

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 33

The Secret Life: Prayer 1: The Principles

Matthew 6:5

by Maurice Barratt

In chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel Jesus begins by telling us about the three "means of grace" - that is, ways in which we can give God a right to work in our lives. This is not "works"; neither is it a guaranteed formula which will always work. Prayer, fasting and giving are means of grace. We may pray and fast and give diligently, and God may give us no grace! Grace is a free gift, and it is always God's prerogative. But if we don't pray, fast or give, we are denying God the right to work in our lives. The more we habitually practise these things, the more God will be able to work in us and through us. Because they are so effective, prayer, fasting and almsgiving are strongly resisted by the devil. This fact in itself should spur us on to do them more!

Public And Private Prayer

Jesus begins to speak about prayer by contrasting public prayer for the praise of men (verse 5) with private prayer in secret to God (verse 6). We may note several things about this. Firstly, there is of course nothing wrong with public prayer in itself. But in all public prayer, we are aware that people are listening. We are, consciously or subconsciously, praying for the ears of other people as well as God. If you don't think this is so, try listening to your own public prayers, the ones you pray at the prayer meeting or bible study, and see how they compare with the prayers you pray alone in your private room. There's nothing wrong with adjusting our prayers to suit the circumstances. In fact it would be quite wrong to pray about some intimate or personal things in public, or to confess certain personal weaknesses and sins. It wouldn't be edifying to others, and it might be harmful to them.

Secondly, public prayer cannot avoid the reaction of men. They will praise or criticize the prayer. And that judgement of men, Jesus says, is our reward for public prayer. We cannot obtain reward from God as well as reward from men. This is a fixed spiritual principle. But private, secret prayer to God has a reward from God, because it has no reward from men.

Thirdly, you cannot build a relationship with God through public prayer. That only comes through private prayer. This is obvious when we think about it; no close relationship can ever be built in public. All close relationships are built in private, in intimacy, in secret from the outside world, on personal one-to-one communication.

A Practical Illustration

Jesus gives a practical illustration of the contrast in Luke 18:9-14, the story of the Pharisee and the publican praying in the temple. The Pharisee, Jesus said, “stood and prayed thus with himself ...” - that is, he wasn’t even praying to God, he was praying for his own ego! This is a disturbing development on Jesus’ words in Matthew. The Pharisee might have prayed a similar prayer in private. We don’t need to be in public to pray a prayer for the praise of men. We can get to the stage, if we’re not careful, where we’re praying for our own praise. That’s dangerous.

Everything the Pharisee said was true. He was not unjust, he did fast, he was not like the publican. But he was listening to his own prayer and feeling good about it. But the publican’s confession and plea for mercy came from his heart, and even though it was in public (in the temple), it had all the qualities of private prayer. It was an intimate prayer for the ears of God alone. So both the Pharisee and the publican might have prayed the same prayers in private. In the end, the deciding factor is not the outward circumstances but the inward attitude.

Principles

I want to devote this article to the principles of prayer. In the next edition I will address some practical issues. I have six points to note about prayer.

1. What prayer is. A dictionary definition is “entreaty, petition, intercession, request, desire”. To pray is just an old English word meaning to ask. In Shakespeare’s plays, which date from around the same time as the King James version of the bible, “I pray you” or “I prithee”, just means “I ask you”, or as we would translate today, “please”. It has become a “spiritual” word to distinguish talking to God from talking to men. But it isn’t, it’s a normal ordinary word for a request.

So if prayer is a request, it excludes praise. It also excludes thanksgiving. Both of these are good, but neither of them are prayer. Paul says we should offer our prayers with thanksgiving. Prayer also excludes demands or claiming rights. A request is not a demand. It is a plea for a favour.

2. Why prayer is so difficult. Logic should tell us that it is quite unreasonable that prayer is so hard, so resisted. Why is it so difficult to pray in secret to God? Why are there always so many obstacles and distractions? It’s not hard to talk to your best friend in private; it’s a delight. It’s not hard to read a magazine in private. Why is it so hard to talk to God?

It is resisted so much because, as we have already noted, the devil fears it so much. I’m not talking here of what some Christians call “satanic resistance”, “attack” or “opposition”, the exciting “warfare” talk that goes around. I’m talking about a much more mundane sort of resistance, which I think is just as satanic: the apathy and lack of motivation, the distractions and weariness that set in when we try to apply ourselves to prayer. There are no “feelings” of resistance, and it doesn’t seem like warfare. It doesn’t seem like anything at all, and we give up out of boredom rather than out of the “exhaustion of the battle”. But this boredom is the real battle that we have to overcome. This is the really satanic thing. This is why Jesus urged that “men ought always to pray and not to faint” (Luke 18:1) and Paul exhorted to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

3. Our lack of prayer exposes us. The fact that we have no problems in talking to our friends for an hour, yet we find it so hard to talk with God for an hour, exposes the fact that our relationship with God is pretty poor! That in itself should exhort us to redouble our efforts in prayer.

