

The Cause of Anxiety

We live in a world that's filled with daily situations that can elicit anxiety even from those with the strongest constitution. That being true, what does scripture teach us regarding our personal anxiety? Is there a root cause that brings about anxiety that can express itself in a number of practical ways? In this series of articles I want to attempt to answer those questions from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Before we get to our primary text in Matthew's gospel, I want to note an event that happened in the gospel of Luke that will set in place what I want to address in this article.

Early in chapter 12, Jesus is teaching to large crowds of people about the reality of unhealthy fear; e.g., fear of man and fear that the needs of our lives will not be met. Luke also makes a statement on anxiety brought about by the fear of man. It's at this time that someone in the crowd shouts out, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." This launches Jesus into a warning that we must be on our guard against coveting, which as we'll see, is directly connected to misplaced trust, i.e., the cause of anxiety. Jesus then tells a parable about the land of a rich man that produced a plentiful crop. The rich man thought to himself, "What will I do? I have nowhere to store my crops." He decided that he would tear down his barns and build bigger barns in order to store all of his wealth. But notice that his thinking is wrong and his trust is misplaced. "And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry." This rich man is convinced that, because he has plenty of earthly wealth everything in his life is set; all he needs to do is to live the remainder of his life in ease and comfort.

As the parable continues, God speaks to this man with these words: "You fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things that you've prepared, whose will they be?" In other words, you trusted in earthly wealth and focused on yourself. You thought that only good times were ahead for years to come but your life is really a vapor and though you think you have it all, you've clearly placed your trust in earthly treasures that cannot last. Jesus concludes this parable with these words: "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Our text in Matthew's gospel finds Jesus teaching on this same reality of misplaced trust. Jesus begins by exposing what it will look like if we're wrongly placing our trust in that which cannot last. This text gives us a look at causes of anxiety by comparing and contrasting that which we should and should not place our trust in beginning with:
—contrasting treasures: Jesus begins this way: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal..." Although the word translated "treasures" may make us think only of money, the word can be used of anything that we value most dearly. These are "treasures" that are subject to decay. "Moth and rust" need not be absolute, but rather, Jesus is merely giving us an example of placing our trust in things that are destined to perish.

Now it's important to notice that Jesus is not condemning sensible planning for the future and he's certainly not forbidding honest work to provide for ours and others' needs (Proverbs 6:6-11). What he is doing is calling on us to look at the unhealthy, unbiblical priority that we often place on "earthly treasures." "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy." 1 Timothy 6:17. In summary, we often place our trust in all the wrong things and people. We're called to place our ultimate trust in God alone, i.e., what he reveals in his word, the Holy Scriptures. When we begin to understand his love for his children and his sovereignty over all of life, these truths will go a long way toward alleviating our anxiety. We'll look more at this in my next article.

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