Sunday, June 9, 1991
SOME THINGS NOT TO BORROW (NO. 5 IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)
Matthew 6:25-34

A number of you requested a sermon on how to handle excessive worry or how to let go of anxiety. It's not a new problem. Being anxious seems to be part of the human condition. Jesus spoke about it frequently two thousand years ago.

Let's begin by remembering that not all worry is bad for us. There are many things in life we need to be concerned about — housing, food, education, medical care, taking precautions against accidents, doing our jobs well, making our marriages work, planning for the future, and more. The right kind of worry can motivate us to work hard, prepare ourselves for the future, and be concerned about our overall welfare and the welfare of others.

The problem is that for too many people, worry is at the center of their lives so that it consumes too much of life's energy. It becomes excessive. For example, some people worry too much about whether or not they are liked and accepted by others, whether or not they have value and are worthwhile. In doing so, we concentrate too much on ourselves.

Then too, there are people for whom the normal daily concerns of life develop into intense feelings of anxiety. It's so easy to become a chronic worrier and to magnify the possible evils or threats that face us until we paralyze our power of action. Not only do we worry about today, but we borrow trouble from yesterday and tomorrow to worry about. And if that's not enough, we borrow trouble from others to worry about.

So, the first key to letting go of anxiety and worry is to limit what we are going to worry about. What you don't have in the first place, you won't have to let go of. And that's exactly what Jesus said.

One day, when I was visiting church members who were in the hospital, I overheard a nurse give some good advice about worry to a patient. The patient was worried about the possibility of surgery coming up, and learning of this worry, the nurse began her short speech. "Listen," she said, "we don't borrow trouble from tomorrow. You may have surgery, who knows, but that's not today. In this place," she continued, "we live one day at a time. If we borrow all the problems tomorrow's going to bring, we'd never make it through a day. You live one day at a time, and you've got quite enough to think about today without borrowing tomorrow's trouble."

I don't know if the nurse knew it or not, but she was quoting what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount almost word for word. Jesus put it this way, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Remember, when you start borrowing tomorrow's troubles, you are borrowing a lot of imaginary ones that will never actually come into existence.

Life is not without trouble, but some of us go around borrowing more trouble than necessary and soon we have so much that we have difficulty in letting any of it go. Some people hoard trouble and worry in the same way that others hoard money. And it's a human tendency that the more we have of anything, even trouble and worry, the harder it is for us to let any of it go.

So, the first point that Jesus made about worry is this: don't borrow trouble from tomorrow to be anxious about — you have enough trouble already today.
We never know for sure what tomorrow is going to bring — so don't go around inventing trouble where none exists. I call people who are always wanting to borrow trouble from tomorrow the "what if" people. They ask, "What if my child is not home on time?" "What if there is not enough food for tomorrow?" "What if I cannot pay my bills on time?" "What if I take a trip and the airplane crashes?" "What if I am attacked?" "What if a war starts?" "What if the world comes to an end?" "What if I get cancer?"

Now, if these worries about the future cause you to take some constructive steps to prepare for the future, then they have served a good purpose. "What if I die next month?" I know I'm going to die sometime. Then I should make a few plans, such as having a will prepared by a competent attorney. But too many of us do not go any further than worrying about these "what if's."

Jesus knew that when we worry excessively about the future, when we borrow too much trouble from tomorrow, it can paralyze us in the present. If I begin worrying about all the sermons I'm going to have to prepare for the next five years, I won't have any energy left to prepare the sermon for next Sunday. I have to do what needs to be done now, then tackle the next job, and then the next. "Do one thing at a time and be all there when you do it" is an old saying that each one of us needs to memorize.

It is impossible even to anticipate all the problems that tomorrow might bring. Jesus is saying to us that each day presents its own challenges, its own troubles and opportunities, and that we should not borrow from tomorrow.

Secondly, Jesus is also saying by implication — do not borrow troubles from yesterday. Who is there among us who has not lived through some unhappy experience, or made some foolish mistake, or has some deep regret about something we have done in the past that we should not have done? And now foolishly in the present, we keep borrowing trouble from yesterday. Jesus said, "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."
If people who are always borrowing trouble from tomorrow are the "what if" people, then those who keep borrowing trouble from the past are the "if only" people. "If only I had not made that mistake." "If only I had Bill's leadership ability, then I would be way ahead in life." "If only I had inherited all the money that she did, then I would be happy." "If only I could sing like Mary." "If only I hadn't quit college 10 years ago." "If only I had kept those shares of stock three months longer and then sold them, I would've made a lot more money." "If only I hadn't turned down that job offer three years ago." "If only I had listened to the advice of my parents."

