

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 43

Take No Thought For Your Life

Maurice Barratt

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is dealing with our conscious thinking. The two great issues in the Sermon on the Mount are covetousness and hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the consequence of covetousness. Covetousness is the root; hypocrisy is the way we cover up our covetousness. Jesus' purpose is firstly to expose hypocrisy, and then to deal with the covetousness which is at its root. So firstly Jesus speaks about the heart, our subconscious thinking and motives, then he moves on to consider the mind — how we should consciously think.

We cannot serve God and mammon. "Mammon" is equivalent to covetousness — the love of money. If covetousness has a hold on us, it is our master, and we cannot serve God if covetousness is our master. The two will conflict. So what are we to do? Jesus has some practical advice. In verse 25 he begins with the word "Therefore". You can't serve two masters, therefore this is what you should do, this is how you should think. So his next words will be the key, the answer, the way to avoid serving two masters, the way out of being a slave to covetousness.

Attitudes And Consequences

Jesus rightly regards our attitude towards basic things like food and clothes as vital, because they are roots, causes with major effects and consequences. Sodom was a very wicked city, full of abominations. But that wickedness was the consequence of a root. In Ezekiel 16:49 we find out what the root was — not what we would expect at all: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread and abundance of idleness was in her ... neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy". No mention of homosexuality and violence. Those are the consequences, the effects. The roots, the causes, were indulgent eating, luxurious materialism, and excess leisure time. We see exactly the same roots in Western society today — and now we're also seeing the consequences.

Similarly, Babylon the whore, who was guilty of "abominations and filthiness" and "drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs" (Revelation 17:4,6), is depicted as primarily a society of materialistic luxury. The bible speaks of "the abundance of her delicacies ... she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously" (Revelation 18:3,7). These are the roots which result in abominable filthiness and sin of every kind.

At the root of all this materialistic luxury is a condition of the heart, covetousness. People say that the devil's sin was pride, but I would say it was covetousness. Satan coveted God's position; he wanted to be like God. That's what led to his rebelliousness. Likewise, in the first human sin, Eve coveted the fruit and the wisdom it would bring; that led to her disobedience.

Daniel's Way

Daniel shows us the opposite way. Given the opportunity of a luxurious and indulgent lifestyle, he refused it, and deliberately asked for a simple lifestyle (see Daniel 1:8-16). He would not eat the king's food. The reason may partly have been that some of it was not "kosher", but that's not the whole explanation; Daniel didn't have to live on a diet of lentils to be kosher. The reason is that he wanted to live simply and differently. I'm sure the king's food and wine was choice fare, and I'm sure Daniel would have loved to eat it. But he fought against whatever covetous desires he may have had by making a rod for his back and going the opposite way.

The Heart

It's the condition of the heart that is important. Paul knew that food offered to idols doesn't defile the heart, and Daniel knew it too. But Daniel also knew that covetousness, the desire for rich food, luxury, status and privilege, does defile the heart. It's not rich food that's wrong, it's the desires of the heart. Jesus said that what goes into our mouth doesn't defile us, it's what comes out of our mouth that defiles us; because what goes in cannot touch the heart, but what comes out reveals what is in the heart (see Matthew 15:11,17-20). "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity ... it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:6,8). "Put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth" (Colossians 3:8). The mouth is not a gateway to the heart. The eyes and ears are a gateway to the heart; things reach the heart through them; but the mouth reveals the heart.

In primitive and simple societies, where necessity enforces an unvaried, plain diet, the problems of materialism do not exist; at least not to nearly the same extent as in the West. But in our consumer-oriented society, we face the problem of "overchoice", a bewildering array of foods and lifestyles to choose from. Food has become far more than a matter of nutrition; now it's a matter of status. Some people wouldn't dream of shopping at Aldi; everything must be from Sainsbury's or Marks and Spencers. It's not that there's anything wrong with Aldi's food, it's just a lower class of shop, "beneath" some people's status.

Fads and Fashions

Exotic foods have become wildly popular. Affluence, increased leisure time and the vast range of multi-cultural foods now available have allowed us to explore our taste for the exotic and the expensive. Strangely enough, expensive foods, like expensive drinks, are actually acquired tastes — they don't have any appeal at first. So people will spend exorbitant amounts of money on foods that they don't actually enjoy until they have acquired the taste!

