

## **Barratt Ministries Challenge**

### **Issue 32**

#### **The Secret Life: Almsgiving**

##### **Matthew 6:1-4**

*by Maurice Barratt*

Our studies in the Sermon on the Mount have brought us to chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel, and this chapter begins something entirely new. It is worthwhile pausing here to look back.

Up to this point, the whole of chapter 5 has served a dual purpose: to show us what the character of Christ is like, and to expose the fact that this is not our natural character.

So at the end of the chapter we are left with a problem. How are we to change from our natural character to the character of Christ? We have learned that we cannot do it by trying to become moral outwardly, by summoning up all our reserves of will power and self-control. That can only lead us to condemnation or hypocrisy - condemnation if we are honest with ourselves and realize we can't do it, or hypocrisy if we start to believe we have become holy, when all we have done is put on a respectable moral front. In practice, most of us end up with an uneasy blend of these two. We feel condemned by our failure, and the more guilty we feel, the more urgently we feel the need to cover up and not let other Christians, and even ourselves, know the truth. We daren't let others see us as we are, and we daren't see ourselves as we are.

#### **Two Natures**

We have already seen that the key is understanding that we have two natures. Our natural character, the character we were born with, which we inherited from Adam, is the old nature, a corrupt tree which cannot bear good fruit. The new nature is the nature of Christ himself, which was given us when we were born again. We only have to feed and nurture this new nature of Christ within us, and if we do this we will find, to our great surprise, that his character will naturally and spontaneously begin to manifest itself in our lives. All of the commands and statements of chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount are his very character.

The secret of living the Christian life is knowing how to feed the new nature and starve the old nature. Chapter 6 begins by telling us exactly how we can do this.

Jesus has a very practical plan of action, a step-by-step instruction of simple, straightforward things that we can all do - not hard things at all, nothing beyond our power. The answer to the whole problem of our secret inner life, the thoughts, desires and motives that lie deep within us, is another secret life. Our secret thought life is going to be dealt with, not by tackling it directly, but by practising entirely other things in secret - that is, alone before God, away from the eyes of others.

By doing these things we feed the new nature of Christ within us, and give God the right to work in our lives.

In Matthew 6:1-18, which we shall be studying in detail over the next few issues of Challenge, Jesus tells us three practical things we can do to feed the new nature: giving to the poor in secret, praying in secret, and fasting in secret. In this issue we will consider the first of these instructions: almsgiving.

Almsgiving is an old-fashioned word, rarely used now, and indeed rarely used in the bible. It means giving to the poor, charity. It is referred to in Acts 3:2, where a lame man at the gate of the temple "asked an alms" of Peter and John, and in Luke 12:28, in Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount, where the disciples are told, "Sell that ye have, and give alms" - that is, give your money to the poor.

Jesus says, "When thou doest thine alms", not "If thou ...". That means he takes it for granted that we will give to the poor. He assumes it is our normal practice. The Pharisees did it; good non-Christians do it. What Jesus says is that we must do it differently.

### **What Almsgiving Is Not ...**

Almsgiving is not the same as tithing. Tithing (giving a tenth of your income) began before the law. The first instance is Abraham paying tithes to Melchizedek, who was God's priest in Jerusalem (Salem). In the law of Moses, tithes were also for the priests, the ministers, those who were called to serve God in the temple and not to earn their own living. I believe that tithing today should be for the ministers, for a pastor's livelihood. Not for building projects or missions or evangelism, but for ministers of a church. Ten people tithing out of their incomes should be able to support a pastor! But tithing has nothing to do with almsgiving, because from tithing you get a reward. You support your minister, and you get the benefit from his ministry. That's your reward. Almsgiving has no reward.

Almsgiving is not the same as free will offerings. We give for different reasons and different causes; it may be for some particular need in the church, or to a charity, or to a building fund. But none of these are almsgiving. They each have a reward. When the need in the church has been met, you receive thanks for it, and you share in the benefit. When you sit in the new chairs under the new roof at church you're get the benefit from the building fund. That's your reward, you earn it and you get it. But no man or woman will reward you for secret almsgiving.

Almsgiving is to the poor, and not the poor in the church, but the poor in the world. John Wesley would often ask for money for the poor. But he would never give it to Christians. "They have their heavenly Father to look after them", he said. Almsgiving was for people who had no heavenly Father to look after their needs.

I don't believe that evangelists should be included as ministers who receive tithes. It doesn't seem to be scriptural. Jesus instructed his disciples how to go out as evangelists. He told them to take no money, just to trust God. God was to be their provider. Of course, God provides through people, but this is different from being provided for out of tithes. A man called out by God should trust God.

