

Worry workout: A worry-control plan

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

Back in the Middle Ages, which means somewhere in the 1990s, the acronym WWJD was a widely publicized guide to Christian ethics. We don't hear much about it today, and sales of jewelry and bumper stickers banner the letters seem to have declined. Why has its market value dropped?

Perhaps it is because the people who favored such a slogan thought they knew exactly what Jesus would do: he would support their often mutually contradictory causes. More likely it lost favor among biblical literalists after they read the Bible and encountered the Sermon on the Mount. They may not have liked what they read there. Follow Jesus and amputate an arm. That rare male who lusted would have to extract his right eye. Only a few haven't found a way to wriggle out from under the weight of his command. So consign WWJD to the dustbin.

I hope literalists and nonliteralists alike have not given up on that sermon entirely, however. We might all profit from taking seriously Jesus' counsel. For example, Matthew 6:34 reads, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." WDJ? What did Jesus do? He chided his followers not to worry.

The worrier who reads the ancient version will find new reasons to worry: If I keep on worrying today, am I violating the command of Jesus? But since Jesus does not expect the impossible, there must be some way to control worrying and move with one sin fewer into tomorrow.

To aim for best-sellerdom today an author would have to revise the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible to read like this: "So do not worry about tomorrow, because if you follow my techniques, you will never have to worry on any future day."

From psychologists who study anxiety, we can learn these techniques. One recent trend is the "20-minute worry control plan." This revision of the gospel text would read: "Do not worry more than 20 minutes about tomorrow." Proponents of this plan

advise you to pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and open it for only 20 minutes a day. Look forward to worry time. Look back on it with serenity. Pack all your worries into that one-third of one hour and go blithely through the other 23 hours and 40 minutes.

Confessors used to advise sinners who were short on memories of sins to make lists. So too with worries. Name everything that worries you, and take those worries on in a concentrated way. But if a worry comes to the edge of your mind outside the 20 minutes, don't let it in. Put it in a figurative penalty box and assure it that it can play when the break in the nonworry part of the day comes along. You can enjoy brain-busting, soul-splattering, depression-inducing, self-pitying worry for those 20 minutes. Don't let anyone talk you down to 19, and don't indulge yourself and stretch worry time to 21. If you run out of worries before 20 minutes are up, it won't help to trade another worrier for Worry Points to use the next day, because they should not be deprived of their blissful 20 minutes in which to control worries.

I am not making fun of therapists who offer good counsel like the 20-minute worry time. Jesus said, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light," and I welcome wisdom from many sources. However, when all else fails, might a Christian turn into a Bible believer and at bedtime reread "So do not worry about tomorrow" and, in faith, turn out the light and sleep well?