

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 40

Treasures In Heaven: Contentment (Mt 6:20-21)

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 and steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

When Paul wrote to the young church leader Timothy he reserved an especially severe criticism for certain Christians. He called them “men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness” (1 Timothy 6:5). These Christians believed that material wealth and prosperity was a sign of God’s blessing. Paul scathingly attacks this doctrine, saying they are absolutely wrong; and then he adds, “but godliness with contentment is great gain” (verse 6). Contentment is the result of laying up treasure in heaven, not on earth.

Paul continues his thoughts on this line: “... having food and clothing, let us be therewith content ... they that will be rich fall into temptation ... into many foolish and hurtful lusts ... for the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith ... but thou, O man of God, flee these things ...” (1 Timothy 6:8-11). The exhortation is unmistakable and pointed. We should take it personally. But Paul is not finished. He also has advice for Christians who are rich: “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God ... that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute ... laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Clearly echoing Jesus’ words about laying up treasure in heaven, Paul says that rich Christians have the privilege and potential to turn their earthly wealth into heavenly treasure. Don’t save up riches on earth “for a rainy day”; but do store up riches in heaven for the kingdom. It’s all to do with what we’re storing for — for this life and this world, or the resurrection life and the kingdom.

Real Riches

And Jesus is talking about real, material riches. Let’s not deceive ourselves and conclude that it’s to do with “spiritual riches”. When Jesus talks about “treasures on earth”, he’s not talking about “spiritual treasures”, whatever they may be. Moths and rust can’t eat away spiritual riches! So why should it be any different when Jesus talks about treasure in heaven? Treasure, whether on earth or in heaven, means material things. Jesus gives us no reason to think anything else.

The confusion may stem from a misreading of the expression “treasure in heaven”. We may take that to mean “treasure which has a heavenly character” or something similar. In fact, “treasure” in heaven means exactly the same as “treasure” on earth. Perhaps it may clarify the issue if we

understand that the treasure is only being stored (“laid up”) in heaven: heaven is the bank, and when Jesus comes again to reign on earth in his kingdom, the treasure that has been stored up will come with him. It is our inheritance for the kingdom. “Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be” (Revelation 22:12). In other words, treasures stored on earth and treasures stored in heaven are both for earthly use, and the only thing that makes treasure in heaven different from treasure on earth is that in heaven it can’t get moth-eaten, rusty or stolen.

The Kingdom and Eternity

We need also to understand about our eternal future. When Jesus comes again to reign, that will be on this present earth. But the kingdom reign is only temporary. It will have an end, as Paul clearly tells us: “Then cometh the end, when he [Jesus] shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet ... And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” (1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

After Jesus has handed the kingdom over to God, this old earth will be destroyed, and God will create a new heaven and a new earth. This sequence is clear from Revelation 20:11-21:1, (following on after the description of the kingdom reign of Jesus in 20:1-7); and confirmed by Peter (2 Peter 3:5-13). The new heaven and earth is not the scene of a “kingdom reign”; it is more of a return to paradise. In the kingdom, Jesus returns to reign over the old earth; after the kingdom, God returns to dwell with man on the new earth, just as God walked in the garden of Eden with Adam. That is the fulfilment of God’s plan, but first, Jesus has to have his reward, and so do his followers, and that happens in the kingdom.

In eternity there is no need of “treasures”, just as Adam had no treasures, just fellowship with God. But before this, there must be a reward and a recompense. Values must be reversed, because there are Christians who are saved by grace, but who laid up treasure on earth; they will lose out in the kingdom. And there are others who “forsook all” and suffered on earth, investing in the future kingdom; and they will be rewarded.

Jesus tells us both sides: those who have become poor, hungry or persecuted because of the gospel are blessed, because they shall be rewarded, but also those who “live it up” on earth now are cursed, because they shall suffer loss in the kingdom. “Woe to you who are rich! for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). Jesus is clear — we can’t have it both ways. We can “live now”, but we will have to “pay later”. Or we can “pay now”, forsake wealth and status and privilege and power in this life, and we will “live later”. If we will lay up treasure in heaven, we will enjoy the benefits of that treasure — material treasure — in the kingdom.

