

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 51

SEEK: YOU SHALL FIND

Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 7:7

by Maurice Barratt

This is the second part of Jesus' statement on prayer. In the last issue we looked at the first part: asking. This next part is a progression. Asking is simple and easy, and requires no effort. Seeking is more costly; it demands time and energy. It is an active pursuit. You can ask for something while sitting down. But to seek something, you have to get up and move.

God is always looking for people who will seek him. "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God" (Psalm 14.2). But what does he find? "There is none that seeketh after God" (Romans 3.11). There's a stark, blunt statement! What it tells us is that seeking God goes against the grain; it is not natural for us; and that's why it needs effort. Many people will ask, but not many will seek. So when God does find people who seek him, they are close to his heart. "Thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee" (Psalm 9.10). "God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11.6).

You don't seek for what you already have. An obvious thing to say, perhaps, but many Christians don't seek God because they think they already have him. But Paul, even at the end of his life, was still saying that his aim was "that I may know him ... not as though I had already attained, or were already made perfect, but I follow after ... I press towards the mark" (Philippians 3.10,12,14). We all need to know God more, and to know him more we need to seek him more.

The Conditions

We noted in the last issue that Jesus' statement is not unconditional. We cannot ask for just anything and expect to receive it. We are to ask for good gifts. And the same principle applies to seeking. We must seek good things; then we can have the confidence that we shall find them. What "good things" can we seek?

1. Seek God himself.

If it is good to seek good gifts, it is better still to seek the giver of the gifts. An old hymn says, "My goal is God himself, not joy, nor peace, Nor even blessing, but himself, my God". "If from [captivity] thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deuteronomy 4.29). God doesn't say, seek deliverance, or seek victory, or seek

restoration; he says “seek him”; and it must be with the whole heart. “Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29.13). Asking is just from the mind; seeking God is something that must be done from the heart. It demands the effort of your whole being.

2. Seek God’s favour.

“If my people shall ... seek my face ... then will I hear from heaven” (2 Chronicles 7.14). There is a difference between seeking God’s face and seeking his hand. Seeking his hand means seeking what he has to give; seeking his face means you want to see how he looks. Is he pleased? Angry? Grieved? God is not the same all the time towards us. We ought to know, if we say we have a living relationship with God. And we need to know, if we are going to pray effectively. Moses knew when God was angry because God spoke to him “face to face”. Because Moses saw God’s face, he could intercede at the vital moment and save a nation from destruction. Seeking God’s face is essential for effective intercession.

3. Seek justice.

“Cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1.16,17). Seeking justice doesn’t come easy. We’re naturally selfish, we have our own agendas, our own bias in everything. We don’t see things objectively. That’s why we need to seek justice, for God to tell us what is the right thing to do, whether it is personally, or in our close relationships, or in the church, or in the world. Again, it’s not just a matter of asking; it needs diligent seeking.

4. Seek righteousness.

“Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you” (Hosea 10.12). Today is certainly a time to seek the Lord in our nation, which has fallen back so far from righteousness. We need to seek God for the rain of righteousness to return; but it will take effort. The fallow ground needs breaking up. Rain does no good to hard ground; in fact it only compacts it and makes it harder. We need brokenness before we can have righteousness, and that brokenness is part of the effort of seeking God.

5. Seek God’s will.

But we must realize that we cannot seek God’s will and our own will at the same time. Jesus said he did not seek his own will but God’s, and because of that, he was unbiased and just in everything he said and did. “My judgement is just, because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5.30).

6. Seek to edify the church.

“Forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church” (1 Corinthians 14.12). Paul tells us which gifts will edify the church. Tongues is not an edifying gift in the church unless there is also interpretation or prophecy. To speak in tongues requires little effort. But to receive a word from God, we must seek God from the heart. Words of prophecy are sometimes given out very lightly and easily. Many times they are not genuine prophecy at all. That’s why we need to test them (1 Corinthians 14.29). Often such words do not edify or build up the church at all; on the contrary, they destroy it, destroying faith and causing division and problems in the Body. True prophecy comes from men who seek God diligently with their whole heart.

