

Dating, Sex, Marriage
RUF, Fall 2012

Trusting God in Relationships

Matthew 6:24-34

Introduction

After last week, someone came up to me and asked if I was going to talk about singleness at all. It's a great question since most of you are single. And so I asked if she wanted to be single forever? That's a possibility that the New Testament talks about – someone who is called to remain single, devoting his/ her life to ministry and the work of the Church. And she said no... very violently... very convincingly. She didn't want to be single forever. But she is single now. And I think she represents the overwhelming majority of you who are single. You see your singleness as less than ideal. You don't want it to be permanent. You want to be in a relationship, if not now, then some day. And yet, you understand that you can't force a romance. That's why the idea of "fate" plays such a big role in the way we as a culture view romance. We understand that relationships are at least partly out of our control. Something outside of us has to play a part, and when it works in our favor, when things really click, we call it "destiny."

In Christianity, there is no such thing as fate. We use a different word to describe what's going on around us, and that word is called, "providence." Providence means that God is supporting and arranging his entire creation. From the big stuff to the tiny stuff, God is involved in it all. But here's the kicker – he doesn't share all the details with us. Most of the time, how God is at work in us and around us, well, it's shrouded in mystery.

I don't like mystery. I like math. I like predictability. As a friend of mine said recently, we wish God were more like the Weather Channel. Pull him up as an app on your phone and find out what your personal life circumstances will look like hour by hour. Wouldn't that be awesome? You'd like to know that there is 70% chance of you meeting a great guy on Thursday if you're eating lunch at Umph at 12:30, or that your upcoming accounting exam is easy enough that you don't have to pack your textbook at all over Fall Break.

But God isn't a Weather Channel app. The Bible says that he is the ruler of creation and that he is the heavenly Father of those who entrust themselves to him. And much of the details of how those two things come together – how he rules his world on one hand and how he rules our personal lives on the other – he keeps to himself.

And frankly, that worries us. Especially when that which we want so badly feels out of our control.

So what do we do? How do we deal with our anxiety? How do we live, not passively, but actively entrusting ourselves to God's "providence"? What does that look like, specifically in our relationships?

Let's read together from perhaps the most famous sermon in history, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and consider these questions together.

Read Matthew 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious 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? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Pray

Opening Remarks

As I mentioned, this passage comes from perhaps the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount. And I think it’s important here to note that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, those who are struggling to follow him. If you haven’t joined that struggle tonight, then you can at least consider what that struggle might look like for you... and, if Jesus’ claims seem believable to you.

I want to begin with an important tangent.

In verse 30, Jesus says, “O you of little faith.” I think this is an important thing to notice about Christianity. You can have little faith and be a Christian. The strength of your faith does not make you a Christian (repeat). It is the object of your faith instead. Let me give you a quick example. My mother is terrified of flying. She worries from the time she gets on the plane until the time she gets off. But she often flies with other people who are not worried at all. They get on the plane, pass out, and never wake up no matter how turbulent things get until the plane lands. Who has more faith? The person who is cool, calm, and collected, right? Not my mother. Who gets to their destination safely? Anyone who gets on the plane, no matter how worried they are! My mother’s faith handicaps her experience, but it doesn’t affect the plane’s ability to get her somewhere safely. She’s still a passenger. To put it another way, if you’re climbing a tree, is it better to have strong faith in a weak branch, or weak faith in a strong branch? You’d pick the strong branch every time. Why? It’s the object of your faith that’s most important, not the strength of your faith. That’s true in Christianity. We may have weak faith, but the Bible tells us that the branch we’re holding onto is incredibly strong.

Why is all this important? All to make this clarifying comment: A Christian is not someone who has it all figured out. A Christian is not someone who believes without doubts or questions. A Christian is someone who is following Jesus with their doubts by their side, trusting him in spite of how strongly they feel. If you have doubts tonight, intellectual doubts, existential doubts, or any other kind of doubts, you don't have to have them all resolved before you follow Jesus. You can board the plane even with weak faith.

That's a rabbit trail that I wanted to walk down just a little ways tonight. Now back to our passage and this issue of worry in our lives.

I. Where does worry come from?

In verses 24-25, Jesus tells us where our worry comes from. He diagnoses it.

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life..."

Whenever you see a "therefore" in Scripture, it means that the conclusion is connected to the idea right before it. So, in this case, verse 25 is the conclusion of verse 24. It seems like a strange connection, but Jesus is telling us that anxiety is the conclusion to serving the wrong master. In other words, worry is not merely a matter of having too little faith. Worry is a matter of putting our faith in the wrong place. It's a matter of bowing down and serving something that was meant to serve us.

Jesus connects our worry with our worship. He is saying that we worry because we have an inordinate love for something in the place of God.

A Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen retells a story from ancient India:

Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." "I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete."

So the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone in order to demonstrate their specialties. The bone they found was from a lion. The first brother added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. And so the lion woke up, saw his creators, and devoured them. And then he vanished happily into the jungle.¹ (This was not a survivor story, unless you identify with the lion.)

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*

Nouwen told the story to illustrate this point: **We have the capacity to create what can devour us.** Our goals and dreams can consume us. Money and possessions can control us. Even gifts as good as relationships can ruin us if they become the things that we worship.

What would that look like in our relationships? Here are some examples:

You could be consumed by a particular person. You could care way too much about what he or she thinks of you. Maybe you dress with this person in mind; maybe you arrange how you walk to class to ensure a “chance” encounter; maybe you find yourself obsessing over every little detail of communication hoping to decode in it some hidden meaning.

Or you could be consumed with a particular dream. Maybe it’s the classic American version – that beach picture with khakis and white shirts and perfectly bleached teeth. Maybe you’ve set the age when you want to be married in your mind, and you have a mental list of things you absolutely must do before you turn that perfect 28.

