

Striving for the Kingdom

I've witnessed these tragic consequences more than once: A young attractive couple, living in a very



Michael K. Olmsted

nice neighborhood and associating with professional people who are building successful careers. They are enviable, good people with solid goals – or that's how it seemed, until a Sunday School teacher tells me the

children are showing signs of stress in their behavior, and I notice the husband is missing church. When I casually mention missing her husband, the wife asks for an appointment. Their dream is falling apart. Her husband is fixated on career, trying to put enough money away to pay for the kids' college someday, being able to join the club that will enhance their social standing, and achieving success. Her great despair is that "his goal is success and his family has dropped to second place." The question is so basic: What is the purpose of your life?

The verse immediately before our study passage singles out the pivotal stress factor all believers face: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon" (v. 24). Mammon means wealth, security or goals of self-importance.

Jesus is explicit: "I tell you," followed by the common needs of life. So there is no pointing our fingers at rich people or community leaders. This is about us and our world of ordinary needs, "your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear ... because life is more" (v. 25). As I told that young mother whose marriage was under stress that of course a loving father wants to plan for his children's future, but a crucial piece of good parenting is loving, teaching values and demonstrating worthy goals. What do you live for? We are a success-oriented society, shaped by an endless barrage of success markers: appearance, clothing, electronic devices, cars, shoes, music, even the right words. The pressure to fit in and look and sound right results in mental and physical distress, drug addiction and even suicide.

The prize the world offers cannot fill the deepest longing of the human heart. Jesus points to the simple examples of the natural world: "Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them ... are you not of more value ... can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life ... and about clothing, consider the lilies of the field who do not grow, toil, or spin, yet they are more beautiful than Solomon in all his glory" (vv. 26-29). He goes on to remind us all that God, who cares about a sparrow and a lily must certainly care for every one of us (v. 30). Simplistic? Yes! Because if you cannot hold on to this most basic truth of life, God bless you, your life will be a series of anxious moments, frustration and lack of purpose.

Now, don't suggest Jesus was living in a fantasy bubble of happiness and feel-good slogans about believing and blessings on the road to happy ever after. No one has ever been more realistic or in touch with this challenging world. He dealt with death, disease, poverty, social inequality, rejection and finally with the humility and pain of the cross. The four gospels are nothing like a fairytale: they are reality beyond our comfortable ideas and syrupy slogans. Without the darkness and light of this world, God offers each of us a wonderful gift of spiritual potential.

My family taught me by example that you work hard for a worthy goal, your circumstances are not permanent, money does not vanquish problems, conscience is shaped by faith and moral choices, and faith is the ultimate foundation for life. Worry changes nothing. Idleness has no goal. There is God at the beginning, middle and end of this world, the God who allows you amazing freedom and continues to love you every day.

Living in its best form is experienced only when God is included. Jesus is not comparing us to birds or lilies, but instead is pointing out the potential of a life aware of God and open to his blessings. It is not wrong to seek good employment, plan for the needs of your family and want the best for your children, but none of these areas will be fulfilled by anxiety. God is the center of

Formations

August 26, 2018

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

life. Jesus taught that concept every day, demonstrated it as he put broken lives back together and proved it when he allowed the political and religious leaders to crucify him. Jesus says the Gentiles (those who do not believe in the one true God) try to find meaning and inner satisfaction in the things of this world, but "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" ... so "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and (the needs of your heart and life) will be given to you" (vv. 32-33). There is more than enough worry for every day, so give up the endless cycle of worry and trust God (vv. 33-34).

I'm still learning to trust God. It's hard to let go of a worrisome situation when I know I should be able to solve these problems. The Bible (coupled with my numerous failures at solving problems!) continues to remind me that life is always better when I trust God to work in situations. Striving for the kingdom of God is learning to trust God again and again.

The young family I mentioned at the beginning learned to talk about stress and worry, to communicate as husband and wife, and to focus on putting God at the top of their priorities list. Anxiety can destroy a relationship when it is pushed aside instead of confronted. I can look back at times I said or did the wrong thing and hurt others as well as myself. When we pray with a spouse or friend, that sharing reduces the power of worry.

In Jesus' farewell to his disciples he offers all of us the antidote to uncertainty and fear: "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places, if it were not so, I would have told you, for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am there you may be also" (John 14:1-3 NASV). There is much in this world to unsettle us and challenge our faith, but in the wideness of God's grace, there is the tangible gift of his love in the suffering and joy of our Savior who shows us how to live beyond the negative power of worry. Life is a journey, a striving for the kingdom of God today until forever.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.