

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 27: The Christian and Anxiety, Part 1

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Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof (Mt. 6:25-34).

After our Lord discussed the foolishness and danger of focusing one's mind on the things of this world, storing up treasures on earth and making a slave master out of possessions, He begins a new, closely related section in verse 25. The subject matter continues the general theme of a disciple's attitude toward possessions; but, from verse 25 to the end of the chapter, Jesus shifts His attention from temptations of people who are often more affluent and thus have the ability to hoard possessions, to people who worry about the bare necessities for living—food, clothing and water. Both groups are guilty of a lack of faith in God and of having wrong priorities, but exhibit this lack of faith in different ways, perhaps due to different circumstances.

The sections are connected by the word “therefore” (*dia touto*, literally, “on account of this”) which shows that this teaching (25-35) logically follows what precedes it. Many commentators connect the “therefore” only to verse 24 which speaks of the impossibility of two masters; but, it is more likely connected to the whole preceding section (19-24). Thus, the sense would be, since earthly treasures are undependable and temporary while heavenly treasure is permanent (19-21), those who focus their mind on earthly treasures instead of God are blind and full of darkness (22-23). Also, because it is impossible to serve both God and material possessions, do not be anxious about even the necessities of life such as food, clothing and water. After all, God who gave you your life regards you as more important than these things. Consequently, He will provide for you.

By way of introduction there are a number of things to consider about this section of Scripture. First, the translation of the King James Version, “Take no thought for your life,” is antiquated and easily misunderstood. The expression “take no thought for” is from the old English and was used by writers such as Shakespeare and Bacon in the sense of being anxious or excessively concerned. The Greek verb used is *merimnao* (from *merimna*) which means to be

anxious or excessively concerned. This verb comes from *merizo* and has the basic sense of being distracted or divided in mind. The person who is anxious has a disturbed mind that is in a continual state of painful uneasiness. “The cognate noun *merimna* occurs in 1 Macc. 6:10 and Sir. 42:9, where it is associated with sleeplessness.”¹ This verb occurs five times in this section (vs. 25, 27, 28, 31, 34), three of which are in the imperatival form. It is used only one other time in Matthew where Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about what to say when they are delivered up to the civil magistrate.

In this context the command is emphatic. The imperative is in the present tense and can have the meaning, “Do not have the habit of being anxious;” or, “If you are already in the habit of worrying, then stop it at once.” In verse 31, our Lord uses a different tense (aorist subjunctive), which has the sense of “do not become anxious” or “do not worry at all.” The forbidding of anxiety is clearly the central proposition of this whole section.

It is important that we note how radical this teaching is. It is crucial that we understand that faith in Christ and excessive worries about life are contrary to each other. Worrying over material needs is a sin that is dishonoring to God. It is explicitly forbidden by the Redeemer three times in these verses. If you are in the habit of excessive worry over the future, then you need to pay very close attention to this section of our Lord’s sermon. “There is scarcely any one sin against which our Lord Jesus more largely and earnestly warns his disciples, or against which he arms them with more variety of arguments, than the sin of disquieting, distracting, distrustful care about the things of this life...”² “The very fact that such anxiety is here forbidden not only exhibits once more the exalted standard of piety which is set before us in the Holy Scriptures, but also evidences their uniqueness, their Divine Authorship, for there is no other...religion in the world which condemns inordinate solicitude over the temporal necessities of life.”³ Although the natural man and our pagan culture see anxiety as a trifle, we must view it as a serious sin requiring repentance.

Second, this section, like the others, is clearly directed to Christians: “Therefore, I say to you.” It is a given that unbelievers who worship money and possessions will live with continual anxieties about the things needed for life. They do not trust in God and His providence and thus they, according to their own worldview, are adrift on a sea of chance where bad things can happen for no rhyme or reason. The life of unbelief is presented to people by the devil as the good and easy life, but the truth is completely different. Those who do not place their faith in God, who instead look to the things of this world, are weighed down with cares and troubles. Our Savior’s yoke is a light one. The more faith we have in Christ, the more peace of mind we will have—even in spite of trials and persecutions.

