

I want to speak to you today about the virus that is currently and quickly changing the landscape of our world. More specifically, I want to think together about how we, as Christians, are called to respond in times like this.

Now, obviously, we are called to be wise and responsible. We should carefully consider all the recommended precautions from the CDC and other officials. As Christians, we should demonstrate sanity, sympathy, and take one day at a time. And of course, we should pray. We should pray for those affected, for the tireless workers caring for those who are affected, and for the international authorities who are working around the clock to prevent, contain, and eradicate this virus. As Christians, we are called to all those things.

There are two main things that God has put on my heart for us today. They're two things that Jesus teaches us here in this passage. And they're two things that have stabilized and inspired me over this past week and I pray will do the same for someone here today. How do we rise to this occasion as Christians? Well, like always, Jesus lights our way. So, let's hear from him.

(Read Matthew 6:25-34)

An old Scottish professor and preacher James S. Stewart once made a helpful distinction between the foreground and the background of life. He used the metaphor of a painting and said that life has both a foreground and a background. The foreground are the things that are right in front of us. The things that we easily focus on and can feel like are right on top of us. It's the things that are seen. And the background of life is the invisible unseen spiritual realities that are behind us and beyond us.

Now, we need to be clear that these two things are not divided. We should never have an unbiblical divide between the sacred and the secular, the physical and the spiritual. Oh no. Remember, who is Jesus? Who is addressing us here? Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh. The

divine and the human in one. No, just like the foreground and background are two parts of the very same painting and are interconnected and relate to other another, so the seen and the unseen, the physical and the spiritual make up the portrait of our lives and our world. But you see, our trouble too often in life is all we see, all we focus on is the foreground of *our* immediate problems and we've lost sight of the unseen divine eternal background that's meant to put everything into proper perspective.

WHAT IS OUR FOREGROUND?

Our foreground right now is that the World Health Organization officially declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) to be a pandemic. Our foreground right now is the frightening possibilities coming from the news reports that we're hearing about every day. Our foreground right now is the virus and all the affects that this still might have on our society, economy, and day-to-day living. This is the foreground. But! We must remember, it's *only* the foreground!

THERE IS A BACKGROUND!

There are divine spiritual realities and promises that are meant to put all of this into the right perspective. And this is what Jesus is showing us here in this passage. He recognizes both the foreground and the background of life. He's not dismissing the foreground of our immediate cares, and needs, but he's wanting us to see that that's not the whole picture. He wants us to see our needs in light of the colorful dynamic background of God's Fatherly character and kingdom. And it's in the light of *that* background, that Jesus teaches us to do two things: The first is something to avoid; the second is something to pursue.

The first thing we're told is, "Do not be anxious." The second thing were told is, "Seek first the kingdom of God." So, he doesn't just give us the negative, he gives us the positive. This is

always the way true Christianity works. It doesn't just tell us to put off, it tells us to put on. It doesn't just tell us to say no, it always gives us a bigger and better yes. And so, in the light of this background, Jesus gives us two commands—Do not be anxious and seek first the kingdom. And so, let's consider both of these together ...

FIRST: JESUS SAYS, 'DO NOT BE ANXIOUS.'

Just in case we were dozing off when he said it the first time, or got distracted when he said it the second time, he says it three times in this passage—do not be anxious. But did you catch the word that comes right before each time he says it? Verse 25—*Therefore*, I tell you do not be anxious. Verse 31—*Therefore*, do not be anxious. And Verse 34—*Therefore*, do not be anxious.

Now, you see what this means? It means a Christian's peace is always meant to be a rational peace. It means we don't have to somehow dig deep and muster it up ourselves. It means that we're meant to know something that logically and spiritually removes anxiety. Now, I understand that there are cases when anxiety is, in fact, a chemical issue that only medicine can remedy. But remember, as Christians we always have a "therefore."

What's the Therefore?

What's the reason of our peace? It's the truth that, in Christ, God is our loving heavenly Father. This is what chapter 6 in this Sermon on the Mount is all about. It's all about the Father. Starting at the very beginning, Jesus tells us of the Father who sees. And then when he comes to prayer, we're told of the Father who knows and who hears. And now here, we're told that God is our Father who cares and who provides.

What is our "therefore"? The logical background for our peace? That God sees, he hears, he knows. he cares, and he supplies. What does Peter say in 1 Peter 5:7? "Cast all your anxieties

upon him for”—here’s the reason—“he *cares* for you.” This is the background to our life—the sovereign care of our heavenly Father.

But the problem that Jesus points out in verse 25 is that too often we’re only focused on the foreground. We’re focused on the wrong things and asking the wrong questions. All we’re focused on is *our* immediate needs and all we’re asking is what if: What if I don’t get ...? What if this happens ...? What if my needs ...?

