Think Birds and Lilies

Reflections on Mediating the Anxieties of Affluence in Late Modernity



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Thoughts on entering into God's reign/rule and mediating the anxieties of affluence in late modernity.

Think birds and lilies.

Recently, I read the "Artist's Introduction" by Makoto Fujimura to his work in Crossway's beautiful *ESV The Four Holy Gospel*'s illustrated Bible, which stands in the centuries-old stream of historical productions and publications of hand-illuminated editions of the Gospels. It's a wonderful work of art, combining God's art and genius in the Gospels with Fujimura's art and genius, which of course Fujimura would readily admit is a gift from God that he has the privilege of stewarding for God's glory and the renown of his beloved son, Jesus Christ. Reading the Gospels in such a setting is always a highlight of my day.

But I digress.

My point is that Fujimura's introduction is a work of art itself.

And it has something in there that I had never seen before in Scripture. In his ever so brief but profoundly insightful commentary on Matthew 6:28, 25, 33 (in that order), I was struck with a strange light, it seemed, a wonderful illumination when I read it for the first time.

Here it is:

> Jesus tells us to 'consider the lilies' (Matt. 6:28), instead of being 'anxious about life, what you will eat or what you will drink' (Matt. 6:25). I consider this passage to be a crucial step that needs to be taken, before we are able to 'seek the kingdom of God' (Matt. 6:33). To assist us in taking this step, we benefit much from the artist's observation and depiction of the outer and inner worlds, and from the poet's capturing of complex experiences and nuances of life, to help us

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grow in our capacity to love our neighbors and even our enemies, and to empathize with the needs of our world.

As I am prone to do when something comes alive to me afresh from reading the Bible, my mind went on a wild goose chase about "birds and lilies" as I read and then reread and then dug into Matthew 6:19-34. It's been a wonderful journey since that Sunday morning in early June 2024 discovering new insights into entering God's reign and rule in my life through Fujimura's insights. It's a journey that continues as I "look at the birds" and "consider the lilies" in my life.

Here's what's come to me through this journey into Matthew 6 through Fujimura:

1. Developing the habit of "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies" in my life is a key to entering into, a key to experiencing God's reign and rule in my life right now and each day, to living with the consciousness that God is present and that I am stewarding my life under my heavenly Father's superintending providence and kind, tenderhearted forgiving love toward me in his beloved son Jesus, my Lord and Savior and good elder brother and friend and king and wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-liberation-freedom.
2. Developing the habit of "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies" in my life is an antidote to anxiety in my life.
3. Developing the habit of "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies" in my life is an antidote to the anxieties of affluence in my life.
4. Developing the habit of "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies" in my life is an important practice demonstrating to myself that I'm trusting my heavenly Father to meet my needs and not acting like "the Gentiles" – who Jesus depicts as fretting over what they will eat and wear.
5. Developing the habit of "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies" in my life has helped me:
    a. Interrogate myself in a healthy way with questions such as:
        i. Am I living a life of "little faith" when it comes to what I need to live (Mt 6:30)?
        ii. Am I trying to do the impossible in my life, to serve "God and money" (Mt 6:24)?
        iii. Am I stopping to "smell the roses" in my life by "looking at the birds" and "considering the lilies"? (I have to say quite joyfully that I am enjoying both creation and my work in a whole new way now through the biblical-spiritual spectacles Fujimura has provided!)

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b. To wrestle with myself and examine myself to see if I truly believe what Paul said to Timothy (1 Tim 6:8), “If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.”
c. To see Ephesians 2:10 in an entirely new and liberating light, such that I live with a daily consciousness that I am my heavenly Father’s (along with all my brothers and sisters in Christ) “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that” I am now free to “walk in them” – wow, really? This is such a wonderfully liberating truth that motivates me to get to sleep and get up to get working in the present and the future that is in God’s good hands in Christ.
d. Test and examine myself to see if this is true of my life: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU” (Heb 13:5).
e. Come back and reconsider whether I truly believe and live like I believe that Acts 20:35 is true in my life: “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Do I work like that?
f. If I am supposed to be content with just food and clothing, should I remain content with others being without food and clothing in the world today, especially those who are my brothers and sisters in Christ? Texts like these have sprung to new life in my consciousness:
    i. **14** What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can [a]that faith save him? **15** If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, **16** and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, [b]be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? (James 2:14-16)
    ii. **16** We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. **17** But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his [g]heart [h]against him, how does the love of God abide in him? **18** Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:16-18)
    iii. …*the* POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM (Matthew 11:5)

More to come…

I feel like Fujimura is a friend now. I feel like I can say personally to him, “Thank you, Makoto.”

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And so I do.

Many thanks, my friend and brother in Christ, for your reflections on Matthew 6:28, 25, 33. I fully expect more illuminations to come joyfully flooding at times and flowing at others into my heart, mind, and soul as I reflect and take time to look at the birds and to consider the lilies in my life.

Now I see more clearly than ever that these "birds and lilies in my life" are, gloriously, many.

> Tamara, our children and grandchildren, my mom and dad and our sisters, my mother-in-law and our families and friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ both near and far.
>
> Nature with its birds and flowers and deer right off our deck at Wood Haven.
>
> New Smyrna Beach, Longwood, Heathrow, and Winter Haven, Florida.
>
> Oceans and lakes.
>
> All those good works that are being done by those walking by grace through faith in the Son of God into that certain, hope-full resurrected future prepared beforehand by God and kept by God in his good hands.
>
> All those works of art like Makoto's and other redemptive-historically oriented Christian artists.
>
> All those biblical-theological Jesus-and-the-gospel-centered works of art like Richard Pratt's through Third Millennium Ministries and David Platt's through Radical and N. T. Wright's and John Piper's and Timothy Keller's through their prolific writing and teachings and preachings.
>
> All those wonderfully true and honorable and right and lovely and admirable and excellent and praiseworthy things in the world.

And, strangely somehow, they are bringing peace and serious joy, freedom and liberty I've never known before. Is this what Jesus is getting at in Matthew 6:19-34? Is this what mediating the anxieties of affluence in late modernity feels like? I wonder…

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