



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Stress, and How to Manage It” Matthew 6:25-33

[play, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” by Bobby McFerrin]

[after his first verse, show “Chick-Fil-A” slide of cows with signs saying, “Eat more chicken.”] [fade out music]

I thought it might be a good time for us to take a look at “stress and how to manage it,” because there’s a lot of stress going around just now. It’s no news to any of us here that the world’s economies are in recession. Unemployment is over 10% in much of California. The stock market may have hit bottom, but still is down 20%-40% from its highest point less than two years ago. The Federal budget deficit has exploded under our previous president, and exploded again under the current Administration. In our State, as you know, we are about to have a huge change in state spending in order to make up our own deficit. And we don’t want to talk about the collapse of the real estate bubble.

When the economy is in the tank, it’s just one more large stressor in our lives. People who still have jobs have feel their stress increase as firms cut other employees; they may also feel “survivor guilt”, as their jobs continue while others are sent home. Surely teachers will see their student population expand next year, for example, in each classroom; that will bring more stress, and they deserve support from us.

Besides our working lives, stress can come at us from a number of other directions. In the last week or two, we have had a jump in people of our church who are facing health challenges. I have spent several hours this week at the hospital, visiting 3-4 different people--and that’s in addition to others of our church family that have had “outpatient procedures” this week. Finances, work, health—O yes, and relationships can also be sources of stress. Parents and children—of any age. In-laws. How many ways can we disappoint, bug, and bother each other?

Stress makes us less intelligent. We get anxious—a form of fear—and our survival instinct makes us focus exclusively on the threat we perceive to be before us. That can be a very good thing. But that same “focus” also narrows down our perceptions; we can miss opportunities that are hidden in that danger, and not see solutions that are close by. Fear can make us stupid.

When we are stressed, it not only affects our minds, it affects our bodies. Stress causes our bodies to increase the level of the hormones Cortisol, Adrenaline and some Glucocorticoids. These hormones get our body ready to respond to a threat—either by combating it, or “getting out of Dodge”—“fight or flight”. That’s a great survival response when a stress suddenly comes upon us.

But if we are constantly anxious about life, stress becomes chronic. The elevated levels of hormones block some normal chemical functions in the brain. Chronic stress lowers our immune response, so chronically-stressed people get anxious AND sick. Continued over a significant time, people fall victim to panic attacks, agoraphobia—and in extreme cases, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. These are serious conditions that begin to generate additional problems, and we've fallen into a terrible spiral of anxiety that can ruin our lives.

And scientists have seen the effects of chronic stress on the physical structures of the brain and body. Chronic over-stimulation of Cortisol can cause the brain's hippocampus to atrophy. In our brains, the amygdala (our "reptilian brain" where our fear responses are located) hijacks our ability to think. We no longer assess threats accurately. Indeed, we've found that lots of brain cells die off and new cells do not generate when someone's life is bound up in chronic stress and anxiety. As our brains suffer under chronic stress, depression can also set in. In major depression, our adrenal glands can swell to 50% larger than their normal size, because of the constant demand for them to put out this hormone. It's like Arthur Somers Roche wrote, years ago: "Worry is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained." (*The Treasure Chest*, page 226)

Some people get addicted to stress, and without it, they become fidgety and vaguely anxious about not being anxious. For example, some men who retire from high-pressure positions can feel this as a painful problem—so much so, that they seek a way back into the work force, just to feel what they came to believe is "normal".

Have I made the case that chronic stress is bad news? But is there also an "up side" to stress? There must be, because people seem to seek out stress from time to time. Horror movies, roller-coasters, mystery and thriller novels—people experience these as *fun*. We call that, "eustress". The big difference between destructive stress and eustress is control. If we can turn on and turn off the stress, it doesn't do bad things.

Just like there are different kinds of stress, so there are different ways of dealing with stress, and not all of these are helpful. Let me introduce you to a helpful formula: Stress + _____ = Less Stress.

This is a basic formula for life, because life is inevitably going to bring stress. Jesus said, in John 16:33: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Some people use "alcohol" into this formula. And alcohol works, of course, because alcohol is almost the same molecular structure as "ether", the standard anesthetic used in surgery for many years. Alcohol works. But just as alcohol works to reduce stress, if it becomes a habit, alcohol can bring on its own problems, producing psychological or physical addictions. All of the Twelve Step programs are aimed at prying out of the formula the problem substance or habit, and replacing the substance with an alternative that likewise reduces stress.

Well, if alcohol or other self-medication is not a great addition to our formula, what are some better ways to reduce the stress of living?

Most of these you know already, I'll bet. For example, exercise. This does not have to be an expensive gym membership—just getting up and walking is enough—say, ten minutes.

Some of the oriental movement traditions such as yoga or Tai Chi fight stress very well. Longer exercise is great—but that gets more into physical fitness, and we want to focus on “stress” today. Even simple exercise is a great way to lower stress.

Another proven way to lower stress is with humor. You remember our ad from Chick Fil-A. Telling jokes—even jokes about stress and worry—is a great way to lower stress.