7. Seek heavenly things.

“Seek those things which are above ... set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3.1,2). It’s natural to seek earthly things: earthly comforts, earthly relationships, earthly treasures, earthly ambitions. So it takes effort to seek other things, heavenly things - relationship with God, treasures in heaven, ambition for the kingdom. It doesn’t come naturally. We have to push ourselves. But Jesus says that if we do it, then God will make sure that we have all the earthly things we need. “Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6.33). If we make his kingdom our priority, he will make our earthly welfare his responsibility.

Hindrances to finding God

It seems we have a clear-cut principle here; seek good things and God will always give them. But it is possible to ask for the right things and still not receive them; it is possible to seek God and not find him. The principle “Seek and you shall find” still stands. But one law can supersede another. The law of aerodynamics appears to “break” the law of gravity, but the law of gravity still stands; it has just been superseded by another, higher law. And the same is true with God.

When there is disobedience in your life, you will not find God when you seek him. “When Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled. And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets” (1 Samuel 28.5,6). Why did God not answer Saul? Because of Saul’s prior disobedience. And Saul proved that the same stubborn spirit of disobedience was still in him, because when God didn’t answer him, he sought a woman that had a familiar spirit.

If you seek God with a wrong motive, he will not answer you. God said of Israel, “They seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness” (Isaiah 58.2). Yet God did not answer, and they were puzzled. “Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our souls, and thou takest no knowledge?” (v. 3). God tells them they were fasting with the wrong motive. “Behold, you fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness” (v. 4). They were fasting and praying to try and get their own way, to get what

they wanted. Their motives were all wrong. Many Christians do the same, and they wonder why God does not answer.

Lack of faith will stop God from answering. James says we can ask for wisdom and God will give it to us, but we must ask in faith, “for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord” (James 1.6,7). Clearly, lack of faith is a hindrance to receiving the answer. Paul says that Israel, who sought after righteousness, didn’t attain it because they didn’t seek it by faith (Romans 9.31). “Without faith it is impossible to please him; for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11.6).

The Blessings of Seeking

But aside from these qualifications, if we set ourselves to diligently seek God, tremendous things can happen. King Josiah brought revival to Israel because “while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father” (2 Chronicles 34.3). Ezra was able to lead the captives back to Jerusalem “for Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgements” (Ezra 7.10); and that seeking meant effort: “I proclaimed a fast ... that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones ... so we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us” (Ezra 8.21,23). Ezra didn’t presume upon God’s protection and mercy, but sought God’s face. Daniel set himself “to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: and I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession ...” (Daniel 9.3) and in response God sent the angel Gabriel to him with tremendous revelations. Seeking God takes effort, but the results are worth it.

Adversity makes us seek God

There’s nothing like adversity to make us seek God. When we are at ease and in blessing, we rarely have the motivation to make the effort of getting down on our knees and spending time seeking God. But in desperate times, in crisis and affliction, we seek him; and he knows that, so when necessary, God himself will deliberately afflict his people in order to make them seek him. So to backslidden Israel he said, “I will be to Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him. And I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early” (Hosea 5.14,15).

A man of God who I knew well testified the same thing. Caught up in the busyness of his calling and ministry, he was suddenly struck down with cancer. Alone in his hospital bed, he wept. The doctor came to him and asked him what was wrong. “It’s none of your business!” he replied. It was a matter between him and God. “God,” he cried, “what do you have to do to get my attention?” It’s a good question to ask yourself: what will God have to do to you before he gets your attention? If you set yourself to seek him now, you may save yourself much suffering. But through drastic means, God was helping this man to seek him. In hospital he met with God, and God healed him of the cancer, and gave him more years of fruitful ministry.

By becoming seekers after God, we become more like God, the God who sought so many times after backslidden Israel, and more like Jesus, who came “to seek and save the lost”. God seeks those who will seek him.

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

All These Things Shall Be Added!

