

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, May 6, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**MARK 4:40 and PHILIPPIANS 4:6**

“Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?

“Do not be anxious about anything.”

**RESPECTABLE SINS**  
**(2) THE RAT THAT EATS THE HARP STRINGS**

Worry is perhaps the most respectable of all the respectable sins but let us never forget that it is a sin. It was Dr. Peter Marshall who once offered this prayer before the United States Senate: “Oh God, save us from the sin of worrying, lest stomach ulcers be the badge of our lack of faith.” The African proverb from which I have derived the title for this sermon says, “Don’t let rats eat your harp strings.” Yet myriads of people allow the rats of fear and worry and anxiety to take away the music out of their lives!

Jesus took a very dim view of worry. You remember how in His parable of the Sower, He paints a vivid picture of how people’s lives are spoiled, and how their spiritual growth is stunted. “But the worries of this life and the longing for money come in to choke out God’s Word” (Matthew 13:22). Ours is a very materialistic age; people want all the things that money can buy; and yet, says Jesus, the first and most serious choker of the Word is not the glamor of wealth and the delight of being rich. On the contrary, spiritual enemy number one is “the worries of this life.”

A famous psychologist said recently, “Anxiety is the most prominent mental characteristic of Western civilization.”

Of course, fear has a beneficial aspect. When spelled with a small “f” it can mean safety and security. Fear makes the frightened deer swift and alert. The driver who drives recklessly because he has no fear of breaking the rules of the road is a public enemy. The pilot who has no fear of the laws that govern flying will end in a crash. The druggist who has no fear of giving the wrong drugs is a menace. In each case, a healthy fear makes for efficiency and safety.

But when fear becomes Fear with a capital “F”, then it becomes master instead of servant, ruins life, and robs us of peace of mind.

Many things conspire today to produce fear and create anxiety.

**1. Fear of the future.** On the morning of August 6, 1945, the bomb exploded 1500 feet above Hiroshima, and 100,000 souls perished. An American newspaper columnist said that after the falling of that bomb he walked the streets of Washington for three days and never saw a smile on a single face. Why? Why weren’t people elated because we now had the power of the

atom on our side? It was because they knew, as if by instinct, that the bomb had fallen not merely on Hiroshima, it had fallen on all our securities everywhere. We feel naked and unprotected against overshadowing catastrophe. It is not pleasant to realize that Metropolitan Washington is a stationary target for a devastating intercontinental atomic missile fired with deadly accuracy from 5,000 miles away. And what if Mikhail Gorbachev is ousted from power, to be replaced by another Joseph Stalin?

**2. Fear of illness.** It is appalling the number of people who are in bondage to the fear of illness. A college professor was afraid illness might prevent him from finishing his lifework. He would break out into a cold sweat when he remembered how long it took him to shave in the mornings! Everything seemed to press him down. His doctor said to him one day, "Go to the cemetery and get acquainted with the people there; and remember that they didn't finish all their work either; nobody ever does!"

Strangely enough, the fear of illness can actually produce illness. The American Medical Association affirms that at least one half of all illness is rooted in spiritual maladjustment. It is things in the mind and spirit -- fear, guilt, frustration and the like -- that are the direct cause of at least one half of all illness.

**3. Fear of unemployment, insecurity and old age.** The tempo of life has been so speeded up in our generation that business has become one mad headlong rush to outwit and outmaneuver the rest of the competing field; and the pressures are almost more than the average person can take. For example, many of you know that here in the metropolitan area firms find the competition very severe as they seek to obtain government contracts; and to fulfil the contract for the price they bid, they virtually compel their employees to work eight to ten hours on a Saturday without extra pay. It is uncompensated overtime; and their job security would be in jeopardy if they do not go along with this arrangement and work "Greentime," as it is called. We can only imagine how devastating this must be to their home and family life, and the underlying fear of unemployment or lack of promotion if one were to try to buck the system.

**4. Fear of death.** This is caused by one or more of three things:

- a. People are naturally afraid of the unknown.
- b. If they have not lived the way they should, they are afraid of judgment, and rightly so.
- c. They are afraid that death is equivalent to extinction.

**5. Fear caused by resentment.** We hold resentments against people; our lives get off-center, and we know it; guilt begins to lay hold of us, even though we fight it and try to justify our behavior. We hate ourselves for hating. We hold guilt, unconfessed and un-surrendered, in our lives, and hence we are afraid.

Now, unfortunately, the individual creates most, if not all, of these fears for himself. Psychologists assure us that there are only two fears born within us, (1) the fear of loud noises,

and (2) the fear of falling. All the rest of our fears and anxieties are home-grown. Take even the case of an electrical storm. Some children seem to enjoy the heavenly fireworks. A mother was concerned about her small boy alone in his room during a severe thunderstorm. She thought she would find him terror-stricken. Instead, she found him at the window dancing in glee; and when a particularly hard clap of thunder came, he yelled, "Do it again, God, do it again!!"

### How are we to deal with our fears and anxieties?

There are two things we must never do:

a. We must never try to forget them. Our generation is drinking far too much, mainly in the attempt to forget. The mad world of drugs and licentious pleasure is designed to do the same thing -- to make us forget for a little while the things that are eating into our very vitals. But release can never come that way.

b. We must never try to fight them. You can't get rid of fear by fighting it. It is a psychological law that "whatever gets your attention gets you." Place a plank, 6 inches wide, on the ground, and walk along it. There's nothing to it! But try to walk along a 6-inch girder, 100-feet above the ground! The 100-foot drop gets your attention, so it gets you!