Or you could be consumed with dating in general. If you think that a relationship or a romance is the thing that will really make you happy, the thing that will solve your problems, or cure your anxieties, then you are asking a relationship to carry a burden it was never meant to carry, to be for you only what God himself can be for you.

According to Jesus, worry and false worship are twins. So...

II. What should we do about it?

1. Know your old patterns. And change them.

Let me give you an example from Jesus’ own argument here. Look with me at verse 27: “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” What Jesus is doing here is asking us to look at the result of our anxiety and worry, and to really ask the question, “Can it deliver?” “Can worry actually bring about what you want it to?” “Can it deliver Prince Charming?” “Can it make you more attractive?” Can it deliver?

I read an article recently by a woman struggling with anxiety, and she basically saw two patterns that her own worry and anxiety led her into. These were the two main results of her worry.

The first was **detachment**... she either pretended not to care about the situation, or she would look for some kind of escape. She would run away emotionally, usually by trying to stay so busy she would never have to think about it. Or by shopping!

The second pattern other than **detachment** she noticed her worry causing was **control**. **Control**. Think about it. We have a deep desire for structure and predictability, and let’s face it, if you’re single and want to be in a relationship, then the last thing you feel is in control. And often, when the future feels slippery, you’ll grab onto whatever you can to anchor you.

Let me share with you a hard personal story about this from my own life. My younger sister was bulimic in high school and early in college, and do you know what triggered her bulimia? It wasn't a glance in the mirror. It wasn't the scale. It was the feeling that her life was out of control. My sister felt out of control in so many areas, that she made her own body the mechanism by which she could ensure predictability somewhere. She was tired of her other slaveries, and so she punished her body as her own slave. She needed control.

Maybe it's not diet and exercise for you, but maybe you grope for control in other ways. I read a book a couple of years ago called *Sex and the Soul*. The author interviewed hundreds of college students all over the country about sex, romance, and religion. One of the things that she found was that most students who were hooking up on a regular basis didn't like it all. They hated it. That's not true for everyone, but she said for most. So why would someone do something they didn't like? In their minds, it was social currency. It was also the only way they knew to start a relationship. They deeply wanted relationships. They were worried they couldn't have one any other way. And so they compromised in order to find control in a situation where they felt powerless.

In some ways, what Jesus is asking you to do tonight is to be a realist. He's not asking you to be a theologian at first, but a pragmatist, and to ask yourself this question: Does worry work? Does the way that you cope with worry, does it deliver or does it merely defer? Do you find it leading into new forms slavery, new places of misery and anxiety and worry?

The first thing we have to do is to know our old patterns, and change them. And then secondly, we need to:

2. Preach to ourselves the truth about God.

What is that truth? Basically, Jesus says two things here about how God relates to us:

1. **God knows you, and He knows what you need.** Look with me at verse 32: "For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

God knows your past, and He knows your future. He knows your own mind and heart, and He knows what you need in a relationship better than you do. And guess what: God is not worried! He isn't scrambling around in heaven trying to get your relational equation just right. He's not looking at the calendar wondering if you're running out of time. If you're single and want to be in a relationship, know that God is not worried! He created you. He knows you. He knows what you need. And He knows when to give it to you.

2. **God is active in shaping your life out of His love for you... right now.**

If you're single, you are not in a waiting room. Your life is not on hold. God is at work shaping you in this moment.

What Jesus is trying to do most in this passage is convince our hearts that we matter tremendously to God.

Look again at verse 26:

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

If God will provide for plants and animals, will he not much more care for you – you who have been made in His image... you who have been purchased by the death and resurrection of Christ?

I love what Paige Benton Brown, who is now married, writes in the article that we usually hand out. We have more copies in the back. It’s a must-read. She was single into her early thirties, and this is what she wrote:

“I long to be married. My younger sister got married two months ago. She now has an adoring husband, a beautiful home, a whirlpool bathtub, and all new Corningware. Is God being any less good to me than he is to her? The answer is a resounding no. God will not be less good to me because God cannot be less good to me. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to shortchange any of his children.”²

God is not withholding himself from you. He is not shortchanging you. He is actively shaping you now, for your good and his glory.

Finally, Jesus concludes the passage with a call for us to:

3. Remember the big picture.

A friend of mine told me a story recently about a conversation he had with one of his students. The student wanted to talk, and he told my friend that he had been wrestling with the existence of aliens. More than wrestling in fact, after doing extensive internet research, he was led to the conclusion that aliens do in fact exist, and this led him in turn to ask the question: “Is he responsible for sharing the gospel with them?” He was deeply worried that he wasn’t “doing enough to reach out to aliens.” My friend replied with a simple question: “How are you doing sharing the gospel with your neighbors right now who are humans?” To which he responded, “I’m not doing very well. I guess I’m too focused on the aliens.”

It could happen to any of us. It’s easy to lose perspective.

Jesus challenges us to regain perspective in verse 33:

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

² Paige Benton Brown, *Singled Out For Good*.

In other words, there is something more fundamental than what you're worried about right now... there is something more fundamental than your career, or your Greek letters, or your GPA, or your plans for Fall Break... there is something more fundamental than dating, sex, or marriage... than the relationship you so badly long for... and that something is the Kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom of God? It's the reign of God... it's the work of God to bring healing to the broken, pardon to the rebellious, and confidence to the ashamed. God is invites you to know him, to love him, to trust him, to follow him... and he says that if you let this become the consuming direction of your life, everything else that you're so deeply worried about will be added to you. That doesn't mean you'll get everything you want, but that everything you want will fall into proper perspective.

Trust in God's providence. Trust in Christ. Even if your trust is weak, the branch is strong, and it can hold the weight of all your burdens, all your fears, all your worries.