

The Causes and Cures for Worry

Rich Nathan

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Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

Luke 12:22-34

I am finishing up a series that I've titled *Renewing Your Spiritual Passion*. Next week I'll be getting us ready for the celebration of Christmas with a brief 2-week Advent series leading up to Christmas Eve. But I've mentioned throughout this series that if there were one thing that I could ask for Vineyard Columbus, it would be that we would be passionate followers of Christ. That if you were regularly coming here to Vineyard, that you would be internally motivated out of what you have received from Christ to wish to follow him with your whole being.

Passionate followers of Christ are internally motivated. They give. They share their faith. They read the Bible. They pray. They work on their relationships and their marriages not because they have to, or because someone is manipulating or strong-arming them, but because they want to because the Spirit of Christ in them is drawing them to love and to serve God from the heart.

Now, over the last few weeks I talked about a few barriers that I think we Americans particularly face regarding living passionate, lit-up, internally motivated lives for Christ. The first that I mentioned several weeks ago is simply the over busy, over-committed, over-burdened life. And it's particularly the case during the holiday season. There is a wonderful book out now, by the way, in describing the American ritual of Christmas, by John Grisham called *Skipping Christmas*. It's a brief book, not that I'm recommending that you do it, but if one was inclined to not pay the \$20 sticker price for this very brief book, one could hypothetically, of course, read the entire thing over a cup of coffee at Barnes and Noble and then put it back on the shelf.

But Grisham, in the way that only he can, describes the extraordinary stress that we Americans live under, particularly at Christmas, and what happens to one particular couple when they decide to skip the holidays. It has a very sweet ending. It is called *Skipping Christmas*.

Well, last week I mentioned the second great barrier to spiritual passion. In fact, the barrier I believe in the United States is the greatest threat to our spiritual life and the spiritual life of your children – that is the American approach towards money and accumulation. What has become known as consumerism or materialism is what the Bible calls greed.

Now in the text we're going to look at today, Jesus links the problems we have with over-accumulation to a deeper problem – worry.

Luke 12:22 – *Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.”*

You can underline the word *therefore*. Jesus is explicitly connecting what he said about the rich fool in the story we read last week with the command not to worry.

Are any of you worriers?

I have relatives who are world-class worriers. If there were an Olympics for worries, they would win the gold medal. One time they picked up Marlene and I at the airport and the man who I’ll call John said on the way to the baggage claim, “I hope they didn’t lose your bags. Maybe I should run up ahead and check to see if your bags are there.” I said, “John,” (who at the time was 75) “you don’t need to run up ahead. I think the bags will be there.” He said, “well, someone might steal them!” I said, “John, it’s okay, we’ll get there in time to protect our bags.”

Well, as we’re walking to the bags John said, “maybe I should pull the car around, it might rain.” I said, John, it is not going to rain. You don’t need to get the car.” Well we got our bags and no joke, John said, “You know maybe we should carry the bags up the stairs. We don’t want to get stuck on the elevator if it breaks down.

I was thinking, you’re 75 and you’re going to walk up 5 flights of stairs with suit cases to avoid the elevator?! I said, “John, the elevator won’t get stuck, let’s just get on it.” In the course of picking up suitcases, John had painted like 10 worst-case scenarios. Do any of you have the worst-case scenario mentality? Any of you think John was just voicing reasonableness?

There is nothing more common in life than worry. Business people worry about the competition opening up near by. Restaurant owners worry when a new restaurant opens. Mothers worry about their children. Single people worry about whether they are going to be married. Older adults worry about retirement. Students worry about their exams. Worry is a universal experience. People around the world worry about whether they will have enough to eat. Workers are worried about employment. After September 11, Americans worried about safety.

Let me ask you a question? Are you a worrier? Today I want to talk about three times in this text that Jesus says, “Do not worry.”

Verse 22, *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.*

Verse 29: *And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink. Do not worry about it.*

And then again in verse 32, *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*

Do not worry; do not worry; do not worry; do not be afraid. Why does Jesus repeat himself?

Worry comes to an individual's life as foreign power that grips the mind. It is like a vice-grip. Have you ever spoken to someone who is in the grip and power of worry? What you find as you talk with them is that they seem to be unable to hear what you are saying.

You say, "But you have enough food now, don't you?"

Their answer is, "Yes, but, I don't know if I am going to have enough tomorrow."

"But you have enough money now, don't you?"

"Yes, but I don't know if my money is going to hold out tomorrow."

And no matter what you say, there is this yes/but response and you just don't seem to be able to get through to addressing the root of what is causing them to worry.

Why is that? Why is it so hard to get through to a worrier?

