

June 6 Lesson 1 (NIV)

FREED FROM WORRY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezekiel 34:11-16

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6:19-34

MATTHEW 6:25-34

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

KEY VERSES

The pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
—Matthew 6:32-33

CONFIDENT HOPE

Unit 1: Jesus Teaches About Faith

LESSONS 1-5

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- B. Prayer
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HOW TO SAY IT

Galilee*Gal*-uh-lee.

Gentiles*Jen*-tiles.

omniscient*tahm-nish*-unt.

Solomon*Sol*-o-mun.

Introduction

A. What, Me Worry?

From its appearance in 1952 until it stopped monthly publication in 2019, *Mad* magazine poked fun at politics, television, movies, and everyday American life. Its irreverent theme was that the powerful and influential were continually phony and corrupt. In the pages of *Mad*, everything was falling apart.

On the cover of nearly every *Mad* magazine from 1954 until 2019 was a cartoon image of a gap-toothed, grinning boy who looked like he cared for nothing except making mischief. Christened Alfred E. Neuman, his motto was “What, me worry?” *Mad* was saying that the world might be unraveling, but those who read *Mad*’s cheeky parodies could adopt the cover boy’s devil-may-care indifference.

Worry is a universal human experience. Our brains constantly provoke us to evaluate our circumstances and identify threats to our well-being. Threats are many, but even when they are minor, we exaggerate them or imagine threats that do not exist. We leave ourselves with restlessness, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, short tempers, and feelings of hopelessness. We would like to have Alfred E. Neuman's carefree outlook, but we cannot pull it off.

Jesus addresses our deep capacity to worry in today's text. He tells us not to worry, but he does so differently from others. And his conclusions are cause for great faith in God.

B. Lesson Context

Today's text is near the middle of Jesus' discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Containing some of the best known of Jesus' teachings, the sermon answers the question raised by Jesus' announcement of the coming of God's kingdom (4:17): What is life like under God's rule?

Jesus' answers touch on the most sensitive areas of human experience. God will bless the weak and lowly (Matthew 5:3–6), those who reflect God's character (5:7–9), and those who suffer in the name of Jesus (5:10–12). God's people will be ambassadors of his redeeming truth (5:13–16), fulfilling God's will with lives that are righteous inside and out (5:17–30). Their integrity and love will reflect God's own, extending even to those who wish them ill (5:31–48). They will be godly not simply on the outside, where others can see, but also inside, where God alone sees (6:1–8, 14–24). God's people will let him judge others, as they pursue his righteousness and give help to others in that pursuit (7:1–6)

Repeatedly in the sermon, Jesus addressed the problem of worry. Subjects under God's rule are to pray for God's will to be done in all the earth, dependent on him to supply the resources, grace, and strength that they need daily (Matthew 6:9–13). They live in confidence that God is a kind, generous Father who gladly gives his children what they need to thrive (7:7–12)

Our text is preceded by statements that contrast the trust of a citizen in God's kingdom with the life of someone who lacks that trust. If God cannot be trusted to provide for us, we must provide for ourselves by accumulating and hoarding possessions. But we know those will fail us in the end. Only storing "treasures in heaven" works in the long run. This happens as we put our confidence in God's reliable promise to provide (Matthew 6:19–21).

I. More Than Birds

(MATTHEW 6:25–27)

A. Freedom from Worry (v. 25)

25. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"

The focus of *worry* is first on survival. For the vast majority of people in Jesus' day, food was grown on one's own land, water drawn from wells daily, and clothing sewn by hand. Those tasks required an enormous share of one's time, energy, and resources. Most people did not have disposable income. They used all they had to meet their most basic needs.

Jesus was reorienting their focus away from worry and toward trust. For the person who knows the true God and believes that he now rules the world, the perspective is different. There is *more to life* than *food* and *clothes*.

B. Provision for the Weak (v. 26)

26. “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

In Jesus’ day as now, *the birds of the air* are of little value and very vulnerable. But in God’s design, they are fed not by their industry but by the *Father*. They gather whatever food God provides for them in the natural ecosystem. Jesus used this imagery to argue from the lesser to the greater: if God provides for birds, how much more will he care for people created in his image?

Jesus was not encouraging people to stop growing food. He assumed, rather, that sowing, harvesting, and storing are what people ought to do. After all, God created humans to work in the garden (Genesis 2:15), and he commanded Israel to work (Exodus 20:9; compare 2 Thessalonians 3:10). The idea, rather, is one of trust as a hallmark of faith: because God feeds the birds, how much more are we to trust him!