4. Our relationship with God is our Christianity. Prayer is the measure of that relationship. Our prayer life is directly proportional to our relationship with God. For Paul, Christianity was summed up in his phrase "That I may know him" (Philippians 3:10). This intimate knowledge of God can only come through personal private prayer. In fact, we may confidently say that those who do not pray in private do not really know God. Great men of God have always been great men of prayer, in the bible and throughout church history.

5. Prayer is not taught. There is very little teaching on prayer. But really, how can you teach prayer? You can't teach someone how to have a relationship, or how to fall in love. You can copy other people's public prayers, and use those in your private prayers. But this is the road to praying for your own ears, what I call "professional prayers". In private prayer we must do what we cannot do in public prayer, be intimate and honest, reveal all our weaknesses and faults.

Our Christianity is our relationship with God, not our relationship with the church or with other Christians; so that relationship must be developed alone with God. That can't be taught. It's got to be learned and experienced between you and God. Everyone's relationship is different.

6. Prayer is two-way communication. Talking to the wall is not prayer. It's no use making a request if the person you are making the request to is not listening, or if you have not got their attention. People assume that God is always listening. But I can prove that this is not the case.

In Psalm 17:6 David asks God to "incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech". Why would he do that? Surely, only if there was a possibility that God would not hear him. What would stop God hearing us? Psalm 66:18 says "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me". And in the New Testament Peter advises husbands to honour their wives "as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). The Lord's Prayer tells us that if we do not forgive others, our own prayers for forgiveness will not be heard. And so on; there are really many instances in which God will not "incline his ear". We need to ensure that our hearts are right. When we speak to God we are coming into the temple of God, into the holy place before the throne of grace, within the veil; we are ascending God's "holy hill". "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart ..." (Psalm 24:3,4). This does not mean that we cannot come as we are, confessing sins and weaknesses. It means that we must come with honest hearts, conscious of our weaknesses, covering up nothing.

When our hearts are right with God, we may expect God to hear us; but we should then also expect God to speak to us. People who know God hear God.

Conclusion

There is no greater, quicker, surer way to get to know God than to spend time with him. If you want to get to know me, the quickest and best way is to come and live with me. It's the time spent alone

with God, speaking to him and listening to him, developing that relationship, that counts. We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we have a good relationship with God if we work hard for him - and we should work hard for him - but this is not a substitute for prayer. God is interested in our worth, not our work; in who we are, rather than what we do. Doing the will of God is important; but how will we know what he wants us, personally, to do, unless we hear from him, and how will we hear personally from him except through regular and frequent private prayer?

These are some of the principles behind prayer. In the next issue we shall examine some of the practical implications of Jesus' words. What is the best time to pray? Where is the best place? How should we begin? The principles are no good without the practice. May God help us all to strive diligently in prayer, that like Paul we "may know him".

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Don't Get Mad At God

I suppose I asked for it really, but being a naive human mortal, I didn't realise how a wise, holy immortal God would answer my request for God to change me and make me like himself. My problem was that I constantly had a battle going on within me between the carnal nature and the spiritual nature. If my carnal nature had died a sudden final death when I accepted the forgiveness and salvation God offered, and volunteered my life in commitment to his service, things would have been so different.

An Easy Option?

It's all wonderful at first. God miraculously delivers us from the things we can't free ourselves from - drugs, smoking, drinking, sickness, all sorts of problems we've battled with to no avail for years. But our problem now lies in the fact that God is perpetually testing us to show us what is in the depths of our hearts because there are things there that have no bearing on his own character, and he desperately wants us to show the world what he himself is like. He also wants to know if we really want him for himself, or is he just an easy option - healer, provider, deliverer?

Israel's Problem

The children of Israel witnessed all the miracles in Egypt which gave them their freedom. The Red Sea parted, they received miraculous food and drink in the wilderness, but they constantly grumbled. They didn't like the menu preferring the food they received in Egypt, they didn't like their leader and kept rising up against him, they didn't like the restricted lifestyle which made them

different to all the other nations and kept joining themselves to them both in their physical relationships with whoredoms and in their spiritual relationships with bowing to the false gods. This caused God to get so angry on numerous occasions that he sent plagues or an angel to wipe out thousands at a time. God has to try us to find out if we want him for the benefits, or like Job where we can say, "though he slay me yet will I love him." And we can only know what is truly in us when the heat is turned on.

I can honestly say that I've learned more about my true desires for God in my trials rather than in my blessings. And this goes for all relationships. It's easy to love your husband when he's giving you presents, paying compliments, and piling on the praise and attention. But how do you feel about him when he's had a hard day, and because you're the closest person to him emotionally he takes it out on you? OK he's lost his grace for that moment in time, but do you resent it, take it personally and hold a grudge against him for the rest of your life?

