

Sermon XII

"On Worldly Anxiety"

by
Thomas Gisborne

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6,7).

In this passage the Apostle warns us against a state of mind which will prove itself intimately allied to a spirit of Discontentment. The preceding verse closes with a very weighty admonition: *"The Lord is at hand."* It is as though Paul had said, "The present life is not only so uncertain but is likewise so short, that death, which fixes your state for Judgment, may well be always contemplated by everyone--whether old or young--as near." To the various instructions which he had been delivering, this consideration would give additional force. Had he not exhorted the servants of Christ, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice?"* The more warmly would they rejoice in the promises of the gospel when they reflected that it could be but a short time which should pass before they should depart and be in possession of their inheritance with their Lord. Had he not addressed them, *"Let your moderation be known unto all men?"* The more easily would they refrain themselves, through the grace of God, from setting their affections on earthly things when they bore in mind that the period could not be long before they should be separated from earthly things forever. The same consideration would contribute to teach and to enable them to obey the succeeding command, *"Be anxious for nothing."*

On another occasion we find the apostle employing the same general argument in a similar manner. He counsels the Corinthians to be cautious as to the needless aggravation of their difficulties in their Christian course, and the accumulation of fresh anxieties respecting temporal concerns by entering into the married state during those days of distress and persecution. And then he impresses this advice: *"But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice [in the present accomplishment of their worldly wishes] as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be without care" (1 Cor. 7:29-32).*

We perceive, then, how powerful is the motive with which the apostle introduces the directions upon which we are now to meditate: *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."* They are directions replete with the soundest advice and the most encouraging consolation. May divine grace guide us all to apply them aright to our own instruction and comfort!

I. What is the disposition of mind against which Saint Paul admonishes us? Harassing anxiety, whether under present troubles or under the apprehension of future trials. To such anxiety we

are all prone. The causes are many which naturally incline us to it. One of them is the consciousness of our own helplessness. We find that we are open on every side--within and without--to tribulations, losses, and perils which we are unable to guard against. Their actual number, though very great, we often magnify; and in many instances we magnify the probability of experiencing them, or at least of experiencing them speedily. Thus we are easily drawn into overwhelming anxiety.

Another cause is the acknowledged necessity and duty of personal exertion in avoiding the evils which we dread and obtaining the good which we desire. This very habit has in many cases a tendency to increase and rivet the very anxiety from which it in part begins.

Another cause is an undue value placed on earthly objects. Where our treasure is, there also will be our heart. And in proportion to the gratification which we promise to ourselves from any possession will be our anxiety to acquire and retain it.

Another cause, this one amiable in itself and laudable, is affection for others. For those who are justly dear to us, we feel--and ought to feel--as for ourselves. We are not less anxious for their interests but are frequently much more anxious for theirs than for our own. Nay, it often happens that we indulge our minds in a state of unwarrantable anxiety respecting them, when an aversion to even the appearance of selfishness would have prompted us to check that anxiety with regard to ourselves alone.

Another cause is the lack of a sufficiently strong and lively faith in God. In looking so little to Him, we are deservedly allowed to harass ourselves with our own schemes, to become a prey to our own imaginations.

These causes of anxiety are general. They exercise an influence more or less active over everyone. In some people their effect is increased by particular causes, such as weakness of health, unusual calamities, or other circumstances which have weighed down the spirits and disposed the mind to more than ordinary fear and suspicion.

The unsuitability of this anxious temper to a Christian may be shown by various arguments. One argument, adequate of itself to prove its unsuitability, is the consideration that "*the Lord is at hand,*" which has already been noticed. Objects with which we are speedily to part cannot reasonably call forth overpowering anxiety.

In the next place, let us reflect on our ignorance: "*For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow?*" (Ecc. 6:12). The objects we strenuously desire might prove injurious to our present comfort, dangerous to our final welfare, when once attained. The events which we dread and are laboring to shun may be blessings in disguise--blessings to us both as to this world and the next.

This is an argument employed by our Lord himself: "*And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest?*" (Luke 12:25,26). Remember also the disabling effect of anxiety upon the mind. It clouds the understanding, perplexes the judgment, produces imprudence, rashness, wavering and tardy actions, and frequently disqualifies us by denying the power without which the attainment of our

wishes is impossible. It increases too the already immoderate value which we give to these earthly desires.

