

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Less Worry, More Faith**

Matthew 16:1-12

Some folks treat their personalized license plates as a form of witness. I saw one earlier this week that read: HASF8TH. I'm guessing that Jesus would have cautioned his first disciples about driving around Galilee with an announcement like that on the rear of their cars. Not because faith is unimportant, or because you shouldn't make your faith known to others, but rather because at this point in their ministry with Jesus, the disciples don't really have as much faith as that kind of license plate might indicate.

Today's text combines two scenes that, at first glance, don't seem to have a lot in common. In the first scene, some Jewish religious leaders confront Jesus and attempt to discredit him by demanding a "sign from heaven" (v. 1). Jesus rebukes them. Now this doesn't mean that he was in complete opposition to the Pharisees and Sadducees on every issue. In fact, there were probably some points on which Jesus and his followers agreed with the opinion of the majority of Pharisees, or other groups within Judaism. But in this particular case, Jesus reprimands them for their hardness of heart and their refusal to believe.

And yet, this doesn't mean that Jesus' disciples themselves are paragons of faith. In the second scene, we see how they too fail to recognize and rely on Jesus' power. After breaking off communication with the religious leaders, Jesus struggles to communicate with his own followers. At first, he tries to warn his disciples about the dangers of unbelief, and how it can spread. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," says Jesus (v. 6). He uses the metaphor of yeast, which permeates flour and produces an effect. In this case the effect is negative. Cynicism and distrust, opposition to the reign of God, can spread.

Jesus' comparison is sharp, but his disciples seem to be a little dull. When Jesus speaks of yeast, they take him literally. They think he's talking about bread, which, oops, they've forgotten to bring with them. Now they're on the east side of the lake, which is more sparsely populated and where bread is in shorter supply. Not a good situation. They've neglected their responsibility and failed their teacher. At least that's the way the disciples see it.

But that's not what Jesus meant. He walks over to their little discipleship huddle and asks, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?" (v. 8). Then he goes on to remind them of the feeding miracles they've already witnessed, yet seem to have quickly forgotten. If bread were needed, Jesus could miraculously supply that. But that's not the most pressing matter right now. Jesus' point, and what's most urgent, is that they beware of the corrupting, destructive power of unbelief. He doesn't want those "of little faith" to end up with even less faith.

Actually, what his disciples need less of is worry and self-absorption. By the end of our text, the disciples finally get it. But up until then, they're so focused on daily anxieties that they misunderstand what the Lord is trying to teach them. The religious leaders showed their lack of faith by actively attempting to spread skepticism about Jesus. The disciples

showed their lack of faith by being so caught up in the worries of daily living that they didn't recognize and trust in the movement, power, and presence of God in their midst.

From what Matthew has told us, we know that Jesus has already been instructing his disciples on these issues. In the Sermon on the Mount, he taught them to trust in God for provisions, without letting concern for physical security take priority over spiritual realities. Not that food and clothes and shelter don't have spiritual dimensions as well. "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them," says Jesus (6:32). But life is more than just these things. So seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. Don't let worry and anxiety overtake your pursuit of what God requires and expects of his people. Deep down you know that worry will not add even a millisecond to your life. In fact, it may shave some time off your existence.

The great preacher C. H. Spurgeon once wrote, "It is always weakness to be fretting and worrying, questioning and mistrusting. What can we do if we wear ourselves to skin and bone? Can we gain anything by fearing and fuming? Do we not unfit ourselves for action, and unhinge our minds for wise decision? We are sinking by our struggles when we might float by faith. . . . Oh for grace to be confident in God."<sup>1</sup>

"You of little faith." Jesus applies this expression to his disciples, not to the world in general. Yet you won't find anyone driving around with a license plate that says LITTLE F8TH. It probably wouldn't fit anyway. But it does remind us that in today's text, Jesus is concerned that his disciples' progress in faith seems very slow. And their struggle to learn faith is due in no small part to their self-reliance, which manifests itself in worry and anxiety.

There's a scene in an episode of *The Bob Newhart Show* where Bob, a psychologist, is talking to a woman who has come for her first visit. Bob begins by explaining how he bills—five dollars for the first five minutes, and then nothing after that. The woman is thrilled. Bob assures her the session won't go over five minutes. The woman begins by explaining that she fears being buried alive in a box. When Bob asks her to say more, she describes how this fear extends to other things—being in tunnels, elevators, houses, cars, "anything boxy." "So basically you're saying you're claustrophobic?" says Bob. "Yes, that's what I'm saying," she replies.

