

# Like a Bird

“Make it better.”

Matthew 6:25-26

Fifth in the Series, *Ups and Downs on the Emotional Roller Coaster*

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## Jumpy

‘Ever been kind of jumpy? A *Prairie Home Companion*’s annual Pretty Good Joke Night aired one of my favorite jokes; which isn’t one of Laura’s. I’ve changed a few of the details to make it more fitting for a Sunday morning. A cowboy was eating his breakfast in the town’s café when a guy came running in, doors swinging behind him, urgently shouting, “Joe! Joe! ‘You gotta’ hurry! Your house is on fire!” The cowboy dropped his fork and jumped up from the table, ran outside and jumped on his horse, ‘galloped out of town and half-way across the prairie when suddenly he pulled up on the reins and stopped the horse. “Wait a minute,” he said out loud, “I don’t have a house!” So he turned his horse around and went back to the hotel and continued eating his breakfast.

Soon another man burst into the café excitedly urging, “Joe! Joe! You gotta go! Your wife just got off the train over in Abilene and she’s lookin’ fer ya ta fetch ‘er!” The cowboy looked startled. He dropped his fork and jumped on his horse and started galloping east toward Abilene when, sometime after the horse had broken a sweat and his face was full of dust, he suddenly pulled back on the reins and said out loud, “Wait a minute! I don’t have a wife! I’m not even fixin’ ta ever git married!” So, he turned the horse around and returned to his breakfast, now getting pretty cold. (‘You ever had cold cowboy coffee out of a tin cup?)

Too soon after that, when he’d just had a couple bites of grits, another man wearing a visor and garters on his shirt sleeves came bursting into the café. “Joe! Joe!” he says, “You gotta hurry! A wire just came in at the telegraph office. You just won the lottery and you gotta send your claim in right away! At once the cowboy leapt from the table and jumped on his horse. He galloped across town, jumped off his horse, ran to the door of the office and stopped. “Wait a minute,” he said, “My name’s not Joe! It’s Bill!” That’s kind of jumpy.

Life can be filled with jumpiness. Unless you're an unusual sort of person, there's bound to be something that's capable of making you jump from your seat without even thinking. It's how our culture is wired: it seems we thrive on concern: what's the stock market doing? Are you doing enough at work to get the raise you need to pay off the boat you needed to have last spring? Is the meal you're preparing going to be pleasing to your guests? Are you wearing the right clothes for the occasion? Have you studied enough to ace the test? What if you don't make it into the best school in the field of study you've chosen? What if your deodorant wears off before you get home, or you run out of breath mints? What if...?

Never mind looming threats of terrorist attacks, you've probably been taught to worry over just about everything. Whole industries are built on your worries. I'm not talking about *anxiety disorders* – clinical conditions that afflict some 20 million Americans<sup>1</sup> and require professional treatment. What I'm talking about is the jumpiness of the world that teaches you to obsess about an endless list of bad things that might happen.

Maybe if we'd stop to ask the question, "So what if they did?" we'd realize the world really wouldn't fall apart after-all.

Sometimes, I think, it could be healthy to stop and just take it cool. There's something appealing about the Jamaican song we kept playing a few years ago:

*"In every life we have some trouble. But when you worry you make it double Don't worry, be happy. Don't worry, be happy now."<sup>2</sup>*

If you brought a bunch of concern into church with you so that it's even hard to concentrate on worship: take a deep breath. And let it out. Don't worry: be happy.

Isn't that what you're looking for?

### **Focus**

That's what you might call *cool*. I don't mean *hip*. *Hip* is a matter of being in style: wearing the fashionable clothes; going to the right places with the right people; owning the trendy things our world expects. You can be *hip* yet not be *cool*.

You're *cool* if you have self-control. You're relaxed and at-ease and even warm with people. *Cool* isn't being aloof. You're cool when you aren't straining for attention or

acceptance. You have a sense of self-assurance. You're more aware of others, willing to listen, concerned. You are un-befuddled, focused, and attractive in a way that exceeds fashion or trend. You don't have to be *hip* to be *cool*. *Cool* is a state of mind, a presence.

*Hip* is not the opposite of anxious. *Cool* is. It doesn't worry. It isn't jumpy. The cowboy wasn't *cool*. I often wish I were.