Well, you know that the word Jesus uses here for worry is an interesting one. I've mentioned it in other talks, but it literally means to have a divided mind. Half of an individual's attention is on what you are saying, but half of it is distracted. A worrier is someone whose mind is divided, whose attention is divided. When you try to address a worrier, the person is only paying attention to what you are saying with part of their minds. But there is this other thing going on. It is like you are talking, but their baby is crying in the background and they are distracted. They are not focused on what you are saying.

Have you ever tried to talk with someone while they are watching TV or they are listening to a CD? They are not able to hear you unless you say it over and over again. They are distracted. In fact, I believe that at the root of a lot of people and children who are labeled with attention deficit disorder is nothing other than anxiety.

I think that this idea that the worrier is a person with a divided mind shows us why praying about our fears, whether we are talking about financial fears or our fears regarding our kids – about whether you will be able to conceive or whether you will be married – I think this shows that praying about our fears often doesn't relieve our sense of worry.

You see, if you have a divided mind when you go to God, only half of you is praying to God. The other half is already plotting and planning and strategizing regarding what you are going to do if and when God doesn't answer your prayer. You have this war going on inside. A part of you is saying, "Give us this day our daily bread, help me with my bills, save my niece or nephew or child, find me a husband..." But the other part of you is saying, "Well, I know that my prayer is likely to go unanswered, so let me put together a contingency plan in the event that God doesn't give me my bread or find me a job or save my kid or heal my marriage...?"

Now, many Christians really have tried to address the area of worry in their lives. But like so many other things, we try to address the issue of worry in ways other than that suggested by Jesus. We have all of these spiritual counterfeits, these false alternatives to the counsel that Jesus gives us in this text. Very often people think they are being very Christian as they pursue one of these spiritual counterfeits.

For example, many people approach church as an hour or an hour and a half escape from the pressure of life. Christianity as escape, that's how I will deal with my worries. I picture one of these hard driving businessmen in Chicago, Los Angeles or New York – just enormous pressures from their jobs. They are working 60-70 hours a week. They have demands from stockholders and the board, a changing market, a declining economy. Once a week they like to go to a quiet church where they can just have some peace for an hour. They aren't particularly interested in the message or why the church exists. They are just looking for a bit of quiet. They pick the oldest, most traditional church in town – the one that's the darkest with the stained glass windows and the familiar traditions. Aesthetic experiences are what this hard driving businessman is looking for. I call that Church as Valium. Church as Escape.

People everywhere are looking for peace. I just talked with an inner city pastor who said to me, "You have to understand Rich that I have a huge retraining process to engage in with my flock. People are living high pressured lives in the inner city. They are dealing with crime and illness and bad schools and unemployment. So when they come to church they just want a couple of hours of escape. They want to whoop it up and scream and yell and they want me to whoop it up with them."

Then he said something that was really insightful to me. He said, "But I won't do that. I am not going to give them church as an escape or Christianity as an escape. I want to train them to engage their world and not escape from it."

I said, "Amen, brother." That has always been my desire. To assist the people who attend this church, to engage the world, to deal with the world as they find it presented to them in the year 2001 in America, here in Central Ohio, at their jobs, in their homes, in their communities. I want you to find peace when you

come to a worship service here at Vineyard Church of Columbus, but not peace through escaping by screaming your head off or peace through the aesthetics of the building. I want you to find peace because you have been equipped to more effectively engage your world with thoughts of Jesus Christ and the power of Jesus Christ. That you come here so that you could live better Monday through Saturday, not just so you could have an escapist experience on Sunday.

Christ doesn't offer an escape from rebellious teenagers or aging parents, or negative coworkers, or Christmas catalogs or an endless stream of patients or client demands. What he does offer us is a way to engage life more effectively whatever it is that we are facing.

Now a second false alternative is what I call passivity. People read these words of Jesus concerning the ravens and say, "Well, look at this." *The ravens don't sow or reap. They have no storeroom nor barn, yet God feeds them. Or verse 27: Consider how the lilies grow. They don't labor or spin. Yet I tell you not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed up like one of these.*

I guess that means that so long as I am a child of God, God will provide for me apart from any of my activity. I will just pray (it sounds very spiritual) and God will provide all the finances that my family and I need. How silly of people to work for 40, 50 or more hours a week – I will just pray and God will provide.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, had to address passivity and idleness in his own day. He said, "yes, let's consider the ravens. They don't sow and they don't toil, but neither do they sit on the post and wait for God to drop a worm in their mouths." If you watch the birds of the air or the animals, you will see them busily gathering food.

