

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 44

Take No Thought For Your Clothes

by Maurice Barratt

Jesus tells us, "Take no thought for your life". In the last issue we considered our attitude to food. Now I want to look at the subject of clothes. Food is to do with the inward, what goes into our bodies, but clothes are to do with the outward, what is on display to the world; and that makes it in one way more important than food. Choice of clothes is of absolutely vital importance to millions of people in western society today, especially so because clothes are associated with our "image". What we wear has come to be a statement about who we are. We determine our image by our choice of fashion. Thus experts now say that 21st century shopping will be "an emotional construction kit for the self". Yet Jesus tells us to not even think about what we wear.

The Myth Of Self-Image

The clothes manufacturers and marketers fully realise, of course, that who we really are has nothing whatsoever to do with what we wear. But they have incessantly pushed the myth that we can create a "self" and a "self-image" through our choice of clothes. Buy the clothes, and you buy the image, whether it's cool and trendy, elegant and sophisticated, or dignified and official. What drives this massive multi-million pound industry? Why will people swap one perfectly good set of clothes for another (more expensive) set in a few months' time, just to "keep in"?

The answer is covetousness. Remember that in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is focusing on covetousness as a root of man's problems—and that includes Christians. Covetousness is, to adapt the phrase, what makes the world go around. Mammon, love of money, covetousness, rules the world. But Jesus says we cannot serve God and mammon—we can't have both kingdom thinking and the world's thinking. Paul says, "Don't be conformed to this world"; James says, "Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (Romans 12.2, James 4.4). The whole attitude, disposition and mindset of the world is totally at odds with God's way. And covetousness is a mindset. "Image" is a mindset. "Fashion" is a mindset.

Covetousness, independence and disobedience are all linked. In Joshua 7, Achan, an Israelite soldier, saw a sumptuous robe amongst the spoils of Jericho after they had taken the city, and he took it into his tent along with some silver and gold. But God had told Israel to not take any of the spoil; it was all to be burnt, and the silver and gold put into the Lord's treasury (Joshua 6.17-19). Achan's covetousness got the better of him; it led to independence and disobedience, and in Achan's case, to his death as a punishment and an example to all Israel.

A Severe Judgement

Exactly the same principle was in operation in the early church. Ananias and Sapphira sold some land and gave the proceeds to the apostles. But, out of covetousness and a desire to inflate their reputation, they kept some of the money to themselves and lied to Peter about it, and God moved swiftly and sharply to stamp out this emergent covetousness in the church, striking Ananias and Sapphira dead. In the Old and New Testaments, God is equally severe with covetousness. It's as if he was saying, "This must be dealt with, at any cost." Out of all the temptations God's people faced, this was the one that God would not tolerate. That should be a sobering lesson to us all, in this materialistic age which is so utterly dominated by covetousness. We are to be of a different spirit. Take no thought for your life. Take no thought for clothes. The mindset of covetousness will make us independent and disobedient, as it did Achan. Disobedience is the consequence; covetousness is the root.

No Fence To Sit On

If we do not have this radical kingdom way of thinking, we will be serving mammon. There is nothing surer. There is no middle ground, no fence to sit on. We will be covetous for the things of this world unless our whole heart and soul and mind and strength is turned towards God's kingdom, God's righteousness, God's ways. And it's a battle. We all have an old nature, and we all covet our independence, and that makes us inclined to disobey God. As Christians we are not immune from this, and the greatest danger of all is not so much that we become covetous, but that we become covetous and justify it in the name of Christianity. The church in Laodicea received some particularly harsh and cutting words from Jesus, because they justified their covetousness. "I will vomit you out of my mouth, because you say, 'I'm rich, I have plenty of goods, I'm prospering, I don't need anything', and you don't know that you're wretched, miserable, poverty-stricken, blind, and naked." (Revelation 3.16,17). That may not sound like the Jesus you know. But it's the same God who hated covetousness in Achan's day and in Ananias' day, and who hates it in our day.

Babylon

The culmination of this world's system is Babylon, and in Revelation Babylon epitomizes covetousness. She "glorified herself, and lived deliciously"; and "she says in her heart, 'I sit as a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow'". But what is God's verdict? "As much as she has glorified herself and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her ... her plagues [shall] come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine"; and she, like the spoil of Jericho, "shall be utterly burned with fire" (Revelation 18.7,8).