So, what does Jesus do? Starting in verse 26, he brings the background into view. He says, “Look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.” Who feeds them? Who dresses them? It’s God! *God* is managing the entire bird economy. And *God* is in control of the lily fashion industry.

What is he doing? He’s getting us to see the background. It’s almost like he’s saying, “Imagine a Father who has a bunch of birds for pets. And these birds don’t work; they don’t toil; they’re not stressed out. And yet they’re fed every day. How irrational would that Father have to be to care more for his birds in the cage than for his own children in the house? And this same Father has a garden of flowers. How mad would that Father have to be to care more about his flowers than his very own children? And this is why Jesus says, “Are you not of more value than they are?” And the answer is ... “Of course you are! In me, God is your Father and you are his children!” And every Father in his right mind knows how much he cares for his children.

What is Jesus doing? He’s getting us to see the background—that behind every good thing in all creation is the loving sustaining hand of our heavenly Father—never mind his very own children.

This is the background that Jesus wants us to remember and be reawakened to. Because if we don’t and if we’re not, there’s ultimately no long-term solution for our anxiety. Christopher Hitchens pointed this out. The late atheist wrote in one of his leading books, “There is no escape from anxiety.” Now why did he say that? Because he refused to acknowledge the background. If

we cut God out of the picture—and not just any god, but *this* God, our loving heavenly Father—if we’re not seeing all our problems and needs in light of him, we will always find ourselves choked and suffocated with the constant churning of anxiety. But I’ve got to add something here. Because unfortunately, in times like this, whenever God is brought into the conversation the only question that people seem to ask is...

Where is God?

One of the questions that I always start getting as a pastor in times like this is, “Where is God?” I understand and deeply sympathize with the question. I do. But I need to ask why is it only in the hard times that we tend to ask this question? When the sun is shining, and times are good, and life is comfortable, and our team is winning, and our health is strong, why aren’t we plagued in *those* moments with the question, “Where is God?”

Well, the Bible tells us. It’s because sin blinds us from the background of God’s goodness. So, when times are good, we tend to ignore God, but when times are bad we tend to blame God. Sin blinds us from the background of God’s loving care that he gives every day—in the day of prosperity and in the day of adversity.

Where is God? Well, let me ask you ... Where was Jesus? Remember Jesus said, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” So, where was Jesus? In John 2 we find him in Cana making wine at a wedding. But then in John 11, we find him in Bethany crying tears at a funeral. Where is Jesus? He’s at the wedding and at the funeral. And if you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen God. So, where is God?

-He’s at the wedding and at the funeral.

-God is there in our good days and in our bad days.

-Because He is the God of Good Friday and the God of Easter Sunday.

-He is the God of the spectacular and God of the ordinary and mundane.

-He is the God of the hills and the God of the valleys.

-He is God in the midst of our laughter and in the midst of our tears.

-He is God when the market is up and God when the market is down.

-He is God in the light and God in the dark.

Where is God? God is with us. He's in both places—He's in *all* places. He is carefully and sovereignly in control of it all. He is our ever-present help in time of need. That's the background!

So, the problem isn't with God, the problem is with us. The problem, Jesus says, is that we forget the true background of life. As the hymn goes, "This is our Father's World, and let us never forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." Sin blinds us from the

background of God's goodness in life, but, thankfully, Jesus can open up the eyes of the blind! This is the background that Jesus is calling our hearts to see with the eyes of faith.

So, anxiety comes from obsessing over the wrong things—our immediate issues and asking the wrong question—what if! What if this happens? And what if that happens? That's the question that breeds anxiety, worry, and fear, because we don't know what tomorrow will bring, only God does.

The question that brings peace and hope and strength is "Who is?" Who is my God? Who is *our* God? What do we profess to believe as Christians? "I believe in God the Father Almighty ..."
That's it! That's the background of our life and faith. So, what are you focused on? What questions are you churning over in your heart and mind? Do not be anxious. But then, as I said, we're also given something to do. We're given the positive.

SECOND: 'SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM'

Now, what does this mean? And how do we do it practically? Well before we try and answer that, I want you to see the helpful connection that Jesus makes for us here.

In verse 32, Jesus connects our anxiety with our seeking. Watch this, he says, "The Gentiles" – which was short in their day for the people who don't know God—he says, [they're] the ones seeking after all of these things: Health, wealth, and material possessions—the physical tactile things of life. That's all they want and that's all they talk about. And that's why they're anxious about it.

You see the principle?

Our anxieties reveal our priorities. We get anxious about the things we put our hope in. That's why earlier in this chapter Jesus says where your treasure is your heart will be also. In other

words, what you're hoping in, what you're investing in, that's what's going to have a wise grip on your heart.

So, what does Jesus do? Again, he calls the background into view and he says, let me give you something else to seek after. It's almost like he says, "You want to be anxious for something? Be anxious for this. You want to seek something? Seek this! Seek first the kingdom of God."