It is absolutely the case that God is the ultimate source of all you need, but you just can't sit around and wait for God to drop a baked chicken in your mouth. And if you are out of work, it is obviously not sufficient to sit by the phone and wait for it to ring as if an employer is going to be led by God to open the phone book and put their finger next to your name and call you offering you a job. If you are out of work, you have a job to do and that is to get a job. To write your resume; to go from place to place interviewing all the while you are praying.

Now listen, here's the way we think about this theologically. In all of life God has appointed not only the provision, but also the means to obtain the provision. Let me relate this to something in my world – the world of church and pastoring. I speak with lots of pastors who say that they want their churches to grow and that they are praying about the growth of their church. And they are praying for the salvation of people in the community. And that's right and appropriate. Prayer is one of the means by which we see growth in the church and also salvations in the community. Prayer needs to saturate everything that we do in this church-

from children's ministry to leading a small group, to counseling another person. Prayer needs to thoroughly saturate all that we do.

But prayer is not the only God-appointed means for growing a church or seeing the community saved. God has also appointed preaching the gospel and letting your light shine before men. And good works. And service. And healing the sick. And counseling the abused. God has lots of means by which churches grow and the community is influenced. One of the ways is *giving*. Let me read a letter that someone in the congregation wrote.

Dear Rich,

After four and a half years of separation, God miraculously restored my marriage which to most appeared very lost. This incredible blessing prompted the sale of my house and my reuniting with my wife in Columbus.

I have prayed about how to best tithe the sale money; This morning at the Vineyard service, God clearly spoke to my heart.

You expressed a desire to initiate a Vineyard program for the neighborhood children. Enclosed please find a check which may serve as a start for the new ministry. Perhaps others heard from God and will help make the program a reality, an avenue for Christ's life-changing power.

May God continue to bless you and the entire Vineyard family.

Love in Christ,

It sounds very spiritual when someone is out of work to hear them say, "Well, I am praying for a job." Or someone who has not made any provision for retirement or for health insurance to say, "Well, I am just trusting the Lord. I'm praying about it." But rather than getting intimidated by that kind of passive approach to God's provision, we could say, indeed, that in addition to prayer God will also provide for your family by wise planning for their future.

One of the ways we want to help individuals in this church to be responsible in the handling of their finances is that we are offering a class in our second Saturday seminar. We run classes the second Saturday of every month and as part of our Second Saturday Seminars, we are going to be offering a class on financial stewardship. This class will assist you as an individual to establish a budget. You will be going through a brief overview of what the Bible teaches about finances. And we are also going to be offering a 12-week mentoring group on finances using Crown Financial Services materials. You may not be familiar with Crown Financials, but it is the largest Christian Stewardship Ministry in America. This is an opportunity for singles and young adults to get together in a small group environment to learn the nuts and bolts of getting your finances under control. If your finances are the major issue in your life or one of the major stumbling blocks in your life and you see this mentioned in the bulletin, you will want to get in on one of those small groups.

Do you know the devil always pushes us to extremes? If he can't get you to step on the brake and bring your life to a stop by being passive, he will get you to jam the gas pedal to the floor and race around like a chicken. The devil always pushes us to extremes. You will see it in churches. Some churches are hyper legalistic. The people believe that Christianity is just a list of rules and do's and don'ts. And everyone in the church has their list of 500 things that the good Christian never does. I don't smoke, or drink, or chew, or go with girls who do.

But if the devil can't push us into the extreme of legalism, then he pushes us the other way towards license. Hey, we're under grace. Therefore, there's no call for a distinctively Christian lifestyle. Who cares if you're having sex outside of marriage? What difference does it make if you've been divorced half a dozen times or practice almost nothing the bible commands.

We see the same thing in people's disciplining of their children, the devil either pushing people toward an excessive rigidity where a child is just collapsing under the weight of all the rules in the home, or excessive permissiveness. There doesn't seem to be any boundaries or any one ever saying "no" to the little demanding brat.

Well, if passivity is one extreme the devil pushes us towards regarding our finances, our future, hyper planning and hyper control is the other extreme.

Folks say, "Well, the way I will deal with the issue of worry in my life is I will plan every step of my financial future with such extreme care that no matter what happens in the future, my family will be exactly in the same financial situation as they are now. If the economy bottoms out, if the stock market falls apart, if the American government is overthrown, if I die, if my husband or wife is disabled for the long term, everything is lined up."

Hyper control. That I think is the alternative that many worriers reach for. How many of you worriers find it exceptionally frustrating that you can't control all the circumstances and events of your life? That something unexpected always throws a wrench into the works? Doctors' offices are filled with people who are emotional wrecks because they are trying to gain control over a world that will not be mastered by us.