Permit me this indulgence but I really must share something very personal which has been a tremendous blessing to me and I’m sure will also bless you.

Nathan my eldest child (10) dearly loves the Lord and for the past 6 years has attended a wonderful Christian School, run on godly principles by born-again, Spirit-filled Christians who have adopted the school motto of “Fit For Service”. When Nathan was 6 he was taken, along with some other pupils, to a joint service of Christian schools in the locality where they partook in praise, worship and had a message preached to them. At the end of the meeting Nathan went forward to publicly commit his life to Jesus and made the promise to read his Bible and pray every day.

Nathan took this very seriously and endeavoured to keep his promise. Some nights I would be outside his bedroom unbeknown to him and would hear him talk to God as though He were sitting in the room with him. He would tell God how much he loved Him and wanted to serve Him, and would beg God to guide and direct his life as he only wanted to do His will, whatever that may be. To hear his exuberant chatter would sometimes bring me close to tears as I remembered the abandoned and innocent relationship I once had with God before all the responsibilities stole my freedom and energy.

A Giving Heart

A couple of weeks before Nathan’s 9th birthday, friends of ours from Open Doors came to share what had happened to them on a recent trip to a dangerous country where Christianity is forbidden and made an appeal for financial help to provide Bibles and other helps for the people there. Nathan had been saving for about a year for a bike and had collected around £45, but wanted to help, so asked if he could get some of his own money. Once we had said this was OK he emptied his money-box and put the entire contents into the basket. I was a bit alarmed at this, thinking that he would probably be sorry about it later, but he was adamant, they needed the Bibles more than he needed a bike, and he wanted the money to stay where it was. Maurice said a prayer with him after the meeting and asked God to look after Nathan’s needs (thinking that God would probably provide him with a bike from somewhere), but Nathan was just content to give the money to God.

Give And It Shall Be Given ...

On the Monday following this incident Maurice was due to speak at a house group in Bradford and the man who ran the meeting, knowing that Maurice was interested in musical equipment and knew quite a bit about them, showed him the new guitar which he had bought, but then announced that he wanted to give his old one to Nathan. Maurice expected a well worn, clapped-out guitar to be given to him and was astonished when he brought down a black, hard case which when opened revealed a fur lining and had a compartment for putting plectrums and duster in. The guitar nestling in this beautiful case would be coveted by any serious guitarist, looking just like an Ovation in perfect condition, which could be played both acoustically and electrically ... too much for an 8 year old! But this man believed that God wanted Nathan to have it.

Within 3 months Nathan was strumming out a good, solid rhythm and could play quite a number of chords. He had even begun to write his own songs. Nathan gave away the money that could buy the bike he desired, but God had seen his heart and gave him direction for his future. Nathan knows God wants him to be involved in music, and in the space of a year he has even written Filipino music for a video showing the work going on in the Philippines for some friends of ours.

More Blessings ...

Earlier this year some other friends of ours, together with their 2 children, paid us a visit. The lady, who could also strum on the guitar, asked Nathan to bring his instrument down to play for her husband who had never heard him yet. Nathan loves an audience and was delighted to do this, especially as all my children are very fond of this man who is a very famous rugby player and a tremendous Christian example for them. Nathan started off playing a chorus which we all sang lustily together, than he sang a song which he had written himself. I looked over to the tough, rugged husband and saw his eyes become soft and wet. When Nathan had finished he just smiled at him and told him how much he had appreciated his performance.

The next morning, the same man called again, as his wife and children had stopped overnight with us. But from the doorway, before coming in, he shouted through to me and asked if it was all right for Nathan and Izaac to go to a sports shop with himself and his son. I thought this was a great idea as it would get these boisterous boys out of the way for a short while. But an hour or so later my boys came back with beaming grins from ear to ear and both carried a heavy JJB Sports plastic bag each. They ran to show me what was in them and they both contained ... running shoes, football boots, a track suit and a T-shirt to match. The kids were delighted. I later asked the man privately why he had done this, and he told me that when he saw Nathan playing his guitar with so much love and dedication to God, it had really touched and moved him, and he felt that he just wanted to do something to bless him back. I know Nathan was blessed, especially as Izaac had shared in his blessing, but as the mother, and knowing that Nathan had given his all after seeking God and His will, I feel I was blessed more than everyone.

