is always worthy of praise? Jesus Christ is. Prayer, at its core, is about directing our thoughts toward Jesus Christ. And if we can be intentional about doing *that*, it won’t *stop* the stress and anxiety in our lives, but it will help us to *face* it, because, as Paul says, the peace of God and the God of peace will be with us, reminding us that we belong to God and that God will provide. Amen.