

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 39

Treasures On Earth: Covetousness

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 6:19-23

by Maurice Barratt

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Jesus has been talking about “the secret life of the disciple” — almsgiving, prayer and fasting done in secret, the active things we do to give God a right to work in us and change us. But now there is a change of emphasis. We are going deeper, beyond outward actions, to the roots — to the heart.

In common with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, there is a progression here. If we will not obey Jesus and do the private prayer, fasting and almsgiving, then God cannot deal with our heart. But if we will do them, then God can start to deal with the roots of our problem.

Two Problems

The Sermon on the Mount deals with two major problems in man. One is covetousness, and the other is hypocrisy. These are the two evils which lie at the root of all our problems. One is the consequence of the other: covetousness always ends up in hypocrisy.

The first sin in the Bible was covetousness (not pride, as some people say). Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant (literally, ‘a desire’) to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Genesis 3:6). Eve coveted the fruit, she wanted to have it, she desired it. But as soon as she had what she wanted, she became a hypocrite and covered up, blaming the serpent instead of her own covetousness.

Covetousness means not being content with what you have. The opposite of covetousness is contentment. I have entitled this message “Treasures on earth: Covetousness”, and the next issue will be entitled “Treasures in heaven: Contentment”. Covetousness comes from trusting yourself, leaning to your own desires. Proverbs 27:20 says that “the eyes of man are never satisfied”. Fulfilling our own desires can never make us content. But if you trust in God, you won’t covet anything else. You’ll be content, knowing that everything is in his hand, that he gives and he takes away at his pleasure and for our benefit.

Hypocrisy is the outward consequence of the inner problem of the heart, covetousness. In order to deal with the heart, our outer cover of hypocrisy has first to be exposed. This is what Jesus does in

Chapter 5, exposing us again and again, showing us that we all fail, that inwardly our hearts are rotten and selfish, and that our show of righteousness is just a mask, a pretence. But if we will accept this damning indictment and realize that it is the painful truth, God can begin his work on our heart. Hypocrisy has been replaced by honesty.

Heart And Mind

In the bible, the heart and the mind are both to do with our thinking. Our mind is the seat of our conscious thoughts, but the heart is the place of our subconscious thoughts — our motives, intents, attitudes. A few verses further on, Jesus deals with our mind, on how we consciously think: “Take no thought for your life...” But first he must focus on our heart.

Jesus gives us the essential key to knowing our heart. We might think it is impossible to probe the depths of our own hearts, to know what is in us, to find out our motives. But Jesus says it is easy: “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (verse 21). To find out where your heart is, simply look for where your treasure is.

But what is your “treasure”? It’s whatever you value. It’s found in what you spend your time on, what you spend your money on, what you talk about. Look at your own life. Consider for a minute where your time and energy and money go. Now you know where your heart lies. It’s as simple as that.

Storing Up

Jesus tells us to not lay up treasure on earth. To “lay up” means to store up. Jesus isn’t telling us to have no money or material possessions. He’s telling us to not store things up. Jesus didn’t criticize rich people. He had rich friends — Lazarus, Martha and Mary were a wealthy family. Jesus was supported by rich women who travelled with him and “ministered unto him out of their substance” (Luke 8:3). But he did criticize those who stored up wealth and material things for the future. “Take heed, beware of covetousness”, he said, and told the parable of the rich man who built barns to store up “much goods for many years” (Luke 12:15-21). Jesus said the man was a fool, because the “many years” were not his: that very night he was to die. He was a fool not because he was rich, but because he’d stored up for a future which wasn’t his. Likewise Paul didn’t criticize rich people, but warned them “not to trust in uncertain riches” (1 Timothy 6:17). It is the confidence in uncertain things that is wrong, placing security and value in what has no security, because firstly it can go: moth, rust or thieves can destroy it or steal it; and secondly you can go, and as we all know, “you can’t take it with you”. But you can have riches stored up in heaven ready for the future. Isn’t that a far better option?

If our “treasure” is what we value most, then surely we should value God, and his values, most of all. Jesus threw out this challenge to all would-be disciples: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). We must not love anything more than Jesus. He must have the precedence in everything. It’s easy for us to say, “Of course we love Jesus more than anything — he

is our Saviour, our Lord!” But can we prove it? It’s easy to prove it, we now know: we look to see where our treasure is, where our time and money goes, where our interest lies. For love, two people will give up their own lives and commit themselves to each other. What will we do for Jesus?

No Possessions?

