



Into the Light

November-December 2006

Matthew 19.26

Sometimes I Worry Too Much

By Bob Van Domelen

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6.34)

You know, I don't think I have ever spoken with someone who could look me in the face and say, "I never worry about tomorrow." And if someone did say that to me, I would probably be as skeptical as the next person in terms of whether or not I'd believe the words. Like a lot of people, I tend to measure the truth in what I hear against what I know in my own life—and maybe that's a big mistake.

At some point in my time of prison confinement, my property list was pretty much at bare minimum. I had some paper, envelopes, a pen or two, some stamps, my Bible, and that was it. The only time a shakedown ever bothered me was once when I had borrowed a book from a friend. Fortunately, nothing was said, but I was anxious nonetheless.

Meals, although usually leaving something to be desired, were sufficient. There seemed to be a ton of rules just waiting to be broken—like the time I stepped out of my cell with socks and no shoes. The sergeant looked at me, then at my feet, and then back at my face. Maybe he saw panic, but he gave a sideways movement of his head to indicate I was to get back in the cell. No ticket—just anxiety.

It seems like my friends and I were always praying that God would take care of us if and when we got released from prison. We said we trusted God to do that, but each of us harbored thoughts of a very difficult re-entry despite the confidence behind the words we prayed aloud with one another.

My release from prison came in December 1988 and the time of confinement does not seem "just like yesterday." Prison has a way of becoming an indelible mark, a period of time tattooed on some corner of the brain.

There is not one topic that is of more concern in the letters I receive from sex offenders daily than that of re-entry. Many write to say that no one will be waiting at the gate, no one is waiting to offer employment, and few, if any, outside churches are reaching out to them in a way that extends the growth they have experienced at the prison chapel.

Most write of the legislation that is meant to restrict where they live, work, or worship—all legislated by people who never ask themselves if they themselves could survive were the laws they were enacting applied to them.

And some write to say that they are trusting in God to meet their needs, to protect them, and to bless them. I

have learned that such statements can be weighed against what they normally share is happening in their lives at the moment. Getting out of prison is not the signal for God to step in and take over. That relationship is day to day, inside or outside of prison.

Do not worry about tomorrow

Sometimes I bet we all just want to say, "Give me a break, Lord! With everything going on in my life, how can I not worry about tomorrow?" And we all know how Jesus answered that kind of thinking—He talked about birds and flowers. I struggled with that for some time before coming to understand that what Jesus offered was the simple truth.

Not worrying about tomorrow is not the same as ignoring it. When you stop and think about it, yesterday's tomorrow is today. Stuff happens—some you can prevent and some you can't. Learning wisdom is to know what you control and what you don't. The sixth chapter of Matthew's gospel *does* give some healthy suggestions, however, that I'd like to share here.

Prayer

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (v.6) You might have been taught as a child to memorize prayers recited before meals, bedtime, or other specific occasions, but prayer is conversation with God—both sharing and listening. If you take your anxiety to the guy in the next cell, don't you really just want someone else to know how anxious you are? Let God settle and calm your heart and let Him renew His peace within you.

I have read that rabbis each had a prayer that they taught their students, a prayer that connected teacher with student. Jesus gave the disciples what is known the world over as The Lord's Prayer. Say it slowly and think about what Jesus considered important.

Give of yourself

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. (v.3-4)

It is so easy to think of giving as something connected with money or things, and inmates rarely have much of either. Sex offenders might easily think more possessively than others because there is so much working against them in terms of re-entry. But Jesus didn't say, "All you people need to reach out to one another—except you sex offenders, because you've got nothing and we all know that."

I can pretty much guarantee you that the world or even your next door neighbor won't be beating a path to your

door. They might even be considering putting up some kind of barricade that separates you from them. So it will be your attitude and not theirs that will transform, and I believe that starts with the simple things like saying hello to another person, offering a hand when needed, or acknowledging the good someone else does—in prison or out of it.

Fasting

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen. (v.17-18)
There are different ways to look at fasting. One is saying no to something that is desired; another is saying yes to an alternative; both are, in a way, setting aside what I might consider my normal response or choice for a different one.

We are a society who considers saying no to self as denying self, and that is a way of thinking that drives advertisers crazy because they want you to think that you should have everything and anything. Their job is to make their product as appealing as possible so that you will agree with them that their widget is something you cannot live without.

Property and food aside, fasting is stepping back from one's normal way of thinking or doing in order to see the potential for something better. For the sex offender, fasting is recognizing some appetites as not only a poor choice but a harmful choice.

Treasures in Heaven

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (v.19, 21)

"Give me a break! What treasures?" might easily be the response to these verses from an offender without a place to stay, a job, or a church. My answer is to remind the reader of the difference between want and need.

I know a man who lived with his family in a tent because he had nothing else to offer them. He was not telling everyone his family preferred a tent to a house, but he was telling them that the tent met an important need – for a time.

What this man also shared repeatedly in letters to me was that He knew God was present in his life, that God loved him, and that despite difficult moments, he would continue to serve God.

I would like to say that everything in his life is now a story of success in a traditional sense, but I can't. He still has difficult days, still is looked down on, but even through all of that there is the theme "But for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24.15)

What you see

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. (v.22)

Here again, these words could be interpreted as avoid pornography, suggestive movies, or inappropriate glances at people who might ring some biological bell. But I think there is an argument that can be made for other things that are seen.

Spending time with good people, observing positive experiences and images, and allowing the mental images of God's word to take up residence in the mind would, I believe, cause the internal lamp we carry to burn brightly, so brightly, in fact, that others would be drawn not to me or you but to the good that motivates that brightly burning lamp.

The bottom line

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (v.33)

I wish that I could be one of those who say that I seek God first in ALL situations, but I can't. All too often, I look for my solutions to issues and my ability to overcome adversity *without* seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness.

Does that human response make me or you a bad person? No. But I would suggest that at some point trying to fix everything on our own is really about not trusting God enough. We have to be able to see Him in the solutions and to know that what we do, say, or think will make His plan possible. In other words, we actively participate in God's plan.

Worrying is normal but it should always lead us to seek God's peace in all things. God does love us all and God wants us to have the very best in life, offender or not. And from where I stand, God IS giving us the best. He gives Himself.

All things are possible with God!



Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For those who minister to victims, that their witness of love and support helps to bring healing for those so desperately needing it.
- For those preparing to be released from prison, that housing and employment be available to them.
- For those in treatment, that they will know in their hearts that God is with them and will bless them in their efforts to understand their offenses and learn how to avoid them.
- For those struggling with authority, that they are able to recognize the authority of this world without losing the peace that comes from God's authority.
- For support ministries dealing with sex offenders, that they find encouragement to continue their efforts.
- For Bob, that he continues to listen for the voice of the Lord in all things; that his life be filled with healthy balance and accountability; and that he has the time needed to do everything.
- (As always) For those who are still abusing, that they will come to understand the devastation they bring on their victims and that they seek help for themselves—whatever the cost.

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