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FRET NOT THERE AIN'T NO REST FOR THE WICKED

Oswald Chambers says, “All our fret and worry is caused by calculating without God.” It destroys victorious living as surely as insects and other pests destroy leaves. . . . Fret is the snail under the leaf, and in order to have lives of fragrance and beauty, these snails of fret must go. And God has a specially prepared way for their exit. It is found in the cycle of victorious living.

—*Earl Lee*

My teenage sons work hard to try to keep me young and hip. Not long ago they introduced me to a band named Cage the Elephant. The Kentucky rock band’s first hit song, entitled “Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked,” is pretty catchy, but I have become fascinated mainly by its message. The song contains three verses that serve as a kind of testimonial of lament. The singer tells the story of three separate and somewhat broken encounters. In the first verse he stumbles across a prostitute who propositions him. He declines

her offer, but he wants to know why she has chosen to live her life working the streets. The second verse is about the singer coming face to face with a mugger who takes all his money, but before he goes on his way, the singer asks him why he wants to live this kind of life. The last verse is about a preacher who is arrested for taking all the “righteous dollar bills” from his congregation. The singer recognizes this as a despicable act but one he can identify with nonetheless.

In each situation the singer asks the person why he or she has chosen this kind of life. In each case the chorus of the song is the reply. The person has chosen to sell himself or herself, steal from the vulnerable, or forfeit his or her soul for money—because there is no rest for the wicked until our eyes close for good: money doesn’t grow on trees; there are mouths to feed; and nothing is free.

I’m not sure if the members of Cage the Elephant have ever read Psalm 37, but nevertheless, I think they may have given us a very clear picture of part of its message. According to the psalmist, all people have two paths to choose from: life or death, light or dark, Yahweh (the Lord) or idols, the narrow road that leads to life or the broad road that leads to destruction. According to the Scripture, there is no third option. One has a choice between the way of the Lord or the way of the wicked.

The way of the Lord is described in Psalm 37 with words like *trust, good, security, delight, commitment, vindication, justice, stillness, and patience*. In contrast, the way of the wicked is described using words such as *envy, evil, schemes, devices, anger, wrath, plots, violence, and insecurity*.

Jesus picks up on this identical theme in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6 He connects “the way of the

wicked” described in Psalm 37 with the way of the Gentiles. Jesus proclaims,

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry 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 the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today (*Matthew 6:24-34*).

Like the psalmist, Jesus proclaims that there are only two options from which to choose. A person can choose to serve God *or* serve wealth. No one can serve both. According

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to Jesus, the lifestyles exhibited by the Gentiles or pagans reveal that they have already made their choice. They have chosen to serve the god described in the sermon as wealth or “mammon.” To serve wealth or mammon is to live a life dedicated almost exclusively to the pursuit of money, food, clothing, and extravagant homes. The problem with choosing this life is that it looks like such an appealing road to take. Unfortunately, when a person chooses this way of life, instead of reaping blessings, he or she reaps curses. Sadly, what appears to be the road to life is actually the road to death. And most interestingly, in both Psalm 37 and Matthew 6, what appears to be the way of security is actually the way of instability and worry.

In both passages of Scripture, for both the psalmist and Jesus, the wrong road in life—the way of the wicked or the way of the Gentiles—is marked by the same torment: worry or fret. Significantly, the command in both passages of Scripture is the same: do not fret and do not worry. Fret is not just the on-ramp to the way of the wicked; it is the quality that defines the life devoted to serving the god of wealth. The cycle of non-victorious living, if you will, is the life people live worrying about what they will eat, fretting about what they will wear, or obsessing about where they will live.

