

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 42

Take No Thought For Life

Maurice Barratt

At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount we find Jesus dealing with the two root problems in the lives of Christians: hypocrisy and covetousness. In this section, we are still on the issue of covetousness, but now we are moving from the heart to the mind, from our subconscious to our conscious thoughts. The heart is the place of our motives, our subconscious thinking. The only thing that Jesus can do with this is expose it to us, so that we see the problem. But now we are beginning to deal with the mind, our conscious thoughts, and that is an area we can do something about. We can make conscious decisions to think in a certain way.

In Luke 12:16-21 we read about a man who was covetous in his heart and in his mind. Jesus said he “thought within himself”; that is, his conscious thinking was at work, thinking of a way to lay up treasure for himself. Directly after this parable in Luke, Jesus follows on with the words, “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life ...” (Luke 12:22). So this is a very relevant parable to the verses we are considering. He was thinking about the wrong life — his own life, the self life, and not the life of the kingdom, the abundant life of Christ.

In the last issue we noted that Satan has no direct access to our hearts. The same is true for us. We cannot control or change our motives. They are subconscious, too deep down for us to go. Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” And the answer is, only God can. (Jeremiah 17:9,10). But we can change our conscious thinking. And the greatest problem in Christianity today is that Christians do not change, because they are not willing to change the way they think.

Renewing The Mind

Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed (that is, changed) by the renewing of our mind (that is, by the renewing of our conscious thinking). Renewing the mind is not brainwashing, but the two have something in common. Both work through repetition in order to instill new thought patterns. But whereas brainwashing is often done subliminally and against the will, renewing the mind is a conscious, willing decision to renew our thought patterns, with known consequences. If our ways of thinking, our patterns of thinking, change, then we can come to the place where we know God’s ways and his will, and we are no longer conformed to the world’s ways of thinking.

Jesus says “No man can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). We can qualify that by adding “at the same time”. We can vacillate between the two, and serve one one day and the other the next. We can be “double-minded” (James 1:8). And there are degrees. You can serve wholeheartedly or half-heartedly. “Either he will hate the one and love the other ...” (both strong qualities) “... or else he

will hold to the one and despise the other” (weaker qualities). Jesus is saying, however much we love God will be how much we hate the world, and vice versa.

“You cannot serve God and mammon.” Why does Jesus not say “God and Satan?” Because we can’t serve Satan directly. Worship of Satan is always indirect, through something else. No-one could look at Satan and love him. But we can love money, and we can love self, and we can prove by our actions, lifestyles, and allegiances that we are really serving Satan. If we love money, that is mammon, and it is indirect service of Satan. This is a key point, though a fearful one. A child of God, born again of God’s Spirit, can be covetous, can serve mammon, can have the wrong master. Many Christians do. But for a disciple, this is a contradiction in terms. A disciple can’t be covetous of money, the love of which is the root of all evil.

There is a clear demarcation line here between followers and disciples. Disciples must have dealt with covetousness. Their lifestyles (which come from their way of thinking) must prove that they have only one master.

So in the following verse, Jesus now says, “Therefore”, (because of all this), “take no thought for your life”. What life is Jesus talking about? The self life, your own life, your independence, what you want for yourself. Jesus contrasts this “self” life with “the life” - the spiritual life, the Sermon on the Mount life, the source and fount of our relationship with God. “Is not the life more than meat?” (verse 25). This life shines through when the self life is at its lowest ebb. In persecution, suffering and great distress, the life of Jesus seems to shine all the more brightly. Paul talked of the persecution he suffered, “always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). “In him”, says John, “was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). In Revelation, we read of “the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27). This is the life that Jesus offers us as an alternative to our life, self life.

Remember, Jesus has just told us we cannot serve two masters. So if we are serving our self life, we cannot also be serving God. The only course is to take no thought for our life, and then the life will shine through. “For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35). If you let go of that self life, of the pursuit of what you want, you will gain the life. But only if.