This whole exchange takes about two minutes. Then Bob takes another ten seconds or so to empathize with her—how awful it must be to live with this fear. "It's horrible," the woman says. "All right," says Bob, "I'm going to give you two words that I think will clear up everything. Just take these two words and integrate them into your daily life, and you should be fine." The woman is excited, and asks if she should write them down. "Oh, you can if you like," he says. "But most people have no trouble remembering them." "Okay," she says, leaning forward. "You ready?" asks Bob. "Yes," she says. "Okay, here are the two words." Bob leans across his desk to put his face close to hers, and says, "Stop it!"<sup>2</sup>

If Jesus took that approach with his disciples, the Gospel narratives of his ministry would be regularly punctuated with Jesus telling them, "Stop it!" For Jesus, moving his followers further out of worry and deeper into faith was, and is, an ongoing project that takes patience and perseverance. As one commentator has put it, we need to remember that Jesus' rebuke is "like that of a concerned parent, not that of a harsh drill sergeant."<sup>3</sup> It takes more than just "Stop it!" to help us recognize and rely on the presence and power of God. It takes getting more of Jesus in us, so that little faith becomes greater faith.

Amazon once released a list of passages that e-book owners had highlighted in some of the most popular books. When it came to passages in the Bible, you might think that America's favorite Scripture portion would be John 3:16, Psalm 23, or the Lord's Prayer. Actually, it was a less prominent text, Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Perhaps, as others have noted, the popularity of this text says something about the level of anxiety or worry in our contemporary setting.<sup>4</sup>

Believers are certainly included in this anxiety. We who confess Jesus Christ as Lord can be just as worried as those who don't share our faith. A couple of years ago, the Pew Research Center did a study in which they asked evangelical Christians about their worries. It turns out that what they worry about most is their health. About 75 percent said they worry about a personal health crisis. Other high-ranking worries included having their home broken into, not being able to pay their bills, losing their job, or being the victim of a terrorist attack, violent crime, or mass shooting. If I did some unscientific polling among you this morning, some of these same anxieties might come up, along with others that weren't noted in their study.

"You of little faith," says Jesus, "why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?" I'm guessing that if I asked you to turn to those near you this morning and talk to one another about what's worrying you, the conversation would probably go on for a while. That might be therapeutic for all of us. And yet, sometimes we can get so enclosed in our own thinking and talking about our worries that we lose touch with the living Lord, who is trying to speak into our anxious gathering, to warn us, to reassure us, and to help us refocus on his presence and action in our lives.

Pastor John Ortberg tells about what he learned from author and teacher Dallas Willard. Though he doesn't recall Willard's exact words, Ortberg says, "I remember him saying that all of us lost souls allow ourselves to live in worry and anger and self-importance and pettiness when life with God is all around us."<sup>5</sup> Life with God is all around us. That's what Jesus is still trying to teach us and show us. But we often become so wrapped up in daily concerns and anxieties over physical security and well-being that we don't see the activity of God around us. I'm not trying to say that our worries and anxieties aren't real, or that we should just try to block them out from our thoughts and conversations. We need to recognize them and address them, but without becoming so consumed and absorbed by them that we miss the sovereignty of God in daily experience.

Pastor and author John Guest says that when he lived in England, his landlady had a little wall plaque that read, "Why pray when you can worry?" He always saw the humor in it, but noted that the reverse psychology was good for him: "Why worry when you can pray?"<sup>6</sup> Perhaps that's part of why you've come here today, to counter worry with worship, to prayerfully bring your worries to God. The Lord knows that anxieties can be corrosive to your faith. They can weaken your confidence in him, blind you to his saving power at work in the world, and distract you from the priority of his kingdom. So he wants to take your faith and increase it, strengthen it, and deepen it.

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, in *Faith's Checkbook*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 34, No. 17).

<sup>2</sup> From Mark Buchanan, *Your Church Is Too Safe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 88-89. At <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/april/6043012.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*. IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997) 269.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Worry Less, Live More* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017) xiii.

<sup>5</sup> John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 186-87.

<sup>6</sup> John Guest, in *Only a Prayer Away*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 33, No. 2).