

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue No. 11

Cause and Effect - Holiness Part 3

by Maurice Barratt

Think, for a moment, of Mr Average - the normal British person - and ask yourself a simple question. Why doesn't he come to church? If we were to do a survey and ask all the people of Britain, "Do you want to be good, or evil?" What do you think would be the response? Ninety-nine percent of them would say that they want to be good. Now if this is true, and if Christianity has the answers, why aren't the normal people of Britain queuing up at the church doors? Quite simply, Mr Average and his friends can't see any answers in Christianity - that is, they can't see any answers in us. That's not a very comfortable conclusion, but that's how it is.

Another question. Why does the word "holiness" have such a stern and unfriendly ring to it? Why do we think of holiness, legalism, prudery and self-righteousness in the same breath? Why do we suppose that holiness is somehow in opposition to grace and freedom? It can only be because so many Christians have tried to be holy and failed. This is so common that I can confidently say it happens to most of us. We want to be holy; we've tried to be holy - but we've failed so many times that eventually we give up all hope.

What do we do now? There are only two choices. We can pretend to everyone else in church that we are holy - and if we get into the way of doing this, we can become so good at it that we start to convince ourselves as well - we'll begin to believe that we are holy. And then who can convince us of the truth? The other alternative is to do nothing - just give up the struggle and feel quietly condemned. We don't really want to hear or talk about holiness any more because it's just a dead end to us. We console ourselves by joking with other like-minded Christians about "worldliness" and criticising people who are "holier than thou". We find comfort in condemning the "holiness movement" as legalistic and out-dated. All because we know we don't have the real answers. Holiness somehow eludes our grasp.

Holiness - A Scientific Principle

What a tragedy! For holiness is not something difficult at all; it is not something to be obtained by trying and struggling. Holiness is a simple scientific principle - a formula, if you like. That may sound ridiculous or even irreverent, but I am not being flippant. It is entirely true. Holiness is an effect, and all effects have causes. For example: daffodils and tulips will come up in my garden in March, because I planted bulbs in September. The "effect" is daffodils in spring; but I can't get that "effect" without a "cause" - bulb-planting in autumn. If I have too many late nights or too many worries, that becomes the cause of an effect - I get a headache. If I take an aspirin, that's another cause - the effect is that the headache goes. And so on. Every single effect in creation has a cause behind it.

Now notice an important principle. The causes are quite different from the effects. Aspirins are not the same as a clear head, and bulbs underground are quite different from beautiful flowers. From this rather obvious point, we can learn a vital lesson: if you want an effect, don't concentrate on the effect - find the cause. Put the cause into operation, and the effect will come naturally, without trying.

The point is this. Holiness is an effect, not a cause. So if we want to become more like Jesus, more holy, the very last thing we should do is try to be more like Jesus! That's the effect, not the cause. We are all trying to be good Christians and aiming for holiness. We're going for the effect. So what happens? We fail! The devil loves it. (Not surprisingly, he suggested the idea to us in the first place.) "You're not succeeding?" He asks. "Oh dear. You'll have to try harder. Try, try again. Come now, use a little more will-power!" If only we would go to the roots, to the cause. That would frighten the devil. But we've never realised that holiness was an effect, and therefore it has a cause. So let us now look at the cause of holiness.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul makes an astounding claim. He says, "We all with open face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into that same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." We need to read this a few times to take it in. It says that just by looking at the image of Christ, as we would look into a mirror, we can be changed into that same image. We can actually become like what we see - like Christ. That seems ridiculous. But that is what it says! To make it clearer, let's look at three key words in this scripture.

1. Glory

What is glory? Is it a heavenly light that surrounds holy people? Is it something vague and indefinable? Not at all. God's glory is His very essence, His nature, His character. In fact, if we replace the word "glory" by the word "character", we often get a clearer idea of what they find the scriptures mean. When Moses pleaded with God, "Show me Thy glory", God passed before him and proclaimed His character: "The Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth..." (Exodus 34:6). So we can read our scripture again in a new light. By substituting the word "character" for "glory", we read that by looking at the character of Christ, we can be changed into the same image "from character to character" - that is, more and more like His character.

2. Change

We are changed from glory to glory - not instantaneously transformed. Change is a process - a slow process. That's why we can't go out for prayer to become holy. We can ask for instantaneous forgiveness, and obtain it. But change, like growth, is an imperceptible, gradual process. We are changed little by little, too slow for us to even notice the change.

