

Ready for God's kingdom

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from Luke chapter 12 verses 22 to 34. And he said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.

For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens. They neither sow nor reap. They have neither storehouse nor barn.

And yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life?

If then you are not able to do a smaller thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin.

Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith?

[1 : 18] And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your father knows that you need them.

Instead, seek first his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Well, good morning, everyone.

Thanks very much, Sydney, for reading. Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the wonderful privilege we have this morning of hearing your living, active words.

[2 : 38] And we pray that by the power of your spirit, it would indeed be that amongst us today. As we hear it, please would you transform us more and more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Now, the issue that Jesus addresses in these verses is anxiety. It's there in verse 22.

Do not be anxious. It's there in verse 25. Which of you, by being anxious? And verse 26. Why are you anxious? And then in verse 29.

Do not worry. We're still in this section of Luke's gospel on discipleship. And what it means to follow Jesus. And in particular, on being ready for when Jesus returns.

And the things that may distract us. Such that we are not ready. We're heading, you'll remember, for chapter 12, verse 40. Where the Lord Jesus warns us.

[3 : 40] You must also be ready. For the Son of Man is coming. It's an hour you do not expect. And in his kindness, the Lord Jesus has been showing us the sort of things that might cause us not to be ready.

Two weeks ago it was opposition. Last week it was wealth and possessions. This week it's the anxieties of life. These things all have the capacity to distract or derail the disciple of Jesus Christ. We see in verse 22 that Jesus is particularly addressing his disciples. I guess many of us will know people. Perhaps we did a Christian camp with them in the past.

Or we were in the same youth group or Christian union. Or we went to the same church as they did. And yet they've drifted. They've become distracted. Distracted. No longer trusting in and following the Lord Jesus.

Not because they were into some alternative lifestyle. Not because they suddenly woke up one morning and thought, Oh, I don't believe in Jesus anymore. But simply distracted by the cares of life.

[4 : 49] Because the fact is that the wise or unwise decisions that we make today have a long-term impact over many tomorrows and well into the future.

Well, for those looking in on the Christian faith, the danger of distraction is, of course, equally real. Someone said to me not long ago, I was chatting to them about how they might consider the Christian faith.

I was encouraging them to join us on a Christianity Explore course. And he said to me, well, look, I'm just going to wait. I'll just wait till life is less busy, till the kids are a bit older and work is less demanding.

And the problem is, of course, we get used to hearing ourselves saying that. And we're forever putting it off, distracted by the cares of life.

Well, if you have an outline in front of you, you'll see our first point this morning is a truth to grasp. A truth to grasp. Verses 22 and 23.

[5 : 58] Let me read them. And Jesus said to his disciples, Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you'll eat, nor about your body, what you'll put on.

For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Do not be anxious. Like the man we saw last week in verse 13.

He asked Jesus the question, Teacher, tell my brothers to divide the inheritance with me. He blows the opportunity of a lifetime. He has Jesus in front of him.

He's been teaching about his kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, being at peace with God. But all this guy's interested in is the money. Anxious.

Like the man in the story that the Lord Jesus then tells, the one who says to himself, verses 17 and 18, What shall I do? For I have nowhere to store my crops.

[6 : 59] And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods. Here's a man who is a prime example of how to miss the point of life.

As he says, verse 19, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink and be merry. I wonder what it is you get anxious about.

Perhaps it's the state of the economy. Perhaps it's your pension. Perhaps it's savings. Perhaps elderly parents. Perhaps children or children's education.

Perhaps your relationships. Our social life. Well, COVID-19, of course, has brought a whole range of other things which we can be anxious about on top of that.

How long is this whole thing going to go on for? What's going to happen to my job? What about schools in September? How's that going to work? Is there going to be a second wave?

[8 : 05] Some of us, of course, are more prone to anxiety. Others are less prone to anxiety. But whether we're more or whether we're less, simply telling someone, don't worry, doesn't work.