Fourth, in order to understand the command not to worry about provisions of our temporal needs, we need to learn the biblical distinction between a godly, balanced, moderate care for the future and an immoderate, overanxious, distrustful worrying about the future. This is particularly important in light of the fact that some professing Christians have misunderstood the King James translation, “Take no thought,” as an injunction not to think about or prepare for the future at all. Thus, there are professing Christian street people who live day to day and make virtually no contribution to society at all.

If we take the command not to be anxious about material needs in the broad context of Scripture, we see that a concern to prepare for the future is lawful and commended. We are

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 163.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:82.

³ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 219.

taught to look to the ant that makes preparation for the bad times by working diligently and storing up provisions during times of bounty (Pr. 6:6). We think once again of godly Joseph who put away grain for a time of famine (Gen. 41:47-49). Paul tells believers that if they don't work they should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10) and he commends parents for setting aside an inheritance for their children (2 Cor. 2:14; cf. Pr. 13:22; 19:14). Earlier we looked at the many passages that speak of using money responsibly, investing wisely, of working diligently (e.g., Pr. 21:5, 20; 22:7; 24:3-4; Mt. 25:27; Lk. 16:9-13). God teaches us to work hard, to try to stay out of debt, to prepare for hard times or what we would call economic downturns. The Bible says that such behavior is wise and can lead to prosperity. If farmers did not think about the future and store grain and other foods for the winter and for planting the next season, everyone would starve. Thus, we could even say that a man who is lazy, idle and irresponsible, who does not carefully plan for the future and work diligently to achieve certain realistic goals, is not a good Christian. "Jesus is not advocating a shiftless, thriftless, reckless, thoughtless, improvident attitude to life; he is forbidding a care-worn, worried fear, which takes all the joy out of life."⁴

In this regard, it is helpful to note that the same Greek word for anxiety is also sometimes used for lawful concerns in life. Paul speaks about married Christians having "cares" about how to please husband or wife in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34. The apostle uses the same word when he speaks of his "deep concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). "These passages show that the word sometimes expresses a lawful feeling of intense concern, which is directed towards proper objects, kept within due bounds, and stimulates efforts to do our duty."⁵ A concern for something lawful means that we take a biblical interest in that person or thing and use lawful means to help it (e.g., prayer, education, alms, kind acts, etc.). Worry is different, in that it is rooted in concern for the wrong things and for the wrong reasons. It is man-centered, rooted in a lack of faith, selfish, egotistical and irrational.

Consequently, the passage before us condemns people who are overly anxious and troubled in mind about the future because they are not trusting in God. There are many professing Christians who are constantly thinking about money and are very anxious about the future with no good biblical or rational reason whatsoever. God has provided for them time after time and has repeatedly demonstrated his kindness, yet such people continue to worry. They live with a nagging paranoia when it comes to money. The person who is continually troubled in mind lacks faith. He is not trusting in God's attributes or promises.

The connection between faith in God and not being anxious is very clear in Paul's classic statement on worry found in Philippians 4:6-7: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The Christian, who has fears and worries, must trust in God and show the fruit of that faith by turning his problems and anxieties over to Him. This trust results in peace. "[T]his is our consolation, this is our solace—to deposit, or (to speak with greater propriety) to disburden in the bosom of God everything that harasses us. Confidence, it is true, brings tranquility to our minds, but it is only in the event of our exercising ourselves in prayers."⁶ When the storms of life beat upon our hearts and begin to trouble our minds, we must look to God through Christ and take refuge in His loving arms.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:255.

⁵ John A. Broadus, *Commentaries on Matthew*, 148.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 119.

Fifth, this is a very common sin among professing Christians and even plagued the Old Testament people of God. When the Jews were delivered from Egypt, they complained about a lack of water (Ex. 15:24) and about food (Ex. 16:2). They even argued to Moses and Aaron that they had brought the people out into the wilderness to starve to death (Ex. 16:3). When we examine ourselves, we have to admit that we have worried at times over the necessities of life. This has especially been a problem for many women. A good number of women are completely dependent on their husbands to provide for the family and not all husbands are reliable or good at making money. Excessive worry is also common among heads of households who have a responsibility to care for a family. Sometimes there are economic downturns and men lose their jobs. Under such circumstances there is a strong temptation for both husband and wife to worry. The news media in our day is constantly speaking about the economy and especially focuses on negative statistics and dire warnings. People are trained by our unbelieving culture to worry about the future and fret over the economy. Consequently, we could say that excessive worry is not only a symptom of unbelief, but is often also the counterpart to covetousness. Thus, we understand why Jesus repeats His command three times and has so many excellent reasons why worrying is wrong. Our Lord came to set us free from sin, bondage and the anxieties that flow from such bondage.