Jesus' intent is to make you cool. In fact, he more or less commands it. He says, "Don't be anxious (even about) the food you need to stay alive or about clothes you wear..." Then he gives you two keys necessary to be truly cool: *trust* and *focus*.

He says, "Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap, yet God cares for them. Don't you think God is going to do more for you than he is for a relatively insignificant animal?"

Be like a bird.

It's a simple commandment to not get too wrapped up in obsessions that, in the end, you don't have to worry about. Concern about having the right clothes becomes worship of clothing. Undo concern about food makes a god out of your belly. That kind of concern boils down to idolatry. You're worshiping the wrong god.

That's what happened in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve that everything they needed would be provided. They could eat anything except the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The temptation presented to Eve by the serpent was to distrust the promise and good intentions of God for her well-being. If she ate the fruit, then she could take over from God. She would be in control; after all, she could at least trust herself.<sup>3</sup> This is the root of all sin. It's also the root of all worry. If you rival God, then you've got a lot to be responsible for. There is a lot to worry about.

Consider the birds of the air: the root of serenity is trust in God's goodness and love.

Jesus does not mean that you should refrain from action. He's not posing choice between action and passivity. He means, though, that there are two different kinds of action.<sup>4</sup> When you trust, you are given hope; and hope spurs you to right action. When

you don't trust, you either exert frantic efforts to control or idleness and passivity, indicators of despair.

And you are anxious.

Look at history and time and again you see people rising to action at moments when they are infused with hope: toppling communism in Eastern Europe, apartheid in South Africa, and Jim Crow segregation in America.

Trust your future the One who gives you life and sustains it and, without worry, you are able to accomplish the second of Jesus' commandments:

"Be concerned first (and foremost) with God's Kingdom and God's righteousness and God will provide the rest."

These two parts of Jesus' covenant are essential: *GOD WILL PROVIDE* and *BE FOCUSED ON GOD*. Trust and obey: you can't manage with only one of them. Jesus told a parable about a man who had seven demons in his house. They were driven out and he went off on a trip. When he returned there were more demons than he had to begin with. The point is that you have to fill the empty space with something. You can't drive out worry over non-essentials without replacing it with a single-minded devotion to that which is essential.

Simply taking a vacation is not going to solve the problem of anxiety. How many times have you gone to the lake and, after only a couple of days, started climbing the walls, tempted to pull out some work? Maybe you've got to take your breaks not just to take a break; but to make it a time out to remember trust and focus and let vacation be a retreat. Let it all be infused with prayer.

Some exercises on eliminating worry can also be effective. For instance, if you find yourself obsessing over things to worry about, set aside 15-30 minutes each day *to worry*. Then, when you start to worry about something at another time, just add it to the list of things you'll worry about during your worry time. If you find yourself starting to worry about these things at another time say out-loud, "No!" Then, when you get to your appointed time, pour over your list and worry; but then get more information and realistically plan actions you might productively take.<sup>5</sup> When you turn a technique like

this into prayer, asking, “What does God want here? How can I practice faith here?”  
You can move from your prayer into living and find: *you’re being cool*.

You’re tackling the matters before you that are really important and not just urgent, withstanding the onslaught of others who tell you to jump. No cold breakfast for a cowboy here.

You’ll have what Reinhold Niebuhr helped us to ask in his prayer: the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

### **Back Off**

So, the next time someone calls out a name and says, “Hurry!” don’t jump. Before you do anything, say, “Wait a minute! I’ve got my clothes. My food’s on the table, and I’ve got my mind on God’s something else and it’s his show now, not mine.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Anxiety Disorders*, American Psychiatric Association [http://www.psych.org/public\\_info/anxiety.cfm](http://www.psych.org/public_info/anxiety.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> Bobby McFerrin. “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”. EMI Special Markets. 1995.

<sup>3</sup> George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church*. San Francisco: Josse-Bass Publishers. ©1999. pp 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> Eduard Schweizer. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Princeton, N.J.: Westminster Press. ©1974. p165.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Holmes, Ph.D., “How to Worry Less”, Mental Health Resources website. <http://mentalhealth.about.com/library/howto/htworry.htm>