Just as we saw last week, that simply telling someone, don't be always wanting more, doesn't work. No, the key is to grasp what life is and isn't all about.

Verse 23 again, for life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. I wonder if you can see what the Lord Jesus is saying. He's saying that we are not simply physical beings.

We're not, in other words, we're not just our bodies. We're not even bodies who happen to have a soul. No, we are souls who at the moment inhabit these bodies.

And yet if we belong to Jesus, one day we'll be given new bodies, resurrection bodies. It means that life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing.

[9 : 12] And don't let's limit the application of what Jesus is saying here simply to food and clothing. The issue, I hope we can see this, the issue is what we think life is really about.

Success, lifestyle, relentlessly chasing after the things the world is chasing after. Now, Jesus isn't saying, I take it, that all anxiety is by definition always wrong.

Some kinds of worry and concern are good and godly. The Apostle Paul is anxious about the church in Corinth. We may be concerned about where someone stands with Jesus.

Sometimes it's good to worry. It can prompt prayerful thought and action. But that is not what Jesus is talking about here. A friend recently sent me a photograph of one of the benches in Dulwich Park. Many of them, if you've been to Dulwich Park, you probably noticed have those little kind of brass plaques on the back of them in memory of a loved one. And this one simply read, A loving memory of Frank Harrington, born 1932, died 2010.

[10 : 28] And then there was a little inscription underneath which read, The life that we have is all that we have. Now, my friends, children apparently rightly observed that is wrong.

They have a right to do so. And therefore, to be preoccupied with the stuff of life life is actually to undervalue our human worth.

We are more than simply the sum of our physical parts, brain, heart, lungs, limbs, and so on. There is a spiritual dimension to our existence.

I wonder if our life reflects that. To be preoccupied with and anxious about material things is to be blind to what makes our existence so precious and special.

For those of us who have been entrusted with children, I think it's worth asking at this point, what are we teaching them about what life is really about?

[11 : 34] As they observe, what we talk about, the things we get anxious about, the things that concern us, how we spend our money, what do they see and observe about us that is teaching them what life is really about?

A truth to grasp. Secondly, a father to trust. Verse 24.

Consider the ravens. They know that neither sow nor reap. They have neither storehouse nor barn. And yet God feeds them. But how much more value are you than the birds?

Now let's not misunderstand. Jesus isn't saying that God provides a special miracle every day for the birds of the air or the flowers of the fields. Rather, the point is that he provides for them in ways that are consistent with the nature that he has given them.

Birds work hard foraging for food. Flowers put down roots deep into the soil. So there's no excuse here in what Jesus says for laziness.

[12 : 43] Get on. Apply for that job. Work hard. But don't be anxious and fret like those without a heavenly father to care for them.

Anxiety about those things ignores God's goodness and grace. And of course, he doesn't get us anywhere. Verse 25. Which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life?

If then you're not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? It's rather like the child, perhaps the youngest child in a family, are desperate to kind of grow taller and taller and taller.

And yet, however much they try and grow taller, it doesn't work. However frequently they stand up against that chance in the hall or wherever it is, which marks off the different growth heights of all the children, it doesn't make any difference.

The fact is, anxiety is likely to reduce the length of our lives rather than to increase it. And then there's the lilies.

[13 : 51] Verse 27. Consider the lilies, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.

Rachel was given some lilies a few weeks ago and they were glorious. You see, the point of both the birds and the lilies is the comparison. Verse 24.

How much more value are you than the birds? Verse 28. How much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith? Instead of anxiety, we are to trust God, our Heavenly Father.

It is fascinating how Jesus describes God in these verses. Notice in verse 24, in relation to the birds, he's described as God. Again, in verse 28, in relation to the grass, he's described, the lilies, he's described as God.

Of course, that reflects his sovereign provision over the whole of his creation. And yet, notice how, in verse 30, in relation to his disciples, he's described as your Heavenly Father.

[15 : 02] and again, verse 32, as your Father. It is an extraordinary thing. No other religion describes God in this way.

