

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(June 27, 2021)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Unbottled**

(Jesus...and your emotional life)

### **Next Steps AWAY FROM Anxiety**

(Matthew 6:19-34)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Present tense...**

I sometimes joke that in our marriage, Kathy and I balance each other out, emotionally speaking. She worries and I complain. But that's not fair. I help with worry, too.

Today, I propose that you and I think together about worry, about anxiety.<sup>1</sup> While doing so, we'll pay close attention to the treatments Jesus' recommends for replacing anxiety with its opposite: Peace. Rest for our souls. Calm.<sup>2</sup>

There is no question but that Jesus wants us to experience great peace, even in non-very-peaceful times.

On His last night with the disciples, with very non-peaceful times looming, He said, ***[John 14:] "My peace I give you, not as the world gives, do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, nor fearful."***

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<sup>1</sup> We often have thoughts that we feel very strongly about. I think it's important, from time to time, to think carefully about our feelings.

<sup>2</sup> A definition of anxiety: a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

And the Apostle Paul wrote, ***[Philippians 4:6] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.***

Internal peace is God's plan for us, and peace is available to us. But if peace seems elusive to you, I understand. There are all kinds of reasons to be peace-less these days.

Whether you're a natural worrywart or not, there's no shortage of stuff to be worried about, from health, to finances, politics, world events, key relationships - you name it.

As the late Henri Nouwen said it, years ago, *"If we follow the news in the morning, we might wonder how anyone can eat breakfast and go to work."*<sup>3</sup>

This morning, listening to Jesus will open our eyes to some "next steps" we can take away from anxiety into peace, and into better emotional health, generally.

In fact, that will be the point of the next several Sunday mornings as we consider Jesus and our emotional life in the series Jeff and I are calling "Unbottled".

*Thoughts about the series on emotions...*

Jesus is concerned about our lives. Every aspect of our lives, including our emotional lives.

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<sup>3</sup> From Following Jesus in an age of anxiety. Nouwen points out that Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus, and many others have made careers out of studying anxiety. Psychologist Jordan Peterson says, *"It is easy to understand why people have anxiety disorders...The question is, 'Why don't more people suffer from them?' We all have great reasons to be anxious. We don't have control of the things that matter most in life. We are all going to die. Not being anxious is the massive mystery."* It seems like everybody is talking about, thinking about, anxiety.

His emotional experience and the way He expressed His emotions were honoring to God and a blessing to others. He wants the same to be true for us.

Watch Jesus in the Gospels and you will see Him experiencing the full spectrum of emotions. I personally think that this is a big part of the *“abundant life”* (John 10:10) He wants for each of us.

Watch Him in the temple. He was angry with the buyers and the sellers, so angry that He threw them out. But He didn’t “lose His temper.” He was in control of Himself the whole time.

He was often upset at the immaturity of His followers and by His people’s sin. But He was never *undone* by what He saw.

When the disciples returned from a successful missions trip, He rejoiced exceedingly.

Jesus took His emotions seriously, controlled them masterfully, and expressed them in ways that pushed God’s purposes forward.

Today, our first week takes us on the adventure of moving from anxiety to peace.

*Preview...*

For the most part, emotions are prompted by some event that happens. After that event, we feel anger or joy or relief or frustration.

Anxiety is an exception to that rule. Anxiety doesn’t concern itself with what has happened, but with what has not happened.

Other emotions live in the real world. Worry lives in the *“what if”* world of potential. I worry about what might be. I worry about a future that hasn’t happened yet.

Mark Twain once wrote, *“I’ve lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.”*

Today, we’re turning to Jesus’ most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. In the middle part of this message, He wanted to help His

first-century audience peacefully navigate an anxiety-rich environment. What He has to say will help us do the same.

Among life’s anxiety-producers, near the top of the list is our relationship to material stuff, to money. It is to that topic that Jesus directs His first words about worry.<sup>4</sup>

### **Fighting Anxiety by Generosity (Matthew 6:19-21)**

#### **The “Leaky Buckets” Storage System (v. 19)**

***[19a] “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...”***

*Treasure’s value*

Think of toys that you treasure as you get older. Toys that you drive or take to the lake, toys that you wear on your wrist or that you sit and watch.

We treasure our treasures. King Solomon tells us in Proverbs (6:6-8) to learn from the wisdom of animals (i.e. - ants) who store up food in the summer for the lean times winter will bring.

And, actually, storing up treasure for future needs and emergencies is smart.<sup>5</sup> But there is a problem with material treasure. The problem is shelf life.

