

Some B.A.S.I.C.S for Life: Steadiness — Dr. Todd J. Williams

Well, good morning. I trust that you're ready for the week that is ahead. It looks like the grip of winter is finally broken, and we're moving into a new season. How about that? And we're nearing what is always, we talk about this often here, February is the shortest month in terms of number of days, but it always feels like the longest month in the year, doesn't it?

But here it is, you're persevering. We're almost to the end of February, turning the corner into March. In just a few weeks, you'll have Spring Break and an opportunity to take a break and regroup and catch up for some of you. It's my pleasure to open this morning the passage of Scripture that Dean Gordon just read for us to continue in this series on B.A.S.I.C.S for Life. If you remember, in the first installment, we talked about the importance of belief. First, our faith in God as the creator and sustainer of all things and his son, Jesus Christ, and the indwelling Holy spirit. Then out from that, what we believe to be true about any number of things that we should not be winging it, as it were, with regard to life, but we should give some thought to what we believe to be true and hold to those things and develop a belief system that is fully integrated, that begins with our faith in God and then draws out from there that we would believe what is true about God ourselves and our world, the world in which we live, through the lens of Scripture and the idea that there is truth that informs our perspective on all those things, and we should be intentional about what we believe. We should not be pushed by the winds and the waves and the tides and the currents of the culture in which we find ourselves, but rather be careful about what we believe.

Then in the second installment, we talked about the importance of not being only hearers, but doers of the word, that our actions would actually be consistent with who we are in Christ Jesus, that it's unnatural and unfitting for us to hold to a set of beliefs that we do as Christians and truths as we find them in the Bible, and then behave in a way that is completely contrary. James told us in the passage we looked at that that's like someone looking in the mirror and walking away and forgetting what they look like. Rather, we should be consistent people. We should be careful in forming our beliefs. We should be consistent with regard to our lives and our behaviors and our actions with that faith and with what we believe to be true. Today, I want to talk about the issue that I think is absolutely critical for our navigating life in this world. That is the issue of steadiness, particularly as it refers to emotional steadiness.

I asked that the passage be read this morning from Matthew 6, because the words of the Lord Jesus actually speak directly to this. There is a lot in Scripture that talks about the importance of emotional steadiness. If you want to have some fun with this, look in the Bible every time you see the exhortation to not be afraid. It doesn't happen just a few times. It happens frequently in the Scripture, where there is the exhortation to not be afraid, do not fear, only believe. And so all of these ideas are actually tied together. What we believe to be true and the way that we act should actually be borne out in the way that we react and respond to things in life. Now, what I really want to get at is this issue is as the Lord Jesus is speaking to his disciples here in this passage in Matthew, but I want you to think about the reality of life. Every day, as was read at the closing of this portion of Scripture, tomorrow has enough trouble already. Each day has

enough trouble for itself. You know that life is full of complications. There are those who would sell people on the idea of Jesus, that if you become a Christian and you try out Jesus like you've tried out everything else, you'll find that life is easier, you're happy, and things smoother.

But anyone who's really walked the path that Jesus calls us to knows that while it is an easy yoke and an easy burden, it is one that comes with a price. It's not always smooth It's not always uncomplicated. In fact, just the opposite. Jesus calls us to himself. He often calls us to the way of the cross. That's what we're called to as his followers. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. Life is hard. It is not easy. The circumstances of life come bearing down upon us. You have challenges and trials and things in your own lives that are not going the way you like. Some of it is by your own doing, and some of it has been done to you. Some of it has been forced upon you. Some of it is contextual. Some of it isn't even in your immediate sphere. Some of you are undone by what is happening far, far away from where we are right now because you're thinking about everything from the overflowing landfills to geopolitical unrest and violence in other parts of the world. Life has a way of bearing down on us. And so how are we to respond to that as Christians?

Well, I have alluded to this many times in my sessions with you in chapel. We, as Christians, of all people, when the world is coming unwound, should be the steadyest, should be the calmest, should have the most perspective. Why? Because if nothing else, we know the God who is sovereign over all things, the creator and sustainer of all things. And we know the end, the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ. Everything in between is fleeting and temporal. And yet so often it's hard for us as Christians to get our arms around our emotional reactions to things. Some of it is because the culture has actually endorsed your easy-going reactions in response to the things that are unfiltered emotion. You feel it, express it. Some of it is because we allow identities to be built around emotional fragility, and some of it is because you have actual trauma that's hard to get through. All those things are true, and we should be thinking about those things.