I'm told, for example, that Islam has 99 names for God and yet none of them is as Father. Now, you may know that the reason COVID-19 is called the coronavirus is to do with its shape.

It's shaped like a crown and the Latin for crown is corona. What a very appropriate name, you might think, for this virus which has such power.

think of the way it has shaped billions of people's lives over the last six months across the globe.

And yet, of course, who really wears the crown in our universe?

It's God. And the wonderful privilege of disciples of Jesus Christ is that we know and experience God the Creator as our Heavenly Father.

[16:14] Now, just think about that for a moment. Stress and anxiety is often the result of wanting to be in control of our lives ourselves.

It's a way, if you like, of trying to play God, trying to control and influence things by mental and emotional efforts. But trying to play God is stressful.

It's always stressful trying to do things which are beyond us. As one wise Cracker said, if you want to be anxious today, pretend you're in control.

That phrase at the end of verse 28, O you of little faith, interestingly, it's the only time Jesus uses that expression to describe his disciples. It's at this very point where they're missing out on just how much God, their Heavenly Father, cares for them.

You see, as we trust our Heavenly Father, it delivers us from the need to be in control ourselves. And therefore, wonderfully, it liberates us from all the stress and anxiety that's associated with that.

[17:27] Hence, verses 29 and 30. Verse 29, And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

Jesus is saying that seeking after these things is essentially pagan. It's the essential mark of a non-Christian world.

If the bench in Dulwich Park is right, if the life that we have is all that we have, then of course it's inevitable that we will seek after and gain for our seek to gain for ourselves as much in this world as we can get.

Indeed, it's not surprising, is it, that as our culture has drifted further and further away from its Christian moorings and foundations, so rates of mental illness and stress and anxiety have increased dramatically.

Now that, of course, is not to say that Christians won't experience stress and anxiety, but for the person who isn't a Christian, it is fundamentally because they don't know God.

[18:39] That is where the root of anxiety and stress comes from, because then they are forced to play the role of God themselves. Whereas if we are disciples of Jesus, we have a wonderful heavenly Father we can trust.

now he's not being, Jesus isn't being glib here about the pains of life or trials and hardships, but he is saying that if we're one of his disciples, you and I can know deep in our souls that there is a heavenly Father we can trust who cares for us.

But perhaps you're kind of thinking to yourself, hang on a minute, you don't know the pressure I'm under, I'm fearful for my job, I'm fearful for my income. And yet of course if that's the situation we're in at the moment, it may well be that God in his fatherly kindness knows that actually we'd be much more used to him in reduced circumstances.

I was talking to a friend a while back who was in his mid-forties and he was just explaining to me how he had been told that his career had plateaued, that he shouldn't expect to progress any further in the organisation that he was working for.

He went on to say what an enormous blessing it had been to have been told that because it meant he could stop their anxious striving. He felt liberated from having to compete with his colleagues and instead could serve God's kingdom.

[20:17] And that brings us to our third point, a kingdom to seek, verses 31 to 34. Have a look at verse 31. Instead, seek his kingdom and these things will be added to you.

Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom kingdom. Now last week, if you were with us, I invited us, you'll remember to imagine a child coming home from school in the days when children went away for school and came back again, hungry and weary and anxious.

Is there anything to eat? Well, you offer them a biscuit. That only increases the stress levels. Is there anything else? I tell you what, let's go for an ice cream.

So you head off down to East Dulwich, you go to O'Donnell's and as you're sitting there savouring the ice cream, all the anxiety and stress about biscuits has disappeared. The ice cream is so much better.

Who stresses about biscuits when you're eating an O'Donnell's ice cream? Likewise, who stresses and gets anxious chasing after the things the non-Christian world chases after when you've received Jesus' kingdom.

[21 : 39] We've seen throughout Luke's gospel that to receive the kingdom is to receive the forgiveness of sins. It is to be at peace with God. It is to know God as our heavenly father.