Healthy eating is a good thing — but it has grown way out of hand. Some people are so obsessed with health that they supplement a perfectly adequate diet with all sorts of vitamins and nutritional "boosts". I knew a person who regularly spent up to £300 per month on vitamin supplements. The strange thing was that he always seemed to have a cold! In fact, by pumping his body full of

vitamins, he was breaking down his immune system, and weakening his resistance to disease. Eventually he became seriously ill with M.E.

The Command To Eat Meat

Vegetarianism is another common habit. It shouldn't be, for Christians. Perhaps that surprises you. Why is it wrong to eat only vegetables? Simply because God commanded that we should also eat meat. In the beginning, Adam was told to eat only fruit and vegetables — “every herb bearing seed” (Genesis 1:29). But after the flood, God saw fit to give man a daily reminder of the sacrifice and death which was necessary for his redemption. He changed the rules, and said to Noah, “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you” (Genesis 9:3).

Today, when meat comes from the supermarket shelves, we have lost the associations of death and sacrifice which go along with eating meat. Relatively few people today have witnessed at first hand a sheep or a cow being slaughtered. More's the pity. God intended it to be a part of our lives.

Dieting and figure-consciousness are more important in our society than ever. The media have conspired to make us an image conscious society. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are the new diseases of our age, brought on by the desperate desire to conform to an image, to be someone we are not. It's just another sort of covetousness.

Temples Of God

Our bodies are temples of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), and it is right that we should take care of them, not abuse them. To live on fatty junk foods and clog your arteries up so your heart can't function properly is abusing your body, just as much as destroying your liver with alcohol. But the “temple of the Spirit” argument can also be taken too far. “Hollywood for Jesus” aficionados in America insist that Jesus should have the best, and that if we are his temples, we should be glamorous for him, wear the most expensive clothes for him, be the most beautiful for him. The problem is that, for one thing, such a lifestyle contradicts the simplicity and humility of the gospel at every point; for another, God is concerned about our inward beauty — “the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 96:9). The outward will all get burned up, decay and die. It's what's inside that matters.

As it happens, inward beauty will always reflect outwardly in some way, and a healthy spirit will often manifest in a healthy body. Healthy bodies come from healthy attitudes. That's not to say that there aren't many holy saints suffering illness or physical handicap, just as there are physically beautiful people who are spiritually vile. But the principle holds true, what is on the inside will reveal itself on the outside.

Be Carefree

Jesus keeps on saying that we should “take no thought”. He means anxious thought, or “care”, as it is used in the scripture “Be careful for nothing” — in other words, “Be carefree”. Anxiety is closely

related to covetousness. This may at first be surprising; but on examination, anxiety is only the flip side of positive covetousness. Anxiety says, “What if I don’t get what I want; what if I don’t get what I need?” Most of the time, “what I need” is actually only what I think I need. Usually it is not really essential at all. It’s all in the mind, whether it’s the “positive” covetousness of desire or the negative covetousness of anxiety. And if it’s all in the mind, then a change in our conscious thinking is the solution.

A healthy attitude is recommended by Jesus. He gives the example of the birds. You don’t find anxious birds, and you don’t find overweight birds, because birds aren’t covetous, they don’t have the materialistic wealth of “overchoice”, and they don’t know what “image” and “status” are. God feeds them, and their nutrition is enough to satisfy them. It should be enough to satisfy us too — not that we should live on bread and gruel every day, but that we should seek to simplify our lifestyle in every area, and food is a big area.

The world seeks to satisfy its covetous heart with food, and with the attendant significances of status, image and lifestyle which are attached to food. In a world besotted by materialistic luxury, in a decadent society, we need to exercise great caution, lest we unconsciously slip into the habits of the world and accept its values for ourselves.

Seek The Kingdom

The best form of defence is attack. The best antidote is to go the opposite way, as Daniel did. Jesus offers us a key piece of advice: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (v.33.) That’s the solution: live for the kingdom, not for the world. They’re opposites. From the very first beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is at pains to contrast this present world with the kingdom of heaven. Seek the kingdom: actively set your mind on it, set your hopes and desires and ambitions on that kingdom, and act in accordance. Once again, it calls for a change in our conscious thinking, a change of mindset — living daily in accordance with the values of God’s righteous kingdom, not this unrighteous world with its greed and its perverted, upside-down values.

