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Seek First, Worry Less

Matthew 6:25-34

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It's hard to believe there's only about a month and a half left in 2013. If you want to be exact, we've lived three hundred and twenty-one days in 2013. Three hundred and twenty-one days you don't get back...three hundred and twenty-one days! No do over's...which raises the question: What did you do with those three hundred and twenty-one days? Did you invest them in the things that ultimately matter, or was it just one day blending into the next day, into the next day and, good for you—you survived three hundred and twenty-one days?

When we talk about living a life *on purpose*, living for the things that matter—living *on mission*—I think a lot of people tend to think of big events—you know, the big things. But I would suggest to you the big things are easy; everybody gets those. The overwhelming majority of your life is lived in the ordinary, everyday stuff. That's why we constantly remind ourselves that every day matters. Frankly, if you don't live the ordinary, everyday days for the things that matter, you will not live a life *on purpose*.

Several weeks ago I was attending a Rogue event in Frisco, Colorado, which is just down from Breckenridge. It's an absolutely beautiful location. It's a beautiful small town in the mountains there, and this particular morning several of us were going to a little café for breakfast. Down the main street of this quaint little town are the mountains, and it had snowed that night so there were freshly snow-covered mountains. A couple of us went in and met the host. He was a twenty-something, looked kind of like a free spirit, and just asked the logical question, "Two for breakfast?" And the person I was with said, "No, actually there are five of us, but the others are out in the street taking pictures." And then he said, "Apparently they've never seen a mountain before," to which the twenty-something didn't miss a beat and said, "Hey, I've been here for a year and I'm still taking pictures." I told Tim that's the line of the day right there—that we never lose sight of the fact that every day matters. I like to say every day has a little magic. You just have to look for it. You just have to find it. But that's part of what it means to live a life *on purpose*.

If we were to take a poll this morning, I would guess that a hundred percent of us would say, "I do want to live a life on purpose. I want to live a life on mission. I don't want to waste my life." The problem is there are so many distractions that keep us from focusing on the things that really matter. This morning I want to talk to us about one of the most difficult distractions that plagues many of our lives. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Matthew, Chapter 6. I want to pick it up in verse 25. This is Jesus speaking, and He says:

> **"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried 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 not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"** (*NASB, Matthew 6:25)

He opens with the words **For this reason**...which would force us up into the previous discussion—*for what reason?* Well, you have it summarized in verse 24—*you can't serve two masters. Either you serve God or you serve money*. Either you live for the things of eternity or you live for the things of this world, but you can't do both. And so because that's true, **for this reason**...he goes on

to this discussion and he talks about the distraction of worry, fear, and anxiety. The sobering reality is that if you spend your days full of worry, full of fear, full of anxiety, you will not focus on the things that matter.

If you're living for the things of this world, then what you think about everyday are the things of this world, and that's typically what creates the fear and the anxiety and the worry in our lives. You have to put this in a first-century context and understand that in the first century they didn't have welfare programs; they didn't have banks and savings accounts and healthcare—all the things that we take for granted. Like many third-world countries today, life was about survival, and every day you wondered: would we have food, would we have shelter, would we have clothing, would we make it through another day? And that's what He's talking about. It was common that every day people would think about: *What about today? Am I going to have enough, and am I going to make it another day?* But then that raises the question: Isn't life more than that? Isn't it more than food and clothing and shelter? In other words, if all you think about are the things of this world and your days are filled with worry, fear and anxiety, then you don't really focus on the things that matter.

When you think about everyday stuff, it can be about just surviving day to day. Put this in a modern-day context: *What do I need to pay the rent, to keep the bills paid, to have a shelter, to have a car, healthcare?* What are the basic needs? And it's possible that every day is just about meeting those needs and maybe accumulating stuff and over time, more stuff. But it's very possible to live that way and make it to eighty years old, and we would say, "Congratulations. You survived eighty years and you accumulated some stuff." But what difference does that make? It's very possible that, "Good for you! You survive every day; you make it to eighty; you have some stuff, and your life was a total miss!" That's what Jesus is saying: "Isn't there more to this deal than just survival, than making it another day, than making it to eighty and have accumulated some stuff? Isn't there more to life than that?" Again, the sobering reality is: if every day you're worried about all that stuff, then that's what you think about; that's what you dwell on, and you don't live for the things that really matter. Verse 26:

> **"Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?"**

I love it when the Bible gives these creation pictures. This is, in essence, a reminder. The birds here wouldn't be like a majestic eagle. In our culture today it's like the sparrow, like the barn swallow—the everyday, ordinary, garden-variety bird. No matter what you do, every time you go outside you can find a bird, and the birds are a reminder that God takes care of them. He shelters them. He feeds them, and the question is: If God so takes care of them, don't you think you're worth more to God than they are? And the obvious answer is: of course you are! You're His child! So every time you're tempted to worry and be fearful and anxious about the everyday stuff of life, the birds remind you that God will take care of you. He's promised! And then I love verse 27:

> **"And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life?"**

I think Patty probably chuckles every time I read that verse because I'm always saying this: "Worry accomplishes nothing!" It would be one thing to have this discussion if worry solved the problem, if worry led to solutions, if worry was somehow strategic, if worry actually resolved the problem. But, at the end of the day, worry accomplishes nothing! No matter how much you worry about it, you can't add one single day to your life. It doesn't fix anything. It doesn't make the problem go away. It doesn't change anything. It is just virtually a total waste of time.

The University of Cincinnati recently did a survey and concluded that eighty-five percent of the things we worry about never come to pass. That is staggering! Eighty-five percent of the things we worry about never come to pass! That is a total waste of energy. They also determined that of the fifteen percent that do come to pass, most people handle those things just fine. Mark Twain once said, "My life has been filled with calamities, some of which actually happened." *(laughter)*

I meet people like that all the time. Their lives have been filled with calamities, but when you sort through it, you realize very few of these actually happened. You have a very nice life; you have a lot to be thankful for! You don't need to spend every day in fear and worry and anxiety. But the sobering reality is: again, if I spend each day filled with worry and anxiety and fear, that is what I'm focused on, which means I'm not focused on the things that matter. You can't serve both! He goes on in verse 28:

> **"And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 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!"** (Vs. 28-30)

It's basically the same illustration, only flowers instead of a bird, and saying, "Look around you! There are flowers that God has clothed better than Solomon in all his glory! And yet, doesn't God care more about you than he does the flowers? Won't he take care of you?" And then at the end of that, He says, "Oh, **you of little faith**!" There is the reminder that at the end of the day it is a faith issue. It's really about whether or not I think God tells the truth. God just made a promise here. God said, *"Listen! Look at the birds! Look at the flowers! I take good care of them. Don't you mean more to Me as My child, and can't you trust Me to take care of you?"*

So it comes down to this: If your days are filled with worry, with fear, with anxiety, you simply don't trust God. You don't think God tells the truth. He just said, *"Don't worry about it! I'll take care of you!"* So if you're going to believe He tells the truth, then you trust Him, which frees your mind to focus on something more, which is verse 32:

> **"For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."**

The reference there to Gentiles is referencing an unbeliever. The logic goes like this: The unbeliever doesn't know God, so the unbeliever doesn't trust God. The unbeliever lives for the things of this world, so that's what the unbeliever thinks about. It's what makes him fearful. That's what makes him worry. That's what makes him anxious. But the logic would be: he should be fearful; he should be anxious; he should be worried. He's functioning as his own god, and frankly he's not equipped for that role. He has good reason to be fearful and worried each day. But we, as those who serve God, we as Christ followers, those of us who say we trust God, there should be a radical difference in saying, "But that's not us! I'm not saying I'm my own god. I'm serving God; therefore I trust Him. I'll look at the birds. I'll look at the flowers. They'll remind me of God's promise that He'll take care of me." And so as a believer, I choose to trust Him with that, which then sets our minds free for verse 33:

> **"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."**

Seek first, in priority, the things that last, the things that matter. **Seek first His kingdom**, and let God take care of the rest. Again, the implication is: if my days are filled with worry and anxiety and fear, that's what I think about all day, so I will not focus on the things that matter. But if I trust God and trust that God tells the truth, then I'll trust Him with those things, which frees me up to focus on the things that matter and to invest myself in the things that last forever. The final verse just kind of summarizes it back up:

> **"So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will take care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."** (Vs. 34)

Now what He is *not* saying is, *"Don't worry about tomorrow because today has lots of problems, so worry about today."* That's not what He's saying. He is saying, *"Don't worry about tomorrow; I'll take care of that. Today is going to have struggles and troubles, but trust Me; I'll take care of it. You seek first the kingdom and focus on the things that matter."*

I want to close our time together this morning sharing a little bit personally about how this particular text has kind of fleshed itself out with Patty and me over the last, basically, year and a half. Most of you know, when I was thirty-nine years old, I had open-heart surgery. I had some problems with my valves and actually had a fairly radical procedure that, at that time, was cutting edge. I was the twenty-seventh person here to have it, and there were only a few places in the country that were doing the procedure at all. And it has served me very well.

