

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

---

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## Seek God's kingdom first

Presented by Bob Smith

### Introduction

At the close of World War II the allies gathered thousands of homeless children into large camps. There they were well fed and cared for but many of them did not sleep well. They seemed restless and afraid. Finally, a psychologist hit on a solution. After the children were put to bed, each received a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided, but this particular slice was not to be eaten—it was just to hold. The result was that the children went peacefully to sleep, subconsciously feeling they would have something to eat tomorrow

Like those children, many of us have been conditioned by our early years to be overly anxious about the future. But Jesus understands this. And he teaches us to go to sleep at night, not with a slice of bread in our hand, but with an attitude in our mind. *"Make God's Kingdom and his righteousness your number 1 priority," he says, "and God will provide what you need."*

In other words he was saying *'let your first and last waking thoughts be about doing God's will, and you will find the rest will take of itself.'*

### The Illogic of Worry

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about the worry habit that afflicts us all in one way or another, and reminds us that it is quite illogical because it accomplishes nothing except to make us more miserable. *"Who of you, by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"* He says.

The problem, I believe, is largely inherited. We were taught to worry by the environment we grew up in. Those of us who grew up in the Great Depression and World War II are far more likely to worry about financial security and to be careful with money than those of us who grew up in the affluent post war era. But it's not just money that people worry about in illogical ways.

People who were abused as children are subject to anxieties that may cripple them emotionally throughout life. Likewise those who grew up in very strict homes which majored on guilt often live their lives in fear of the wrath of God descending on them for the most innocuous things. And these anxieties are not usually related to actual threats to us, but rather to vague possibilities.

Frank Sinatra was a classic example of this. His daughter, Tina, described his compulsion to make money, even when it threatened his health. He refused to stop giving concerts, even when his performances began to suffer. He started to have problems with his memory and became dependant on tele-prompters. Tina said that when she saw him at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, he struggled through the show and felt so sick at the end that he needed oxygen from a tank that he kept on hand. At another show he forgot the lyrics to "Second Time Around," a ballad he had sung a thousand times. His adoring audience finished it for him.

She said, "I couldn't bear to see Dad struggle. I remembered all the times he repeated the old boxing maxim 'You gotta get out before you hit the mat.' He wanted to retire at the top of his game, and I always thought he would know when his time came, but pushing 80 he lost track of when to quit. After seeing one too many of these fiascos, I told him, 'Pop, you can stop now; you don't have to stay on the road.' With a stricken expression he said, 'No, I've got to earn more money. I have to make sure everyone is taken care of.' However, since his death there have been constant family wrangles over his fortune. How sad, and how futile!

But the point Jesus makes is that if we want to live at peace we need a strategy to break this worry habit within us. That strategy, he said, is to fix our minds on one great priority in life – seeking and doing God's will. When that becomes the driving force, assurance of God's provision automatically follows. We are set free.

### **The Biblical Principle of Faith in Action**

I heard about a young woman who took her fiancé home to meet her parents. After dinner the father invites took him aside to talk. He asks him what he does for a living. The young man says, "I am a student of the Bible." "OK, but how will you provide a house for my daughter." "I will study," the young man replies, "and God will provide for us."

"And what about her engagement ring?" "No problem," the young man says. "God will provide for us." "And children?" asks the father. "How will you support children?" "Don't worry," he says. "God will provide."

And that's how the conversation went on. Discussing it with his wife later that night, the girl's father said, "Well, he has no job and no plans, but the good news is he thinks I'm God."

Now, faith has to be practical as well as idealistic. But the problem with many of us is that our faith is neither; it's nothing more than mere mental concept. True Biblical faith is a mental belief that becomes a reality in and through what we do. So, for example, a non-swimmer may say he believes that the water will hold him up, but that belief has no power to make him swim unless he relaxes and trusts himself to the water. It's action that turns mental belief into living faith.