Satan's goal is to take our minds off of Christ and our proper service toward our Savior. He knows that many Christians are not so stupid as to focus their lives on material things and riches. Such covetousness and idolatry is too crass and obvious. Therefore, he takes a much more subtle back door approach with many Christians by attempting to chip away at their trust in God and getting them to worry about everything he possibly can (e.g., family, finances, church, relationships, etc.). He really does not care what you worry about because he knows that such anxiety is incompatible with a strong confidence in Jesus Christ. He knows that, for the most part, the anxious, fretting believer is useless in Christ's kingdom. The man who is paralyzed with fear is the man in full retreat from kingdom responsibilities. The person who is consumed with anxiety will not take the offensive against the world, the flesh and the devil. He is too busy contemplating his own problems and feeling sorry for himself to fight. The devil also knows that anxiety is not considered a sin in our culture, but merely a disease that needs to be medicated with drugs and soothed with self-esteem platitudes. Worrying has become the acceptable sin. But, beloved, let us not be fooled by these hellish tactics. Let us not die in the wilderness because we were focused on our bellies instead of Christ. Jesus has given us blessed truths by which we can conquer our fears and rebuke the attacks of Satan.

Sixth, our Lord supports His prohibition with several clever, irrefutable arguments. There are seven: (1) Life is more important than food or clothing. (2) God cares for the birds and we are more important than birds. (3) Worrying cannot add to our stature or lifespan. (4) God beautifully adorns the flowers and we are much more important than flowers. (5) To worry about these things is to act like heathen. (6) God knows what we need. (7) Sufficient is the trouble for each day. Another reason, by way of precept, is that if we seek God's kingdom first these things will be given to us. In some of these arguments Jesus makes brilliant use of parabolic imagery. He often appeals to undeniable facts of nature that would have had a dramatic effect on His hearers. His refutation of anxiety is so full and multi-faceted that disciples who are guilty of this sin are immediately convicted of the foolishness of such behavior. May God apply this rich teaching to our hearts as we turn our attention to our Savior's specific reasons to avoid being anxious.

The Importance of Life

The first argument is based on the truth that our life or existence is much more important than the things that sustain life such as food and clothing. “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” (25). Here Jesus argues from the greater to the lesser as if to say, “What is more important, your life and your physical body or the things needed to sustain and care for your life and body? This is an observation that everyone would immediately recognize to be true. If a man’s house is on fire, he flees the house to save his life. Food and clothing are necessary to sustain life; but, they are merely supports to life. They are not life itself; they are inanimate objects that are not even comparable to human life. “The daintiest food and finest raiment are from the *earth*, but life from the *breath of God*. Life is the *light of men*; meat is but the *oil* that feeds that light.”⁷ Our Lord taught that the whole world is not worth even one soul (Mt. 16:26).

Thus, the Savior’s rhetorical question teaches us that since God gave us life (indeed, we are created in the image of God) and created our bodies (which are fearfully and wonderfully made), we have an excellent reason to trust Him for food and clothing. After all, if God provided us with our life, which is the greatest, most noble gift possible, will He not also provide those simple, rudimentary things needed to sustain that life? The logic behind this argument is impeccable. The creation of man was an act of God’s power and favor. Jehovah did not create man to let him starve, but also created abundant provision for food and clothing. “When God gives, He gives royally and liberally, honestly and sincerely, logically and completely.”⁸

The unbeliever cannot take comfort in the goodness and mercy of God because he believes that ultimately everything is arbitrary. The universe and our existence, he believes, is a great accident. But we know that man did not come into being by chance. We know that we did not evolve from pond scum or appear out of the void by random mutation. God gave us life and He has an intimate knowledge of who we are and what we need to survive. Consequently, we dishonor God and demonstrate our distrust of Him when we do not place our confidence in Him for food and clothing. Whenever we begin to worry about our material needs, let us remind ourselves that God will take care of the life which He gave us. The God who breathed life into the dust and created the universe from nothing can easily give us bread and raiment.

