

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 58

The Two Trees

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 7:17-20

by Maurice Barratt

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” (Matthew 7:15-20)

Jesus is still talking about the false prophets, and he says that the false prophets are corrupt (bad) trees. Or, to be more accurate, the false prophets are branches of a bad tree. It is specifically the branches that bear the fruit. Jesus said to the disciples, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit” (John 15:5). Three things: the tree, the branches and the fruit. Jesus is the tree, the source of the life; we are the branches, pruned in order to bear more fruit, and severed if we do not bear fruit. And the fruit is what we, the branches, produce - the life and character of Christ, the character of the “true vine”.

So it is with false prophets. The bad tree is the devil. The branches of the bad tree are those who “abide in” the devil, the false prophets. And they bear bad fruit, the life and character of the devil.

Change is always possible

It is always possible to change. Branches can be grafted on, spiritually as well as physically. Paul says that we Gentiles have been grafted, like wild olive branches, on to the cultivated olive tree of Israel (see Romans 11:17). A branch from a good tree can be grafted on to a bad tree and start to produce bad fruit, and vice versa. Moreover, you can begin by being fruitful and you can “become unfruitful” like the wheat that was choked by thorns. But you can also change from living an unfruitful life to a fruitful one! While you have breath in your body, you still have the opportunity to change and be fruitful. So do the things that will make you fruitful now, while you still have time! It will be too late on the day when you have to give account (2 Corinthians 5:10).

One of the things that we learn from this is that it is possible to be “cut off” as a Christian. Jesus says that “If a man abide [remain] not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6). Paul is just as clear when he urges us not to boast against the Jews who have been “cut off”: “Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity

of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Romans 11:20-22). John the Baptist had exactly the same message as Jesus: "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance ... the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matthew 3:8-10).

The tree of conscience

In the garden of Eden there were also two trees. One was a good tree and the other a bad tree. You might think that is an over-simplification: the "bad tree" was actually called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", not "the tree of evil" or "the tree of the knowledge of evil". Nevertheless, it was a bad tree, for the simple reason that God did not want Adam and Eve to eat of it. If God doesn't want you to do it, it's bad. If God does want you to do it, it's good. That's all you need to know. No morality, no values of right and wrong. Unfortunately, we do have our own ideas of what's right and wrong, because Adam and Eve ate of that tree. We have a knowledge of good and evil, or of morality, or conscience. It's not what God wanted us to have. He wanted us to be simply obedient to his commands, not to decide whether those commands were good or not.

The other tree was the tree of life. Our choice today is to eat from one of those two trees, because we have both: we inherited the knowledge of good and evil (conscience or morality) from Adam, and we also have access to Christ who is "our life" (Colossians 3:4). This is "the life", the life Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount, which is "more than meat", the life which comes from having Christ and his kingdom reigning and ruling within us.

The wrong choice

As Christians we habitually make the wrong choice and eat the wrong fruit. We've been brought up on it and we're used to it. It's the false prophets who give us the wrong fruit, because they are the "branches" of that tree of knowledge of good and evil. We're taken in by the deceit of it, because it involves the knowledge of good. It's all about morality and thought-out choices: man's ideas of goodness, religion, Christianity and even discipleship. It allows Christianity to become a moral debate or an issue of conscience instead of simple obedience to the commands of Jesus.

When the new creation is complete, on the new earth, there will only be one tree, the tree of life (Revelation 22:2). There is no longer any possibility of sin, of disobedience, of independence. Thank God! But until then, we can choose between the two trees, and here's the rub: it's always more palatable to taste the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. With that tree we're in control, we can decide what's right and good. With the tree of life, Christ, it's pure obedience, whether we like it or not, whether we think it's good or not. That's not so nice. But it brings life to us. And the other tree, though we may not like to think it, brings death – spiritual death. It stifles the free life of the Son of God within us. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

The roots are in the heart

All trees have roots – so where is the root of the false teaching given by the false prophets? The roots are in the heart. In the parable of the sower Jesus talked about the seed falling into good soil, and he said that the soil represents our heart. The soil is where the roots grow. In a statement very similar to that which he makes about the two trees, Jesus says, “A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matthew 12:35). This is another cause of deception, because our hearts are a hidden place which we don’t even know ourselves. Our secret motives are hidden from us. We can believe sincerely that we are following the Lord with a pure heart, but because we don’t know our heart, we may be pure in our sincerity, but our heart’s motives may be far from pure. There may be all sorts of selfish agendas hidden deep within that we are not aware of.