Here lies one of the reasons why so many of us fail. We hope that by one supreme effort we can somehow manage to wrench ourselves out of our old lifestyle and behaviour and into holiness. We make resolutions, and of course our ideals eventually come crashing down. We are forced to admit

that we are still the same old people, not holy at all. Change never happens by making resolutions or efforts. Our trouble is that we would love to see ourselves change. But we may as well try watching the grass grow! Grass does grow, and Christians can change - but only little by little, and only if we keep on looking at Jesus' character.

3. The Mirror

There is one more vital thing. It is obvious that we are also mirrors. A mirror reflects whatever is facing it. So do we. All people reflect in their own characters the circumstances and influences they have faced in their own lives. But we do more than just reflect - we actually become what we are influenced by.

Suppose that I go, on a train journey and I get talking to a man who I have never met before. Within less than a minute, he has reflected his influences and circumstances so perfectly that I know all about his character. I know from his accent that he is Scottish. I know from his dress, his bearing and his manner of speech that he is well brought up, educated, disciplined in his character, a professional man. I know the sort of company he keeps, the sort of books he reads, the kind of music he listens to. I know from the paper he is reading what his political allegiances are. I can even tell things about his spirit. It is not at all difficult to recognize someone who is bitter or bears a grudge, or has a mean spirit. It is apparent in every word, even in the very look of a person. A genuinely happy, contented soul is just as obvious. We reflect all our influences and circumstance, whether we like it or not. We are permanently on show to others, warts and all!

Nothing comes out of us, out of our characters, except what has gone in. This is why the way to become holy in our characters is to look at Christ. If we are mirrors, we have to be facing the right way in order to reflect the right thing. It should then be obvious that reading pornography or scandal in the newspapers, or watching adultery and murder on the television, is not going to make us holy. We know the things we ought to think about - "whatsoever is of true, honest, virtuous, just, pure, lovely, whatsoever is of good report ..." (Philippians 4:8). But if we're reading the newspapers and watching the TV, what are we made to think about? What influences do we expose ourselves to? Whatsoever is lies, whatsoever is fantasy, whatsoever is ungodly, whatsoever is impure ...!

TV -The Facts

Maybe you only watch the news. What do you get? Whatsoever politician has just had an affair, whosoever has been massacred in some terrorist attack, whatsoever fraud has just been exposed - whatsoever is of bad report! No wonder the world can't see any answers in us - we're just like them, because we subject ourselves to exactly the same influence and so we reflect these influences out in our character.

You insist that the television doesn't influence you? In 1940, the year in which television was introduced to the United States, the top four offences in state-owned schools were: talking, chewing gum, making a noise and running in the halls. Today's top three are rape, robbery and assault. The top ten include murder, bombing and suicide. Fifty percent of America's teenagers are sexually

active. 35,000 American school kids now carry guns to school. These statistics don't come about by accident. What you watch and read and listen to has a tremendous and powerful influence on you. And you reflect those influences in your life, like it or not.

Study the character of Christ! But Christians like to study doctrines instead. We may know all about substitutionary atonement and pre-millennial post-tribulation rapture. But that makes us into reflections of doctrines instead of reflections of a person. And we wonder why people accuse Christians of being dogmatic and legalistic! It's Jesus Himself we have to look at, His life, His lifestyle, His commands, His actions, His thoughts, in order for them to be reflected in our own lives. We need a continuous, living relationship with Him. We need to spend time working at it, just like any relationship. If you only saw your husband or wife for an hour every Sunday morning and five snatched minutes at the beginning of the day, your marriage would soon be in trouble! But have you noticed what happens to couples who have been married for thirty or forty years? They start to talk like each other, behave like each other, even look like each other!

Now we are supposed to be like Jesus. He only reflected God's character. "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father", He told His disciples (John 14:9). Why? Because He spent all His time in a living relationship with His Father. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could say to people, "If you've seen me, you've seen Jesus". "If you want to know what God's like, come and live with me!" At the end of His life Jesus said to God, "I have glorified Thee on the earth" (John 17:4). That means, "I have shown the world Your character". And that is what we are to do, in order "that the world may believe".

In the next issues of Challenge, we are going to look at the character of Christ by studying the Sermon on the Mount. The more we look at Him the more like Him we will become. We're doing the "cause" - the "effect" will be a natural consequence; and this is a wonderful thing, because it means that our holiness is unassuming. If we struggle to be holy by using will power, and we achieve some improvement through our struggles, we'll know we've done it all by our own strong will and perseverance - and we'll be opening ourselves to pride and self-righteousness. But if we've been working at the cause, then the effect begins to happen spontaneously - without us even realising it! We start to become more holy, more like Christ, without knowing it. It's righteousness. It breeds humility, no pride, because we know it's not been our doing. We only need look at Jesus, we only need spend time with Him - and we will be changed into His image, His character, from glory to glory.