We should also remember that, in addition to our regular lives, God has given us eternal life. This renders anxieties over material necessities even more absurd. Paul tells us that if God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also freely give us all things” (Rom. 8:32). “He that guards us against the evils we are exposed to, will supply us with the *good things* we are in need of. If he had been pleased to kill us, to starve us, he would not so often have *given his angels a charge concerning us* to keep us.”⁹ When you are tempted to worry, think about the many times that your heavenly Father’s special providence has come to your rescue.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 227.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

The Example of the Birds

The second reason is taken from God's providential care of birds. "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Mt. 6:26). Here we have our Lord's first example from nature. Israel was full of birds and was a stop for many migrating birds on their way back and forth from Europe and Africa. In the law's discussion of unclean birds, no less the nineteen birds are mentioned (Lev. 11:13-19). It is probable that birds could be seen by the multitude, flying and even feeding as Christ spoke these words.

Jesus' example contains two elements. (1) He points out that, as creatures far inferior to man, birds have no real logical thinking ability to plan ahead. They do not know how to plant or harvest crops. Also, they do not know how to build barns for the long term storage of food. Yet, in spite of all this, they are fed and taken care of by God. This point should not be construed as teaching that birds do absolutely nothing for their food, for they are almost constantly searching for seeds, insects or prey. They are diligent creatures. It is God, however, that created the things that birds need to eat; who sends rain and sunshine to the earth; who, by His sovereign power, causes everything to grow.

This passage is an excellent proof text against Deism and all impersonal concepts of the natural realm. God is in complete control of everything from birds, to ants and atoms. That He cares for all the lower creatures is taught throughout Scripture. God taught Job saying, "Who provides food for the raven, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (38:41). David says that God feeds the sea creatures in their due season (Ps. 104:27); that all eyes look expectantly to God for their food (Ps. 145:15). This providential care flows from God's goodness. God governs His world with tender care and compassion even in its fallen estate. Although it is true that there is much suffering and hardship in this world and even droughts where many animals perish, these things are the exception, not the rule.

(2) After the illustration of God's care for the birds, our Lord appeals to an argument from the lesser to the greater. This argument is based on the biblical teaching that man is the crown of God's creation and far superior to birds. "The assumption that God's human creation is of more importance to him than the non-human (cf. 10:31; 12:12) echoes the pattern of the Genesis creation narrative, where human beings constitute the final and climactic act of creation and are given authority over the rest of animal creation (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. Adam's naming of the animals in Gen. 2:19-20)."¹⁰

The gist of what Jesus is saying is as follows: If God takes care of birds that are inferior, irrational creatures that are not even able to grow crops or store food, then obviously He will take care of you who are much more important and valuable than birds. Birds have tiny little brains and are completely unable to provide for themselves with careful foresight, yet God supplies their needs. Will He not then provide for you whom He has given great intelligence, reason, the ability to make and use sophisticated tools as well as plan ahead? "Note, the *heirs* of heaven are much better than the fowls of heaven; nobler and more excellent beings, and, by faith, they soar higher; they are of a better nature and nurture, *wiser than the fowls of heaven* (Job xxxv.11)."¹¹ Christ uses a similar argument in Luke 12:6: "Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten by God. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

¹⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 268.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:83.

Our faith in who God is and how He operates should dispel our anxiety. Jehovah assigns a great value to those created in His own image. He assigns a far greater value to the objects of His grace that are washed in the blood of His Son and clothed with His perfect righteousness. We will not worry when we focus on the fact that everything is arranged and appointed by God; that by God's sovereign power all things are "working together" for our good (Rom. 8:28). We must have a continued focus on God's sovereign loving hand in the things that happen to us. We must live by the sight of faith and not the vision of the flesh which looks for bad in everything and refuses to trust God. Let us meditate on the fact that God is watching over us and guiding our steps. This kind of thinking and living is the only sure path to contentment and happiness. Even in times of trial and discouragement we must trust in God's love and compassion. We must remind ourselves that God could deliver us out of these harsh circumstances, but for some wise loving reason He has not. God knows exactly what He is doing and has promised us that this experience must be for our benefit. "Hence it is evident, that Christ intended nothing more than to teach his people to throw all their cares on God."¹²