The body is not for food, for luxurious living, or for clothes, for creating an image for ourselves; it is for God. "Yield your members as instruments of righteousness ... Present your bodies a living sacrifice ... You are not your own, for you are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (Romans 6.13, 12.1, 1 Corinthians 6.19,20). Jesus said that his food was "to do the will of him that sent me" (John 4.30).

But how can we not even take thought for our clothing? Isn't that taking things a bit too far? Is Jesus saying we should wear rags? Not at all. What he is saying is that we shouldn't be anxious about these things; we shouldn't let them occupy our minds. To dress suitably for an occasion and to plan what you are going to wear is absolutely right. But to be obsessed and worried about it, or to be turning over the options all the time in your mind, or to be concerned what people will think of you or whether you are creating the right image—this is all the sort of “taking thought” that Jesus warns us against.

Be As You Are

We are not to use clothes to create an image. God sees us as we are, and people should as well. Flamboyant personalities can wear flamboyant clothes if they want, and quiet people can dress with sobriety and subtlety. That's merely an expression of personality. But don't let your clothes create your expression. That's just a mask, and we are not meant to hide behind an image. Be as you are. A suit doesn't make a millionaire, and rags don't make a beggar. It's the person that counts; just be yourself, and don't think any more about it. The kingdom is far more important than how you look.

“Hollywood for Jesus” types may insist that we ought to buy the best and wear the best for God because God is the best. Well, God may have “the best” in heaven. But he doesn't tell us to emulate his life in heaven. He tells us to imitate the lifestyle his Son had on earth. Born in a backstreet cowshed, growing up in a backwater of Israel, he chose for his ministry a lifestyle where he had “nowhere to lay his head”, and he had no truck with luxury, materialism or money. If the gospels tell us anything it is that these things were never once of any concern whatever to him.

What Did Jesus Do?

“But”, you may say, “didn't Jesus own an expensive seamless robe - valuable enough for the soldiers to cast lots for it at his crucifixion rather than rip it up and divide it between them?” Yes—many people supported Jesus in many ways. They provided him with money and food and clothes. Often he ate with rich people. But not because he wanted a luxurious lifestyle. And if Jesus wore a quality garment, that is hardly equatable with a designer suit or a fashion wardrobe. To argue such things about Jesus' robe is really clutching at straws. Jesus proved by his life and his death that only God, and God's kingdom, and God's will, mattered to him. And his conclusion in this passage is that God's kingdom and his righteousness should also be our only concerns (Matthew 16.33). If they are, then we will find that God provides everything we need. Like Jesus, and like Paul, sometimes we will abound and sometimes we will be abased. Paul said he could cope quite happily with both situations (see Philippians 4.12). He had the right mindset; he took no thought about the situation either way. His concern was with the kingdom.

But if we are always looking after our own welfare, providing for ourselves, how can God provide for us? Every father wants to be a good provider for his children, and God is no exception. He wants to prove to us what a faithful father and provider he is, if we will let him. And there are plenty of things Jesus tells us to do, each one of which is radical enough, if we throw ourselves into it wholeheartedly, to necessitate God's miraculous provision in our lives in some way, small or great.

Do I mean that we should all stop work and “sell up” so that we can prove God’s provision? Am I saying that it’s lack of faith to have a job and earn a wage? Of course not. To give up your job in order to “prove God” would more likely be presumption than faith. God may want you to keep on working hard, earn a good wage, and give money to the poor or support an evangelist or pastor. God has used many rich businessmen for exactly these purposes. The issue isn’t the money we earn or the job we have; it’s our attitude to our money and to material things. It’s just that if we do obey Jesus’ command to seek the kingdom first, there will come a time sooner or later (God will see to it) when our resources fall short—and that is when God will have his chance to prove himself as “Jehovah Jireh”, our provider.

What Brings Contentment?

We have been conditioned, by the world, into the belief that material things will bring contentment. Jesus tells us that not only is this not true, but the opposite is true. Seeking after material things will bring misery, blindness and spiritual destitution. Only seeking God’s kingdom will bring the satisfaction we crave—seeking treasures in heaven. Seeking treasures on earth is covetousness; seeking treasures in heaven brings contentment. In 1 Timothy 6, Paul warns that Christians who suppose that “gain is godliness”, i.e. that material prosperity and godliness are the same thing, are “men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth”. He instructs Timothy to keep away from such people.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain”. We should be content with sufficient food and clothes, no more; for “they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.” Strong words, and far stronger when we realise that they are targeted at Christians: “For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith ...”