## How Jesus used money

In Matthew 19 we read about the rich young ruler who wanted to be perfect. Jesus' reply to him is revealing. He said, "Sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21). It is revealing, because Jesus had needs himself. He had twelve hungry men to feed besides himself. But he didn't say, "Give your money to me", or even, "give your money to God's work". Jesus trusted God for his money. Even greedy Judas, the thief, knew that money was for the poor. When Mary poured a whole jar of expensive perfume over Jesus' feet, Judas said, "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" (John 12:5). He might have said, "This money could have fed us for a month". But he knew that Jesus' money was for almsgiving.

Isn't it a waste to give money to the poor? Don't they often abuse it or not know how to spend it wisely? Isn't it better to give to organized charities who can ensure it is used in the best way? We must be careful not to think like this. God himself "is kind to the unthankful and to the evil" (Luke 6:35). He doesn't concern himself with the motives of the people he is kind to. He gives because he is kind. If we think we know better, we're making ourselves out to be more righteous than God.

Jesus begins by saying, "Take heed" - beware, watch out, go carefully. There is danger here. The danger is that you could lose your reward from God by receiving the reward of men. We cannot have both. We are either rewarded by God or rewarded by men. But God will not reward us for doing only what the world would do. God can only reward us for doing what the world will not and cannot do. "Therefore", says Jesus - he is going to give us some help - do it in secret. Don't let anybody know you're doing it - in fact, don't even let yourself know you're doing it: "let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth". At first sight this seems ridiculous. It can't be meant literally. The same brain works both hands! How can we not be conscious of our own actions? But actually this is quite profound, because things that you do regularly eventually become automatic. You're not even aware you've done them. This is true in every sphere of life. When I used to play bass guitar live with Joanna, I would also sing backing vocals. I had to concentrate hard on the singing, and in order to be able to do that, the bass playing had to become second nature, automatic. While I was singing, I was not even aware of the bass part. It was totally automatic and unconscious.

Another musician told me that he was once playing on the piano a piece he knew very well. While he was playing his mind started wandering, and the next thing he knew, he had reached the end of the piece of music - and yet he could not consciously remember what he had played at all! His mind had been on other things; the music, which many years previously had been so difficult to learn, was now so automatic that he wasn't even conscious of it!

## A Profound Illustration

So Jesus' words are not a ridiculous illustration at all; they are profoundly true. We can get to the stage where things that were at first difficult for us to do, and of which we were very conscious, even proud, eventually become so automatic that we don't even register the fact that we are doing them.

It is interesting to note that Jesus is contrasting this way of doing things with the way of the Pharisees, the hypocrites; for he is actually taking the most dangerous element in hypocrisy - the fact that we can be unconscious of our own wrong attitudes - and using this principle the other way round. We can also become unconscious of our own right attitudes. And once we are unconscious of them, we cannot be proud about them. They become unassuming.

Jesus wants secret prayer, fasting and almsgiving to become so much a part of our regular lifestyle that they become unassuming, automatic and unconscious. And then what happens is that God is able to change our characters unassumingly - so that we are not even aware it is happening. We no longer get angry at things which used to provoke us; we are content where we used to be envious; lustful thoughts which used to plague us seem to have disappeared by themselves.

### **Practical Almsgiving**

When I first realized that I had to love my enemies and do good to those who hated me, I had to try and put it into practice. I also knew that Jesus says our almsgiving must be in secret. So I sat down and made a list of my enemies - people who had hurt me and criticized me in the past - and for a few months I sent them each £5 every week in a plain brown envelope. They didn't know it was from me. That was my way of obeying Jesus' command.

We must be careful to strictly obey Jesus' commands. It is secret giving to the poor. If I know there is an poor old widow in my street, and I go round to her house and say, "Mrs. Smith, I want to bless you. Every week I'm going to bring you £5." - she will say "Oh, thank you! God bless you!" That's almsgiving, but it's not in secret. She knows I am the one who has given. And I've received my reward. She's thanked me and blessed me. But if I send £5 in an unmarked envelope to her every week, she can't thank or bless me - she can only thank and bless God! And I won't see her reaction. I won't even know whether the money has reached her. Maybe it got lost in the post. Or maybe Mrs. Smith has a dog, and the dog got to the mail before she did, and ate the £5 note! It doesn't matter. That's not the point. The point is me being obedient to Jesus' commands. And because I've not had any reward from men, God will reward me himself.