Worrying Accomplishes Nothing

Jesus' next rhetorical question drives home the point that worrying is useless or ineffective: "Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?" (Mt. 6:27). The Greek word translated "stature" (*helikia*) can also refer to a person's age or length of life. This is almost universally true of classical Greek and is the predominant usage in the Greek Septuagint. The same word is translated "age" in John 9:21, 23 ("He is of age, ask him."). Given the fact that the context here is physical survival not stature and that it is common knowledge that excessive anxiety shortens life rather than extends it, it is likely that our Lord is referring to the length of one's life and not height. This view is supported by the fact that a cubit is about eighteen inches and thus only an extremely short person would dwell on adding that amount to his height. Moreover, there is precedent in Scripture for applying a physical method of measuring to time: "You have made my days as handbreaths" [i.e. short] (Ps. 39:5). Thus we could paraphrase the meaning of this verse as: "Who among you by worrying is able to increase your lifespan even a little?"

This is another brilliant, irrefutable argument. A person can worry all day long and even lay in bed worrying during the night, but all that suffering and anxiety is a complete waste of time. It cannot change the outcome of anything. It is totally useless. It will not add a single second to one's lifespan. In fact, worrying is worse than useless because it leads to all sorts of problems: depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, sleeplessness, gluttony, drunkenness and drug abuse. Many of us have personally experienced the utter foolishness of anxiety by going through some bad times, worrying and losing sleep for days and even weeks. Then, after the Lord providentially works everything out just fine, we realize that all of that suffering and anxiety was for nothing. It was stupid, irrational, counterproductive and sinful. It was a symptom of a lack of faith in God.

Since we cannot alter our lifespan at all through anxiety, we must trust in God and submit to the disposals of divine providence. It is the power, mercy and goodness of God that keeps us alive, not our irrational fears. Therefore, instead of worrying about material things, we show daily acknowledgment of God's goodness through prayer and praise and trust Him for all our

¹² John Calvin, *A Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*, 1:341.

needed supplies. This is a simple, biblical and rational view of life. Yet, many professing Christians insist on clinging to their anxieties. They would do well to break this sinful habit by memorizing this verse and focusing on the fact that our life is a gift from God. We should go about our work and be diligent in our religious duties and be happy that ultimately God is in control, not us. Those who do not believe in the sovereignty of God, such as Pelagians and Arminians, have every reason to worry because they have placed the human will upon the throne of destiny. Calvinists, however, have no excuse whatsoever for nail biting and worry. They understand the biblical truth that God is in control of all our circumstances. Christ is king, not chance. With Jeremiah we should say, “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (10:23).

Consider the Lilies

In our Lord’s fourth argument, He returns to another example from nature. In an argument that is similar to the one about birds (v. 26), He now points us to the lilies (vs. 28-30). “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (Mt. 6:28-30).

Here Jesus begins with a question that both implied that some of His disciples were worrying and that such worrying was unwarranted. In the example of the birds, the focus was on food, while this illustration deals with clothing. The verb “consider” is a command to “notice carefully” or “study closely” and implies that we are to learn something from such a close examination. Greek scholars and commentators have no idea *exactly* what kind of flower (or flowers) the term “lilies” (*krina*) refers to. Given the context (“the grass of the field” [30]) it is very likely that Christ is referring to wild flowers in general. There are many species of wildflowers that grow on the hillsides of Galilee that are very beautiful. After the spring rains, the hillsides are covered with a dazzling array of colors.

The argument that Jesus presents is once again from the lesser to the greater. It contains three elements. First, our Lord points out the fact that flowers do not toil nor spin. Flowers are even more passive than birds. Birds can fly around and look for seeds and insects. But flowers do not toil at all. Men have to go out and work to make a living if they are going to purchase clothes. Flowers do not do anything. They soak up the sun and drink in the rain that God provides for them. Women can work hard and spin and sew pieces of fabric together into clothes. But flowers just sit there, passive. They cannot move about, let alone spin; yet, God provides for them abundantly.