The wealthy young ruler who came to Jesus was told to sell all he had, give to the poor, and follow Jesus — and he would gain treasure in heaven (Luke 18:22). In the equivalent passage to the Sermon on the Mount in Luke, Jesus told the disciples the same thing: “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:32-34). Does this mean that disciples should have no possessions? There’s no doubt some people are called to this way of life. When Jesus sent out the seventy disciples to evangelize, he told them to take no money and no possessions — not even a change of clothes. (Evangelists are heralds of the coming kingdom of heaven, with its revolutionary message to not live for this world, and if they proclaim that message clad in all the trappings and securities of the world they are supposed to be not living for, they turn the message into a farce and a piece of nonsense. A rich, worldly evangelist is a contradiction in terms.) But others are called to earn and support the evangelists.

We must look at “precept and practice”: what did the disciples do? In Acts 2:44 we read that “all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” That might seem to imply that they all sold everything they had: but in the next verse says that they continued breaking bread “from house to house” — so clearly they still had houses. It appears that those who had extra houses and lands, and things stored up, sold those things and brought them to the apostles. And clearly the believers in Corinth, Rome, Philippi and so on had their own houses, jobs, and money. They were called to work hard, to earn money, but not to store it up. They were to provide for the next life, not for this life.

Security For The Future

Paul challenges us to be content with food and clothing (1 Timothy 6:8). If we have enough to eat (not luxuries and delicacies to satisfy our cravings), a roof over our head (not the best des res we can afford) and clothes on our back (not the latest fashions), we can be content. It’s not that we don’t need security for the future; it’s that our security needs to be for the next life, because the next life is our future. It’s not that we shouldn’t store up “for a rainy day”; it’s that the “day of the Lord” is coming, and that’s the day we should be storing up for. On earth there are only “uncertain riches”, but heaven deals exclusively in “certain riches”. The heavenly riches are just as real and material as the earthly ones. We sometimes suppose that because the riches are “in heaven”, they must be somehow spiritual, not material. But let’s remember that though the treasures are stored in heaven, they are to be manifested and given to us on earth, when Jesus comes again to reign; and just as Jesus is “worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory, and blessing” (Revelation

5:12), so we will receive real, material, earthly riches when he comes, if our “savings account” in heaven is well stocked up.

Contentment

Contentment is the challenge to covetousness. It’s a disposition, an attitude of heart, and if we will be content with what we have — not seeking gain or storing up for our earthly lives, but being “rich towards God”, serving Jesus with our whole heart, pouring our treasure (time, money, energy and interest) into his kingdom — then we will not only enjoy a life of contentment now, we will be laying up for ourselves a tremendous reward for the future.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

COVETOUSNESS? I CAN’T SEE IT IN ME!

“Well, thank God, this is not a problem I have” you may say ... oh no?! I’m sorry to have to shatter your illusions, but this is a problem every single one of us have in some measure. I was intrigued to hear my sons Nathan (aged 8) and Izaak (aged 4) deep in conversation the other day, it was a real eye opener. They had just been colouring a picture for a Christmas competition from a toy store, and were requested to look through the stores catalogue and write down the 3 toys which they would like the most. If they won 1st prize they would receive £500, 2nd prize £200 and 5 runners up would each receive £50 to spend in the store.

Nathan had already made his selection and coloured his picture before Izaak had been notified so he explained what was required to his younger brother. He looked through the catalogue with him and showed him the 3 items he thought Izaak ought to write down as his selection and did his best to make Izaak enthusiastic about them. Unfortunately, Izaak was making quite a rumpus, so I stepped in to find out what was happening. My children are crazy about Action Man - not that they know what Action Men are supposed to do, but they both have very good imaginations - and Izaak was stipulating that he wanted the Action Men figures, not the baby toys Nathan had been trying to get him interested in. I then asked Nathan what he had selected and was very surprised to note that he had wanted a play station with an Action Man game, which he had covered up and not even let Izaak look at. Both children were certain that one would win 1st prize and the other one would win 2nd prize so they would have £700 to spend in the shop. Nathan had been worried in case the items written down as selections were things that you automatically received if you won, and he didn’t want Izaak to make the same selection in case he won the competition and not him!

I found it quite amazing to see them almost fighting about something neither of them had, and all they could think and talk about was how they were going to spend this prize money.

I can't honestly remember a great deal about my childhood desires, all I seemed to be concerned about was earning my own money at the earliest age possible so that I could run my own life and not be accountable to parents or teachers. I do remember though, mum and dad always being short of cash and having to make ends meet. Mum would often tell us what it was like during and just after the war when everything was on ration. Butter and chocolate were as precious as gold and to be savoured with relish. I remember mum getting a box of chocolates for her birthday and she hid them under her pillow so that only she could eat them and not be obliged to share them with the whole family. Her attitude rubbed off on me and even though I hadn't been through a war or time of rationing, chocolate and luxury items like cakes, were things not to be refused, but to be gorged on if they were offered, even if you were already full!