Jesus makes it clear that “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man” (Matthew 15:19,20). God wants truth in our hearts, and he can reveal them to us: “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom” (Psalm 51:6). Paul shows how we can move from the knowledge of God to self-deception and darkness because of the heart’s motives: “When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools ...” (Romans 1:21-22). This is exactly what has happened to the false prophets. They once ate from the tree of life, but somewhere deep down in their heart, they erred, they were disobedient, they began to go the way God did not want them to go. Perhaps they allowed the thorns, (the cares of this life, not “the life”, and the love of money), to choke them and deceive them. And now, Peter says, “it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Peter 2:21). The worst of it is, that now they are deceived themselves, they are deceiving others. Peter again: “There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you ... and many shall follow their pernicious ways” 2 Peter 2:1-2). That’s “many” Christians – many “among you”.

The doctrines of men

The false prophets have been leading Christians astray for a long time. The wisdom that comes from the tree of knowledge of good and evil leads to dogmas, formulas and methods – men’s good ideas, good philosophies, safe-sounding scholarly doctrines that have trapped the church for centuries. In fact, since the false prophets first invaded the church, it has never broken free from the “wrong tree”. By the middle ages a massive system of theology had been built up on completely the wrong foundation, the wisdom of men. Theology was all based, amazingly, on Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, and his way of thought. You couldn’t begin to understand theology without knowing Aristotelian metaphysics! So the Reformers did away with Aristotle, and replaced him with ... Plato, another Greek philosopher! And since then the church has continued on the same lines, in the same tree, the tree of worldly scholarship and philosophy, the tree of morality and ethics, of rules and regulations, inquisitions and councils, boards of reference and sub-committees, instead of the tree of life. Christ came to free us from moral codes, back to pure obedience, back to “love out of a pure

heart” (1 Timothy 1:5). Love is its own justification, its own reason. It goes beyond moral thinking and rules and “the done thing”. Love is extravagant and unreasonable, goes the extra mile, turns the other cheek. Kings abdicate for love; wives return to husbands who beat them for love. And we should be living by that same “royal law” of love, under simple, pure obedience to Christ.

Freedom in Christ

Christ also came to free us from conscience. The Old Covenant sacrifices could deal with sin, but not with the conscience. Christ came to do a more perfect work: his blood cleansed our conscience. If we are eating from the tree of life, we can “draw near with a true heart”, in “full assurance of faith”, because we have “our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (Hebrews 10:22). Your conscience should now allow you to do whatever God tells you to do. But often it does not. It has a “pang”. It has a moral question. It has a reservation, or another factor to consider. What happened to simple obedience? The wrong tree got in the way. The Pharisees had so many “factors to consider” and “moral objections” with Jesus that in the end they crucified him with their conscience and their morality. Now you know which tree Jesus was crucified on. You’ve got to get out of that tree!

“I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). It’s simple: Jesus wants good fruit from you, and that can only come from the good tree, the vine, the tree of life. Which tree have you been eating? “Have you eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you that you should not eat?” You may well reply, “The woman ... gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (Genesis 3:11,12). You’re right; it was the woman – Babylon, the harlot, Babylon, the domain of the false prophets, who were in turn deceived by the serpent. They deceived you. They got you eating out of the tree of conscience and the tree of moral choices. But now is the time to stop eating of that tree. Get back to Jesus. Get back to a personal relationship with God, and away from your relationships with denominational doctrines and institutions and your conscience and its moral codes. Trust God to tell you personally what you should be doing. No-one else can tell you that anyway. Get back to the tree of life!

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

We’re Going To Be Cut Off Anyway!

You’d think, really, that as a Christian there would be nothing simpler than doing what God said. But it can be really tough because God is always trying to find out what is motivating us. We can say with our mouths that we love God with all our hearts, but the truth is proved

when we are tested and tried. Are we willing to obey Him and disobey others? Are we prepared for the confusion it causes others when they don’t understand why we do what we do? God makes sure

we are placed into these situations because He wants to know how far we are prepared to go in our walk with Him. It is also valuable for us to see where our sticking points are, so that we can be real with Him in our prayers.

For quite a while I had been feeling the 'call' to leave secular employment and work for God full time. There was a big problem though ... I lived alone in a flat. If I had been living at home with my parents, or married to some wonderful, hard working and loving man, that would have been a different matter entirely. But I lived alone and had to work to pay my rent, food bills and other expenses. I had been battling through my problem for some time wondering how I was going to work it out. Prayer times had been very difficult because I felt that I had been shown to do something, but hadn't been shown how to do it. Eventually, one morning before leaving for work, I really got desperate with God and asked Him earnestly to show me the way forward. I was prepared to stay in prayer all morning if necessary to get my answer. I spoke in tongues and God in His mercy took me seriously and began to show me a vision.