The way of the wicked for the psalmist, or the way of the Gentiles for Jesus, is not just lived by individuals; it is embodied in economic systems, political structures, and in cultures. The way of the wicked is embodied in what can be referred to as “empires.” “Empire” is a good word to describe the various powers and cultural systems that the people of God confront throughout the Bible. The empires of the Scripture go by names such as Egypt, Canaan, Assyria,

Babylon, and Rome. In each of these cases, Israel—as God’s people or nation—has to learn to live in ways that are a holy contrast to the various ways of these empires. No matter what era or time period is addressed in the Scripture, the challenge seems to be the same: how do the people of God live as His unique people in the midst of principalities and powers—empires—that try to lure them and conform them to their hurried and worried way of life?

But why, if the way of the wicked leads to death, do so many people follow after it? What makes the way of worry so appealing? The way of the wicked, the way of the Gentiles, or what I am referring to as the way of the empire, is formed and sustained through various myths people tell themselves about themselves. Following are some of the primary myths of the empire that are told every day.

The first myth that dominates the cultures and empires all around us is **the myth of value**. One of the most significant convictions of “empire” is that life is found in what we eat, what we wear, and where we live. At some level all human beings must consume or use food, clothing, and shelter. But the myth of value teaches us the importance of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption means that what I eat, what I wear, and where I live add value to me as a person. Since that is the case, then I want to eat expensive food, wear fashionable clothing with the right labels, and live in a prestigious neighborhood—because if other people see me driving an expensive car or wearing expensive brand names, that will mean that I am a person of high value. But this kind of life makes sense only if others see it, so I must be as conspicuous as possible in my consumption so that others will recognize how valuable I am. This is why hood ornaments matter on a car and why

clothing manufacturers put their labels on the outside of their clothes. Thus, the way of the wicked is almost always associated with symbols of status.

Another important myth of empire is **the myth of consumptive emptiness**. This myth says that as a person my primary problem is that I am empty and need to be filled. It is true that God gave us certain appetites—such as the desire for food and sexual intimacy—so we would survive as individuals and as cultures. But if we become shaped by the myth of consumption and focus our lives on our desires, we end up feeding appetites that can never be fully satisfied.

Have you ever noticed how almost every television commercial operates as if it's a parable? At the beginning of an advertisement the viewer is shown a glimpse of despair, emptiness, and futility. I remember an ad that was on when I was young that celebrated a new detergent that would remove any "ring around the collar." The ad would begin with a couple in a restaurant where the waitress noticed that the man had ring around the collar. Soon everyone eating around them recognized the horror of the man's dirty collar as well. He was caught in the pit of ring-around-the-collar despair—until salvation was discovered halfway through the ad in the form of a new detergent that took care of ring around the collar. The ad ended with the couple back in the same restaurant, only this time the waitress and everyone present smiled broadly as they recognized that the man no longer bore the burden of ring around the collar. Salvation had been found on the right grocery store aisle.

Each time the product is different—traveler's checks, medications, sneakers, cars, or mops—but the message is the same: you are currently empty and in despair. But if you buy this product, you will find the bliss and happiness

you are currently missing. You are an empty person needing to be filled with one more purchase or one more product. The only problem is that the system can be sustained only if no one ever finds a place of satisfaction. The carrot of fulfillment must always be just out of reach for the myth of consumptive emptiness to continue.

Another significant myth for the empire is **the myth of scarcity**. One of the primary stories that shapes cultures and nations is the story that there aren't enough resources for all people to share and be sustained. Therefore, when you receive the significant resources of life, you must gather them, hoard them, and defend them. If you don't, those who are without enough resources will take them away from you. This dangerous myth fuels humankind's inclination to covet, and it inevitably leads to violence.

Think of the contrast in the Old Testament that God forms between Egypt and Israel. Egypt, fearful that there would never be enough, built storehouses to hoard all its wealth so that its power could never be taken away. In contrast, when God delivers Israel into the wilderness, He teaches them to depend upon Him for daily bread (manna) and to live in ways that allow for trust to take root. It is apparently one kind of miracle for God to get Israel out of Egypt; it is another miracle altogether to get Egypt out of Israel!