I think that Jesus' words in Matthew 6 drive at this. I'll tell you right now, this is a passage of Scripture that many times in the course of my lifetime, I wish did not exist. If you're honest, as a human being dealing with the hard realities of life, there are many passages of Scripture that you wish did not exist because they actually cause us to rethink how we're thinking and feeling and reacting to certain things. They actually are exhortations to have a course correction and a change of direction. Some of it is challenging us to think about things in ways that are uncomfortable, difficult, unpopular. It doesn't make it any less true, any less pertinent, any less penetrating. I think this passage in Matthew 6 is one of those. Let me pray with you, and then I wanted to look at these specific verses, springboarding into a couple of others after that.

Father in heaven, we do indeed thank you for your goodness and grace, for your great faithfulness, for your loving kindness, for your mercies, which are new every morning. Father, we thank you for your goodness and grace in our lives, individually and collectively. We thank you for this community, for the way you provide for it and sustain it. We thank you for the students who are here studying, for the faculty and staff who are serving, for the trustees who provide guidance, for the donors and friends who support for our alumni around the world who

are praying even for this chapel this morning. We thank you for this community for the blessing that it is to us, and we pray that you would keep it in your care. You would keep it focused on the things that matter most. We thank you for those that are assembled here this morning. We know that there are many in our midst who may be struggling physically or dealing with illness or fatigue. We pray for grace and strength equal to those challenges. Father, we pray that you would enliven in us a faith that trusts you for your gracious provision, even in the midst of our physical and emotional frailty. Father, we know that there are some who are feeling overwhelmed. We recognize that many of us are experiencing stress and a burden of our responsibilities here and distractions and burdens and weights that we're carrying due to things outside of this place. We pray for grace and strength as well. We pray that you would make us a blessing and encouragement to one another, to uphold one another in prayer, to offer encouragement to one another in moments of trial and difficulty. Father, we also recognize that there are some here who are feeling the joy of their labors as students and are experiencing your goodness and grace in a very profound way. We pray that you might enable them to be ministering to those around them. We pray that you would give them joy, but also keep them humble and dependent upon you. For those in our ranks who are resisting the work of your Spirit, who are rebelling in their hearts, who are running from your word and from your truth, we pray that your Spirit would be at work to snatch them up and to break their wills, to bring them into conformity with your divine purposes. Father, we know that you desire us to believe in you, to trust you, to know that you exist and are a rewarder of those who seek him. And we pray this morning as we think about the truths of this passage of Scripture, that your spirit would be at work in us to soften our hearts, to think about these truths in a way that will affect the way we live our lives on a daily basis, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

This is very early in Jesus' earthly ministry. He's called Simon Peter and Andrew to himself, James and John. The disciples are just getting organized. It's very early on. Jesus has been traveling around and teaching and preaching. He's been performing miracles and healing and casting out demons. And there's quite a bit of buzz about Jesus already. What happens here at this point, Matthew records for us that Jesus steps away from all of that and goes up on the mountain, and his disciples gather around him and sit down, and he begins to teach them what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. There's quite a bit here where Jesus teaches them to pray. He talks to them about fasting. He talks about the issues of their hearts, the issues of anger and lust. He talks to them about prayer and fasting. He talks to them about perspective, laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven. He talks to them about not serving two masters, God and money, but making a choice. In all of this, as these men were called away from their lives, dropped their nets, and went with Jesus, not knowing what the outcome would be. I just want you to stop for a second. Jesus knows what the outcome will be. He knows what is over the horizon. He knows that he's called these individuals to walk with him, that he would teach them. He knows that he is going to train them and educate them and prepare them for what is to come after he is arrested, tried, crucified, buried, and raised, and then ascends into heaven. He knows at this moment, soon after calling them together, something that they don't know, which is there is more life to live and death to be faced.

Everything that Jesus does with the disciples, in my opinion, should be read through that lens. Jesus knows what is coming and he's giving them gift after gift after gift because he knows what

is coming and he wants them to be ready. He already loves them. He's loved them from before the foundation of the world. He already loves them. And in his love and his grace and his mercy, he is heaping upon them gift after gift after gift, some in the form of teaching and some in the form of exhortation. There's Jesus reclining with them at meals, laughing and talking, and there's Jesus saying, Peter, get thee behind me, Satan. Both of those are acts of grace and love because he knows what is to come.

So when you read the Gospels and you see Jesus talking to his disciples, you should never lose sight of the fact that he knows what is coming. And I think that sheds a whole new light on this particular passage where Jesus says, look, I'm telling you. Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will put on. Now, a couple of things here. It's just a natural thing to worry about those things as human beings. In our world of convenience, that may not be your case. You may not be concerned. You may not be dealing with issues of food scarcity and the pressure of daily hunger and exposure. You live in a relatively sequestered environment here where everything is provided for us pretty well. But this is a natural thing in life. We worry. And the truth is, it doesn't matter how comfortable you are. You always worry, whether or not you're going to lose it or whether or not you'll get more or better to come. And so there's part of what Jesus is speaking to the disciples, just an acknowledgement of just the way it is. We tend to be anxious. Where will this come from?