The influence of anxiety on morality is energetic and pernicious. It has only a step to take before it becomes discontentment. But even if anxious care wholly stops short of discontentment, still it sets its affections on earthly things, retains its overweening estimate of their importance, tempts us in the use of unwarrantable means in securing our desires, manifests disproportionate alarm under the apprehension of impending troubles, and shows itself not sufficiently scrupulous as to the methods of averting them. Anxiety sours the mind, renders the temper irritable and uncertain, corrodes the satisfactions and undermines the quiet of domestic life. When anxiety is displayed over the smallest matters, it deadens the sympathy others might feel. It predisposes and tempts them to indifference. Disgusting others by treating every trifle as a concern of moment, it teaches them to treat momentous things as trifles.

"But are there not any worldly desires in which harassing anxiety may lawfully be indulged?" Hear the answer of St. Paul: "*Be anxious for nothing.*" There is no worldly desire in which it is allowable to indulge a degree of anxious care that is incompatible with willing submission to the appointment of God, with any branch of the Christian spirit, or with cheerful activity in Christian duty. Does the reply of the Apostle stand in need of confirmation? Hear it confirmed by our Saviour: "*Therefore take no thought [do not worry] about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought [worry] about its own things*" (Matt. 6:34). "*Therefore I say to you, take no thought [do not worry] about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on*" (Matt. 6:25).

In this passage there are two particulars to which I would invite your attention. First, in the original language of the New Testament, the word which our Saviour uses to express *taking thought* is the very word which St. Paul employs to signify *being anxious*. In the next place, by applying the injunction to particulars which are absolutely necessary to our existence, our Lord shows that the command to "take no thought"--not to be anxious--admits of no exception. Do not be anxious about *what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or what ye shall put on*. Why are we not to be anxious about what we shall eat or drink? Because God feeds the birds of the air, which neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. Why are we not to be anxious about what we shall put on? Because God arrays the lilies of the field, which neither toil nor spin, with glory superior to all the magnificence with which Solomon was invested. If, then, we are positively forbidden to harbor distressing anxiety about common nourishment and clothing, articles of which we need a constant supply so life can be sustained, assuredly there is no worldly desire about which such anxiety is permitted. "*Be anxious for nothing.*"

II. What course are we then to take when troubles press upon us or hang over us? "*In everything,*" replies the Apostle, "*by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*"

When our Saviour forbids harassing cares even concerning food and clothing, and consequently respecting any other earthly desire, He gives us ample encouragement to lay aside our anxieties by reminding us of the gracious love with which our heavenly Father is pleased to look upon us. God feeds the ravens. How much more better are you, how much more precious are you in his sight than the birds! "*If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow*

is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? Do not have an anxious mind. Your Father knows that you need these things." Christ exhorts us to communicate all our wishes to God, as a Father of whose tender and unvarying love we are assured.

Observe how far the encouragement extends: *In everything*. The encouragement comprehends all trials, all times, all persons. Apply to God *in everything*. The command to ask God is no less wide--and wider it could not be--than the prohibition against anxiety. Be anxious *for nothing*. *In everything* let your requests be made known to God. Whatever then be the evil from which we would be protected, whatever be the good with which we desire to be favored, we are authorized and exhorted now and at all seasons to ask our Heavenly Father to grant it through the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Observe farther the manner in which we are to make our requests known to Him: *by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving*.

By prayer. We are to address ourselves to Him as a God who hears prayer, who is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, as a Father reconciled to us through the blood of his beloved Son. He is ready to bestow freely upon us, as the adopted brethren of the Lord Jesus, every blessing of the life which now is and of that which is to come.

By prayer and supplication. Note the force of this addition. We are authorized and exhorted not merely to address ourselves to God once or sparingly, but to plead for the blessing we seek with supplication--with earnest, repeated, and continued entreaty. Our pleading must be presented with submission to His good pleasure, with a decided preference that not our will but His should be done; but with that limitation in mind it may lawfully be earnest, repeated, and continued. And to be instant and fervent and persevering in prayer are means declared in the Scriptures to be conducive to its success.

To forward the success of our prayer and supplication we must add *thanksgiving*. A grateful acknowledgment of mercies already received is surely a becoming accompaniment to a request for any additional blessing. But there seems also to be a special reason that might lead St. Paul particularly to name thanksgiving in this passage. Thanksgiving is among the clearest evidences that we are free from anxiety, from the state of mind which our Lord has been forbidding. It is not difficult for a person to be full of anxiety at the very time when he prays and pleads. Nay, his anxiety may be among the motives which send him to prayer and supplication in the first place. But it is scarcely possible for him to be anxious and thankful at the same time. How can the serenity and joy and humble faith which belong to a thankful heart exist together with a spirit of anxiety?

The habit of fervent, persevering, and grateful prayer has a direct tendency to animate and elevate morality. What man who has devoutly prayed for pardon can rise from his knees in an unforgiving temper? How can he who has recently pleaded for blessings be unkind? How can he whose heart has been expressing itself in thanksgiving go forth to a deed of ingratitude?