Experiences from Life

by Joanna Barratt

People Can Change!

For those who have read my past writings you'll know that one of my outstanding characteristics was the ability to argue. I didn't care what method I used - logic or sarcasm - but I always made sure I won, often leaving my opponent red in the face with some home truths which I'd used completely

out of all context! For some people this characteristic could be classed as a quality, but for a Christian this attitude could never be an attribute. I remember on one occasion when I was going through a Sunday school teacher training course that the tutor picked out 6 students to hold a debate, 3 to act as Pharisees and 3 to act as disciples. I only wish I'd been chosen to be a disciple instead of a Pharisee because I was really upset at my capacity to leave the disciples totally winded and without a leg to stand on. It's quite amazing how wholeheartedly you can believe in something which logic and reason can totally disprove. I remember coming away from that particular class amazed that God had enabled me to become a believer!

Never Admit Defeat

I had a hard time at work too, I just couldn't handle being told what to do and would more often than not end up arguing with the boss and walking out. I didn't mean to act like this, I just had this inbuilt defence mechanism that made me act unafraid when I was scared to death. The Bible says "A soft answer turns away wrath" but throughout my life I'd never known how to give a soft answer. Right from being a child I was taught never to back down and admit defeat because "people would walk all over you" and my parents showed me practically that this was the only way to survive. I knew that my attitude made me more enemies than friends, but how do you alter habits of a lifetime?

I was very fortunate to land my job at the advertising agency. Nothing about it was mundane, it was a job in a million and each day held stimulation and excitement. It was through working at the agency that I found myself involved with modelling, beauty contests and all sorts of glamorous activities. And it was here that God had started to use me to start prayer meetings in the lunch break, but always at the back of my mind I had this lurking feeling that it couldn't last and that before too long my old nature would rear its ugly head and I would argue with somebody important and be thrown out. I was constantly living in dread of God's grace being lifted from me and although I didn't relish God's call to work for Him full-time, I also saw this as an opportunity to bow out of the firm gracefully for perhaps the first time in my working life!

For the next 5 years I spent my time serving the Lord and working entirely amongst Christians. The only time I ever mixed in the world was when I went into an area to distribute tracts in the houses and met the people who passed by coming into the church during a "coffee morning". I had plenty of time to pray, study my Bible, write songs, record albums, and the usual topics of my conversations would be God, the church or Christianity. For a couple of years I really did experience what it was like to be "in the world and yet not of it". Because I was living by faith I didn't have a regular income; in fact this was a period in my life when I was living off other peoples benevolence from week to week. A couple of Christmases went by and I felt the embarrassment of not being able to keep up my usual standards where gifts were concerned so I decided that this year things would be different.

Life On The Shop Floor

I applied for a part time job in the local Asda supermarket and was allotted 12 hours work each week. I was then given my overall and my clock number - something which I'd never received at any

of my previous employments - and I embarked on my first week with excitement at the prospect of working in a shop. During the course of this first week I remember one of the men who worked there paying me a mildly crude sort of compliment which left me both blushing and speechless. I wasn't embarrassed so much by what he had said (as sexual overtones are so much a part of male and female conversation in secular employment); what embarrassed me more was the fact that I didn't know what to say in response to his comments, I could literally feel my mind searching for the quick-witted answers that came so readily to my lips at one time, but it seemed as though in such a short space of time I'd forgotten how to banter.

A few weeks later one of the female members of staff who'd taken a dislike to me said something one day which was really sarcastic and cutting. Normally I would have been able to give far worse than I received but once again I found myself speechless, not knowing what to say. These incidents were quite disconcerting and caused me much thought. I certainly hadn't wanted to remain silent, neither had I wanted to argue, but somehow I'd got out of the swing of my usual impulsive outbursts and I had simply forgotten how to argue.

The Miracle Of Change

I realised that for the past couple of years I'd been mixing with Christians where actions and conversations were all for and about God. Throughout this period I had not encountered sexual overtones and arguments during the course of a working day, because my mind and the minds of others had been focused on holy and godly things. For years I had prayed that God would help me to keep quiet when I was being provoked yet no matter how hard I tried my tongue had been too ready with a quick answer. Yet here I was marvelling at the fact that I hadn't risen to the bait when provoked on these two occasions! I came to the conclusion that it is far more effective to concentrate on doing something positive rather than on not doing something negative because without trying God had changed me ... and that's a miracle. If you really want to be holy then find somebody who is holy and stick to them like glue ... Maybe some of it will rub off on you!