

"OVERCOMING ANXIETY"
March 25, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 6:31-32 "Therefore, do not be anxious, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

Some years ago, Satchel Paige, the great black pitcher who was noted for his relaxed approach to life, was asked the secret of his serenity. And this is what he said. "Go very lightly on the vices, such as carrying on in society; the social ramble ain't restful. Avoid running at all times. And don't never look back over your shoulder. Something might be gaining on you."

Unfortunately, many people are not as relaxed as Satchel Paige used to be. They go through life constantly looking back, afraid that "something might be gaining on them." The cost of living, the competition, future shock, the generation gap, a few years here, a few pounds there. Something might be gaining on them. They are like the man who said, "I gave up trying to get ahead a long time ago. I have to run as fast as I can just to keep from falling farther behind."

Perhaps that is why the best selling prescription drug in the world is Tagamet, an anti-ulcer medicine that has posted sales of well over \$800,000 million. It has been said that ulcers are caused, not so much by what we eat as by what is eating us. If so, there must be millions of people who need Jesus' advice, "Do not be anxious." Millions of people who are living lives of quiet --and sometimes not so quiet-- desperation. People who are rushed and harried, driven both by outward circumstance and inner disquiet. Even on their good days they are nervous and stressed. And the hard days really "drive them up a wall." Just when they need inner stability most, their composure disintegrates, and they find themselves immobilized by fears and self-doubts.

The worst cases have to be hospitalized for treatment. The others, more numerous by far, continue to lead what passes for a normal life, but inside there is only worry. No joy. No real pleasure in living. Perhaps some of you feel like that this morning. If so, you are not alone. Sooner or later, many of us do.

To us, as to his disciples centuries ago, Jesus offers this important advice: "Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father

knows that you need them all." I would like to take that verse as my text this morning as I talk about "Overcoming Anxiety."

Before going any further, let me say that I know full well what a large and complex subject anxiety is. I do not pretend that my words this morning will solve all our problems or give us a step-by-step formula for ending all our worries. A skilled and experienced therapist may be needed, and I respect their work as I do the other branches of medicine. But I can shed some light on the subject. And, because it is a specifically Christian light, I believe it has power to help.

Like any weed growing in the garden of life, anxiety and fear gain their strength from their roots. Pluck the flower, and it will only return again. Destroy the roots, and the whole plant dies. Now, I admit that is not easy. The roots are many, and deep. But, given time and enough faith, it can be done.

One of those roots is guilt. Almost all psychologists and psychiatrists agree on that. When we have done what we ought not to have done, the super-ego, or conscience, tells us we ought to be punished. If we are fortunate to be found out and made to pay, perhaps the super-ego may be satisfied and persuaded to leave us in peace. If not, then consciously or subconsciously we wait for the axe to fall.

Often without knowing why, we fear the future because we feel that we ought to. Our as yet un-delivered punishment is out there somewhere, waiting to strike. And, since we have no idea what form it may take, our fear may be quite unspecific and free-floating. We are not afraid of anything in particular. We are just afraid in general. It does not do any good to tell us that there is nothing to fear. We have to conquer the guilt that feeds our fears.

And that is where the Christian message has so much to offer. It agrees that we have sinned, that we deserve to be punished. But it points out that God's grace can overcome guilt and cleanse us of our sins. In I John 1:8-9 we read, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Christianity attacks anxiety at its roots, not by denying guilt, but by recognizing and forgiving it.

Anxiety also stems from a diminished self-esteem. For one reason or another, many of us are afraid because we think we deserve very little out of life. We are like the man who applied for a job and, during his interview, asked what kind of salary he might expect. "Don't worry about that," said the interviewer. "We would certainly expect to pay you what you're worth." "Well," replied the applicant, "you certainly don't expect me to work for that!" Respect yourself, and life will do the same. Belittle yourself, and you may go through life afraid that it will "pay you what you're worth."

Again, however, the Christian message offers a word of hope. St. Paul says that we are "the image of the glory of God." And the Son of God, himself, died upon a cross that you and I might have life and have it abundantly. Of course, we make mistakes. Plenty of them. But the Good News is that every human being has infinite value in the eyes of God. Like any loving parent, God's desire is that each of us should have the very best in life. You are the handiwork of God. And, in the rather ineloquent language of a bumper sticker I once saw, "God don't make no trash."

Besides guilt and low self-esteem, a third source of anxiety is our sense of isolation, our fear that we are all alone. Me against life --one on one-- with no one to help and no one to care. We find ourselves thinking that we have to do everything all by ourselves. Any problems we do not solve will go unsolved. Any good we do not achieve will never happen. Is it any wonder that we are scared?

But we are not alone. Sometimes, in a baseball game, when a pitcher gets in trouble he tries too hard to be perfect. He aims the ball and tries to strike everyone out. Then the pitching coach comes out and says, "Stop trying to do it all yourself. There are eight other players on this team. Just get the ball over the plate, and let your team-mates help you."

In a sense, the Christian message says the same thing. It reminds us that we are not alone. It tells us that God knows and cares about our needs. Centuries ago Isaiah promised, ". . . Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (Isaiah 43:1-3).

It seems to me that too often Lent has been used as a time to stress our sinfulness, to lay a guilt trip on us. But we do not need that. We know our imperfections only too well. And besides, there is always someone out there who is only too willing to remind us. What we need is someone who cares about us, who forgives our sins, affirms our worth, and is willing to go with us through life, giving guidance, companionship, and strength.

And Jesus offers to be that Someone --if we will let him. He said, "Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Who can be really frightened when we have a Friend like that? "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:28) For "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28:20)