An Amazing Vision

As I spoke in tongues I saw myself walking through some huge doors and was in a massive room. At the other end of the room, right in front of me, God was seated on His throne with an outstretched eagle towering above His head. I slowly progressed towards Him until I was right at the base of the steps leading up to His throne. I threw myself down onto my knees and stopped speaking in tongues. At this point I spoke in my own language and poured out all that was in my heart to Him, telling Him of the problems I was facing yet wanting to do His will.

After I had exhausted all that was in my heart God rose from His throne and came down the steps. He linked my left arm and walked me to the door through which I had come. All the time we were walking together He made me feel as though I was in the company of a really great friend, smiling and talking easily with me. When we reached the doors they opened and, putting a ring on my finger and an umbrella into my hand, God told me to jump. I looked through the doors and found that there was nothing there - I was standing on the ledge of a cliff with a sheer drop in front of me. God had said, 'Jump', so I jumped. The umbrella opened out and, and as I held it above me, I felt the wind take hold of it and was carried away with no support in total safety.

I was so sure that God had given me the answer I was searching for that I went to work and handed my notice in that very day. Sure enough, because I had obeyed God and not relied on reason, God provided for me immediately and I began to literally live by faith as I worked for Him.

Confusion

When I was 30 years old and had been the church organist for 15 years, the church secretary and part of a music band, God told me to give up all my activities in the church. I told the minister as obviously he needed to know what was going on, but he thought I'd been deceived and had listened to a voice other than God's. His advice threw me into confusion. At that point in time I respected him more than anybody else in the whole world as he had taught me everything about God I knew. I

reconsidered what I thought I had heard from God and, not being able to shake off the fact that I knew He had spoken, gave up playing the organ for the midweek meetings and continued to play on Sundays in an effort to clarify what God meant.

During this period I had taken up a part-time job as a checkout operator in our local Asda Supermarket which had only just opened. As it was almost Christmas I was handling heavy items such as turkeys, tins of biscuit and chocolates with my left hand as I lifted these from the conveyor belt and stacked the shopping trolleys. I woke up one morning to find that I couldn't lift my arm and was in extreme agony. I went to the doctor to find out what had happened and was told I had a frozen shoulder and would not be able to use my arm for another 6 weeks. Immediately the penny dropped and I realised what God was saying. In prayer I confessed my sin and, begging God not to break my arm, told Him I would do exactly what He said and give up all my activities in the church. My actions met with a great deal of criticism, but at this point I had a healthy fear and respect for God. I had heard Him correctly in the first place, and He was prepared to prove He had spoken when I asked Him to.

Paying the price

When you start obeying, God's voice becomes easier to recognise, but the tests usually get tougher. A couple of years after this incident God told me to change my surname to Barratt. I knew in my heart what God was doing, He was cutting me off from one source and grafting me into another, as He wanted to change my identity. But try to explain something like that to anyone else! I knew an action like this would meet with hostility, to say the least, and I was afraid to do it. Although my parents and I had been estranged for years, I really didn't see the need to rub salt in any wound and knew that this would cause them to think I was taking this course to hurt them. But this wasn't the case at all, I had lived apart from them for years and was no longer affected by family squabbles. Because I couldn't see the need or logic for this action I didn't do anything about it for a long time and tried to carry on as normal. But God kept speaking to me and wouldn't let me get peace. After a couple of years struggling over this issue I finally gave way and changed my name by Deed Poll - and then I really quaked, waiting for the backlash! But I knew I had obeyed God and at least had peace with Him. Nobody understood my actions, but then it didn't concern anybody else anyway.

A few years after this I was married to Maurice, the minister's son, and my name became Barratt again. I have often wondered why God, who knows the future, didn't just wait a while and let everything be done reasonably and easily, but that doesn't seem to be the way God works with some people. Jesus said that unless you were willing to forsake everyone for His sake then you were not worthy to be His disciple (Luke 14:26).

Adam's Dilemma

Poor Adam was faced with a terrible dilemma not long after he was created. Genesis 2:16-18 says, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be

alone: I will make an help meet for him.” It was after this commandment that God made the animals (first) and then Eve. Verse 23 shows how smitten Adam was when Eve was presented to him. “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: she shall be call Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

Notice the commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not given to the animals or Eve, but to Adam, and he was meant to relay this law to everyone else. Imagine his dilemma when Eve disobeyed him and ate of the forbidden fruit. He knew what God had said, and knew that God meant what He had said. But he loved, with a perfect love, this woman God had given to him and had already prophesied that a man would leave everyone who had an emotional pull on him, including his own father and mother, so that he would cleave to his wife. In that moment Adam made the decision to leave his own father (God) so that he could stay with Eve. 1 Timothy 2:13 & 14 says “For Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

Adam only had one choice if he was to keep his wife, he had to eat of the wrong tree and thus be cut off from God. We only have one choice if we are to keep God, we have to eat from the good tree and thus be cut off from the world.