III. What is the benefit promised us if we obey the command to be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, to make our requests known unto God? "*The peace of God,*" answer the Apostle, "*which surpasses all understanding, will guard*

your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Peace is the benefit promised--the peace of God. It is the peace which God is ever ready to bestow and which He alone can impart. Of this promised peace it is declared that it *surpasses all understanding*. It is an unspeakable tranquility, a peculiar serenity which surpasses all previous imagination, and can be fully comprehended by those only to whom it is known by experience. It is one of those gifts of God which, until it has been in some measure possessed, eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man to conceive. It is a composure shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost. It consists in a firm conviction that God is a God of love to each of us individually, that all things are in His hands and come to pass only by His appointment or permission, that He knows all our necessities, that His eye watches over us by night and by day, that He discerns at every moment what is best for us, that no good thing will He withhold from His servants, and that all things shall in the end work together for good to those who love God.

Well might this confidence *keep the heart and mind* of the true penitent in undisturbed repose! It raises them from things temporal to things eternal, from earth to heaven, from man to God. It disperses alarm with respect to present or future events by revealing the Lord of the universe--infinite in power, in foreknowledge, in wisdom, in truth, in goodness, in mercy and loving kindness; as standing by the side of His servants to protect, to guide, to uphold them, to render the whole course of His providence a succession of blessings for each one. Surely this peace is the *peace of God*.

And it is *through Christ Jesus*. It is one of the fruits of His sufferings, of His continued intercession for us. It is dispensed through Him as head over all things to His church. It is connected with the consciousness of that redeeming love by which he has paid the penalty of transgression and destroyed the dominion of sin. It is a foretaste of that eternal peace in which, when the trials of earth are passed away, His glorified servants shall reign with Him in heaven.

Having endeavored to explain the substance of the instruction conveyed in the passage before us, let me briefly apply it to three kinds of persons.

First, I would address those who are eagerly toiling in the pursuit of earthly things. You greatly overvalue the object which you seek. Perhaps, if you should obtain it, you may live to lament that it ever should have come into your possession. But supposing it to be really desirable for you, still, if you gain it, your expectations will not be answered. It will be found more imperfect when near at hand than it appears at a distance. It will also bring troubles of its own. But however valuable it may be, you are not pursuing it in the method most likely to be successful. *"Unless the LORD [Yahweh] builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows"* (Ps. 127:1,2).

Success is from above. Would you obtain it? *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."* Commit your way to the Lord; and if it be for your good, He will bring it to pass. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other needful things shall be added to you.

Secondly, there are persons of a sanguine temper who see everything as in sunshine; and in whatever undertaking they are occupied, promise to themselves a general current of success. Such men may be regarded by others--nay, they may regard themselves--as obeying the command "*Be anxious for nothing.*" But their freedom from anxiety arises not from humble trust in God. It springs from a disposition bordering, or more than bordering, on presumption. Their confidence rests not on a right foundation. It is placed mainly on themselves, or relies on some other arm of flesh, or is grounded on a past course of prosperous events--which they term constant good fortune--and consider as almost certain to continue. It is not a meek and filial dependence on the unmerited love of a Heavenly Father. Are they accustomed "*in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, to make their requests known to God?*" Let them in this manner seek for success if they would have a scriptural hope of obtaining it and finding it a blessing.

Thirdly, let some few seasonable words be spoken to the dejected--to those who being depressed by a conviction of sinfulness scarcely dare to believe themselves authorized to cast all their care upon God and to hope for that peace of God which surpasses all understanding. Be not surprised, you who are bowed down and dismayed, to hear that you are the very persons whom your God particularly encourages to cast your cares upon Him! You are the very persons to whom He specially promises His peace. Examine the Scriptures and you will perceive that the promises and consolations of the gospel are offered and ensured to those in particular who feel their need of them the most. Note your Saviour's expressions: "*Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" "*Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" "*Thou will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee.*" "*Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.*"

Note how St. Paul was supported through all his manifold trials, because he was anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, made his requests known to God. In whatever state he was placed, he was enabled to be content. In tribulation he could always rejoice. Though troubled on every side, he was not distressed. Under every circumstance he found the grace of Christ sufficient for him. He could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. The peace of God, which surpassed all understanding, kept his heart and mind through Christ Jesus.

Take heart, my hearers! Lift up your spirits and be cheerful, for the instruction addressed in this text is for you!

Sermon XII from *Sermons Principally Designed to Illustrate and to Enforce Christian Morality* by Thomas Gisborne (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809). **Note:** Liberty has been taken for some light editing and paraphrasing.