

Don't worry, be happy, live longer

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It all began back in the mid-60s when some 7,000 students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test that, among other things, measured the participants' tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic. Of that group, 1,630 were found by the test to be clearly pessimists and 923 to be clearly optimists. The rest fell somewhere in the middle. Over the next four decades, 476 of those who had taken the test died, from causes ranging from accident to illness to suicide to homicide.

By tracking and collating all this information, researchers determined that the pessimists had a significantly greater likelihood of dying sooner from any cause than did the optimists.

While many of us are not pessimists by inclination, we can be pessimistic in the worries we face every day. If we stop to think about it, most of us don't live our days in anxiety over how global warming will affect us or fret about how or when the world will end. Most of our concerns are over more personal issues such as, "Will I get a good report from the doctor?" "Will my kids stay out of trouble?" "Am I being a good parent?" "Will I be able to pay my bills?"

"Can any of us by worrying add a single hour to our span of life?" The question is as timely today as when Jesus posed it over 2,000 years ago (Matthew 6:24). Does worrying do us any good? Lord knows, we've put huge amounts of time and energy into worrying about all sorts of things that might happen, most of which never actually come to pass. Having burned through all that anxiety, what do we have to show for it? Have we, as Jesus asked, added even a single hour to our lives? Probably we've taken away hours.

Think back to the study mentioned above. The study's conclusion suggests that Jesus was right. But even more, it reveals a surprising flip side to that argument, suggesting that not being a chronic worrier can add not only an hour, but perhaps even years to a lifespan.

When Jesus posed this question about adding to our span through worry, He went on to make clear that what He was calling for was for us to trust God. He pointed to the birds that do not sow or reap the fields but are fed by our heavenly Father. He pointed to the flowers that do not toil or spin but are clothed in beauty as well by our heavenly Father.

It's important to understand that His words were directed to people who still had to sow, reap, toil and to spin. Jesus wasn't telling them to stop doing those tasks; He simply wanted them to understand that their lives were a lot more than the sum of their sowing, reaping, toiling, spinning, or the length of their FaceBook profile. Jesus is not Dr. Phil giving us a prescription for how to avoid anxiety. His main point is: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

None of this is to say that we won't have some normal worries. We can't love someone without worrying about threats to his or her well-being. We can't be sensitive persons without occasional concern that we haven't done all we should. We can't listen to the news without some uneasiness about the direction many things in the world appear to be going.

But we can be focused enough on the things of God that we're able to relax about our priorities and have confidence in God's providential care. That's why, instead of wringing our hands in despair, we clasp our hands in prayer.