I was watching the season when you get all the donate money to the animal protective services to fill their bowl. There's one line, though, that always gets me where where they say, this poor dog doesn't know where its next meal is coming from and can't remember the last time it had a meal. I don't really like to see animal suffering. I'm an animal lover. I have some myself. But dogs don't write poems about hunger. They don't actually organize and loot their local pet store. They don't do those things because they're dogs, and all they think about is survival. All they think about is survival. If a dog is starving, it's because it's literally starving. Its cells are breaking down; it isn't being fed. If it doesn't eat, it will die.

Human beings have a whole other layer of complexity on top of that. Because we don't have to be starving to worry about food, do we? We don't have to be naked to worry about clothing. We don't even have to be in danger to worry about threats. Human beings are perfectly capable of conjuring up all kinds of irrational things that keep us awake at night. When Jesus says to his disciples, listen, don't be anxious about these things that are bad enough in the real world that real people struggle with these provisions. Don't allow the part of humanity where you get to conjure up in your own mind anxieties that may be irrational. I tell you, don't be anxious about your life.

It's counterintuitive for Jesus to say this to these individuals. Don't worry about your life. It's a difficult message to bring. It's a difficult thing to say to you. It's a difficult thing to face for myself. Don't worry about my life. Don't be anxious about my life. Are you kidding me? That's the thing I'm most anxious about. But these are the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Don't be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and body more than clothing?"

The first thing I want you to see, if you're someone who struggles with this issue of anxiety and emotional unsteadiness in this world, one, there are things we should be truly concerned about, other things that are figments of our imagination. But Jesus is offering his disciples right here a perspective which is, isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing? He doesn't say to them I'm going to ask you not to be anxious about life and what you will eat or what you will wear, but I know you won't be able to do it. So just let me know when you're getting stressed out about it.

He says, No, listen. Life is about more than food and the body is about more than clothing. Basically, what he's saying to them is when anxiety comes upon you, you should get some perspective. And I think that's an important thing for us to remember. When we begin to feel all of this pressure around us, this emotional pressure, some of which is legitimate and real, some of which is serious, and some of which is we actually live in a culture where it's almost popular to have it, and some of it is we actually have identified as someone who this is who we are. Jesus is saying, get some perspective, stop yourself from running down that path. Do you not know that life is more than food and the body more than clothing? "Look at the birds in the air. They don't sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

So one, Jesus says, isn't life about more than these things? And second, he says, God is your provider. Look, I don't know how else to put this to you, brothers and sisters. There's so many times in my own life and when I'm dealing with other people who get hit with the train of something in life that upends them emotionally and they're completely undone, the last thing they want to do is say, God will take care of this. For some reason, we think it's easier to simply take it on ourselves. And what Jesus is saying to his disciples, not only is life more than food and the body more than clothing, look around you. God makes a way. He provides. He provides. "Are you not of more value than they? And which of you," here it is, he asked the question, which is really good, "which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to the span of life?" Which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to your span of life? It's a reality check. Jesus says, one, you should think about this differently. Life's bigger than this. Two, God is your provider. And three, it doesn't help. You can't extend your life. The Lord knows. We find ourselves getting stuck down this road where we're coming unraveled. Jesus says, Don't be anxious. Your heavenly Father provides and you can't add anything to your life.

"And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field." Here we go again, "how they grow, neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, Oh you of little faith?" Here again, Jesus giving them a gift. First, you got to think about this more clearly. Life is bigger than this. Second, God provides. He provides all of this. Third, is this idea that you really need to understand that this doesn't help anything by coming undone. Fourth is watch your faith. Now, listen, there are some of us in this room and some listening who have serious, legitimate, overwhelming circumstances in life. I am not suggesting that there are not reasons to be anxious. What I am suggesting is that the Lord Jesus looked at his disciples and said, Don't be anxious about your life, oh, you of little faith. In other words, Faith is necessary to being steady.

Being emotionally steady is not about having bravado or being a stoic or being tougher than the next person. Being emotionally steady means, what Jesus is outlining here, that you think rightly about circumstances of life, that you understand God's gracious provision, that you recognize that anxiety and worry about things beyond your control add nothing to your life. And third, that your faith must be strong if you're going to be steady.