### **Proving Our Motives**

It's hard to do things for no reward. A lady in the church may come and complain to the pastor, "Do you know, Pastor, for 12 years I have provided the flowers for this church and set out the communion table before the service, and no-one has ever thanked me!" It's a shame that no-one has thanked her. That's a bad reflection on the church. But what she says has proved that she was doing it for the reward of men, and not for God. It's proved her motive. It's not easy. But we have to make a start somewhere. And if we make the start, God will help us, and start working in a new way in our lives. And it is possible for every Christian to reach that condition of "unassuming righteousness" where our left hand is not aware of what our right hand is doing. It is not only possible, it is a foregone conclusion that it will happen, if we obey this command of Jesus to pray, fast and give alms in secret.

## **Experiences From Life**

*by Joanna Barratt*

### **“Do Unto Others”**

I'd never heard a sermon on Almsgiving before, and to be quite honest I didn't actually know what it was, so when my minister preached on it I came away from the church with my head reeling. I must have been a Christian for 12 years and yet this topic had never arisen before.

To find out that almsgiving was nothing to do with tithing, or giving to the church was quite a revelation and I knew that if I was going to grow in my Christianity I would have to put this new concept into practice somehow. I didn't foresee problems in obeying this principle of almsgiving, after all I was earning a good wage, but I hadn't anticipated the fact that it would have to register in my brain before I could put it into practice.

#### **Forming the Habit**

After my initial acceptance that I had neglected to do something Christ considered important I made a mental note to start putting money aside out of my salary to give to the poor. Unfortunately, because I hadn't formed the habit already, it went completely out of my head, and it was about 6 months later when I finally began to put my decision into operation. Because I didn't personally know of any poor people, I acquired a tub and each week faithfully placed a pound coin into it which I would give to the poor when I came across them. I lived and worked in a big city, but whenever I was on the streets of Manchester I never actually came into contact with tramps or hobos. Perhaps they didn't need to rise before 8.30 a.m. as they didn't have to get up for work, and were still sleeping off their meths from the previous night. Or maybe they were wandering around looking for something to eat in the bins behind the cafes and restaurants. But weeks and months passed by and the money in my tub was steadily mounting up.

I knew it was pointless having money in a tub for the poor, unless the poor actually received the benefit of it, so one night Maurice and I went out with looking for some tramps to give the money to. We drove round the streets of Manchester for ages without coming into contact with a single tramp. We couldn't believe it. When you are not looking for these people they seem to be around you all the time, but on this particular occasion we didn't see one. Eventually, after wandering round and round for ages I spotted a tramp. We stopped the car and in desperation I gave him the entire contents of the tub which I had planned to distribute amongst several poor people, as I was determined not to return home without getting rid of this money.

We tried several different ways to give money away as we realised that God was trying to teach people in this way to be aware of other people and their needs. During one particular period we made of a list of all the people who had done us harm in the past, and people who had become our enemies, and each month we would put a £5 note in an envelope without any note of explanation

and would post it off to them systematically. They never knew where the money came from, and we were certain that they would feel blessed rather than convicted at receiving these anonymous gifts, but it was doing us good spiritually to know that we were “blessing those who persecuted us”.

### **Giving Personally**

We don't really like the idea of giving to organisations, although we have done in the past, for the simple reason that a large amount of the donations received by these bodies is swallowed up in administration, and in some circumstances on government armoument. We much prefer to give personally, even if the people are totally unaware of where the money came from. On occasion, we have come across people in the ministry who live by faith and have not been able to afford a break from their labours. We know the stress and strain of the ministry having been in it for so many years and can identify with the pressure that these people often feel which can drain them both physically and spiritually. In these circumstances we have asked God to help us find funds to send these people away on holiday as sometimes rest can do far more to help than a few quid to pay the bills.

### **Raiding The Cupboards**

There have been times too when people have knocked on the door asking for money for food until they received their giro. As I have been living by faith myself for quite a number of years, I have no personal money other than what has been given to me to buy food for the household each week. On these occasions I look through the cupboards to see what I can give in the way of food to practically help these people. The disappointment on their face can often show that they came with a tale, but at least I have shown willing and not turned them away. I must admit, if I have money then I will give money, it could save the poor person from becoming so desperate that they will mug someone. We have no idea often of the torments people suffer when they have addictions to drugs and alcohol. Pray for their deliverance by all means but don't use your pious principles to turn a blind eye to their practical need, do something to help them.

### **Considering Others**

Jesus and His disciples trusted God completely for all their personal needs, but we know for sure they carried a bag around with them which contained money for the poor. When the woman poured the precious ointment on Jesus' feet Judas Iscariot remonstrated with Jesus about the wastefulness of this action, saying that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. He had an ulterior motive for saying this, of course, because he was the treasurer and also a thief, but Jesus practically taught His disciples to consider the needs of others. We must learn to do the same ... “do unto others as you would have them do to you”!