Why is it that some of us want to keep borrowing trouble from the past? Sure, we need to learn from our mistakes of the past, but that's something quite different. We can learn from our mistakes and then move on and leave them behind. Jesus said in another place, "No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Do not borrow trouble from the future. Do not borrow trouble from the past. Then you will have less worry to let go of.

Do not borrow trouble from others. Although Jesus didn't say it in so many words, it's certainly implied in his teachings. When Jesus said, "Let today's trouble be sufficient for today," we could add, "Let a person's own trouble be sufficient for that person." But there is among us a tendency to borrow trouble from other people as if we did not have enough of our own.

John Sutherland Bonnell, who was a minister in New York City for many years, tells about taking a taxi in that city at rush hour. The taxi driver was furious at being held up by the slow-moving traffic. He cursed this driver and that, he spurted through impossible gaps in the traffic, he slammed on his brakes, and he seethed with anger. Finally, Bonnell said to him, “Driver, I have an important appointment right now with an out-of-town physician. I wanted to be there on time, but now I’m 20 minutes late.” The driver said, “Mister, I’m sorry, but I can’t help it. I’m going as fast as I can.” “I know that,” said Bonnell, “but you don’t understand me. I mentioned this fact only to remind you that I’m the one who ought to be doing all the worrying in this taxi. You are doing your job well. Some time ago, I saw that I was going to be late and that there wasn’t anything I could do about it, so I just relaxed. Why don’t you try that sometime?”

As Bonnell got out some time later, the driver said, “Mister, I’ve learned something today that I’m going to try not to forget.”

What he learned was very simple: every person’s own trouble is sufficient for that person. There are many times when borrowing someone else’s trouble doesn’t help that person or you.

There are a lot of problems that other people have which you cannot solve for them. No one of us can go around solving everyone else’s problems, making everyone else’s decisions, ironing out everyone else’s difficulties.

Don’t misunderstand. This is not to say that we are to live only for ourselves and should not be concerned with other people and their difficulties. The Bible says in another place that we are to bear one another’s burdens. But we have to be able to distinguish which burdens. Frequently we try to bear the burdens of others that do not help them or us.

Do not borrow tomorrow’s troubles. Do not borrow yesterday’s troubles, and do not borrow trouble from others.

There is yet one more point to remember. Let the day’s real trouble be sufficient for the day. Don’t go around inventing trouble where none exists. Some people are “trouble creators.” They manufacture trouble if there is none available. They prefer life the hard way. They create stress for themselves.
You may have heard about the dear 80-year-old woman who nearly lost her life by turning her yard work into a stressful situation. She took great pride in keeping a perfect yard. One day a neighbor found her under a tree in her yard, and she was screaming in pain. He called 911, and she was taken to the emergency room at the local hospital. Her hip was found to be broken. The doctor asked her how it happened.

“I fell from the tree in my yard while picking the leaves,” she moaned. “Picking the what?” the doctor asked. “Picking the leaves,” she answered. “I like to get them before they fall and make a mess in my yard.” She was serious. Her neighbor confirmed it. She had always tried to pick the leaves from the trees before they had a chance to fall.

I wonder how many of us increase the stress and trouble in our lives when there is no need to. Let the day’s real troubles be sufficient for the day. Don’t add to your day’s problems by borrowing or manufacturing additional ones.

Jesus knew that too many of us have difficulty in letting things go. We are highly skilled in acquisition. In fact, most of what we are taught in life is how to borrow, how to get things, and how to hold onto them. But we’re not very good at the art of relinquishment, at letting things go.

Relinquishment is not becoming overly attached to things, even our problems. It means not giving eternal value to the things we own, and also not giving eternal value to our troubles. In the long run, all things go away. Only God is eternal.

Two workmen got on an elevator. One of them was carrying a heavy bucket of water. As they started up, the one said to the other, half-joking, “Why don’t you set the bucket down? The elevator will carry it up for you.”

So many of us carry buckets full of troubles that we need not carry. Some of the worries and troubles have been borrowed from the future, some from the past, and some from other people. And if that is not enough, we manufacture and multiply our own. Some are a part of life — but not nearly all of them. Some are borrowed. They are not yours. You can let them go.

Deal with today’s real troubles as best you can. That’s all that’s expected of you. You can deal with tomorrow’s troubles tomorrow, and yesterday’s troubles are already past.

Remember above all, you are a child of God, held in God’s loving care. You are entitled to relax every once in a while and let God be in control. God has been in overall control of this creation long before you came on the scene, and God will still be in control long after you are gone. This is the day which God has made; you are entitled to rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.