God often allows circumstances in our lives which could make us wonder why we are being picked on, but it's only like the cycling proficiency test I had as a child. The obstacles were put in the road and I was expected to cycle around them to prove that I could cope with difficulties. If I knocked them over, or they knocked me off my bike, I didn't get my certificate at the end of the test and would have to go through it all again at a later stage. We don't think we could ever hold grudges against God and yet I know from personal experience that this is very possible.

The Kittens

I remember once having two kittens who brought sunshine into my life when I lived alone. I went on tour and got someone to look after them for me, but when I returned one of the kittens was missing and we later found it in the garden. It had been run over, flung over the hedge and was half eaten by maggots. The other kitten became more precious after this loss. I allowed her to have kittens and when they were weaned and passed on to other families I took her to the vet to be doctored. She never came round from the anaesthetic and I was told by the vet that this was very rare and only happened once in every 10,000 operations! I was angry at God, I mean really angry. I couldn't understand why he had allowed this. The cats had never stopped me from serving him, I had never had an "inordinate affection" for them, and if he had asked me to give them away to somebody who needed their company more I wouldn't have refused. But to take them like this - without even asking, was going too far! And would you believe it, I was so miffed at God's behaviour that I vindictively sent him to Coventry - me, Joanna Barratt, frail bit of dust that I am, had a grudge against Almighty God and wanted to hurt him to show him how much he had hurt me!

I'm appalled now at my attitude, but at the time I felt totally justified. Thank God he didn't allow me to carry on sulking, after 3 days he brought me to my senses. But I've never forgotten how high and mighty my old nature is if allowed freedom to exert itself. We have to face obstacles and problems in order to see what's in us, only in this way can we make progress.

Obstacles

We take so much for granted when we become Christians, we almost expect to live charmed lives where nothing goes wrong because "God loves us and wants the very best for us". But if he's going to answer our prayers and change us from what we are, to what he wants us to be, then he puts obstacles in our way which cause us concern and pain because we can't see certain circumstances through without his help. Trials are not reasons to turn away from God, they are meant to draw us nearer to him.

My first child Nathan was breech all the way through my pregnancy. I prayed that he would turn, others prayed that he would turn, people actually prophesied that I would be "freed from the curse, have a pain free delivery and that everything would be perfect" (God forgive them for taking your name in vain and speaking their own thoughts instead of yours). And I was convinced that because I was a dedicated Christian, serving the Lord in every way I knew how, that a miracle would happen. The labour was hard and long and after 12 hours I still wasn't opening up. The baby was in distress and the doctors rushed me off for an emergency operation. I questioned God as I was being wheeled away. I was frightened and bewildered. But I came through it. The baby was safe, although marked on his legs and buttocks from being "stuck" inside me for too long.

I longed for another child to be Nathan's friend and companion and God allowed me to fall pregnant again. Unfortunately, on Nathan's 2nd birthday I miscarried unexpectedly. This test was very hard to cope with - finding out that the baby I was carrying had been dead inside me for the past 4 weeks and I didn't even know. When the news was broken to me I broke down in uncontrollable tears. I was almost 42 years old and didn't feel that time was on my side for more children. I was taken to a cubicle with Maurice to calm down and as my heart was breaking a strange thing happened. I saw my past life before my eyes, all the hardships, lack of love and hurts of my childhood and teenage years, but then what God had brought me into- a loving marriage relationship, a healthy child of 2 years, a ministry, a future, and in that instant I said those words with Job: "God gives, God takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord" - and really meant it at the time. But the next few months showed me what was really in my heart. Although I had accepted God's ruling, I really resented the fact that he had come to that decision and begged persistently that he would give me another child. Time went on and God kindly showed me what I was in actual fact doing - I was putting pressure on him. I wasn't leaving the future in his hands, I was asking him to give me what I thought was best for me.

Repentance

I repented, gave away all the baby things I'd stored up and within a week was having morning sickness. God woke Maurice from his sleep one night and told him he was going to bless him with another son and five days later God told me in a dream to name this child Izaac. But with Izaac also I had a difficult birth, I was cut and Izaac had a ventouse delivery. My stitches got infected and I was in extreme pain for a couple of weeks after his birth. But I firmly believe that God knew what he was doing all the time. I have always been blessed with good health almost to the point where I have criticised weak, frail people, and I think it is very necessary for people like me to experience once in a

while what others go through so that we learn to be grateful for our personal blessings instead of critical at other peoples' apparent failures or curses.

Don't Get Mad ...

God really does answer prayer, but he answers in a way that we rarely anticipate and before he touches those we are asking him to change, he usually puts his finger on us to alter our attitude first. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and if we are to follow in his footsteps we have to tread the path which he trod. Don't get mad at God when he answers your prayers in his way and not yours, believe me it's all working for your ultimate benefit, maturity and happiness.