I challenge you this too, read through the Gospels and see how many times Jesus actually confronts his disciples, his students, about their lack of faith or their faltering in faith. It happens throughout. In the boat, when the storm comes up, Jesus is always saying, Don't you have enough faith? Have you been so long with me that you don't believe? By today's standards, that seems a little bit harsh, doesn't it? Why wouldn't he validate their feelings? Instead, he says, You need to stop being afraid and believe in me. The reason that Jesus doesn't validate their fears the way we do in the 21st century and rather calls them to faith is because that's what works. That's actually what conquers fear and worry and anxiety, is coming to the conclusion that God knows better that he's in control, that he provides, and that his purposes will be served.

That issue of faith is absolutely critical, and Jesus isn't going to let the disciples take a pass on this one. Therefore, don't be anxious saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink? What shall we wear? Because the world seeks after these things. Rather, you, fix your attention on the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. You won't have to worry about these things. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Now, again, I just want you to think about this for a minute. Not saying that you may not have legitimate issues of anxiety and fear and emotional disruption or unsteadiness. What I'd like you to do is to think about whether or not you simply go in that direction because the broader culture around us says you can and you should. Think about whether or not you go in that direction because you actually think it will make things better when in fact it never does. Think about whether or not you're going in that direction before you come to God to cast your cares upon him and to exercise your faith in a gracious, loving God. Think about whether or not you simply are comfortable with the idea of being an emotionally unsteady person, that that's become your identity, that people expect that from you. Or worse, that you actually think that that's actually what impresses people, helps them think that you're busy and important or doing things that are difficult. There's all kinds of studies out there about how people do that. You simply start behaving in a particular way and you get sympathy for that and it fuels this. And underneath is nothing really substantive. Some of you do have real concerns. Others of you may, in fact, just simply find it an easier road or you wrap your identity around it.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't deal with the realities of life. I'm not saying that anxiety and fear and emotional unsteadiness is not part of our trials and travails in this world, but it should be legitimate. And it should be that we run to God when we are feeling those things rather than to Instagram, rather than to our social media platforms to simply spew and express. But rather, rather, come to God with these words, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief."

This is how we become emotionally steady. We keep things in perspective. We remember the sovereignty of God and his gracious provision. We come to him in faith. That's our prompt. That's our default. The culture says you're coming unwound, turn on the camera and scream at the top of your lungs, because you'll get more views that way. That's not helping you; it's not helping the situation. The culture says, get angry and let it out. The Bible says, be angry and sin not. The culture says, when you're feeling overwhelmed, fold. The Bible says, cast your cares upon him. The issue of steadiness, which serves us well in life, is not about you being tougher, stronger, harder, more stoic. It's about you being more careful regarding your faith and your actions. It's about you being intentional in the way you think about the circumstances of life in this world, whether you're thinking about something in your own personal life or you're thinking about something in the greater world or the economy.

When you read the Bible, what you will see is that the Lord Jesus is attempting to strengthen and fortify his disciples. He wants their faith stronger. He wants their emotions regulated and in check. He wants their feet moving in the right direction always. He wants them to steer clear of temptation and evil and wickedness. He wants them to avoid grumbling. He wants them to avoid disputes with one another. He wants them to be ready for what will come, because real trials will come and he wants them steady. He wants them steady. This is the picture in the garden when he's praying, "Lord Father, I ask not that you take them from the world, but that you protect them from the evil one in the world."

I think it's really important for us in this day and age to recognize that what the Lord Jesus wants is for you to come to him honestly when you are grieving, when you are in pain, when you are despairing, when you are discouraged, when you are broken, when you are lost, when you are afraid. He wants you to come to him honestly so that you can set it aside and have your faith strengthened and be steady. I think that's worth thinking about, particularly in this day and in the world in which we live.

Let's pray. Father, give us the grace to desire to be mature and strong in our faith. Where we are lacking faith, strengthen it. We know, Father, that faith comes by hearing and hearing by your word, and we pray that you might grant us grace to be disciplined in our reading and our thinking on your word. Father, we thank you for the tremendous privilege that we are given here to have so much of our courses of study committed to studying your word, studying about you, to thinking and writing and talking about you and your character, your virtues, the work of your son, the power of your spirit, your plan for all eternity. We thank you for the tremendous blessing and privilege that is. We ask you would give us the grace not to waste it, not to lose the power of that. Rather, Father, the time that we spend here thinking on these things would strengthen our inner beings. Strengthen us, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, socially, in every way. We pray that we might be getting stronger by the work of your spirit, by your grace through our faith. We pray these things in the name of Christ, our savior, our Lord. Amen.

Have a great Monday.