*Treasure’s pitfalls*

***[19] “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.”***

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<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament assumed that God’s blessing was reliably accompanied by material wealth. Job’s story shows this, as his material wealth was restored at the end. The New Testament message is different, as evidenced by Jesus’ and Paul’s poverty and by their consistent teaching that faithfulness may well bring hardship.  
<sup>5</sup> You won’t find any place in the Bible that condemns money as evil. It is a root from which evil can grow. But money and the treasure it can buy is not, in and of itself, evil.

For instance, in Jesus' day, a good indicator of wealth was a collection of clothes. A closet-full of clothes was a safeguard against want. If you owned more clothing than you needed, you were rich.

But moths eat clothes and clothes wear out.

In 2021, treasure may be measured by clothes, cars, retirement accounts, or houses. But all these things, while nice, make iffy investments.

Cars depreciate. Houses require periodic upgrades. Thieves steal stuff. Markets rise and fall. Inflation erodes the value of savings. Today's cutting-edge tech is soon obsolete.

Plus, treasure's satisfaction fades.

We are thrilled when we acquire a treasure. Soon, though, the thrill is soon gone because the treasure has to be protected, fixed, and maintained. It's not long before the treasure you own owns you.

We are hard-wired from God to be satisfied with nothing less than permanence. But there is no permanence in our stuff.

There are no guarantees. Treasure perishes. And all of this increases anxiety.

So, Jesus points to a better way to live than the way of treasuring material treasure.

### **Jesus' "Sure Thing" Investment Strategy (v. 20)**

***[20] "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal."***

When you put your money in some financial instrument you hope to get a good ROI. (Return On Investment)

Today, "sure things" like CDs and Money Markets yield anywhere from nearly zero to a little bit above zero.

Well, Jesus has a sure thing for you. Invest your treasure in His kingdom. Use your treasure to further His purposes. Use your money to meet the pressing needs of people, to support ministry, to spread the Gospel, to distribute Bibles, to serve the poor.

Jesus says that when you put your resources to work for His purposes, you are laying up treasure in heaven. He will reward you for those investments. And your ROI is guaranteed to be glorious.<sup>6</sup>

He then says that investing your treasure in what God is all about is good for your heart. Don't miss this. Among other things, He's saying that giving is good for your emotional life.

### **The Counter-Intuitive Treasure Principle (v. 21)**

***[21] "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."***

It's tempting to hear Jesus say that if I follow my heart, I will end up giving - and that's a nice thought.

But it is not what Jesus said. He said that if you give, your heart will follow.<sup>7</sup>

Your passions will follow what you treasure, meaning that if you begin to place value on the things of God - if you start investing your treasure in serving God and serving people in Jesus' Name - your heart will beat fast for those things.

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<sup>6</sup> Lots of very sincere Christ-followers have told me that it is wrong to pursue eternal rewards. If that's true, then Jesus was counseling carnality, for He very often tells us to pursue eternal rewards. Note these verses on rewards: Matthew 5:12, 30, 46; 6:6, 15; 10:42; 18:5; 25:40; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Timothy 6:13-19.

<sup>7</sup> Kathy and I have seen this work out in our own lives. A few years ago, we started giving money to support a homeless ministry in Denver. We now care more about people facing homelessness. When we started supporting a ministry that serves persecuted Christians, our hearts were moved more and more to care about and to pray for our persecuted family, worldwide.

Jesus was speaking then, and He is still speaking today to anxiety-prone hearts. He wants us to know that anxiety dissipates as we invest our treasure in God's kingdom work.

We keep reading and find that anxiety continues to dissipate as we follow God with a single-minded focus.

### **Fighting Anxiety by Single-Mindedness (Matthew 6:24)**

***[24] "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."***

The word my Bible translates "**wealth**" is an old Aramaic word: "**mammon.**"

Mammon is the stuff of life, the things we own that we think will protect us. Jesus gives mammon personhood and says that while God has a claim on your heart, Mammon is also jealous for your heart.

It's like God and Mammon are two slave owners. We are the slaves - and no slave works part-time for two masters.

Most slaves don't have a choice of masters, but Jesus says that we, His children, are slaves with a choice. We can choose to submit to the rule of a gracious God, or we can submit to Mammon.

It will be one and it can't be both.

I have been a Christian for a pretty long time. And I don't mind you knowing that submitting to the Lord Jesus has not been a "one and done" thing for me.

Every day is a battle where I am faced with a choice. Submit to Jesus or follow Mammon. I can't claim final victory yet. The fight is on-going as of June 27, 2021.

But I can tell you that the moments when I try to serve God *and* Mammon are the worst moments of any day.<sup>8</sup> The moments of greatest peace are those moments when I say "Yes" to God and to His rule.

Trying to serve two masters is crazy making. It breeds anxiety. A great antidote to anxiety is to say "Yes" to the rule and reign of God over your life.

