



Respectable Sins: Anxiety & Frustration

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Life is full of difficulties. Cars and computers and refrigerators die. Water heaters explode. Planes and ferries run late. And life is often full of pain. Our bodies are frail. They get injured. They get sick. And when life gets hard, our natural tendency is to get anxious, worried, or frustrated – or all three at once. So tonight I want to talk to you about how the Bible tells us to deal with life.

First, I want to share with you an interesting *fact*. We tend to get caught up in our own ideas about what the Bible says, or what the Bible emphasises. Maybe we know the Bible says something, but we don't ever realise just how strongly it says it or just how often. Think about Christian character traits. Jerry Bridges says that he sat down, New Testament in hand, to look at all the examples of places where Christian character traits are taught by precept or example. It's no surprise that *love* came up as number one, with fifty instances. But it might be surprising that *humility* was only barely behind with forty instances. But what may be even more surprising is that *trusting in God* in all of our circumstances came in third place. In a way it makes perfect sense that these three things would be so strongly emphasised in the New Testament, after all, the Gospel is rooted in God's love for us and our reception of it is based on the Spirit moving us to humility as we recognise our sinfulness – and that leads us to put our trust in him for our salvation. Trust in God is important.

And yet those of us who once put ourselves in God's hands, trusting in him for redemption, so often fail to trust him with our daily lives. The opposite of trust in God is either anxiety or frustration. And sadly anxiety and frustration often describe our character better than the idea of trust in God. But Jesus had a lot to say about anxiety. His best known words on the subject are in the Sermon on the

Mount, the words that made up our Second Lesson from Matthew 6:25-34.

“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.

Jesus uses the word *anxious* six times in those verses. We're not to be anxious about anything; not what we have to eat, not what we have to drink, not what we have to wear, not even about all the unknowns that the next day might bring. In other places Jesus says, “Fear not.” This is one of the foundational principles of the Christian life. St. Paul got it, and it's in his writings too. He wrote to the Philippians, “Do not be *anxious* about anything” (Philippians 4:6). The same goes for St. Peter. He wrote, “[Cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

When we talk to someone who's struggling with pain or difficulties in their life we might say, “Don't be anxious” or “Don't be afraid,” but we're just trying to give them some encouragement – just trying to be helpful. But when Jesus, or St. Paul, or St. Peter tell us in the pages of Holy Scripture, “Don't be anxious,” it has the force of a moral command. That means that it's the moral will of God that

we not be anxious – and that means that when we are anxious, when we do worry, and when we get frustrated we are *sinning*.

Anxiety is a sin for two reasons: First, as I already said, anxiety is really just another name for distrust of God. Think about the passage we read from St. Matthew's Gospel. If our heavenly Father takes care of the birds and the flowers, how much more will he care for us. That's exactly why St. Peter tells us to cast our anxieties on God: because he cares for us. So when you and I give way to anxiety, what we're doing, in effect, is believing that God doesn't really care for us and that he won't take care of the circumstances that have triggered our anxiety.

Imagine if your child came to you and said, “I don't trust you. I don't believe you love me and will care for me.” That's exactly what we're saying to God by being anxious.

Second, anxiety is a sin because it shows a lack of acceptance of God's sovereignty or providence in our lives. The idea of providence is just the idea that God is sovereign over all – that God orchestrates all circumstances and events in his creation for his glory and for the good of his people. Our problem is that we lose sight of this and end up focussing on the immediate causes of our anxiety instead of remembering that those circumstances are under the sovereign control of God.

One of the reasons why I think anxiety has become one of our “respectable” sins is because it can be so subtle and can involve such seemingly insignificant things. Think about it in terms of your trying to make an appointment or trying to catch a ferry. Do you ever run late and get anxious? It happened just about every time we drove up here from Portland before the move. We'd deliberately get up early and leave by 6:00 so that we could catch the 12:45 ferry from Tsawwassen. But it never failed: either we'd get stuck in Seattle traffic or we'd get stuck in the line-up at the border. And so we'd turn on the radio and listen to the ferry report, and I'd find myself getting more and more anxious. And yet when it came down to it, on all but one occasion we made it in time and God even spared us from having to wait at the terminal – we just drove right onto the ferry.

Each time I did have that knowledge in the back of my mind that God was in control.

But what was in the front of my mind was my plan and my timing. (Remember our sermon on ungodliness last week – living with no thought for God.) Even after years of experiences have told me that God knows best, I was still thinking in each instance that traffic or border security was somehow conspiring against me. Even in the instance where we did miss the ferry (we got there in plenty of time, but it was already full), I wasn't thinking in terms of God's sovereign plan. God had a reason for my missing that ferry, and I know his reasons and plans are always good, but at the moment, all I could think about was how *my* plan wasn't working out.

Anxiety tends to be our response to smaller things in life. Worry is what we tend to about the bigger things – with long-term or even permanent problems where we don't see a solution or an end. These are the problems that keep you awake at night. This is the kind of thing that can come up when you were hired by a church eight months ago, but still haven't sold your house – and on top of it the market where you live is dropping while the market where you're moving to is rising.

I like J.B. Philips translation of 1 Peter 5:7, because it makes that verse even more applicable to the times when we're prone to worry: "You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern. Again, Jesus said that God doesn't forget a single sparrow. How much more, then, is it true that you, his child, are indeed his personal concern."