A final myth that shapes the life of the wicked or the Gentiles is **the myth of control**. Every principality or power—or empire—acquires strength and allegiance by convincing people that it is powerful, mighty, eternal, and in control. I believe this is the reason God had Moses bring the ten plagues on Pharaoh and on Egypt. Each plague deconstructed the myth of control Pharaoh had established

with his people. Pharaoh was convinced that he was in control, but more importantly, he needed *his people* to be convinced that he was in control. God sent ten powerful reminders to Pharaoh that his control was nothing more than a myth.

These last few years of economic recession have been a challenge for many, many people in America and around the world. I am convinced that one way God works and redeems through economic downturns is to use them as reminders for all of us that even the economic security of a modern political superpower is essentially a myth. The Scripture frequently reminds the people of God that “the wicked will fade like grass,” because we need to be reminded daily that God and not the principalities and powers are in charge.

But there is good news. There is another path to walk. There is another way to live. It is the *victorious* way of living. To live victoriously does not mean that in a highly competitive world we will always “win” in the same terms that the world sees winning. It is not a life free from suffering. It is not a life where our health is always good and our children always obey us. It is not a life where the bills always get paid with plenty of money to spare. The way of victorious living is the way of peace. It is the way of security in the midst of turmoil. It is the life built on the Solid Rock that is able to stand in the midst of the storms and turbulence of life.

In contrast to the tumultuous, fret-filled life of the wicked, the way of God’s people is the way of *shalom*—the Hebrew word for peace—marked in particular by the practice of the Sabbath. *Shalom*—or peace—is mentioned two hundred forty-seven times in the Bible, and it is usually referenced in connection to the way of God’s kingdom or

the state of God's people. Shalom is the way of the original life for Adam and Eve (and all of creation) in the Garden of Eden. For Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, shalom is the way of the birds, the lilies, and even the grass of the fields. Shalom is the way our loving Heavenly Father wants His children to live.

The Sabbath is mentioned one hundred-forty-four times in Scripture. To honor or keep God's Sabbath intentions is not simply the complete avoidance of work for one day a week so we can burn ourselves out the other six days. Sabbath is rather that practice that keeps our work in proper perspective. For the people of God, the goal of work is not more work. As we discover in the creation story of Genesis 1, the pinnacle of God's creative work is the Sabbath. We rest on the seventh day because God concluded His act of creation with a Sabbath or shalom for all of creation. The high point of God's work is the opportunity to rest and celebrate with Him.

As we will discover moving forward together, Psalm 37 offers four principles for finding the life of shalom with God. But before we can live into those four principles, we must first put away fret. We must move from worrying about what we will eat, what we will wear, or where we will live to a Sabbath trust and celebration in God.

A Sabbath mentality certainly does not come easily for people caught in the cycle of consumption and security offered by the empire. It is very easy for each of us to get caught up in the patterns of consumerism and accumulation that mark the way of the wicked. But this is the way of destruction. It is the way of fret and worry.

Remember: there ain't no rest for the wicked! But a "Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God

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did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs” (Hebrews 4:9-11).

I am not proposing an impossible way of life. I am not saying one will never fret. But I do maintain there is a cycle of victorious living, a working in and a working out of 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, whereby life ever has an upbeat. When we realize we are becoming victims of fret, that we are getting out of orbit, we ask forgiveness and get back into the cycle by once more committing our way unto the Lord. —Earl Lee

CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1: Fret Not: There Ain't No Rest for the Wicked

1. How do God's people live in contrast to "principalities and powers" that try to conform us to a hurried and worried way of life?

2. Read and reflect on Matthew 6:24-34. How do Jesus' words challenge you?

3. Where do you see the "myth of value" around you? In what ways are you or have you been tempted by this myth?

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4. “It is apparently one kind of miracle for God to get Israel out of Egypt; it is another miracle altogether to get Egypt out of Israel!” What is the author saying in this quote in regard to the “myth of scarcity?”

5. How is our world reminded on a regular basis that the control we have over our lives is limited?

6. How are Shalom and Sabbath in direct contrast with the life of fret?
