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Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast, with me, Steve Griffiths. Today we're going to be thinking about the same passage and theme that we were thinking about last week, which is from Matthew chapter 6 verses 24 to 34 and Jesus' teaching about how we can cope with worry and stress and anxiety in our lives. And if you listened to the previous podcast, you'll know that I'm not trying to offer any definitive opinions and thoughts about this, but that it's a topic so important to us and quite complex too that we will need to revisit it a few times in the future. But this passage from Matthew chapter 6 is really rich in teaching and I thought it was worth coming back to a second time so that we can unpack, in a bit more depth, Jesus' teaching in relation to stress and anxiety and worry that so many of us experience so often.

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And in this passage from Matthew 6, we have one of the most famous sayings of Jesus that many of us will know in its traditional format, um, either because that's the Bible version we read or because we will have sung the hymn, uh, many times probably over the last few decades. And the verse I'm talking about is this one where Jesus says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you". And in this episode of our podcast, as we think about coping with worry and anxiety, it's that verse that I want to focus on most of all. And the teaching here is really important to us because what Jesus is saying is that if we put God first in our lives and we live in pursuit of him, then that will shape our minds in such a way that stress and worry and anxiety become less determining factors for us.

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As I was saying in last week's episode of this podcast, given the world in which we live today, that is such an important teaching because probably for all of us, life can be very, very stressful. In our homes, in our work, even in our leisure activities, we are put under stress that causes worry and anxiety. And stress, as I mentioned last time, it is a really debilitating sickness in modern society. More work days are lost through stress than through any other sickness and that's not to mention the amount of fatalities that happen through stress related illnesses. So any guidance from Jesus on how to minimize stress must surely be welcome for us all.

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I think at the heart of what Jesus is talking about in this passage is that to deal with stress and worry and anxiety in our lives, we need to cultivate a new way of thinking. Neural pathways are so strong in us. A certain perfume can immediately transport us to the memory of someone we knew. A song on the radio can transport us to another time and place in our lives. There may be key words that when said to you, uh, trigger responses of anger or joy. Our neural pathways, the way our brains are wired, are deeply embedded and very hard to change, particularly as we get older. But to overcome worry and anxiety, we really do need to work on these neural pathways. As Paul said in Romans chapter 12 verse two, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds".

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And that transformation begins to happen the more we reflect on God and his kingdom and we come to realize that this is the most important thing in life and everything else then takes on its proper perspective when considered in the light of God's kingdom. The temptation for all of us, I think, is to focus on the things of life, the minutiae of life, and to worry about them to worry about our money or our job or our reputation or our security in life or our health. Worry is a 21st century curse. But all the while these things are the primary focus for us, we will worry about them disproportionately. And what we need to do is rewire our brains to focus primarily on God, on his love for us, on his grace and provision in our lives. And when that becomes our primary focus, then everything else gets put into proper perspective.

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"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you". Now this requires a change of mind for most of us. It requires a rewiring of our brains and the way that we think about things. It's hard work, but it's crucial if we are to know peace in our hearts and minds. And at the heart of this is developing the discipline of living in the present moment. I know that I spend far too much energy reliving the mistakes of my past and berating myself for them. And I spend far too many hours awake in the middle of the night thinking about possible futures; problems that hadn't even occurred yet, and in all likelihood never will. And most of the time that I spend in the past or in the future brings with it stress and worry and feelings of guilt and anxiety. But when I live in the present moment, just focusing on what truly is in this moment, and reflecting on God's presence with me in this moment, and the grace that he's showing me in this moment, then that is when the stress and the anxiety decreases and peace descends in my heart.

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So living in the moment and being mindful in the present moment is a key spiritual discipline to develop as we seek to combat stress and worry and anxiety in our lives. And that is the transformation that Paul writes about in Romans. And it's a work of the Holy Spirit of God within us that makes it possible. And in this passage in verses 27 and 34 Jesus says, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own". Try to live in the present moment rather than the past or the future. Because the present moment, in truth, is all we have and it's only in the present moment that we can truly experience God and know what it is to have his Holy Spirit at work within us.