To urge people to fight their fears is, as someone has said, "like people calling to a drowning man to swim, when they don't know that, under the water, his hands and feet are tied." Often there are subconscious fears that tie up the inner life, and the advice to fight them is futile.

How, then, can fear and anxiety be conquered? Let me mention five things very briefly:

1. **If you have a fear, don't be afraid to admit that you have it.** It is often a good thing to write down precisely what it is you are worrying about. Or, better still, talk it over with a friend. If you conceal a fear, you only drive it down into the subconscious, and there it will fester and work havoc. It is amazing how much less terrifying a fear appears when you write it down, or talk it over with someone, perhaps a fellow Christian within the Body of Christ. It is a privilege, as part of our body life to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). And as we share our fear with an understanding friend, we will find that the very sharing of it takes much of the sting out of it.

2. **Because fears show lack of faith in God, surrender them into the hands of God.** Remember - "He who worries doesn't trust; and he who trusts doesn't worry." If you surrender your fears and anxieties into the hands of God, then He has them, not you. This shifts the basis; it means that you are not struggling to overcome them; you and God are working it out together -- your eyes are now on God and not on yourself and your fears, and that makes a tremendous difference.

As a wise person once put it, "I do not know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future."

Someone once asked an old black saint, a radiant soul, how he managed to keep that way,

and he replied, "I know that God won't let anything come my way that He and I together can't handle."

The words "surrender" and "serenity" sound alike; and indeed, they are alike. The one is the root, the other the fruit.

**3. Meet the fears and anxieties of life one day at a time.** Isn't it wonderful that God has divided time into manageable portions, day and night? Do take it a day at a time!

"Life by the yard is hard,  
Life by the inch is a cinch!"

That is homespun wisdom, but it is Christian Truth too. Didn't our Lord Himself say, "Don't worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

"Don't pay for trouble in advance; it may never be delivered!"

When Oliver Wendell Holmes was once in a despondent mood through worry, he found a note on his desk written by his wife, "Dear Oliver, you have lived a long time, and have seen many troubles, most of which never happened!"

The manna in the wilderness was given each day to the children of Israel -- enough for each day -- but not any for the next day.

Take life a day at a time!

**4. Remember that perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).** Helen Keller once asked to see what a lion is like. She was, of course, totally blind, and could not "see" unless she felt. So, the keeper of the zoo gave reluctant permission for her to enter the lion's den, but took precautions in case of an emergency. But no precaution was needed. She began lovingly to pass her hands over the lion, and the lion allowed her to do it, for he felt that the touch was the touch of love, and he responded. There is no fear in love.

Do something for someone every day. Stretch out the hand of love and touch someone along the way. Try as a rule to devote less than one half of your time to your own affairs. In ministering to someone else you will find that your own fears will lose their power over you.

The Living Bible translation of Luke 9:51 is very inspirational. Listen: "As the time drew near for His return to heaven, Jesus moved steadily onward towards Jerusalem with an iron will." That is to say, our Lord knew that He was facing certain death, but He also knew that "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). There you have a perfectly surrendered life with perfect love in His heart for those He came to save; and because of that, He was utterly fearless.

**5. Learn the art of prayer, and accept the Holy Spirit within you as the source of your**

**peace and power.** Many people are a barrel of jangling fears just because they don't know God at first hand. "Mixed-up kids" is an accurate description of multitudes of people today, and they're not all teenagers either; there are lots of "mixed-up kids" who are in their sixties and seventies, and who blunder on in their God-forsaking ways, apprehensive about the future, yet seemingly unmindful of the fact that they must so soon stand before the judgment seat of God, and give an account of their wasted lives.

I remember reading some years ago a feature article in Time magazine about Harry Belafonte, the singer, whose annual income at that time was about one million dollars. In the article, there was this significant sentence that made me blink my eyes and read it again -- "Harry has even achieved the peculiarly 20th century sign of distinction, a weekly visit to his psychoanalyst!" Far from being a mark of distinction, this is the perfect symbol of the emotional immaturity, the spiritual bankruptcy and decadence of our age. The passenger list of the Mayflower did not contain the name of a psychiatrist, but it did contain the names of men and women who knew God, who knew the power of prayer, and who, for that reason, laid the solid foundations for a nation's greatness.

Have you ever prayed about your fears -- spread them out before God, told Him about them, naming them over one by one, beseeching Him to rid your heart and mind of them? People sometimes pray for health, and sickness is their portion; or for success, and it does not come their way. But I have never known of any person who has prayed earnestly and honestly for courage to stand up to life's demands, who has not risen from his knees with fresh heart and hope. Say with the psalmist, "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in the Lord, Yes, I will trust the promises of God. And since I am trusting Him, what can mere man do to me?" (Psalm 56:3,4).

Ask God, for Christ's sake, to cleanse you of everything that is out of harmony with His will and purpose for your life. And if you do, into your life there will come with power the blessed Holy Spirit of God, and you will know "the peace of God which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

That great English preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, used to tell the story of the Swiss martyr who was tied to the stake, and the faggots were piled around him, and the executioner said he felt sorry he had to burn him to death; and the martyr said, "Sir, I know it is not you, it is the other men who are my enemies; but would you come here and put your ear close against my heart; hear how it beats. There," said he, "am I not more calm than you are?" And he that had to put him to death confessed that he it was whose heart was fluttering; but the child of God, even between the jaws of death, was calm and still. "And so," concludes Spurgeon, "will God keep you in perfect peace, if you put your trust in Christ, and do not turn aside to crooked ways."

And who has ever put this whole matter more challengingly than did the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:6,7 when he wrote:

"Don't worry over anything whatever; tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer; and the peace of God, which transcends human understanding, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus." (Phillips)

**AMEN.**