We take a next step away from anxiety by generosity and we fight for peace by single-minded commitment to God. We also fight for peace in our hearts by stretching our faith-in-God muscle.

### **Fighting Anxiety by Faith (vv. 25-34)**

#### **Trust God - Like Nature Does (vv. 25-30)**

***[25] "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried<sup>9</sup> about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?"***

There may be emotions that get more press and that are more sensational than anxiety, but I don't think there are any that are more debilitating.

In Jesus' day, people were tempted to worry about making ends meet, Roman oppression and taxation, crop failure, family squabbles, health, and, of course, death.

And today, we're worried. It is a very human tendency to worry, first century or twenty-first.

Jesus says to them and to us, "*Don't worry.*"

<sup>8</sup> "Purity of heart is to will one thing" - so said Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher, theologian, poet.

<sup>9</sup> Literally, "**stop being worried**", the Greek verb being a present imperative.

He reminds His audience then and now of how big and expansive life is. Life is about God and people made in His image, sin and righteousness, freedom and slavery.

Life is about way more than the kinds of things we often worry about, stuff like food and clothing.

He warns us to not be consumed with the concerns of having enough or the right style of clothing or even about having enough and the right kind of food.

I mean, look at the birds.

*Exhibit A: Birds (vv. 26-27)*

**[26] “Look at the birds of the sky,<sup>10</sup> that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather crops into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more important than they?” [27] And which of you by worrying can add a single day to his life’s span?”**

What do the birds do? It’s not like they do nothing. Birds go about doing what they need to do.

They don’t sit on a couch expecting the worms to inch into their nests. And they don’t store up great reserves of food or nesting material. They flit around seeking food and they eat what they find. They work and it all works.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus says, **“Your heavenly Father feeds them.”**

His point to us is, do what you do. Be diligent about it. DO NOT disregard work. DO disregard worry.

Worry doesn’t accomplish a thing. It is unfruitful.

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Jesus didn’t here, use the example of animals who do store up food (squirrels, ants, bears). He picks His examples carefully.

<sup>11</sup> As one author put it, “God has built into His ordered creation the means by which all things are cared for.”

To listen to the lesson of the birds is to go about doing what God gives you to do. You take care of what is your stewardship and then you trust God for the details, for the outcome, for the result.

Birds serve as Exhibit A. Next, Jesus serves up Exhibit B.

*Exhibit B: Flowers (vv. 28-30)*

**[28] “And why are you worried about clothing? Notice how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labor nor do they spin thread for cloth, [29] yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these.**

God is so good that He covers the ground with beautiful flowers.

Generally speaking, these flowers are not utilitarian. They don’t produce much and they don’t last long. But flowers are clothed with a rainbow’s worth of beauty.

It is always striking to be out hiking in the spring or summer and come to a secluded meadow that is covered with wildflowers.

I’ve been met by bluebonnets in full bloom in February in the creek beds of Big Bend Ranch State Park out in West Texas. Nobody plants or tends these flowers. And there was nobody to enjoy them before we hiked by them. They are just God’s random splashes of color.

And Jesus - who watched over King Solomon - says that these flowers are dressed fancier than Solomon ever was.

Here’s the punchline:

**[30] “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!”**

Learn from the birds and the flowers.

They aren’t powerful and they don’t fret. They don’t control the weather or human encroachment on their environment. They don’t

control much of anything. They just take care of what they can. They gather food and they bloom.

Jesus wants you and me to own the idea that we are just like the birds and the flowers. We control so little. Most of what matters to us is outside of our power to control or to even impact.

Anxiety grows as we focus on what we can't fix, can't do, can't affect, can't change. Anxiety dissipates as we simply do what is set before us.

By all means, pay attention to the great events that are going on around you and by all means pray about all of it. But be like a bird. Don't fret. Use your energy to influence what you can and leave the rest to God.

Of course, there is a cost to this kind of a life. It costs active, robust, intentional trust in God.

### Trust God - Like Children of God Should (vv. 31-32)

***[31] "Do not worry<sup>12</sup> then, saying, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear for clothing?'" [32] "For the Gentiles<sup>13</sup> eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."***

Worry is what people do who don't know God.

So, to worry is to say that God is *not*. Or, it is to say that He isn't *relevant*. Worry says that our potential disasters are bigger than God.

But we don't believe that. THIS is what we believe.

- We believe that God is.
- We believe that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him.
- We believe that God causes all things to work together for our good, because we love God and are called according to His purpose.

- We believe that God is our Heavenly Father, that He knows what we need, and that, in the end, we will be with Him for eternity.

It's tempting to get completely wrapped up in the stuff of life. But life is about so much more than that. And we know that.

I might lead an anxiety-filled life. If I do, you can't conclude that I'm not God's son. You can, though, conclude that I'm acting like I'm not God's son - which is nutty.