The rich young man who came to Jesus (Matthew 19:16-22) found himself submitted to this critical test. He was a follower, and a keen one — keen enough to ask Jesus what he knew would be an important question. “What must I do, that I may have eternal life?” Surely he had come with an open and willing mind, ready to respond and obey? And Jesus at first encouraged him. “If you wilt enter into life” (there is that word again; it is the life that Jesus is talking about), “keep the commandments” (verse 17). The young man could accept that. But he probed deeper. “Which?”, he asked. Jesus listed some specific commandments. The young man was still not satisfied. He genuinely wanted something more, he was hungry for more of God. He probed deeper still. “What lack I yet?” And now, Jesus hit the heart of the matter — not sins or keeping commandments, but the self life, covetousness. “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”

And this young man, though he knew God, though he was so keen and hungry and open, yet he was serving the wrong master. He was serving mammon; and he wasn’t willing to change his way of

thinking, to change his priorities, to change his lifestyle, to change his master. “But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.” Jesus was careful to point out that the man would not lose out. He would gain treasure in heaven; he would gain the life in exchange for his self life. He could have entered into life there and then. Giving up self and covetousness for God brings a wonderful freedom now, as well as great rewards in the future. But he couldn’t do it. He had great ideals, but when it came to the crunch, when he had to make a conscious decision to change, he couldn’t swap his self life for the life, his own life for Jesus’ life.

How keen are you? As keen as that rich young man? Willing to come to God with an open heart and an open mind, ready to respond and obey? For the young man, that was a great attitude, but it wasn’t enough to carry him through. It takes decisions.

How are we to take no thought for our life? We have to start consciously dealing with covetousness wherever we see it in our own lives. Let me give a simple example. Don’t go “window-shopping”. Window-shopping is spending time looking at things you could never afford to buy — why? Because you like them! It’s covetousness. It’s the same with catalogues. Some people can spend hours just browsing through their favourite catalogue looking at all the new fashions — or kitchens or power tools or cars or computers, it all amounts to the same thing — teasing ourselves with things that we desire but can’t afford. We’re tempting ourselves and attracting ourselves to those things, even getting addicted to them; and that’s serving the wrong master. It’s just one area where we can consciously change the way we think, so that by renewing our mind, by “re-minding” ourselves all the time, by insistent repetition, we can come to the place where we see a catalogue and don’t even think about looking inside it. “Think” is the operative word. Taking no thought for your life, renewing your mind, starts with conscious decisions to change. Either we serve our own lives, which is all about covetousness, or we serve Christ, which is all about contentment.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Take No Thought? Easier Said Than Done!

We had just arrived at the conference centre and received the keys to our accommodation. This would be the very first time we had taken all three children with us and we had settled on the sleeping arrangements beforehand to ensure that I could get the best sleep possible. Maurice and I had been to the conference centre on previous occasions and had always been accommodated in a spacious twin bedded room with on-suite bathroom. I planned for Nathan, the eldest boy, to take up the extra bed in my room and Maurice to take Izaak (who snored like a trouper and had an internal body clock which demanded he awoke every morning at around 6 a.m.) and Tamar, who as yet was still in a cot, into a room identical to mine next door. All went well until we opened the doors to the rooms and found the layout to be completely different to what I had expected.

It didn't matter that we had been housed in a different block to normal, but these rooms had double beds instead of twin single beds, no bath only a shower, and were so small that when the cot was put at the bottom of the bed you had to really breath in to get past it to the other side of the bed. We were going to be here for four days and all I could think about was the inconvenience it would mean for Tamar who had nowhere to play, and nowhere to have a bath. I did my best to change into better accommodation but the block we normally booked at the conference centre had been taken up by another group also using the centre's facilities. Maurice then told me he couldn't believe how negative I had become, I was finding problems everywhere. I walked out of the room in disgust ... how could he know how I felt, the children were my responsibility, and it was always up to me to work things out. That evening at the first meeting Maurice was approached by the organisers and asked if he and I would take the next meeting the following morning.