“All these things shall be added ...” There is a great promise here, and so many of us miss out on it. We are so anxious to provide for ourselves, we take so much thought and care for ourselves, that God never gets a chance to provide for us. He must be frustrated. If only we would obey and “take no thought”, we would see God’s miraculous provision, and that would be a tremendous testimony to the world, and a tremendous encouragement to our faith!

How important is food to you? Why is it important? You need to ask yourself these questions. Each day will bring you ample opportunity to realise the answers — at every mealtime, at the supermarket, when you watch the adverts on TV. Now what you are going to do about it. How are you going to “take no thought”? How are you going to live differently from the world?

Experiences From Life

Are You Defiling The Temple

by Joanna Barratt

When I first left home at 16 years of age to live in a flat, I had an extremely low income. Bills like rent, electricity, gas, tithes, etc., took priority and what remained was spent on food. It's quite amazing how cheaply you can live if you don't mind not having a varied diet.

I didn't have the luxury of a fridge, so many things had to change. For instance I had to use powdered milk, as fresh milk would have gone sour waiting to be used up. Crispbreads replaced bread as it didn't go mouldy. The lady at church who prepared the Communion used to give me the bread which was left over so I was able to enjoy beans on real toast for my Sunday lunch — delicious! I wasn't so fortunate with the sausages though. I would buy a pack of 8 skinless sausages and have 2 for a meal. By the time I got down to the last 2 they were quite furry so I washed and fried them very well and said a long "grace" over them to make sure they were edible. I may have eaten very frugally but I was extremely healthy and never even bothered to register with a doctor until I caught the flu' about 10 years later. And even now I only see a doctor when I'm pregnant or giving birth! The fact that I could only afford basic rather than luxury foods had its own compensations ... I began to lose the puppy fat that I'd always thought of as 'my big build', and I found that underneath it all I only had a small frame.

"Only Eat When Hungry"

I lived alone for 10 years in a flat and took on board the philosophy that I should only eat when hungry. When meal times came around I would ask myself if I was really hungry, and if I wasn't that particularly bothered about eating then I would wait until I was. I became very undisciplined and didn't have a regular mealtime pattern, which meant that when I was busy I could go all day without eating, but when I was bored or at weekends I would eat anything I could get my hands on, which caused me to do everything possible to make sure I was always busy.

I suppose it was inevitable, the more weight I lost the more notice people took of me — especially the opposite sex, and my appearance became very, very important to me. When I was plump men would make crude comments about the size of my rear or chest, but the slimmer I became I found that their gaze lifted until it reached my face and it was a wonderful experience to find men looking into my eyes when they spoke with me instead of ogling at my well endowed body. I began to feel feminine, womanly and grown up.

The Problems Begin

My real problems started when I began to live by faith and worked voluntarily for the church. Because I wasn't earning a wage any more God provided me with sponsors who took me into their

own home and treated me as part of their family. I always felt in their debt, so I did as much as I could to make myself useful, baking cakes and other fancy foods to last through the coming week. I wasn't used to regular, proper meals and before long I noticed the weight beginning to creep on again, much to my dismay. Then one evening something happened.

I was eating the Saturday evening 'chippy' supper when a chip got stuck in my throat (even now I don't know how that was possible) and seemed to rip the lining of my gullet. I was coughing for ages trying to get it up but it was resistant. With my eyes streaming and my coughing continuous I retired to bed, lying down with my mouth open, as saliva poured out so fast that I couldn't swallow fast enough to get rid of it. Eventually I thought of making myself sick in the hope that it would bring up the offending blockage. Almost as soon as I put my hand in my mouth I vomited up the blockage, together with what looked like everything else I'd eaten during that whole day. And I was amazed at how quickly my stomach had reacted. I went to bed feeling very empty and my throat very sore. But that one action had triggered something off in my mind.

