

Single-Minded
Matthew 6:24-34

Worry has gotten a bad rap. It's really a great motivator. Some of the hardest working and most effective people I know are worriers. If I had to choose between a worrier and an unmotivated person, I would take the worrier every time.

The problem with worry is that, while it motivates people, it eventually destroys them. It's like contaminated gas. The car can run on it for awhile, maybe even a long while. But eventually the plugs will get fouled and the intake valves will be plugged.

(I'm saying this as if I know what I'm talking about. I know next to nothing about mechanical matters.)

But I have seen what worry can do to people. It affects the body and the soul. It gradually drains health from the body and joy from the soul.

What's the alternative? Is it, "Don't worry; be happy?" That seems to be what Jesus is saying.

Some people read these words from Jesus and come to the conclusion he was saying, "Don't worry about anything. Just relax and take life easy. Be like the birds. They don't work. They just float around in the sky and food comes to them. Be like the flowers. They stand around looking pretty, and good things come to them."

Of course, that's not accurate. Birds are up early and work hard all day finding food. Flowers are constantly working at sending roots out to find food and water, and they photosynthesize their little hearts out all day long.

One time I came to the church early on a Monday morning. I found a group of five college age young people sleeping on the front steps of the church. It was apparent they had spent the night there. I woke them up and asked what they were doing there. They said, "We just travel around from town to town, and we sleep at the churches." Then they asked if I would give them something to eat. I said, "Let me get this straight. You travel around from town to town, sleeping on the steps of churches and begging for food from the preachers?" They said, "That's right." I said, "You look pretty healthy to me. Why don't you get jobs?" They said, "Only sinners work for money." I asked, "Where do you get that from?" "The scripture, Matthew 6:24-34, Jesus said not to serve money." I responded, "And in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul said, 'If anyone will not work, let him not eat.'"

Think what this world would look like if everything believed like that. It would look like a lot of plants and animals working hard to survive without having to compete with human beings, because we would be extinct. Paul was really stating a law of nature when he said, "Those who don't work don't eat."

It may look like we only have two alternatives: Either to worry ourselves to death getting things done, or to be irresponsible, lazy and happy, like those kids. But there are other alternatives. There is a better motivation for getting things done than worry.

What motivates you to get up and go to work every day—wherever you work, whether it be at the plant, or the office, or your house, or the school? Are you saying to yourself, "If I don't go to work, I'll lose my job, and then my family will end up hungry

and on the street?” Or, “If I don’t work hard, I’ll flunk my courses and I’ll be considered a loser by everyone I care about and I’ll have no future?” Or, “If I don’t work hard, this house will be a mess and I’ll be embarrassed when people come to visit me.” Or, “If I don’t work hard, I’ll lose control and my life will spiral into chaos and confusion.”

Is your motivation the fear that if you don’t get to work bad things will happen? What about this for motivation? Rather than working because something bad will happen if you don’t, what about pushing yourself to work hard because good things happen when you do?

We don’t work just because bad things will happen to us if we don’t. We work because we can make life better for ourselves and for others.

As Christians, we do not work to make money, or to win respect and approval from others, or to gain power and control. We work to serve others. And we trust God to take care of the rest.

We like knowing that we are making life better for others. We enjoy seeing people become healthier and happier and knowing that we helped make that happen. Christians enjoy going to work, because they know they are helping produce a service or a product that lifts people’s standard of living. They enjoy knowing that they make life better for their coworkers. They make life better for their clients, or their customers, or their students. They do housework because a clean, orderly house helps their families feel better. It makes their neighbors feel better. It makes their guests feel better. They do community work because that lifts the quality of life for the whole community and they can help people with special needs.

As Christians, we do push ourselves to do the work Christ has called us to do as we serve our neighbors because we are motivated by the good we can do—not because we are worried about the bad things, nor because we have to work in order to survive.

We trust God to provide for our needs. As it happens, the way God usually provides for our needs is through the money we receive from our employment. What we must not forget is that the money we receive does not come from our employers or our customers or from our pension funds or from the Social Security agency. It comes from God. They are only the conduits. If we forget that, we end up serving them. Jesus reminds us that we must serve God and God alone. God is the one who provides for us, and our ultimate allegiance is to God and God alone.

No one can serve two masters: You can serve God or you can serve the people who hand you the money. If you serve the people who hand you the money (or the people who give you the “attaboys”), you have to do what they tell you to do, whether you believe in it or not, because you live in fear of the bad things that will happen to you if you don’t. If you serve God, people are not your masters. Even if you have a boss, he or she is not your master. That is just the person who helps you coordinate your work with the others on your team.

We must never forget for whom we really work.

I was talking with someone one time who attended a church in a neighboring community. He was telling me about his pastor who had served the church for several years. He had been effective, but had not had an outstanding ministry. He was a so-so preacher. But then, this man was telling me, the pastor received a large inheritance. Overnight he became independently wealthy. I asked the man if the pastor retired. He said, “No, he is still our pastor. In fact, he has become a much more effective pastor.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. He said, “He no longer cares if we might fire him. So, he tells us exactly what he thinks. He’s become a much more powerful preacher.” Isn’t it a shame he had to become independently wealthy to say what he really thought? If he had trusted God, he could have been doing that all along.

But we can’t be too hard on him. Most of us have all fallen into that trap. It’s so easy to go along to get along, because you’re afraid of losing your livelihood. The only way to avoid that trap is to truly trust God to provide. Whomever we trust for provision is the one we will truly serve.

No one can serve two masters. You will either hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. If you are working for money, you will become a slave to it, and it is a cruel master. It will take your soul.

If you serve God, you will probably end up working harder than you ever would for money. But you will enjoy your work, rather than resenting it. Because you will believe in what you are doing. And you will be free from fear.

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