C. The Futility of Worry (v. 27)

27. “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

To the comparison with birds, Jesus adds the observation that *worrying* can *add* nothing to *life*. Worry, the stressful anticipation of terrible things that might happen in the future, accomplishes nothing lasting. The word translated *hour* can refer either to time (length of one’s life in this context) or height. Older translations of the Bible opt for the height idea in speaking of “one cubit” instead of *single hour*. (A cubit is a measure of physical length, about 18 inches, the distance from an adult’s elbow to fingertip.) However, the context is about length of life rather than physical stature.

II. More Than Flowers

(MATTHEW 6:28–30)

A. Provision for the Helpless (vv. 28–29)

28. “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.”

Clothing is a necessity for humans. For Jesus’ audience, clothing was difficult to come by (compare Matthew 6:25, above). Nothing was automated; there were no textile mills. Rather, sheep had to be raised and shorn personally. Flax had to be grown and harvested. Fibers had to be spun into thread. Threads had to be woven into cloth on manual looms. Cloth had to be cut and sewn into garments.

All these processes were done by hand, requiring much time and energy. In the end, only the wealthy owned much more than a single garment per person (compare Judges 14:12). Being without adequate clothing left a person without protection from natural phenomena and signaled a low status as society saw things (compare 1 Corinthians 4:11).

Jesus contrasted this situation with that of common wildflowers. These plants did no work, and certainly did nothing that compared with the tedious handcraft by which Jesus' audience clothed themselves. *Flowers* were quite ordinary in Galilee, as they are today. Even so, God made them beautiful.

29. “Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

Solomon was the wealthiest king on earth when he ruled over Israel (1 Kings 10:14–29). When people the world over came to Solomon to hear his wise teaching, they regularly brought rich gifts for him, including “robes, weapons” (10:25). Surely the king with the most splendid palace also had the most beautiful clothing!

But the sight of the wealthiest king's clothing could not rival the sight of a meadow in full bloom. God's care for common flowers surpasses how any person can dress himself or herself.

B. Provision for Small Faith (v. 30)

30. “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Again Jesus argued from the lesser to the greater. The *grass of the field* lasts only for a season. Then, even the most beautiful blooms dry up and are used in fires for cooking. If God gave splendid clothing to the common plants, how *much more* would he do so for his people? Jesus' audience could see that God cared for the plants. They should see the same for themselves.

In Matthew Jesus used the phrase *you of little faith* to rebuke his disciples when they failed to trust him while in danger or need (compare Matthew 8:26 [see lesson 2]; 14:31 [see lesson 4]; 16:8). In every instance, Jesus provided what his “little faith” followers needed.

Jesus commended great faith on occasion (Matthew 8:10; 15:28). But faith as small as a mustard seed can accomplish great things (17:20). Even so, faith that doesn't grow is a stagnant faith (compare 2 Thessalonians 1:3).

III. Trusting God

(MATTHEW 6:31–34)

A. Questions Worry Asks (v. 31)

31. “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’

With the word *so*, Jesus began to shift from what not to do to what to do. Another context in which Jesus instructs them *do not worry* is Matthew 10:19 and its parallels in Mark 13:11 and Luke 12:11. The idea is not one of ignoring common-sense planning (see Luke 14:28–32; Romans 15:24; etc.). Rather, what Jesus condemned was undue anxiety (compare Matthew 13:22; Luke 8:14; 21:34; Philippians 4:6).

B. Worry and Ignorance (v. 32)

32. “For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

The word *pagans* refers to those not of the Jewish faith. A common trait among pagans was their worship of false gods (example: Deuteronomy 7:1–6). The pagans had God’s general revelation through nature (Romans 1:18–20), but had not received God’s special revelation of his inspired Word (compare Acts 17:22–23). Those who fret over life’s necessities are behaving as if they had not received God’s Word—like pagans do.

The *heavenly Father* is all-knowing (omniscient). He recognizes every human need (compare Matthew 5:45). He is ready and able to meet human needs. To fret is to indicate lack of faith regarding God’s character and power.

C. Replacing Worry with Faith (vv. 33–34)

33. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

In contrast to the one who worries unduly is the person who seeks *first* the *kingdom* of God. Jesus’ followers want above all for God’s will to be done everywhere as he reigns (Matthew 6:10). We are to be focused not on providing for ourselves as did Demas (2 Timothy 4:9), but on serving, obeying, and sharing God. The parable in Luke 12:15–21 stands as an additional warning in this regard.

To seek God’s kingdom goes hand in hand with seeking *his righteousness*. The two cannot be separated (compare Matthew 5:6, 10, 20; Romans 14:17; Hebrews 1:8). What Jesus expresses here is the active pursuit of righteousness, which complements his earlier statements. For those in the kingdom of God, nothing matters as much as having God’s righteousness—his right way—prevailing in the world.