I don't know how soon after this initial event was, but the next time I felt as though I'd over-indulged with my eating I remembered how easily I had brought back my food by making myself sick, and did it again. I began to enjoy that really empty feeling, especially as it meant that if I overate at any time I could be sick and it wouldn't make any difference to my size. The problem was that I didn't limit being sick to times when I'd overeaten, I would be sick after family meals, and eventually it became the routine thing to do after everything I ate.

My situation changed and I took up full time employment again. The more weight I lost, the more confident I felt. The bathroom scales took a prominent place in my bedroom and I was on them at the very least once a day. I got a great thrill out of buying really small sizes in clothes and laughed when people said I had gone skinny and thought that they were just secretly jealous of the fact that I had lost so much weight when they were struggling so hard themselves. I would look into every shop window I came across, not necessarily to view the goods that were displayed, but to see myself in their reflection and make sure my proportions were as I desired them to be.

Paranoid

No matter how slim I became, I never reached the point where I was content. I became paranoid about gaining weight. People began to worry about my weight loss, not just women at work who were mad jealous of me because I was receiving so much male attention, but people who really loved me and were concerned for me. My minister in particular made a point of praying earnestly for me, and tried on several occasions to broach the subject of food and eating properly. But for some reason I was extremely defensive and sensitive and would not enter into any sort of conversation concerning my health or diet, even though by this time things were getting way out of control and my health was beginning to suffer. I began to notice my vision blurring, my teeth loosening and instances where I was on the point of fainting in public places. But even these occurrences didn't frighten me enough to control what had now become a dangerous habit.

But God is very good. Sometimes we won't ask for help until we are so desperate and broken that we realise we actually need it. I remember one occasion when I was out shopping with a boyfriend.

By this time my stomach had become so weakened that I couldn't take tea or coffee and was just drinking water. We were in a cafe and he ordered something to eat and drink and I just asked for a glass of water. I only had a sip when I felt an urgency to rush to the toilets to be sick. It was awful. We walked out of the cafe and I began to vomit involuntarily in the street — right there in front of passers by, and I just couldn't control myself. I felt so embarrassed. This happened on a couple of occasions, and I realised that my habit had gone way too far. It is one thing to make yourself sick, but it is completely different when your body begins to automatically reject food and drink. A situation like that results in death. I'm ashamed to say that even as a Christian I had always secretly desired a disease that would make me slim, but now that I had Bulimia, I felt scared ... thank God!

Shortly after this incident I was mercifully at the home of the minister with him and some members of his family. We were having friendly conversation until things began to get a little personal. My eating disorder was mentioned and I immediately got defensive. I fought off the advice and help that was being offered as I had done on so many occasions in the past, but this time I was weakened by the fact that I'd had a few scares to make me think seriously about what was happening to me. Eventually I told the minister that if it was a point of real concern to him then he could pray for me. He acted quickly on this licence I had given him and laid his hands on my head. As soon as his hands were in place I saw a vision in my mind of a devil sitting in the pit of my stomach eating everything that came down my gullet and laughing. In an instant I knew that this devil wanted to destroy God's plan for my life and would kill me to do it. Prior to seeing this devil I had been under the impression that being sick had been my idea, but now I realised that it had been fiendish and a sinister deception. Something rose up inside me and I wanted to fight back at this evil that had taken control of my life. For the very first time I wanted to be rid of this satanic influence that I had secretly desired. I began to pray in tongues as the minister had his hands on my head praying for me and once again felt the familiar desire to be sick, but this time as I got up and rushed to his sink to vomit, I saw in a vision this devil being vomited up out of my stomach, and God completely delivered me.

Do you know, if we lived the way God intended us to live we would never have to worry about food, the lack of it or the abundance of it? It's interesting to note that when God provided food supernaturally, i.e. the children of Israel with manna, Elisha with the cruse of oil and meal, etc., He didn't think of giving a varied diet, only the basic necessities to pacify the hunger. Jesus said, "Take no thought for what you eat or drink", in other words, don't place so much importance on it. Food is to keep you alive. We don't have to pamper the flesh just because we have the money to be able to buy those luxuries we enjoy so much, what about keeping someone else alive with the money we would spend on our indulgences ... God knows there are millions in the world starving to death whilst we concern ourselves with looking at the labels to buy foods with fewer calories or less fat!