But what does that mean?

Well, he already told us. In verse 20 he says, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Invest in eternal things. Don't put your ultimate hope in this life, put it in the next life. But how do we do that? Well, elsewhere in this sermon he tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to go the extra mile, to turn the other cheek, and to give to our own hurt.

So, seeking first the kingdom of God involves two main things: remembering our hope of heaven and radically demonstrating the love of Christ in the here and now. Do you see how this works? The great security of our hope in heaven frees us to demonstrate the love of Christ here. In case you're tempted to think, *Ahhh, this is just some pie-in-the-sky, impossible, unrealized ideal!*, let me remind you that the early Christians took these words to heart, lived them out, and radically changed the world.

Later in the first century this is what we read in Hebrews 10: "*But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings ... For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property*" —wait, what? —"*You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you...had a better possession and an abiding one.*" You see the connection? The hope of heaven and the love of Christ.

Rodney Stark, the author of the *Rise of Christianity*, tracked the conversion rate and argues in his book that the spread of Christianity in the early centuries was largely due to the care and compassion that Christians showed for the poor and the sick during different plagues and epidemics.

Eusebius, the early church historian, wrote that because of the church's compassion for those in need during times of crisis, "the deeds of Christians were on everyone's lips."

Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame noted that an "epidemic that seemed like the end of the world actually promoted the spread of Christianity." Because of their hope of heaven and the love of Christ that was shown, Christians showed the world that "Christianity is worth dying for."

All throughout the centuries the reports are the same. In England during the 1800s, when many were dying of cholera, Charles Spurgeon and his church visited hundreds of homes to care for people. And even now, the reports are already coming in that churches in China and Italy are on the streets giving out free masks, sharing their food, and helping the sick.

Why do they do it? How do they do it?

Because they know the hope of heaven and the love of Christ. Christians know that Jesus, the Son of God has shown us the greatest love of all. He has died for our sins and risen from the dead. The sin that separates us from God, he has taken it all away. For on the cross, God the Father knowing every sin we ever have committed or will commit, he put those sins on Jesus and he was punished in our place. On the cross, Jesus was cut off so that we could be brought it. He was condemned so that we could be acquitted. He was forsaken so that we could be forgiven. And three days later Jesus rose from the grave to prove that all he said and all he did was true.

And it's this gospel, and this assurance, and this love that Christians have believed in and it frees us to invest in people instead of possessions and invest in eternity instead of the here and now.

Have you come to that place?

Can you say with Paul in Philippians 1 that, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain"? Do you have the hope of heaven? What does Jesus say later on in Mathew 10? "Do not fear what can destroy the body! Fear God who can destroy both body and soul in hell." And he asks the calculating question, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" One of the things that times like this call us back to is the brevity and fragility of life and the great question of where do I stand with God?

And it calls us to put others needs before our own.

Now, none of us know what that might mean for us in the coming months, but it sure doesn't look like hoarding toilet paper and hiding in the basement. It looks like Christ and a cross. It looks like running towards the need not running from it. It looks like sharing our resources, possibly to our own hurt. It looks like the type of life that only makes sense if heaven is real, if Christ is alive, and if his love is our driving force in life.

Now, are we going to do this perfectly?

Of course not. But thankfully we know the One who has. From Bethlehem to Calvary, Jesus always lived with the background in view. Every day of his life he had a serene attitude of peace and sacrificial actions of love. Even there on the cross we see him loving his enemies and saying, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit." The very things that God requires of us, Jesus has already fulfilled for us—for all those who put their faith in him. We're not saved by our peace and love, we're saved by his.

So, if you have put your faith in Christ, then the pressure to respond to these times in the perfect way is off because Christ has already done it for you. But at the same time, remember that the power and possibility to not be anxious and to seek first the kingdom is very much available because what does Jesus say before his departure? “My peace I give you—my Spirit I give to you.” And the fruit of his Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience—all of these qualities that he wants to shape the foreground of our lives.

Friends, in this fragile and fallen world, as people who call ourselves Christians, we are called to bear witness to the kingdom of Christ. In the coming weeks and months, may the Lord lead us in how to do that in creative and helpful ways.

CONCLUSION

Let me close by telling you the story of Tom Chisholm. Thomas Obediah Chisholm was born in the mid 1800s and at a very early age he struggled with debilitating health concerns. His impaired health affected almost everything he did and it caused him to fail at almost everything he tried—*almost* everything he tried. Thomas was a Christian who loved to write poetry. And one day in the midst of the ever-changing disappointing foreground of his life, he sat down and wrote a poem about the faithfulness of God. It was a simple poem penned in faith that’s now sung across the world as a favorite hymn—“Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

Remember, dear friends, eternity is long and life is short. And come what may, God is our Father and great is his faithfulness. And may his faithful character and eternal kingdom be the background that transforms the way we see everything else.