Izaak's disappointment

God also did something wonderful for little Izaak. He has a lovely personality and because he is the younger brother (6) he knows that he has to wait his turn for most things - "when you're older", or "your turn will come" - but he doesn't complain and he is very generous. Maurice was booked to preach in Belgium during the summer holidays this year, and friends of ours who live close by to the people who accommodate Maurice asked if Nathan and Izaak could also come with him to have a holiday with them and their children. My kids were delighted to be going to another country where they speak a different language and were packed a week before they were due to leave.

On the very morning that Maurice and the boys were due to catch the ferry, Maurice checked through the documents and passports and found to his horror that Izaak's passport was a year out of date! We had to break the news to Izaak, this had been a terrible oversight on our part and it was possible that he may not be able to go after all. I could see Izaak was truly disappointed, but he kept hugging me and telling me that he didn't mind. Maurice did his best to get someone in authority to authorize Izaak's trip, but nobody would give him the OK, the only thing he could do was take Izaak to the ferry, explain the situation and see what happened, but they couldn't guarantee anything, and it was very likely that he would be turned away.

A heartfelt prayer

I saw little Izaak sitting on the floor with his head down and asked what he was doing. "Just thinking", he said. I asked if we should pray together and see if God would make it possible for him to go on the holiday. "You can if you want to, Mum, but I know that sometimes God says no". Oh, the little dear, he didn't want to ask in case he was refused. He didn't feel important enough, yet he didn't feel bitter or resentful, it was just a fact. I wanted to cry. He too had given his heart to Jesus just recently and had tried to follow his older brother reading his bible and praying every night. But he always felt in the shadow of Nathan. God had done so many things for Nathan. I so badly wanted God to show Izaak that he, too, was important, so I prayed with all my heart that God would take care of this situation and let Izaak go.

Alex followed in another vehicle behind Maurice and the boys just in case Izaak was not allowed to get on the ferry, but returned home alone. God had worked a miracle ... and it was a miracle, because Maurice certainly doesn't look like Izaak's father - more like his grandfather! But I received a phone call from an ecstatic little boy saying that God had answered our prayer and he was on the ferry. The Bible tells us to seek the Lord with all our heart and He will grant our hearts desires. My children are learning from a young age that they can rely on God, He is trustworthy.

My Blessing

I also have had a tremendous blessing just recently. Since having a family my life has been turned upside down. The things I considered so important before - quietness and time to seek God - have been snatched away by the broken sleep and daytime demands of young children. I've passed through condemnation, defeat, helplessness, so many emotions, but all the time yearned with all my

heart for the relationship I once had with God. I knew it was only a matter of time before my youngest child, Tamar (3 on 6th December) would also go to school, and so hung on. But a wonderful thing happened.

My children go to a fee-paying Christian school and Maurice just didn't have enough faith to commit himself to send Tamar to the pre-school. But after going to a conference and hearing the message, faith came into his heart and he rang me to say she could start right away, if the school would accept her, instead of after Christmas, when they had the next intake of pupils. He also made me book a break for myself for 5 days at a Christian centre in Wales. As soon as Tamar went to school things changed.

But going on the retreat was what made all the difference. I was on my own with my Bible. I read, prayed, thought and sewed as I listened to a cassette of David Wilkerson I'd found on the premises. I was on holiday with my Best Friend whom I hadn't been alone with for years, and there seemed to be so much catching up to do. I am transformed, refocused, invigorated, it is wonderful. I can thoroughly recommend it. My husband says he has his old (cheek!) wife back. Paul the apostle said that his whole aim was to know Christ ... Make opportunity to seek the Lord and this will truly give you fulfilment.