Erring from the faith, destruction, perdition ... these warnings remind us that we should not forget Ananias and Achan in our age. Jesus said that before he returns, men would be obsessed with the cares of this world and material gain; eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building (Luke 17.26-30). And his warnings to the servants who are not alert and watchful are severe. Get your eyes off material prosperity, and onto Jesus and his kingdom. The race is not over yet!

Experiences From Life

No Need For Fig Leaves

by Joanna Barratt

It must have been wonderful to live during the time when Jesus walked the earth. Decision making must have been so simple compared to today. I don’t recall anywhere in the bible where it talks

about people getting undressed for bed and slipping into their pyjamas or night wear, they must have worn the same thing day in and day out, only changing garments when they were filthy and needed to be washed. Boring? Yes, but what a fuss free lifestyle.

I must be one of the very fortunate ones, because my parents couldn't afford to kit me out in designer clothes as a tot, so I never really worried about what I wore. My clothes came from either the neighbours or jumble sales. I can vividly remember the first time my younger sister and I were taken to a store to get something new when I was about 9 years old - we both got a pink 'Duster Coat' each which cost £2 from a fire salvage store. Mum set to work making dresses for us from an old pair of floral curtains and, together with our little pink coats we wore them for the Whit Walks which were regularly held in those days. I was a real tomboy when I was a kid, but in this outfit I almost felt like a princess.

My first worry concerning clothes occurred when I moved up into the senior school and was obliged to wear a uniform. Mum and dad tried their very best to get a grant to cover the cost as they couldn't afford to buy one, but to no avail. I managed to salvage an old shirt and tie from my older brother who fortunately went to the same school, but had to make my own skirt and jumper (and I was only 11 years old!). My brother in law had a job emptying dustbins and he'd been put on a round where he had to dispose of rubbish from clothing warehouses. He'd brought home bags of sewing threads (some of which I still use today), remnants of material and a pile of white polar necked jumpers which had been thrown out. I bought a navy blue dye from the shops and used it on one of the jumpers. When it was dry I cut off the neck and cut out a "V" which I stitched as neatly as I could to make my school jumper. The skirt was just a basic "A" shape out of some of the material salvaged from the bags, and there I had my uniform. On the first day of term I stood with all the other "new" kids dressed in their navy pleated skirts, blazers and satchels and I think for the first time in my life knew I looked an absolute mess, but at least I was wearing a uniform.

I was still pretty unconcerned about clothes right up to leaving school and starting employment. My wardrobe offered nothing to wear at a real job so I had to set out again making some clothes. I made 2 "A" line skirts which I wore alternately, and knitted 2 short, sleeveless tops. Because I wore a cardigan over these little tops I did the fronts in one colour wool and the backs in another colour so that I could turn them round on different days - thus it looked as though I had 4 tops altogether. I was still fairly happy with this situation until I noticed the male species, and this altered everything. I became very conscious of my appearance and also began to notice the other women at work and their effect on men. Television, magazines and advertising hoards also shouted their messages, and I realised I just didn't have the image that a girl my age should have. Mini skirts were the order of the day and it didn't matter what shape you were, if you didn't wear the same as everyone else then you just weren't "with it". Even though I was plump and my legs the wrong shape I made myself mini skirts, even hot pants! And when the cold weather came I would wear 2, sometimes even 3 pairs of tights with long boots to fight off the shivers whilst I relentlessly gave way to fashion. Conformity is a curse which never brings freedom, and while I worked in firms I always conformed to the image of that particular company, formal in offices, outrageous in advertising agencies, never really knowing the real me.

The beaches presented similar problems. I have seen vast changes in swim and beachwear during my lifetime, from all-encompassing swimsuits, to bikinis, to topless, to tiny thongs, and back again.