And at this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will secure all the benefits of his kingdom for his people as he dies on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

And so you see Jesus' point is simply that if we view God properly, if we grasp the enormous significance of having been given his kingdom, then we will view possessions properly.

If we don't know God or if we see him as a kind of demanding tyrant who can't be trusted, then we'll cling on to what we have for dear life. But if we know God as he really is, our heavenly father, if we have grasped the enormity of what it is to have been given the kingdom, then we can relax our grip on stuff and open our hands in generosity.

Hence verse 33, send your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourself with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroyed.

[23 : 12] Now of course in the first century, if you wanted to give money away, you had to sell possessions first. What is to be sold? How much is to be given away?

Jesus doesn't specify. What to give to? Well, the rest of the New Testament provides some help. The rest of the New Testament helps us to see that the needy primarily are those within the church, either the local church or the worldwide church through agencies perhaps such as Open Doors or the Barnabas Fund.

While giving to the kingdom, we'll prioritize giving that establishes the spread of the kingdom, again through the local church and its mission partners, churches, but also further afield in the support of gospel proclamation, training pastors and planting churches.

J.C. Ryle, the first bishop of Liverpool, wrote this, The kingdom of God is the only kingdom worth laboring for. All other kingdoms shall sooner or later decay and pass away.

The statesmen who rear them are like men who build houses of cards or children who make palaces of sand on the seashore. The wealth which constitutes their greatness is as liable to melt away as the snow in the spring.

[24 : 37] The kingdom of God is the only kingdom which shall endure forever. Happy are they who belong to it, love it, live for it, pray for it, and labour for its increase and prosperity.

Now I guess many of us might give assent to that to some extent. Let me ask the question, what in practice stops us doing that?

It seems to me that for many of us it is that we kind of buy into a package. The type of home, the type of car, the kinds of holidays we go on, the things we do with our children, they're the kinds of things which our kind of people at our stage of life, in our kind of job, have.

It's the lifestyle we have, we buy into the whole package. But Jesus says the point of material goods is not to maintain a lifestyle package, but to be rich towards God.

As we invest in his kingdom, we turn temporary material goods into heavenly treasure. And therefore, I want to finish by asking whether you have a personal mission statement.

[25 : 59] I guess some of us may have thought about this before. Some of us may even have written something down. Perhaps some of us have never really thought about it at all. What would it be, your personal mission statement?

Perhaps a comfortable existence, a lifestyle that others around us seem to enjoy, success at work, or perhaps it's simply just having an easy life.

As much me time as possible, please. well, if we're disciples of Jesus, we can only have one mission statement, and that is to seek and serve his kingdom.

By contrast, living for anything else demonstrates that we are practical atheists, that we believe that the life we have is all that we have.

And to live like that is, of course, profoundly illogical. Because worldly wealth will always fail, as the Lord Jesus says here in verse 33.

[27 : 06] It will rust. It will wear out. It will get stolen. He'll get lost in the stock market. He'll be erased away by inflation. Whereas investing in God's kingdom, it not only guards our savings by putting them to eternal use, but notice too, it guards our hearts by training our hearts.

As the Lord Jesus says in verse 34, which we spent more time on last week, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The writer John Piper helpfully puts it in this way. how you handle your possessions shows where your heart is.

And where your heart is determines whether you are saved or not. And whether you are saved or not determines whether you will inherit the kingdom, the treasure in heaven that does not grow old. Selling your possessions and giving, rather than accumulating more and more things for yourself, is the proof that you love the kingdom more than possessions, that you trust the king more than money.

[28 : 26] Well, let's pray together. I'll leave a bit of time for reflection and personal prayer and then I shall lead us in prayer. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

Heavenly Father, we confess how slow we are to grasp this. how easily we simply follow those around us in our attitude to life.

And we praise you for the wonderful privilege, those of us who know Jesus, of having been given the kingdom and of knowing you as our heavenly Father.

And we pray, therefore, please would you help us, each one, to seek his kingdom. rather than to seek the things everyone else is seeking.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.