Probably about five years ago my aortic valve started to leak, which isn't really all that uncommon. You can go a long time with a leaky valve. It just depends on how severe the leak is. And so I've had cardiologists and my doctor watching over me, and I just want to say how much I appreciate these guys: Keith, Clyde, Brandon and Gus. Three of the four come to Berean. All four of them are believers and love me, care about me, and we felt very confident walking through this together.

About a year and a half ago—so it would have been September, 2012—I went in for my six-month checkup and there was some concern that my heart was enlarging, which would be symptomatic that it is stressing out over trying to keep up because of the inefficiency of the valve. And that's kind of naughty, and so that became a concern. And so we had a little discussion about the possibility of surgery and where all of this might be headed, but we needed to run a second test in order to get clarity before we did anything. And that second test was scheduled about two weeks out from when I had my first test.

Well, right in between there, I had committed to going to the *Rogue Event* in Estes Park. If you were here for State of the Church, it's part of *Harbor Ministries* that we talked about quite a bit. *Rhythm in Twenty* is for the 20 and 30 year-olds. Rogue is for old guys like me—and so I did the Rogue thing. It's basically two events that bookend one year. So I initially signed up for Rogue because I'm very passionate about what Tim and that ministry is doing. I believe in it; I support it. I wanted to be part of it; I wanted to experience it myself. I wanted to encourage Tim, and I wanted to grow and continue to learn myself. But the discussion about the possibility of a surgery was a couple of days before I found myself in Estes Park so now that was definitely at the front of my thinking and what concerned me.

One of the activities during the Rogue event is a half day of silence and solitude. Literally, they take you up into the park and they drop you off, and for four hours you're alone and quiet—no phones, no music, no clatter—none of the stuff that clutters up our lives every day. So it's four

hours of peace and quiet. For those of us that are introverts, it's a little taste of heaven. *(laughter)* It was beautiful.

Because I wasn't quite sure what was going on with my heart, I thought it probably wasn't wise to go up the mountain, and so I just wandered down the stream, down into a meadow and just kind of sat down by the stream. And I remember what was continually going through my mind, what kind of the burden was: if something happened to me, what about Patty and the girls? You know, as a pastor, I've spent thirty years walking with people who lose loved ones. I know what that's like. I know what the pain is like and, selfishly, I did not want that for my own family. So I was wrestling with that and kind of journaling and trying to process some of that and, over time, I found myself getting just kind of lost, staring into this meadow—just the beauty of it and the colors—and I just kind of got lost in it. And right behind the meadow were aspen trees. They were in full bloom; the colors were magnificent. It looked like somebody plugged them in and they were electric. It was just one of those moments, and I found myself just kind of lost in the beauty and the wonder of this moment. After probably thirty minutes or so of that, out from the trees walked this huge bull elk. He didn't see me, and he walked into the meadow and began to bugle and, for about an hour, I watched this elk not far from me in the meadow bugling and just kind of meandering around this meadow. It was an absolutely magnificent scene.

But as I began to take this in, it was interesting. God began to bring back this text that we just went over. And the reason was because just a couple weeks before that—September 1st and 2nd, 2012—I had just preached that text. And what God was saying to me is, "*You need to listen to your own sermon. You need to think about your own words. What did you just tell the people? Didn't you tell them to look at the birds, look at the flowers, look at the trees and the meadow and the elk and remember that if God takes such good care of His good creation, won't he take care of me? Don't I matter more to Him than that meadow or those trees or that elk?"* And I began to rethink my own sermon and preach it back to myself and remind myself what I said was true.

And then there was a moment where I felt like God spoke to me. I did not hear an audible voice, but it was as clear as what I'm saying today where God said, *"Bryan, I promise I will take care of Patty and the girls. Look at the trees. Look at the elk. I promise I'll take care of them."* And I remember writing that in my journal and just settling that—that I need to practice what I preach; I need to remember what's true—that God has promised, and that He would take care of my family.

That evening we gathered back together in the lodge and I actually shared that, to me something very personal, but chose to share that with this group of men, partly because I wanted to confirm it in my own heart. But interestingly enough, a couple of the men that were there would say that God spoke to them through that and in that moment, they too settled some struggles they were going through. It was just one of those amazing God moments.

A few days later we came back to Lincoln and I had the follow-up test. The test indicated my heart was not enlarging as much as thought. Actually, everything looked pretty good, and so we were full speed ahead.