Moreover, if the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:12-24) is anything to go by, the bank of heaven provides interest on our investment as well. The servant who made ten pounds was given an eleventh — which was taken from the servant who had done nothing with it. Jesus said, “Unto

everyone that hath shall more be given, but unto him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him" (Luke 19:26).

The Prosperity Doctrine

Some Christians believe that we should be "preparing the way for Jesus to return" by gaining influence in all sectors of society and "winning the world for Christ". And part of gaining influence means growing prosperous. If you have wealth, you have power and influence. These Christians justify material prosperity by appealing to the Old Testament, in particular to the passages in Deuteronomy where, as part of Israel's law, God promised material blessing to those who are obedient to him. Unfortunately, they completely ignore the New Testament, and wildly misunderstand God's plan for the kingdom. In fact they are a classic example of the error of trying to put new wine into old wineskins. They are trying to integrate a new system into the old system, trying to set up a new world in the old world. (The Pilgrim Fathers made the same basic error, sincere though they were, 400 years ago, and look what has become of their "New World"!) But Jesus, the bible says, will set up his own system himself "with a rod of iron" — by force. The old system, the old "world", has to be completely destroyed before the new can come in. Anything else is a compromise and can only result in a counterfeit of the kingdom.

Those who believe in the "prosperity gospel" do their best to live it up in this life. As far as they are concerned, the more they have, the more blessed they are. They fit exactly the people Paul warned Timothy about. And they had better make the most of enjoying all the material blessings they can in the few short years they have on earth, because Jesus says they are going to lose out, and have bitter regret, when he comes in his kingdom and reverses all the roles. They have "had their consolation". They've had all the reward they're getting.

Covetousness Isn't Wrong

It would be easy to think from all this that covetousness in itself is wrong. It is not; Jesus never teaches that. Covetousness is neutral, and necessary. People who covet nothing become nothing themselves, or destroy themselves. Buddhists strive through meditation to divest themselves of all desire, and end up with their minds emptied of thought and possessed by demons. Others who lose all desire for anything, become tramps and drop-outs, on a path of self-destruction, caring nothing for themselves or anyone else. Both are escapist in their own way. But Christians are realists. We do have desires, and we do care for ourselves. (That's why God tells us "love your neighbour as yourself", and Paul confirms that "no man ever yet hated his own flesh".) To "covet" simply means to desire, to long for, to greatly want something. The bible itself tells us to covet spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:39). And is not Jesus telling us here to covet treasure in heaven? He is certainly not saying we are to have no treasure; on the contrary, his only is that we don't store up treasure on earth in this life. It's not wrong to desire things or to value things. It's what we desire and what we value that matters. God values his kingdom. Do we? Can we prove it?

Investing In The Kingdom

Some people think that Jesus simply told the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22) to get rid of all his wealth. That's incorrect. Jesus told him to transfer his investments. He said, "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). If he'd done it, the rich young man wouldn't have lost out; in fact he would have gained greatly. He went away sorrowful, but he made a bad decision, even in investor's terms. Proverbs 19:17 says, "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again". God is no man's debtor, and that applies to wealth as much as to everything else. Whatever we invest in the kingdom by giving to God — time, energy, talents, money — he will make sure we are repayed in full, and more. The joyful welcome of Jesus to his faithful servants in the parable of the talents is truly something to be coveted.

Nevertheless, as the servant who buried his talent in the ground knew, Jesus is a "hard man", who demands much from his servants. Why? Because he paid a high price to win us. God demanded much of his Son in order to redeem the world. C.T. Studd only used good logic when he said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him" — and he made his actions match his words, giving away a fortune and forsaking a glittering sporting career to give his life as a missionary in Africa. Jim Elliot used the same sound logic when he said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose". Jim Elliot gave his life as a martyr. But the principle applies to anything we sacrifice to God — time, money, energy, talents. He will repay.