Some time ago I attended the funeral of a very wealthy businessman. He was one of these can-do guys who built a large business and who achieved very often in business deals the impossible. When other people thought a project couldn't be achieved, it only gave this can-do businessman incentive to prove that the project could be done under budget in half the time.

Well, there was one thing that this can-do businessman couldn't accomplish and that was beat cancer in his life. Cancer struck with a ferocity that it surprised the doctors. He sat out on the front lawn of his estate one evening and talked with

an old friend. He said, "You know, it wasn't supposed to work out this way. All of my plans and all of my goals – it wasn't supposed to work out this way."

The fact is Friend, very little of our life turns out according to our plans. The end is always a surprise. There are always twists and turns that you didn't anticipate.

Jesus tells us, hyper control simply doesn't work. Jesus says in verse 25, *Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?*" Are any of you living with an unexpected curve in the road right now?

If escape won't free you from worry; and passivity won't free you from worry; and hyper control won't free you from worry, then what will? Let's listen to the counsel of Jesus. Jesus says, *Consider the ravens (verse 24)...consider how the lilies grow...consider...consider...* And then he works out his line of logic.

Do you know one of the main causes of worry is a failure to think? We let our emotions run riot. We don't take ourselves in hand. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a physician in England, who became one of England's best-known preachers in the middle of the 20th century, once made this profound observation. He said, "Most of our emotional problems are rooted in our failure to think. Our failure to think deeply about truth."

In one of the best books I ever read on depression, a book entitled "Spiritual Depression" by Martyn Lloyd Jones (I think we have copies available in our bookstore), Lloyd Jones said that very often at the root of depression we find guilt and regrets. A parent is depressed because as the parent looks back on his or her life, they have these regrets about the way they raised their children, certain negligence, certain things they said or didn't say, things they did or didn't do. There are these regrets. And the guilt over what should have been leads to depression. A person fails to reconcile with a loved one before the loved one dies and there is a regret over that. A person regrets quitting school and not listening to their parents counsel or getting an abortion. And that regret and guilt leads to depression.

Lloyd Jones says the cure for much depression is to think deeply about the center of our Christian faith, which is that we can be right with God through faith in Jesus Christ – the great doctrine of Justification by Faith. That simply trusting in Christ and his saving death on the cross can actually pay and make amends for all the things we've done wrong. We can deal with all of our regrets by bringing them to the cross. At the cross, we can receive forgiveness from God and the root of depression can be cut.

Well, the same thing is true regarding the root of worry. Worry is rooted in a failure of thought, a failure to think deeply about God. Jesus said, *Consider the ravens, they don't sow or reap. They have no storeroom or barn, yet God feeds*

them. Consider how the lilies grow. They don't labor or spin, yet I tell you not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed as one of these. If that's how God clothes the grass of the field..."

When you are worried, why not take your emotions in hand and begin to think deeply about God? Who is God after all? Is God big or little? Is God bigger than the problem you are facing or smaller? Is God bigger than the person that you are at odds with or smaller? What is God's character? Is God someone who provides, or someone who withholds? Is he generous or stingy? Is he in control or out of control?

Rather than spend all of your time thinking about what could happen in your worst-case scenarios, why not take some time to think deeply about God and to worship him?

How about thinking deeply about your relationship with God? That you are not only a creature, like the raven or the lily, but that you are much more valuable to God than birds or flowers, as Jesus says, because God is your heavenly Father. Verse 30: *For the pagan world runs after such things and your Father knows you need them.* Verse 32: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*

Jesus called God your Father. Remember that not everyone in the world gets to have the title "child of God." The title "child of God" is not ours by way of physical birth. The Bible is very clear that it's only those who have trusted Christ as Savior, received Christ in their heart as Lord, that get the honor to be called children of God. Have you done that? Have you ever had a moment when you trusted Christ as Savior and received him into your heart as Lord? To have the title "child of God" is so amazing that the apostle John in one of those wonderful moments of celebration that we find in the scriptures says in 1 John 3:1, *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are.*

We, being what we are, with all of our faults, are children of God. We are God's children. Do you think deeply about your title as "child of God?" Do you meditate on what it means that God is your Father? A significant root of worry is simply a failure of thought, of thinking deeply.

A second root of worry is a failure of trust. Jesus says in verse 28: *If that is how God clothes the grass of the fields, which is here today and tomorrow and is then thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith?* That phrase, "you of little faith" is actually one Greek word, oligopistoi – it literally means "little faith one." Jesus is saying will he not feed you and clothe you, you faith midget? 10 times in the New Testament Jesus calls his followers faith midgets. We might call it faith dwarfs. We are faith munchkins. He is saying the reason why you get so worried about everything is that you have so little trust.