While one of the cars was coming out of the park that day at Estes, the car that was about five minutes behind us came across a scene where two bull elk had their antlers stuck together in a fight right up on the edge of the road. The picture that's on the front of your *Loop* (and also the picture on the screen) is the picture that my pastor-friend Stu took out of the window of his car. Is that amazing or what! So he sent me a copy of that picture. And even though that's not exactly what I

saw in that meadow, I thought that picture will be a reminder of what God taught me that day. I printed it out and I taped it on the bookshelf right next to my study desk. And for the last year—virtually six days a week—I have seen that and remembered that God made a promise that no matter what happens, I can trust Him.

I think both Patty and I would say with confidence that the last year has not been a year of fear and anxiety and worry. It has been a year of trust and a year of kingdom building—seeking first His kingdom.

Well, all that brings us up to the present then. A couple of weeks ago I went in for my six-month checkup, and basically the valve and the heart size looked about the same. Everything there looked pretty good. But there was a little bit of a concern that where my aorta comes and attaches to the top of my heart looked like it was swelling, and that's kind of naughty. And so the next day I had a CAT scan and it clarified that it is indeed swelling quite a bit, which raises then the risk of an eruption and, in medical language, that would be a bummer—almost always fatal. So now I do have a bigger problem that has to get addressed.

So all of that leading up to say: a week from tomorrow I'll be going back into open-heart surgery. They'll have to repair that aorta and they'll swap out my valve. And because it's a redo—it's a second heart surgery—there's a lot of scar tissue which makes it a little bit more intense, a little bit more delicate. So we would certainly appreciate your prayers. That will put me out until the middle to the latter part of January, and then I plan to be back and full-speed ahead.

So a couple of final things: One question would be: how are we doing? And I would say I think we're doing fine. I think I can personally, honestly, say I haven't spent five seconds wrestling with the goodness or the faithfulness of God. I don't question why this is part of my story. I don't wonder. If you were here this summer, I told my own story. I walked that dog years ago. I settled it. I've accepted for years the heart thing is part of my story. It always will be. I'm really at peace with that and have been for a long time.

But I'd also be honest in saying the thing that has a tendency to be a concern for me is the same thing that bothered me a year ago: What about Patty and the girls? I hate it that this has to be and how that affects them and how it affects my friends. I wish I could change it; I wish it was different. I can't do anything about that.

So I would say for all of us as a family, it's a daily discipline to choose to believe what we just talked about this morning—that God has promised that He'll be faithful, and we have to trust Him with things that we can't change or do anything about—and not fill our days with anxiety and worry—and to discipline ourselves to focus on the things that matter each day. So that's where we're at. That's what we're doing. That'd be a great thing to pray about. So I would say we would definitely covet your prayers. The next couple of weeks will be rough for us as a family, so we would certainly appreciate that.

The other thing that you could do for me and for us as a ministry staff: Often in times like this, there's kind of this feeling like *we'd like to do something*, but what can you do? Well here's what you *can* do: I would say we, as a ministry staff, are very much like a family. We love and care about each other. This isn't going to be easy for anybody. And one of the things that would really help is if everybody stays really focused on the mission. This is a real strategic season for the church. You get into the holidays and year's end. It's a critical ministry season. It's a critical

giving season. We're trying to eliminate the debt. There are a lot of things that really matter right here. And it would really be meaningful to me and to the rest of our staff if we just stay focused and stay on mission—that's what really matters—and finish the year strong. Our staff really doesn't need additional stress. And so if you're wondering *what can we do*, just keep doing what you're doing and stay focused. That would be very meaningful to us.

I would like to close the service this morning with all of us together singing the great old hymn: *It is Well with my Soul*. When I found out that I was headed back into another surgery and I was downloading this with Patty—and so didn't want to tell her this—while I was downloading the information, I didn't realize this but she told me a couple days later that the song that was playing on the radio was *It is Well with my Soul*. So while I am telling her this, it's against the backdrop of that music, reminding her that no matter what, it's going to be okay.

Now what I've shared with you this morning, that's my story. But you have your own story. Some of you are going through things just as difficult—maybe more so. And so it's our reminder today that no matter what you're going through, no matter what we're going through together, this feels to me like kind of a family moment to remind ourselves together that no matter what we're facing, no matter what happens in the days ahead, it is going to be okay. We can say with confidence, "*It is Well with my Soul*." So let's stand together and let's remind ourselves of this great truth.

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