A critical key to taking a next step away from anxiety when it comes to stuff like food, clothing, shelter, and other stuff, is to be all wrapped up in God's stuff.

### Trust God - As You Seek Him First (v. 33)

***[33] "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you."***

This is one of Jesus' most widely known statements. It sounds radical - and it is radical. But what does it mean? Here's how I take it.

I think that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' clearest call to whole-hearted discipleship. I have nicknamed it "The Kingdom Constitution."

The Sermon isn't a recipe for how to be saved. We receive eternal life by faith alone in Christ alone. Believe in Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount is a description of what life under the Lordship of Jesus looks like.

To "***seek first [God's] kingdom and [God's] righteousness***" is to strive to live Jesus' way.

- Live out the Beatitudes.
- Be salt and light for God.
- Fight against anger and lust and greed.
- Love. Turn the other cheek. Forgive enemies.
- Give to the poor. Pray like crazy. Fast for God alone.

<sup>12</sup> This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> time Jesus says this (v. 25). He'll say it one more time. (v. 34)

<sup>13</sup> Clearly, Jesus was speaking to Jews.

Seeking God's kingdom is the path to a life of meaning *and* it's the antidote to an anxious life.

There is no better life than the life that is consumed with following Jesus. Part-time discipleship wastes part of a life.

To whatever extent you have started following Jesus, you have tasted the kingdom way. Don't be satisfied with a taste. Enjoy the whole banquet.

When He is the priority of your life ("*Seek first...*") "*all these things*" (stuff like food and clothing) **will be added to you.**"

Now, let me take a minute to say a word or two about this.

It is obvious that many people who are "all in" for Jesus have not only NOT received all the food that they would ever want; they have even suffered greatly and have died - sometimes precisely because they were following Jesus.

Earlier in this Sermon, Jesus said (5:10-12) that persecution could very well be the disciple's lot in life.

He anticipated that there would be times when His followers would not get all the food, shelter, clothing, money, comfort, relational bless, and years of life they might enjoy.

You and I live in a fallen world. Sin and its effects are seen everywhere. When He says, "**all these things will be added to you**", we've got to take that in light of what He says elsewhere.

So, if I could give an expanded sense of what Jesus is saying, it would be something like this -

*"Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. God will see to it that you get exactly what you need - and always let Him define what it is you need. Trust Him in this. Even when it seems like you're not getting what you need. And in the end, I promise, you'll see how the goodness of God was lavished on you."*

He wraps all of this up with a comment that was probably accompanied by a twinkle in His eye.

### **Fight Anxiety by Taking Life One Day at a Time (v. 34)**

***[34] "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."***

A few years ago, our daughter, Erin, came back to San Antonio after college and lived near us for a short time.

While she was living close by, I was always trying to get her to exercise with me. I'd ask to join me in the garage for a workout and she'd tell me, "*Tomorrow, Dad. I don't have time today. Let's work out tomorrow.*"

And her strategy worked like a charm because "*tomorrow*" never came. All she had to do to take care of tomorrow was refuse my silly invitation to get sweaty in the garage today. That's what Jesus is talking about.

Mark Twain was right. Lots and lots of the terrible stuff he anticipated would come his way never came.

You and I are given today. Deal with today. One day at a time. Trust God today. Walk with Jesus today. Be the disciple God calls you to be today.

That's your assignment and that's enough.

### **Conclusion:**

According to what we've seen today from Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount, we take "next steps" away from anxiety by practicing generosity, by choosing single-minded commitment to God, by flexing our faith muscle, and by doing all of this one day at a time.

No matter where you are in your journey with Jesus, these are daunting assignments, and none of us will perfectly “arrive” this side of heaven.

For me, it has been one “next step” at a time in all of these. But I have learned something about this journey. As we close, I’ll share what I’ve learned about worry from the world of hiking.

It was tempting, when on my first backpacking treks to the Rockies, to try to climb long, steep grades at a normal walking pace. Never slow down. Climb fast.

After a few trips, I learned that it was actually faster to choose a pace I could keep - even if it was very slow - rather than go fast and have to stop for frequent rests. I learned that the slower I walked, the longer I could walk.

That’s important when tackling a tough climb and it’s just as important to a lifelong walk with Jesus.

All of us want to experience more peace and less anxiety. We accept and we understand Jesus’ words. So...

- ...take a slightly bigger than normal step into generosity.
- ...make a choice to trust God in one, troublesome area of life today. Then make the same decision tomorrow. Not everything. Just one thing.
- ...own the truth that when it comes to being in control, you’re a lot like a bird. Tell God that you’re going to work as hard as you can to do what you should - and trust Him to take care of the rest.

One step at a time.