Conclusion

Jesus told a story about a wealthy man whose land produced a very plentiful harvest; and he decided he should build bigger barns to store up his goods for the future, retire gracefully, and enjoy life (Luke 12:16-21). Jesus called this man a fool, not for being wealthy, but for laying up treasure for himself on earth — for investing in his future in this life. The man didn't know that his life would come to an end that very night, and his investment would be useless, lost as far as he was concerned. Our lives may not be demanded of us this night (who knows?), but what are even 70 brief years in the light of eternity? As Paul said to Timothy, "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7). We are fools indeed to hang on to riches in this life. But we can "transfer our investments" and "lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come" (1 Timothy 6:19). That is what Jesus called being "rich towards God" (Luke 12:21).

Much of this article has been about riches, treasures, and rewards. But in the end, God is concerned with our hearts. Our treasures, as Jesus said, only reveal the desires of our hearts. What we do in our spare time, what we talk about, what we think about — they all show where our heart is; and if our hearts are set on the "blessed hope" of Jesus' coming kingdom, there will be something else evident in our lives: we will be content. Our lives will manifest a deep and lasting contentment, the result of a lack of covetousness for material things in this life. "Godliness with contentment is great gain". Striving after prosperity in this life is, in the end, pure frustration. Even the fabulously wealthy King

Solomon found that. But laying up treasures in heaven will yield great contentment, great satisfaction, and great reward.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

What started off as a neat idea became the very foundation for my way of life. I just happened to be around at the right time to observe a family in a time of crisis and witness the way they handled it.

My friends (two sisters) had an invalid mother and their father was a minister who didn't receive a realistic salary. They decided at one of their 'family meetings' that one daughter go out to work and the other daughter stay at home to look after their mother and take care of all the responsibilities which she could no longer cope with. At the end of the month they would pool the wages from the minister and the working daughter to pay all the bills, allocate money for the coming months food and travel, etc. and if there was anything over they would split it four ways so that they could each have personal spending money. Sometimes with the money remaining from their overheads they would purchase some household item which needed to be replaced, but everything was done through the one purse. There wasn't usually much left over after all the bills and expenses had been accounted for, but for the first time in all her married life, the mother was actually receiving personal money which she could use in any way she pleased.

Years after this incident I was in the (unfortunate for me) position of being completely supported by a family who were already very stretched financially. For them it was an act of service to God and showed me their tremendous love and faith in me. But for me it was extremely difficult as I constantly felt that I was adding more pressure to their already heavy burden. It was a happy day for me when the tables were turned and I had an opportunity to pay them back. I had landed a really good job with a great wage and introduced to the family the example I had witnessed years before. The wife earned a part-time wage, one of the daughters was on a works opportunity training scheme and brought in a nominal wage, the other daughter was still at school and the husband had been called by God to live by faith and preach the gospel with no income. When my wage was added to the wages of the wife and daughter, there was enough to pay the bills and coming expenses, and we still had enough over to split ... and we each received £4 a month personal spending money. Tight? Yes, but what a thrill we all received to find that we could cope with the situation when we all pulled together.

I suppose since those days I have never really looked back. When you don't have much money you become very selective in the way you spend it. I was often amazed at how much I could save on such a small income. Wages increased with the standard of living, so did the personal amounts that

we all received, but the foundation had been established in my life to buy only what was needed, not necessarily what was wanted.

Before the birth of my first child, Maurice and I preached and sang our way through Europe for two months ending our travels at the very borders of Russia just after the walls had come down. We had really wanted to go into Russia to meet up with a friend we have over there but the queues at the border waiting to go into Russia were seven days long, as were the queues waiting to come out. Fortunately we came into contact with Polish people who knew our Russian friends and made arrangements to pass on a gift to them. We were able to leave both bibles and money in their safe keeping.