When I think about this kind of thing I think of both my grandfather and Veronica's dad. Both of them fought in World War II – just on different sides. My grandfather was in the Army Corp of Engineers and was scheduled to be in the first wave to storm Normandy on D-Day. But he ended up with a hand injury the week before the invasion and was kept behind in England. While most of the men in his unit died that day, God chose to spare my grandfather. Similarly, Veronica's dad was in the German Artillery. His unit was entirely wiped out, but he was spared because not long before that, he was captured and placed in an American POW camp in Italy. Both men were unhappy, even worried, about the

change in plans that happened in their lives, but in the end, in both cases, God used those unexpected and unwanted circumstances to spare them.

Now it's nice to know that God is in control. The problem we face is that when the problems come – when they're looming large – they get in our way and we don't see around them to remember the promises of God. (This is why I said that a deep knowledge of Scripture, and especially Scripture memory are important. If you've got it stored away in your heart and mind, it's less likely to be pushed aside by life and more likely to *become* your life.) When our problems seem bigger than God's promises, we should remember the words of the father of the demon-possessed son in St. Mark's Gospel. He said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). There's a big difference between stubborn and real unbelief that refuses God and the struggling faith of that boy's father. God honours struggles and promises the Holy Spirit to help us. We need to remember that even if our faith isn't perfect, even while we struggle, what God wants to see is that we seek to honour him through our faith, even when it's weak and faltering, instead of dishonouring him through deliberate unbelief.

The more you practice your faith, the more it will grow and the more trust in God becomes second nature. I like the way John Newton puts it, "How happy are they who can resign all to him, see his hand in every dispensation, and believe that he chooses better for them than they possibly could for themselves!"

But accepting God's sovereign and providential will doesn't mean that we're not supposed to pray about the outcome of the things happening to us and around us. Notice that St. Paul not only says, "do not be anxious about anything," but that the verse continues with him saying, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). Even Jesus prayed as he was dreading the suffering he saw coming on the cross. That was something with greater potential for anxiety and worry than any of us is likely ever to face. He cried out to God, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). God calls us to

bring our worries to him in prayer, but when we do so, we need to come to him with an attitude of acceptance of whatever God's providential will may be and a confidence that, whatever the outcome, God's will is better than our plans or desires.

I also want to look at the sin of *frustration*. I find myself badly convicted here. As I was doing this study I realised that I often replace the anger I might otherwise feel at a situation with frustration. I mean, anger is an obvious sin, but frustration? But you see, whereas anxiety and worry involve fear over a situation, frustration involves being upset over that situation – even angry. There are a lot of situation in which we have no reason to be anxious, but lots of reasons to get frustrated. You're working on the car and that bolt just won't come loose. You're working on the computer, it crashes, and you lose the last hour of your work. You're trying to put the kids to bed and they keep getting up. None of those situations is likely to make you anxious or to make you worry – we can still see the outcome and in the end we know that it'll all work out, but in the meantime we get frustrated with that rusty bolt, the crashed computer, or the kids that won't sleep.

Like anxiety, frustration has its roots in ungodliness. When you get frustrated by a situation, at least for that time, you're living as though God's not involved in your circumstances. You're failing to recognise the invisible hand of God behind whatever's triggering your frustration. In the heat of the moment, it's easy to forget about God and focus instead on how *our* plans aren't working out.

I like what David writes in Psalm 139:6: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." When David writes "days ordained for me," he's not just talking about the length of his life, but also all the events and circumstances of each day of his life. This is a tremendous encouragement for us. No matter what happens, we can take comfort in the knowledge that God is in control – that what's happening now has come from him. We can say to God, "This circumstance is part of your plan for my life today. Help me to respond in faith and in a God-honouring way to your providential will. And then please give

me wisdom to know how to address the situation that causes the frustration.”

Now you don't have to pray those exact words, but look what we've done to address the sin and the circumstance causing the frustration: we've brought up specific applicable Scripture and dependence on the Holy Spirit expressed through prayer to enable us to respond in a godly way. And then we pray for practical wisdom to know how to deal with the situation. After all, the bold does need to come off the engine, the computer does need to be fixed and the document retyped, and sometime the kids really do need to go to bed.

We also ought to have in mind the possibility that God's wanting to teach us something through the frustration.

Remember that when I talked about how to deal with sin, I said that often God orchestrates situations so that we can learn to deal with specific areas of life in godly ways. I used the old example of praying for patience, because if God wants you to learn patience, he's more likely than not, going to start putting you in situations that teach it to you. We need to remember that there are no events in our lives that do not ultimately come to us from the invisible hand of God, even though they come through some visible cause.

In closing let me stress again: anxiety, worry, and frustration are all sins, and because they're sins, they aren't something we can take lightly or brush off as common or acceptable reactions to difficult situation in a fallen world. Think about it, can you imagine Jesus ever getting anxious or frustrated – stressed out about where his next meal or rent payment was coming from or frustrated because he couldn't find his car keys – or because his children were almost constantly disobedient. In a lot of ways we've actually come to see anxiety and frustration as part of our temperament – if not ours, then other peoples'. We call someone a worry-wart or a grouch, almost as if that's just how they are. Maybe we even think of ourselves that way, as if that's how God made us. But anxiety and frustration don't have any more of a part in our temperament than other sins.

Imagine someone saying, I'm an adulterer – it's just how God made me, it's my temperament. If we say that about anxiety or frustration in our lives, we're doing

exactly the same thing. It might not be as serious, but it's still sin. And all sin is serious in the eyes of a holy God.

Please pray with me: “Our Father, we give you thanks for taking care of us. We give you thanks that we can have confidence that you know what's best for us and that you are sovereignly in control of all things, working them out in our best interests and to bring glory to yourself. Forgive us, Father, for the times we forget that you care for us and forgive us for the times when we insist on being in control and become anxious or frustrated over our circumstances. You have give us your grace and your Holy Spirit dwells in us. Help us to remember to rely on you and to look for you in all of our circumstances. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.