In the same way many of us believe in our minds that God loves and cares for us; yet we worry ourselves to distraction over the details of daily life; bills, sickness, relationships and so on. Jesus talked about this when he said: *"Don't worry about what you are going to eat or what you are going to wear...Isn't life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes."* Meaning that if you believe it is God who has given you life, won't he also give you the means to sustain it?

Then he went on to say: *"Look at the birds of the air...your Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"* Meaning that just as birds calmly do what God made them to do, so should we live responsible, productive lives, doing what we believe God wants of us, trusting that we also shall be provided for.

It is all about translating that belief in our minds into action. It's when we actually start to do God's will that faith comes alive and worry diminishes. There's a marvelous example of this in the Old Testament story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. In a time of famine she shared her last meal with Elijah because she believed it was what God wanted. Elijah said to her:

*“This is what the Lord says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’”* And so it was. That near empty jar of flour and jug of oil which were to provide her final meal, became a flowing stream of God’s provision.

And that story illustrates the same great spiritual principle Jesus taught. Don’t spend your energy worrying about what will be there to meet tomorrow’s challenge. Spend your energy making sure that what you have today is used to do God’s will today, and God will provide for tomorrow’s needs.

### **What Would Jesus Do?**

*“Don’t worry about tomorrow,” Jesus said. “Tomorrow will worry about itself...But seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

What did he mean by *“seeking God’s kingdom first?”* He meant making God’s will the number one priority in our lives.

When I was staying at my brother in law’s place in America, I used to walk past a church that had a curious sign over its front door. The sign just had the letters W.W.J.D. One evening I saw a bunch of teenagers there, obviously part of the church youth group. I asked one of them what the sign meant and she showed me a bracelet she was wearing. On it were the same letters, W.W.J.D. She told me that a lot of the kids were wearing them now, and the letters stood for the phrase, *‘What Would Jesus Do?’* They wore the bracelets, and the church had the sign over its front door to constantly remind people of that simple but profound question; what would Jesus do?

The more I think of it the more convinced I am that that simple question is the key to *‘seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.’* It’s all about developing a habit whereby everyday and in every situation we ask ourselves, ‘what would Jesus do?’ And whatever conclusion we come to is what we choose to do.

Now some people would say that you can’t necessarily know what Jesus would do in every situation. But I believe that if we deliberately build into our lives regular time for quiet prayer, meditation and reflection on Jesus’ teaching as we have it in the Bible, then we will develop a sensitivity to what God’s Spirit is trying to say to us. And if our constant habit is then to ask, ‘what would Jesus do?’ We will live our lives *seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness.’*

Then, and only then, will we discover the glorious peace of those who know for certain that because they are living in the centre of God’s will they need not fear nothing that is outside of God’s will. It’s that wonderful assurance that the Bible describes as knowing *“that in all things God works for the good of those that love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

It is not a guarantee of lifelong financial prosperity, constant good health and easy living. But it is an assurance that nothing will happen to us that is outside of God’s care and provision for us. It means there will never be anything that we and God can’t handle together. And it is that confidence that enables us – even those of us who grew up in anxious times – to go to sleep peacefully at night, like those refugee children clutching their slice of bread, knowing that the one who provided for us today will surely provide for us tomorrow.

## Conclusion

Do you know that a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of a hundred feet contains less than one glass of water. All of that fog, if it could be condensed into water, wouldn't quite fill a drinking glass. Now compare this to the things we spend our energies worrying about. Like fog those worries block our vision of the sunlight of God's promises, and condemn us to gloom and depression. But the fact is they have little substance to them.

The good news is that through faith in Jesus we can break free of this and live in the sunlight of God's promises. Jesus knew that you don't change lifetime habits of anxiety just by thought alone. That thought has to be translated into action. Life transforming faith is more than mental belief; it is a mental belief that translates into daily action. And that, says Jesus, is to constantly "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.*" Concern yourself only with doing what Jesus would do, and he will provide the rest.

*Loving God, teach us each day to make doing your will our first priority in life, so that we may know the peace of knowing that you will provide for all our needs. Amen.*