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So we need to make a choice about how we're going to live; either to prioritize worrying about the things of everyday life or prioritize the kingdom of God and dwelling in his presence in this moment and then contextualizing everything else in the light of that mindfulness. There is a choice for us to make. And interestingly, Jesus makes that clear to us in the first verse of this passage from Matthew 6 verse 24 where he says this, "No one can serve two masters for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth". Now in these words, Jesus isn't talking about employment or consumerism in the way that we might think about these things in the Western world in the 21st century. Instead, he's talking about how we are choosing to dedicate the pattern of our life.

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Where do we find meaning in life? What activities will we pursue in order to find our sense of meaning and self-worth? And Jesus is speaking a brutal truth to us here. We cannot serve two masters. We need to either try and find meaning in our work, our earthly relationships, our money and our reputations, or we can try and find meaning in our relationship with God. Now of course we do to quite a large extent find meaning through employment and earthly relationships. I'm not saying that we don't. But these are only temporary. They will pass away. They will fade. But ultimate meaning, the type of meaning that lasts can only be found in our relationship with God because he gives us eternal life. So who will be your master? What will be your master? A life dedicated to pursuing things that will eventually fade away or a life dedicated to pursuing that which will last for all eternity? You cannot serve

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two masters.

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So a crucial step for us in dealing with stress and worry and anxiety in our lives is to make a conscious decision about which master we are going to serve and to establish in our minds exactly where eternal value is to be found. And once we've made that choice and assuming that we choose for God, Jesus is then able to say in verse 25, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life". And as I've said before, when reflecting on this passage in the previous podcast, Jesus isn't saying that the stuff of life is unimportant. He knows that food and clothing and money and somewhere to live are really important issues for us. Of course they are. But he's just saying to us, "God already knows that these things are important to you and he will take care of you". Jesus is saying, just keep your focus on God and his kingdom and he will sort the rest out for you.

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"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and these things shall be added unto you". So what is it about God that we are to focus on that will give us a better perspective on our lives and help us to rewire those stubborn neural pathways? Well, essentially as Jesus very simply says here, we are to focus on his righteousness, which is to say that God is a Holy God who has sent his Son Jesus to die for us on the cross so that our sinfulness and failings can be washed away and covered by his own righteousness. As Paul writes in Romans 6, "But thanks be to God that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness". Now we are not righteous in and of ourselves. As Paul says elsewhere in Romans, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

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We are only righteous because Jesus' righteousness has been transferred onto us through his death on the cross. And that is the glorious message of the Christian gospel. And the more we meditate on that message and the more we allow it to inhabit our minds and hearts, then the more we will be transformed by God and our priorities in life will be changed. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you". So we are to meditate on God's goodness towards us and that will transform who we are and how we think. God has been so good to you by sending Jesus to die for your sins. And if God has done even that for you, how much more will he provide for your money and clothing and housing? Meditating on God's goodness helps us to get a better perspective on life.

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And it's when we doubt God's goodness that we end up worrying about the minutiae of life. But as I said earlier, it's a choice that we need to make and it's not easy to make that choice and it's even harder to live it out day by day. And that's why Jesus uses the word "Seek". It isn't an automatic mindset for us, and it's not always a comfortable one. We need to work at it. But God will enable us to do so by the power of his Holy Spirit within us. And it's God who will work the transformation that we need in our minds and our hearts. The renewal of our minds is actually God's gift to us if we sincerely seek after it. So it's not easy to cope with stress and anxiety and worry in our lives. And there really are no simple answers and this podcast and the one preceding it, and the ones that will follow at a later date are not trying to give simplistic answers to this issue; they're just trying to give some windows into the topic really.

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But I would say that a crucial starting point for all of us as we seek to cope with stress and worry and anxiety is the transformation of our minds through which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we learn to think differently. We learn to make God our priority and we learn then to put everything else in life in the context of God's enduring goodness to us, a goodness that was primarily shown on the cross when Jesus died for our sins, a goodness that continues as God provides for our every need day by day. These two crucial biblical verses: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you". And then Paul in Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds". That is the work of God's Holy Spirit in us if we choose to serve the kingdom and make that our priority. And we are so grateful for God's transforming power in our lives. So I hope that you found this a useful podcast. If you haven't listened to the other one on this passage yet, then I would encourage you to do so. And we are going to be returning, as I say, to the topic at some time in the future, to get an even broader perspective on this important issue. But for now, I hope that you will have a good day and that you will know God's peace in your heart, whatever worries and anxieties you may be experiencing at the present moment. So thanks for listening.

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Bye.