And friend, let me tell you what little trust looks like. A person with little trust decides ahead of time what the process must look like in the answering of their prayers. We pray about our finances or obtaining a job and then the person of little faith, the faith munchkin, dictates to God, "Here's the way that you are going to meet my need for additional finances."

Or we pray for a loved one's salvation. And the faith munchkin dictates to God, "Now here is the process that you need to employ to accomplish salvation."

Well, friend, the whole problem with that approach is the God we are praying to in the Bible is the God of surprises. Do you know that if you want to build your trust in God, you've got to begin to look at God as the God of surprises? God almost never follows the script that people lay out for him. Instead, he comes along and surprises. He seems to delight in surprising people.

I mean, ladies, would you consider it a surprise if at age 90 you gave birth? Abraham sweated and worried for decades about the fact that his wife Sarah wasn't giving birth. And then surprise, she gives birth at age 90.

The children of Israel worried about their enemies, the Egyptians, coming towards them. They thought they were going to be killed. Surprise, the Red Sea parts.

The disciples were discouraged and worried about their future when Jesus' body was laid in the tomb. Surprise, Jesus has risen from the dead.

God is a God of surprises. He loves to surprise his children. Worrier, maybe you can't figure out how the difficulty in your life is going to work out; what process God is going to use. Perhaps God wants to surprise you. Have you ever thought about that? Has God surprised any of you at any time? Given you a baby when you thought you couldn't conceive? Healed your marriage when you thought it was all over? Protected your life when by all rights you should have died?

Worry is rooted in the failure to think. Worry is rooted in the failure to trust the God of all surprises. Finally, worry is rooted in the failure of goals. Look at what Jesus says in verse 29 and following: *Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink. Do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after such things and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.*

Fellow worrier, if you've set your heart on God's kingdom, if you said, "What I'm going to be after in this life is seeing God's rule over me be more fully established, that what I really want more than anything is to be about the business of Christ, to look more and more like Jesus, to see Jesus' rule and reign

extended over more parts of the community, over my family, over my neighborhood, over coworkers and over relationships.”

Well, then what could happen good or bad that would be a cause for you to worry? I mean if your real goal is to see more of the rule of Jesus Christ in your life and through your life, then what in the future could ever sidetrack you from that goal?

Listen to me now. If you get sick in the future, but your goal is to see the rule and reign of Christ in your life, well then you say, “Lord, use this sickness for your glory. If it would glorify you to heal me, please do so. If I have to lay here in the hospital, then let your rule and reign work through me in the hospital. Work out of my life those things you need to work out.” If the economy goes up or down, how will that move you from your goal of seeing the rule of Christ?

Listen, if you have other goals, life can destroy those other goals. But if your goal is seeing more of Christ’s kingdom, then nothing in all this work can take away from that goal.

I want to read to you a story in closing.

The governing bodies of universities in the United States are generally known as boards of trustees. University trustees are usually people with deep and sometimes long-standing relationships with the university and the surrounding community and are also, quite often, people with significant wealth who have been generous in their financial support of the university and who are influential with business leaders, other philanthropists, etc.

When I worked in the Athletic Department at the University of Notre Dame (1988 through 1991), there was a member of the Board of Trustees of the University (I’m not sure if he is still on the board or not) who had been tremendously successful in his business over the previous 20-25 years and was very, very wealthy. Back in the 1960’s, when he was just starting his business and had a young family, he needed \$20,000 in order to make a specific purchase of materials or equipment so that he would be able to secure a really lucrative contract for his fledgling business. If he could somehow get the money, buy the equipment or materials, and secure the contract, then he would really be able to take a big step with his business and get some financial security. Remember, \$20,000 was a lot more in the 1960’s than it is today -- that might have been how much his house cost, in fact.

Well, he got someone to loan him the \$20,000 (maybe he mortgaged the house). But before he could buy the materials/equipment that he intended to buy, he caught wind that some charity or benefit organization with which he was involved (maybe it was his church, but I don’t recall) also had a specific need of \$20,000 for some campaign or building project. You know what he

did? He gave away the \$20,000 he had just borrowed. He just gave it away. How foolish!

Despite that incredibly foolish decision, he somehow managed to stay in business. Not only that, but he somehow managed to pay back the \$20,000 he had borrowed. Not only that, but he prospered so magnificently in his business that he became one of those really successful people who donate time and money generously and, as a result, are always being asked to do things like be a trustee for a major university.

The Causes and Cures for Worry

Rich Nathan

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Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

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