To seek God’s kingdom and righteousness before our basic needs appears to make us more vulnerable. But in fact, the opposite is true. Because God reigns in his kingdom, he is able to grant his people exactly what they need, when they need it.

No less than Jesus himself promises that those who seek first the kingdom will receive *all these things*—namely the basic needs of life. God’s provision is more reliable than anything we could plan and accumulate for ourselves. By yielding first attention to matters of God’s kingdom, we as Christians acknowledge that we do not hold ultimate power over our survival. God does! And God promises that he provides for his people under his rule.

We cannot stress enough that this promise has to do with God’s meeting our needs, not our wants. Many have distorted this text and others like it to suggest that if people pursue God’s kingdom vigorously enough, then God will grant material abundance, whatever we ask for. That obviously ignores the emphasis of this passage (compare James 4:3).

Jesus speaks entirely of foundational needs. The whole emphasis of his teaching in this section is on trust in God and submission to his will. Those who do so realize that they are not in a position to specify the precise amount of material goods that they require. Rather, they trust

God to give them what they need in the right amount. They express faith not by demanding more, but by believing that what God supplies is sufficient.

It is also important to note that Jesus' teaching does not imply that people do nothing for their own support. We seek the kingdom first, but we continue to obey God's purpose for humanity as expressed in creation: to do useful work in the world (example: 2 Thessalonians 3:12).

The issue is not whether or not to work, but in how we approach our work (compare 2 Thessalonians 3:8; 1 Timothy 1:8; 2 Timothy 2:21; 4:5). Pursuing God's kingdom frees us from anxiety as we work because we trust God; we are not testing him (compare Luke 4:12; etc.). We see our work not as the means of providing for ourselves, but as God's provision for our needs. Further, we are to see our work as a way of serving God and pursuing God's right way.

Jesus demonstrated personally what it means to seek God's kingdom first. The kingdom came through Jesus' willing death for the sake of those who deserved only death. Though like anyone he did not want to die, Jesus committed himself to the kingdom plan (Matthew 26:42). At first, his death appeared to be the most terrible end to his story. But just as Jesus had promised, he rose to life again (16:21; 28:5–7). Jesus now lives a triumphant, never-ending life for God's triumphant, never-ending kingdom.

34a. "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."

Jesus' closing remarks remind us again that God is in control of the future over which we have much less, if any, power. To *not worry* means to have no anxiety, to not fret. Jesus does not exclude prudent planning or saving (see again Luke 14:28–32 and Romans 15:24). Rather, his words remind us that our planning and saving ought not be motivated by fear. Instead, it is directed by trust in God and for his will.

The expression *tomorrow will worry about itself* is ironic but clear: "The future," an inanimate entity, obviously does not worry. People, however, are more than capable of worrying! We worry not only about tomorrow, but also about months and years into the future! The God who is sovereign over the future promises to care for his people. Even if the worst happens, God's people can be confident that he will provide for us, both in this life and in the life to come.

34b. "Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Why worry about tomorrow when there are *enough* problems today? For the follower of Jesus, the focus is not to be on the uncertain future, but on the concrete present. To worry about tomorrow could be classified as poor stewardship if it results in today's problems going unaddressed. Jesus calls his people to be obedient in "the now," not anxious about "the later."

Conclusion

A. With Us to the End

Few passages of the Bible challenge us relentlessly throughout life as much as does this one. Do you see all the ways it makes us think about our lives? Trusting God for the future, seeking his kingdom constantly as the first priority, makes us ponder how we use our time, where we place our efforts, how we relate to the people around us, and how we feel inside.

Jesus gives his followers a great responsibility in this passage. But we are missing the point if we feel burdened by that responsibility. When we listen carefully, we realize that Jesus is not making our lives harder with these words. Rather, he is making our lives easier. We are free from the burden of worry when we submit to God.

Clearly, worry does not keep us alive and well. Only God's provision can sustain us through the trials of life. And certainly only God can give us a life that triumphs over death. God's provision is powerful. He provides exactly what his people need. Trusting in God's provision is the antidote to worry. Do you worry but rename it something like "concern" to pretend you are not violating Jesus' command?

B. Prayer

God our Father, give us confidence in your provision so that our worries are silenced! As you do, may we respond with trust so that our hearts will pursue your rule. Grant us strength in the Holy Spirit to pursue your righteousness as subjects in your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

"Worry ... empties today of its strength."

—Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983)

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING¹