On one occasion when it was mum's birthday, I'd bought her a box of chocolates which I knew would please her. It was like buying a box of treasure as far as I was concerned and I couldn't keep my hands off them. There was an advert currently being shown on the T.V. which showed a woman receiving a box of chocolates from her fiancé and upon opening them found a pair of diamond earrings substituted for a couple of the chocolates which he had taken out. I'd seen it done so I thought I would do the same with a string of beads. I removed (and ate) a whole row of the chocolates to put in my string of beads, but I just couldn't stop and before I knew it the whole box was finished. I wrapped up the beads and gave these to her without any pangs of conscience, unfortunately, still relishing the taste in my mouth.

Poor mum, she was diabetic and wasn't supposed to eat anything which contained sugar, but she just couldn't resist and would eat 5 or 6 cakes at a function without batting an eyelid, the stodgier the better, and would cope with the consequences later. I suffered with the same problem, not that I was diabetic, but even on the most strict diets my resolve would crumble if I was at a function or someone else's house and I would make sure I sampled all the confectionery. Even if it meant not having the main course, I would make sure there was plenty of room for dessert. For some reason I couldn't bear to see other people indulging in the goodies and not being able to participate myself, I really felt deprived.

When I look back, I recognise that people viewed us as a family of grabbers. We had carved out a way of life for ourselves where we didn't want anyone else to get what we could grab first, whether we needed it or not, be it food, clothes, or anything else that was being given away. We were always first in the queue to take home leftovers from a function, and pushed and shoved to get the bargains at jumble sales. The problem with this lifestyle is that you are totally unaware of how selfish you appear to everyone else, unless by some miracle your eyes are opened. Growing up helped me tremendously where the food was concerned because I became conscious of my size, and I was determined to get rid of the fat I'd accumulated. Even I could see my exterior. But other habits were harder to control because I don't think we really see ourselves as others do, we justify so many of our actions and always have very good reasons for our 'thrift'.

About 20 years ago God told Maurice and myself to sell up our business. It was only a little business - just a 4-track recording studio. But because it was now functioning as a business and not as a ministry, as we had initially intended, God told us to get rid of it. We put it up for sale and managed to free ourselves. Maurice was more aware of his inner motives than myself, so said he was forfeiting his half of the business and would hand it all to me so that I would receive all the money

from the sale. That sounded good to me as I knew I was far more careful with the finances than he was ... or so I thought! From the moment the money was placed into my bank account I became paranoid that people were trying to take advantage of me. I was suspicious of everyone, and especially of my best friend and partner, Maurice. I knew he had bills, debts, and every mention he made of money was taken by me as a hint to fork out. I can't believe how evil my mind and heart is and I can only say I am grateful that God has ways of showing us what we are really like. It was too much for me to handle so I got rid of the money as quickly as possible. I didn't have the problem of it burning a hole in my pocket where I wanted to buy all my heart desired, I was just so careful with it that I became miserly and closed my ears and eyes to the needs of others.

Covetousness takes many forms, and is so hard to detect in our own lives, for as I have already pointed out we always have good reasons for the way we act and think. Proverbs says that the ways of men are always right in their own eyes. It must have been a great shock to Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24) to have his covetous and bitter heart exposed by Peter when he asked if he could buy the gift of the Holy Ghost so that he could bestow it on others in the way the apostles were doing. And what about the "prosperity gospel" which is so widely preached and so appealing? Give to God and you'll receive a hundredfold by exercising "seed faith". Or the Pastor who prays for more members so that he can teach them to tithe, which in turn will enable him to build the extension to his church? Surely these are examples of covetousness.

But there are ways to covet which I believe are acceptable to God. When I was going through all my childhood difficulties I frequently ran to the Pastor for encouragement. He was the most influential person in my life and God really and truly used him to help me. He gave me the opportunity to be the church secretary which meant that he had regular contact with me for a number of hours each week. He didn't waste his opportunity and would talk, and talk, and talk to me about God, pouring out his heart, his love, his desire to serve Jesus. It impacted me so much that sometimes I thought my heart would burst. I desired with all my heart to have a relationship with God and Jesus like him. I watched him like a hawk, observing his lifestyle, analysing his words, nothing was passed off as insignificant to me, because I wanted to copy him. Paul said that the early Christians were to copy him as he himself copied Christ. What a pity more ministers can't stand up to this scrutiny. But my Pastor, God bless him, glorified God to me and helped me to allow God to alter me. My covetous heart was channelled somewhat in the right direction at last. But there are so many other things to covet, like prophecy and "running the race" as though you alone are going to win. Pray about it, God will open your eyes if you really do want to see.