

# Be Not Anxious



FROM GCS PRESIDENT - GARY DEDDO

Dear faculty, students, alumni, pastors,

Probably like you, I have been mulling over things and finding I need some kind of way to better cope with all the input, contention and complexity swirling around us since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and more recently the death of George Floyd, and the ensuing protests and riots.

There's no lack of advice it seems. But I'm not sure that most of it goes deep enough to see our way through and forward. And some of it seems to promote increased anxiety, fear and even panic. As far as I can tell, guilt, fear and anxiety are not a constructive basis to address any real challenges including those more at the center of our attention just now. More often than not, these motivations are short term, more like alarms that go off. If they continue too long, we become numb to them or simply burn out, give up, avoid them. We may even become panicked or paralyzed by them.

I've been considering once again Jesus' command not to "worry," "be anxious" or "troubled" (all translations from the root, *merimnaó*). If you recall, he says multiple times to his disciples not to be anxious. In context he references various circumstances such as being without food or clothing, or coming before civic or religious leaders, or more broadly about the future ("tomorrow") or what threatens to end our earthly life, and regarding his imminent departure. The identification of these particular triggers for anxiety don't seem to be restrictive or limiting to just those particular circumstances mentioned. Rather they seem to indicate a selection of common and concrete instances in which our anxieties are often set off. (See for example Luke 12:11, 22; Matt. 6: 25, 27, 34; 10:19)

So, is Jesus indicating with these particular examples that there is no situation in which we really need to be, or should be anxious, troubled, worried? Yes. That is how other New Testament writers took it. So, Peter writes: "Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." (1Pt 5:7). Paul exhorts us: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil 4:6). Notice how all-inclusive their exhortations are. All circumstances are covered.

The New Testament writers offer such comprehensive coverage because they recognize and affirm the basis and ground for never needing to be anxious. That basis, solid ground, is the nature and character of our God, who our Triune God is and has revealed himself to be. The directive

to not be anxious comes out of a trust in who God is and will be. It's because God actively cares for us even individually that we ought not, and need not be anxious.

Most directly God exercises his care for each one in every circumstance in and through Jesus Christ and by his Spirit. Jesus' most comprehensive and positive declaration to us about this is recorded in the Gospel of John. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me....Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (14:1, 27). "I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!" (16:33).

Notice that Jesus is giving *his* peace to us. He is the source of it. And notice that he can do so on the basis of what he alone can do and has done: overcome the disorder in the world or cosmos. So, by counting on him, remaining in deep connection with him (being "in" him) we can share in his peace. And that is indeed a peace that our fallen and broken world cannot give us.

We are not being told to construct our *own* peace but, rather, since we belong to him as Lord and Savior, crucified and risen from the dead, we can experience *his* peace. And in this way, then, we overcome the temptation to be anxious—in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Simply trying not to be anxious will not work. It doesn't work—right? It is only by counting on him, who he is and what he has done, is doing and will do, that we can escape the trap of anxiety, having troubled hearts, being fearful. And for this God has sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds, the Spirit who is one with the Son. It is by the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit who reminds of the Word of God that we can experience more and more all the benefits of belonging to God through Jesus Christ.

It is because of who God is and what he has done, is doing and will do that we can be set free to obey the command to not be anxious, no matter what storms are blowing around us.

But there can be ongoing obstacles that will intrude to block our reception of Jesus' peace. I want to mention two since I have found them to be all too effective in my own life and those I've attempted to serve in Christ's name over the years.

First, I should say that there are many, unfortunately even in Christian ministry, who attempt to motivate Christians to do the good and right thing by appealing to and even stoking our guilt, fear and anxiety. Admonitions to obey the Lord can be couched in terms that pour gasoline on the fire of our anxieties or fears. Pastors and others can be tempted, perhaps out of their own fears and anxieties, to exhort brothers and sisters out of accusation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his day, was very aware of this at the time of the rise of Nazi Germany. He noted that Satan himself is identified as the accuser of the brethren. (See 1Ptr 5:8; Rev. 12:10) To those training for ministry, he said (paraphrasing) “The church already has one Accuser, it doesn’t need any more.”

Hearing accusations of the brethren which are couched as exhortations will indeed stoke our anxieties and fears. The Evil One will attempt to turn such accusations into condemnation—and result in paralysis and self-loathing. This is not from the Lord. The Lord convicts us of any sin to repent of on the basis of faith, hope and love, not guilt, fear and anxiety. That is, on the basis of his transforming grace. Our Lord is not the accuser of the brethren. We can rightly resist and throw off words of condemnation and accusation so that we can hear words of correction in the context of the mediation of Jesus Christ, on the basis of our faith, hope and love. And on that basis, then, repent, act and serve in the peace of Christ, on the basis of his righteousness and justice. That yields the “obedience of faith” which is the only kind of obedience that our God is interested in. As Paul reminds us, that which does not arise from faith in him is actually sinful (Rom. 1:16; 14:23). Obedience that arises from unbelief in the living God is not honoring to God and does not yield sharing in Christ’s own righteousness. It can only result in attempts to achieve self-righteousness. Faith, hope and love for Christ and sharing in his kind of ongoing ministry is the only basis for our own obedience, not words of accusation or fear of condemnation.

And second, I want to mention what I have found to be another obstacle to receiving and living in the peace of Jesus. And that is a certain hidden assumption or expectation that seems simply to “be in the water.” That is the assumption or expectation we have of others or more importantly of

ourselves, that unless we are anxious or worried—we don’t care. We signal our care by exuding worry, anxiety. And we believe we can only maintain our care by maintaining our anxiety. It is impossible then to both care and not be anxious under such an assumption. If we obey Jesus in one way we would have to disobey him in the other. Now that’s an unbreakable double bind! Indeed, a self-destructive prison.

I think this very assumption was behind the disciples accusing Jesus of not caring when they were caught in the fearful storm while Jesus remained asleep “on the cushion”! If he cared, they expected him to be in a panic, to be as anxious and fearful as they were. But he wasn’t!

If Jesus and the rest of the New Testament is serious and true, then anxiety cannot be a test of caring. Rather our caring should be expressed out of our faith, hope and love in God through Jesus and in the continuing present ministry of the Holy Spirit. The compassion of Jesus comes out of his peace, not anxiety.

And I think such compassion and caring will often demonstrate itself in the work of prayer, especially in situations where it is not clear what we ought to do, or what we can do. Prayer is a vital work of the church in dealing with “principalities and powers,” those that Jesus overcome, who are our true enemies, not flesh and blood as Paul reminds us (Eph. 6:12). And sometimes prayer is indeed the most practical and fundamental work the church can do in overcoming evil with good. It is certainly the right place to start. In faith, hope and love we turn again and again in prayer to the One who has overcome the world and who in doing so gives us a share in *his* own peace. Out of that peace, his peace, we then may discover other ways to help and serve all our brothers and sisters in his name.

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus,



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