Second, the inferiority of flowers is demonstrated by their exceptionally transitory nature. In hot, arid climates after a rainstorm, the hillsides, which were completely brown and barren, spring forth into a beautiful tapestry of flowers. But, not long after the rains are over, the flowers wilt and the hillsides are covered in a mass of brown stems. This point is emphasized by the statement, “which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven” (Mt. 6:30). Flowers are not only transitory, but once they dry out their only use is for fuel in an oven. Notwithstanding their extreme beauty, wild flowers are on the same level as common grass. In Middle Eastern societies at that time where firewood was unavailable and coal nonexistent, families would gather whatever they could to burn as fuel to cook food. Dead grass and wildflowers were gathered and tied into bundles and were thrown into the fires under their brick ovens to cook. (Dried dung was

also saved for this purpose.) The flowers had a very brief existence which often ended in the flame. In this illustration flowers are placed on an even lower scale of value than birds. Wildflowers are passive, exceptionally transitory and are destined for the flames of the oven. Yet, God clothes them with a beauty so amazing and extraordinary that the richest, best adorned monarch on earth (Solomon) does not even come close to their beauty.

Third, after pointing out the inferiority of flowers in value yet their superiority of beauty, which is a gift of God, Jesus draws His conclusion: “Will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” The point is that if God provides so well for these little transitory flowers by His power and providence, then we can obviously trust Him to meet our essential needs in the sphere of clothing. If God gave the flowers such gorgeous attire, then we can have a strong confidence that He will give the needed clothing to His own dear children. Since Jehovah has clothed the lilies, then we can rest assured that He will clothe those who have been created in His image and who have immortal souls. We are much more important to God than grass and flowers which are food for cattle and fuel for ovens. If God, in His plan of creation and providence, makes flowers so excellent, then it is foolish to think that He will leave us unadorned and out in the cold. “In other words, biblical cosmology plus observant eyes engender real trust in God.”¹³ “Lovely lilies, how ye rebuke our foolish nervousness! The array of lilies comes without fret: why do we kill ourselves with care about that which God gives to plants which cannot care?”¹⁴

In modern America where modest clothes are usually very cheap and easy to obtain, there is not the kind of worry about clothes as bare necessities that occurred in ancient times. Today fretting about clothes (at least in wealthy countries) is connected with covetousness and a lack of contentment. Men and especially young women lust after fancy clothes and the latest fashions. They are continually looking at catalogs, websites, shopping malls and clothing stores for the latest fashions, accessories, shoes, purses and jewelry. They obsess about things they want, but do not have and usually cannot afford. They are more concerned with keeping up with the latest styles than in serving Christ and humbly walking before Him. For such people clothes have moved from the realm of necessity to an exhibition of pride. It is a form of gross worldliness when young men and women concern themselves with what the surrounding heathen think of their attire. It is the embracing of vanity and extravagance. It is rooted in a pagan desire for popularity. It is a form of materialism that is a species of idolatry.

The key to humbling proud, worldly hearts, subduing inordinate cares and immoderate lusting after clothes and accessories is this lesson of the lilies. If God wanted us to be as beautiful as the wild flowers in our attire, then He would have made us so. But even Solomon with his silks, gold and jewels is nothing compared to the hillsides in spring. Attempting to achieve such beauty is vanity. Thus, we must be content with the ordinary garments that God supplies. Clothes, like food, are to serve our bodies and not the other way around.

Moreover, we need to meditate on the fact that, although our souls are immortal, our earthly bodies have something in common with the grass of the field. Man’s days on this earth are numbered. As Peter says, “All flesh is like grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever” (1 Pet. 1:24-25; cf. Isa. 40:6-8). We will live our allotted time on this earth and then we will be cast in the grave where our flesh will rot and be consumed as in an oven. Thus, to be overly concerned about clothing and fashion shows that one’s priorities are all wrong; that our hearts and minds are focused on this world and not on the world to come. Remember, that your

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 91-92.

¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 74.

handsome body and beautiful clothes will rot; that the body you pampered and clothed will be consumed by worms. In view of this, we need to devote our energies toward “the beauty of holiness” (1 Chr. 16:29), for this is the beauty that really matters. It cannot disappoint us for it will never fade away, but will be rewarded by God forever. Does your ambition rise no higher than to appear as the wildflowers and impress those around you? If so, then remember that death and the oven of the grave await you. You need to repent and listen to Peter who said, “Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

Men of Little Faith

As our Lord’s argument about anxiety over clothing comes to a climax, Jesus calls His disciples men “of little faith” (*oligopistoi*). This is a gentle rebuke designed to cause the believers to embrace the Savior’s imperatives and supporting arguments and replace this weakness with a strong, steady belief. There are a number of things that are noteworthy about this statement.

First, it proves once again that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is directed specifically to Christians, not unbelievers. Christ does not say that they had no faith at all or that their faith was counterfeit and worthless, but that it was “little” or weak. These were men who understood their guilt and sin and thus mourned over their record and their heart. They knew that they were helpless to save themselves from their predicament and, thus, were meek before God. They thirsted for righteousness and came to the Redeemer as naked beggars in the dust. They had faith, but it was weak and deficient in this area of trusting in God’s care and provision for their needs.

Second, it is an expression used to describe the apostles on a number of occasions. Besides our text, on a different occasion, Jesus says the same thing in relation to their worry about clothes (Lk. 12:28). When the disciples feared because of the great storm on the sea Christ said, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (Mt. 8:26). After Peter began to sink in the water the Savior caught him by the hand and said, “O you of little faith, why do you doubt?” (Mt. 14:31). After the great miracle of the multiplying of the bread and fish, our Lord rebuked the disciples for not remembering the lesson of His power in connection with food (Mt. 16:8). It is very interesting that the gospel accounts repeatedly portray the disciples as weak in faith in spite of the Redeemer’s presence, teaching and repeated use of His amazing miraculous power. This is clear and excellent evidence for the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

Jesus’ great love toward His disciples did not cause Him to withhold painful truths or rebukes from His apostles. On the contrary, He repeatedly corrects their weakness because He loves them and wants them to be strong. The soft, antinomian, non-confrontational version of Christianity that is so common among evangelical and Reformed churches in our day is more a reflection of our lax, lawless, permissive, pluralistic culture than it is a reflection of the teaching of Scripture or the example of Christ and the prophets. We must not skirt the truth or explain it away, but speak it in love (Eph. 4:15).

Third, it is important that we understand that Christians have different levels of faith and that our Lord is encouraging us to strengthen or increase our faith. A person can have a very weak and imperfect faith and yet still be saved by the Redeemer. We must always keep in mind that it is Jesus that saves us and not our faith. A person’s faith may be very feeble, yet the Savior it grasps *is infinitely strong to save*. What Christ wants us to understand is that an assailed or

weakened faith may be strengthened and grow if we meditate on and pray over God's promises. That is the main point of all these arguments. Our Lord keeps pointing us to God's gracious character and the proof of His goodness in creation. If we meditate on who God really is and we think upon His providences and promises, we can subdue our doubts and increase our faith. Faith, as it relates to sanctification and daily living, needs to be nurtured and exercised. In these areas God does not simply bestow more faith mystically and immediately, but rather uses the ordinary means of grace. Consequently, we are responsible to care for our faith, nurture it and increase it.

Is your faith or trust in God weak when it comes to basic necessities? Do you have the sinful habit of worrying about money and the future? If you are, then you need to *read* God's Word daily. You must study, memorize and meditate on passages that speak of God's goodness, love, faithfulness, grace and mercy. There must be a careful consideration of the doctrine of Christ's intercession and God's loving preservation of His people. Also, there must be a continued concentration on the cross of Christ. The more we learn of Jesus and His Word, the more absurd, irrational and stupid worry becomes. We must pray that God, by His Holy Spirit, would use His ordained means to enable our faith to grow and our anxiety to subside. Faith enables us to hand over all our earthly cares to God because we know He cares for us. Let us not be guilty of remaining men of little faith. "Little faith' is not a little fault; for it greatly wrongs the Lord, and sadly grieves the fretful mind. To think the Lord who clothes lilies will leave his own children naked is shameful. O little faith, learn better manners!"¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ibid, 75.