These changes are more easily coped with when you are middle aged or older, but for the young they present enormous pressure which challenges your morals and conscience to see how far you will go to fit in with what everyone else is doing. I have, in the past, thought that it was somewhat easier to be different from the world in my speech, readily professing my Christian beliefs, rather than be different in my dress. Why is this? The world has forced us so deceptively and cleverly into its mould that many Christians are afraid to break free and be different in their manner of dress. I suppose it's rather like going on holiday to a foreign country. For a couple of weeks, even months, it's relatively easy to continue to wear your customary dress, but if you decide to live in the community it's not long before you adopt the dress of everyone around you so that you are accepted into their culture and society. Do we want to be accepted into the worldly culture? For many of us the answer, even though we wouldn't like to admit it, is yes!

I remember quite recently travelling on a plane and during the flight a man and then his partner walked through the aisle to use the toilets. I was immediately struck by the fact that they were both very obviously Jewish. The man wore the black hat and coat, with ringlets and all the rest that goes with it, and the woman also stood out to be very orthodox in her dress. I turned in my mind directly to the scripture in the bible where God was telling the Israelites that He wanted them to be a peculiar people, different from everyone else around in neighbouring countries so that everyone would know by their appearance (not even by their speech) that they belonged to Him. You might think this is taking scripture too far to consider dressing differently from others in today's world, nevertheless it gave me food for thought.

When I was pregnant with Nathan God spoke to Maurice and told him that He wanted him to smarten himself up and present himself in a more dignified manner. Prior to this Maurice had considered himself a musician and as we travelled we would take our instruments with us - Maurice had 2 bass guitars, I had a keyboard, and I would sing to live backing. In between the songs Maurice would remain seated on his high stool and talk to the congregations or audiences dressed in his frilly or glittery shirts which I had made, because he wanted to present the image of being a musician rather than a preacher. But God told him to change his image. This gave us no cause for concern, as being in the ministry we didn't have money to buy clothes, so we didn't act immediately. But God meant what He said and decided to take the matter into His own hands. During a weekends ministry at a church the minister asked Maurice to try a suit jacket on. It fitted perfectly. He then went back upstairs and brought down the accompanying trousers, together with 7 other suits, and gave them to him. Problem solved! Or was it? Maurice was still very reluctant to sit on his stool as a musician wearing formal suits - it just didn't look the part. So whilst I was still pregnant and on holiday, we received a telephone call from home to say that we had been robbed and only the musical instruments and P.A. equipment had been taken - apart from 2 leather jackets which belonged to Maurice. Now it wasn't only a change of clothes, but a change of ministry. I now sang to backing tapes, but Maurice had a new job and was forced to preach!

I found preparing for a new baby was quite a stressful time as being in the ministry I couldn't afford to buy all the things I needed. Maurice would often tell me not to worry because God knew about my needs and would provide everything when the time came, but sometimes I would resent this situation because I wanted my little baby to have things I had personally chosen which were new. But on reflection I am really glad that God didn't bless (or curse) us with spare cash because it's so easy to waste money in this area. Babies and children grow so quickly, changing sizes from month to

month, outgrowing clothes, toys, cradles, prams, and so many other things which can cost a small fortune. I didn't have to buy a thing for Nathan, nor for Izaac or Tamar, other than school jumpers and sturdy shoes, and sometimes my children have been given so much good quality, and in some cases designer clothes, that I don't know what to do with them. God promised Maurice and I once that if we looked after His house, then He would look after ours, and he has fulfilled His side of that promise over and over again.

I also have been provided with beautiful clothes, some of which are so elegant and classy that I don't know who would wear those which don't fit me. I remember once singing in a youth prison. I was walking through the corridors wearing a gorgeous vivid green cashmere coat with a velvet collar, accompanied by a couple of men who were carrying my P.A equipment and overheard a couple of young men talking to each other in a doorway as I passed them, "Hey, the television's here!" I wanted to laugh, because at that time I really did look the part and knew they were serious and very impressed. And God really blessed that night. The kids, after initially showing off and being witty, settled down and became very intent as they listened silently to my message to them from God.

I think the thing I have been most blessed with is lack of finance. Some people will find this particular statement impossible to believe. But because I have no personal money of my own, and the money given to our ministry is spent on getting out our message via television, books, audio cassettes & C.d.'s etc., we leave God to provide us with everything we personally need.

I never worry about clothes. I can honestly say that I can "take no thought for clothes" because I have enough stock of good quality, classy clothes, to last me for another 20 years. And after each pregnancy I have had my wardrobe to look at for the incentive to lose all that weight gained so that I can get back into God's bountiful provision for me.