Weeks later we received an incredible letter from our Russian friends which has radically altered our attitudes yet again. They were delighted with the Russian bibles as we expected, but what we didn't realise was just how valuable our meagre gift of £100 was to them. It was apparently the equivalent of two years wages for the average working man! When they had exchanged it into Russian money they were able to pay a considerable amount towards the cost of building their church, and the husband had been enabled to buy his new wife a coat. Maurice and I were in tears when we read the letter, we had almost been embarrassed at only having £100 to leave with them instead of some really significant sum, we hadn't anticipated what our 'widow's mite' could achieve in the hands of someone from another country. It just goes to show, we may not be able to afford Reebok trainers or even a Nike tee-shirt, but even half of what we would thoughtlessly spend on these items would keep a pastor and his whole family for more than a month. Surely this is worth consideration.

For about 20 years now I have never had to consider what happens to my wage — it just goes into the pot and is not counted as money which I personally have any say over. But I have been amazed at the way God has looked after me, my husband and my children. We live as frugally as we possibly can in the household (that goes for those who work and live with us also), so that we can get out the message God has burdened us with and support others who are in a similar position to us, living by faith and serving God. It is good to remember that with what we have been given we are meant to trade with and use wisely.

I have noticed when reading the bible how apparently easy it seems for someone to give everything, when they have either little or practically nothing, compared to the rich young ruler who, after receiving a direct instruction from Jesus himself on how he could become perfect, went away desperately saddened because he couldn't bring himself to comply. On the other hand look at the widow Elisha was sent to, who only had enough oil and flour to make the last cake for her son and herself to eat before they starved to death. Elisha asked that she feed him first before taking care of her son, which seems most unreasonable. She had nothing else to lose other than one last meal, hers and her son's death would come just a little sooner, that's all. But if her tiny amount of faith had foundation, then what could she gain if she gave to God what He asked? Look again at that poor widow in the New Testament who cast two mites into the offering. She was condemned by those judgmental people who looked on, but was commended by Jesus who knew that she had given everything she had. And consider also the woman who broke the alabaster box and poured ointment on Jesus' feet. She too was condemned for this wasteful act. Peter had no funds to give to the lame man outside the temple, but what he did have he gave freely and the lame man was healed. Giving to God because we love Him will not go unnoticed, it will one day be rewarded. And

how do we give to God? By looking after others ... “If you can’t love your brother whom you see, how can you love God whom you don’t see?”

If you are on the bread line, you are a prime candidate to receive tremendous riches in heaven, not because God feels sorry for you and your plight down here, but any little effort you make to sacrifice will be greatly amplified because you haven’t much to give. Anything we have has not been given for our own personal benefit alone, but that we should share it with others, be it wealth, talents or gifts. Jesus said we had to love our neighbour as our self ... didn’t he? Well ... do we? It is very rare to come across this quality in people. Perhaps the one person who stands out in our modern age is Mother Teresa who identified in every way with those she ministered to. Usually people live on a higher plateau to those they are trying to help, it seems to make them better equipped for the task.

When you realise what small amounts of money can do for people in other countries where lack of bibles, starvation, malnutrition, disease, and earthquakes are rampant, it becomes very difficult to spend money on trivialities and luxuries. On one trip to America I came across a minister who had been to China with members from his church. They had witnessed first hand the deprivation of the people. Whilst the church group were eating their meal in the Chinese McDonald’s(!), the starving children would be staring in at the windows watching every mouthful of food they were eating. On returning to their homes in America they shared with everyone they came into contact what they had seen with heartfelt compassion, yet they still trashed food from their tables because it was superfluous to their requirements. Surely, when we have been exposed to needs we should buy less and save trashing the excess, so that we can give a little to those who are completely without.

It’s the starting to live like this that is difficult. Once you get into thinking this way it becomes easy. Allow your conscience to prick you when you take a fancy to buy what you don’t need and go along with the impulse to put the money to one side for a worthy cause. You will be amazed at how quickly your attitude can change. There are so many people needing help — Adopt a Child; Adopt a Granny; Open Doors; a whole host, if you need help thinking of someone in need, write to us and we’ll give you a few pointers. But don’t continue to live for yourself alone. Lay down treasure in this life and start putting your finances and resources into the heavenly bank. The interest is higher and eternal.