I was quite bleary eyed when I arrived at the meeting next morning after feeling as though I'd done a few rounds with Mohammed Ali during the night. I thought I had taken the easiest option having Nathan with me, I had not anticipated the kicks or punches he threw at me, and I really didn't feel in a very good mood, my fears being confirmed. Nevertheless, God does not pity the flesh, and He doesn't expect us to either! Especially our own!! Before we were due to speak a couple of people got up to give brief testimonies and the underlying current was that, whether sickness or dire circumstances had struck, these people had carried on regardless and come through stronger Christians. We had also sung at three different intervals before the message "Let the Bride of the Lamb say, "Come Lord Jesus", and I was feeling extremely uncomfortable. What on earth would Jesus see in me if He did come back for His Bride? In those brief minutes I looked back over my life and was shocked to see just how negative I had become and tried to trace it back to its cause.

I remember the very day I left home my mother said with such real conviction and threat, "you'll be back!" I said to myself with the same conviction, "never!" And I never did, no matter how tight and difficult things got. I managed, I made the best of everything, even my poverty, and never let anyone know just how destitute I was. I was very proud and positive - I would make it. And I did. I threw myself into the church and Christianity. I got up early every morning to spend two hours with God before leaving for work. I went on solitary retreats so that I could spend my days and nights fasting and praying. My parents had taught me how to fight and not take no for an answer, so now my determination and strength of will was put to good use. I found life had become exciting and the more problems I encountered and overcame proved to me that if I put my mind to it I could do anything. Even when I was five months pregnant with my first child and travelling through Poland on a ministry trip with my husband, the fact that we had no money for food or accommodation didn't bother me in the slightest and it was my suggestion that we slept in the car, even though I woke up aching all over. So what had happened? Why was it I had become so negative?

I think that maybe for the first time in that meeting I realised that everything I had done for the Lord had not been done with His strength, but with my own. That's the problem with strong, tough people, they can manage fine, even doing God's work, in their own strength - but the bible specifically says that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. All I was seeing now was the real me, the me when faced with the responsibility of having dependants to take care of instead of just myself. I now understood why God had given me children so late in life. He had to break me somehow and make me know just how vulnerable Joanna Barratt really was. How kind He is try me whilst giving me such a blessing.

I honestly wasn't aware of this problem I had, I have taken so many active measures to ensure that I was putting my trust in God. When each of my children have been born I have adamantly refused to allow them to be vaccinated, we have no insurance for anything other than a third party policy for the car which is compulsory, we have no alarms on the house or car, we live by faith and send our children to a Christian School even though we have to find hundreds of pounds each term for this privilege.

But as I sat there in the meeting I saw how often I had panicked when something unusual had occurred to the children's health, and how readily I had run to the doctor for help. Often they would just end up putting my mind at rest and saying that I was perhaps reacting because I was over tired, and stressed at having three young children to cope with. But that's not the truth. In my mind and heart I know that I can trust God. Nothing can happen to me, my husband, my children, my home, anything, unless God allows it. We have given our lives to God and Jesus said, "take no thought for your life." We can accept so easily the words, but living the reality is totally different. Truth is truth. Trust is trust. Faith is faith. God can only prove what is truth in us by allowing circumstances which will expose the truth. I have failed this test, but to my advantage. With God's help I can change. There's always room for change, it's just embarrassing when you find your own testimony trips you up. But that's OK.

In the society we live in we have absolutely no excuse for being negative about anything. As a family we sponsor a little girl in Guatemala through Adopt-a-Child. On their programme she is fed twice a week and given dental and medical attention. During the rest of the week she and her two brothers are out on the rubbish tips searching for food and any articles they can sell for a living. They live with their mother and grandmother, with no male influence to take responsibility for them. I think also of the brothers and sisters in the faith who are being persecuted by family and governments because they love Christ and have taken up their cross to serve Him. These people are practically taking no thought for their life, they are trusting God to do with them what He wants and see them through their trials and circumstances. Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego had the same attitude. They knew what they had to do - serve and worship God alone and not bow down to any idols. When faced with the threat of the fiery furnace they didn't back down, they refused to submit to pressure, not because they were convinced that God would not allow them to come to any harm. On the contrary, they knew for sure that God was able to deliver them but even if He didn't want to they still would not bow.

I don't know how God will perfect my heart to get me to that state where I can say like these three spiritual giants that no matter what I am faced with I will trust God in all circumstances, but I am encouraged because God is still at work in me exposing areas which haven't as yet been yielded to Him. It's easier said than done, but it's far better to do it than say it.