For example, a man was bothered with continual ringing in his ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face. Over a period of three years he went to doctor after doctor. One took out his tonsils, one his appendix, another pulled all his teeth -- he even tried the goat gland treatment in Switzerland -- all to no avail. Finally, one doctor told him there was no hope -- he had six months to live. The poor fellow quit his job, sold all his belongings and decided to live it up in the time he had left. He went to his tailor and ordered several suits and shirts. The tailor measured his neck and wrote down 16 1/2. The man corrected him: 15 1/2. The tailor measured again: 16 1/2. But the man insisted that he'd always worn a size 15 1/2. "Well, all right," said the tailor, "but don't come back here complaining to me if you have ringing ears, bulging eyes and a flushed face!"

Former NBA center and coach Johnny Kerr said his biggest test as a coach came when he coached the expansion Chicago Bulls and his biggest player was 6-8 Erwin Mueller: "We had lost seven in a row, and I decided to give a psychological pep talk before a game with the Celtics," Kerr said. "I told Bob Boozer to go out and pretend he was the best scorer in basketball. I told Jerry Sloan to pretend he was the best defensive guard. I told Guy Rodgers to pretend he could run an offense better than any other guard, and I told Mueller to pretend he was the best rebounding, shot-blocking, scoring center in the game.

We lost the game by 17. I was pacing around the locker room afterward trying to figure out what to say when Mueller walked up, put his arm around me and said, 'Don't worry about it, Coach. Just pretend we won.'" (From a story in the *Los Angeles Times*, as submitted by David Bolton, Bethel Baptist Church, Anaheim, California.)

A materialistic yuppie was driving his new BMW on a winding mountain road in California. He hit a slick corner and lost control of the car. Just before the automobile tumbled over the roadside cliff, he jumped out. In the process of jumping, his arm was cut off. A trucker quickly ran to the young man and found him weeping over his lost car. The trucker tried to console him. "Don't worry about your car, the way your arm's bleeding you're lucky to be alive." The yuppie looked down at his severed arm and screamed, "Not my Rolex too!" (Rick Warren)

Churches can be a source of humor. Here are some church worship announcement bloopers: -- "Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help." -- "Thursday Night Potluck Supper. Prayer and medication to follow." -- "Remember in prayer those who are sick of our congregation" -- "Tuesday Night Bean Supper. Music will follow." -- "For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs."

And then, there's the story of the visiting preacher was quite concerned when he began the first night of a revival meeting, and noticed all of the men were wearing a gun. Although rattled, he did the best he could with his sermon. When finished, his anxieties heightened as several of the men walked to the front with their guns drawn. In panic, he turned to the chairman

of the deacons who was sitting next to him. The deacon quickly calmed his fears, "Oh, don't worry about them. They ain't coming after you. They're looking for the guy who invited you to preach." (*Watching The World Go By*, W.E. Thorn, 1987, p. 68)

Another great way to fight stress is, other people. A first grader went on her first day to a newly integrated school at the height of the segregation storm. An anxious mother met her at the door to inquire, "How did everything go, honey?" "Oh, Mother! You know what? A little black girl sat next to me!" In fear and trepidation, the mother expected trauma, but tried to ask calmly: "And what happened?" "We were both so scared that we held hands all day." Men are not good at this. So many men have so few friends. But we need other people, especially in times of stress.

And one of the best ways I know to fight stress is to spend time with God. If we have experience in talking and listening to God, we start by growing quiet, and we let our stress settle out. (That's why we always start our prayer time here with silence.) Then we gently unpack our lives before God, and let God help us see our lives differently, from His perspective. We've talked at length about this at other times, so I'll just leave it at that. Prayer is, I think, the best way to deal with stress.

The fear that underlies stress is a test of faith. Jesus made that clear. Open your bibles to his words in Matthew's gospel, chapter 6 and the start of chapter 7. Listen for God's voice in these words of Jesus. *[text]*

And those who follow him know what he said about trusting God is true. "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety." (George Muller in *Signs of the Times*, quoted in *Christianity Today*-Vol. 35, #1) Ruth Bell Graham wrote, "I [have] learned that worship and worry cannot live in the same heart: they are mutually exclusive." (Ruth Bell Graham in *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them Christianity Today*-Vol. 36, #9)

Eight-year-old Frank had looked forward for weeks to this particular Saturday because his father had promised to take him fishing if the weather was suitable. There hadn't been any rain for weeks and as Saturday approached, Frank was confident of the fishing trip. But wouldn't you know it, when Saturday morning dawned, it was raining heavily and it appeared that it would continue all day. Frank wandered around the house, peering out the windows and grumbling more than a little. "Seems like the Lord would know that it would have been better to have the rain yesterday than today," he complained to his father who was sitting by the fireplace, enjoying a good book. His father tried to explain to Frank how badly the rain was needed; how it would make the flowers grow and bring much needed moisture to the farmer's crops. But Frank was adamant. "It just isn't right," he said over and over. Then, about three o'clock, the rain stopped. Still time for some fishing, and quickly the gear was loaded and they were off to the lake. Whether it was the recent rain or some other reason, the fish were biting hungrily and father and son returned with a full string of fine, big fish. At supper, when some of the fish were ready, Frank's mom asked him to say grace. Frank did -- and concluded his prayer by saying, "And, Lord, if I sounded grumpy earlier today it was because I couldn't see far enough ahead."

Many times in our lives, we worry because we cannot see far enough ahead. But we know who can. And followers of Jesus trust Jesus' Father, too. For He is "OUR Father."

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on May 24, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]