

## **Barratt Ministries Challenge**

### **Issue 59**

#### **Burning or Pruning?**

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

*by Maurice Barratt*

“Every good tree brings forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree brings 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 you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:17-20)

There are key words here. The first one is “every”. Every tree will be tested, there are no exceptions. Every Christian will be tested. Tested for what? To see whether we have borne fruit. Bearing fruit is the purpose of your Christian life. “Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8). “Fruit” is another key word. What is fruit? It is the character of Christ manifested in our lives. We’re back to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: the character of Christ is the beatitudes, those attitudes and characteristics which are the opposite of the spirit of the world. Every tree will be tested; if it is “corrupt” or bad, it is thrown out and burned (because not only is it corrupt in itself, producing only bad fruit, but if it is not dealt with, the corruption will spread to other nearby trees and they will become bad. Good trees don’t affect bad trees, but bad trees affect good trees. A farmer or a gardener knows that the only thing to do with a thoroughly disease-ridden tree or plant is to burn it before it starts to affect others).

#### **Two alternatives**

But what if the tree is producing good fruit? What if you are a good tree, doing well, bearing fruit? Then you will also be dealt with! You will not be left alone to bear your fruit – you will be pruned, cut back. Why? So that you will be even more productive. Jesus makes this clear in John 15, which echoes much of what is said in these verses of the Sermon on the Mount. “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:2). The only other alternative is burning: “If a man abide 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). These two alternatives alone exist: pruning or burning. Either way, everyone’s work is tested.

Another key word here is “fire”. What is fire? It is God’s nature. Many times we read in the Bible that God is like something or other; but very few times does it say that God is a certain thing, that it sums up his very nature. “God is love ... God is light ...” but also “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). Fire is the means of God’s ultimate judgement. In Noah’s day God destroyed the earth by water, but ultimately he will destroy it by fire. The lake of fire is God’s ultimate judgement on sin.

The sacrificial animals in the Old Testament were all not only killed but “burned with fire”, a picture of God’s judgement on sin.

### **The Devil has no fire**

Strangely, fire is more associated with the devil than with God in some people’s minds. They still have the stereotyped picture of Satan with the horns and pitchfork, the “boss of hell”, “stoking up the flames” and cackling over the misery of the sinners. Of course this is nonsense. The bible frequently associates fire with God, but never with the devil. Even when Satan obtained permission to afflict Job, the fire that destroyed Job’s flocks was “the fire of God ... fallen from heaven” (Job 1:16) – not the fire of the devil. The devil has no fire, and nothing in common with fire. In fact no one is more afraid of the lake of fire than Satan. He will not be in charge of it, he will be tortured in its flames for eternity, when God’s ultimate judgement comes. [The lake of fire is as yet empty. No one has yet come under God’s final judgement. The angels who sinned are “in chains ... reserved unto judgement” (2 Peter 2:6). Satan too is reserved unto judgement. He will be bound for a thousand years in chains, but still not finally judged until after that time.]

### **Many ways of judgement**

God judges in many ways before he reaches the ultimate judgement. If we will allow the Lord to judge us now, in this life, he will not have to judge us in the future. If we will allow God’s fire to come upon our lives and expose all that is not of him and burn it away from us, it will equip us to dwell with him, the God who is “a consuming fire”. Isaiah asked “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” (Isaiah 33:14) The answer is not what we might expect, for Isaiah is not talking about the fire of hell, but about the fire of God’s nature: “... He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil” (Isaiah 33:15).

### **Tested by fire**

Paul makes it clear that we as Christians will be tested by fire. “Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Corinthians 3:13). This is the fire of God’s judgement – not the ultimate judgement of eternal destruction in the lake of fire, but the purging, purifying fires that strip us of vain, human, fleshly works and leave only the gold, silver and precious stones in our lives: only the things of God, only the things of eternal value. The old nature will always burn when God’s fire comes, because it’s a corrupt tree. The new nature will always survive, because it’s a good tree. The gold, silver and precious stones will shine all the brighter for going through the fire, and be manifested all the more gloriously because nothing is left of the old, the wood, hay and stubble.

We avoid the ultimate judgement of the lake of fire by becoming children of God. But we can also avoid the pain of “suffering loss” in the purging, testing fire of 1 Corinthians 3, by building with the right materials, materials that will abide in the fire. “If any man’s work abide, he shall receive a reward” (1 Corinthians 3:14). To abide in Jesus, then, is to abide in the fire. To abide in Jesus is also to bear fruit. “He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit” (John 15:5). And when Paul talks of building with gold, silver and precious stones, he is talking about bearing fruit.

### **Judging ourselves**

We avoid God’s judgement by judging ourselves. Paul, talking about the breaking of bread, says, “If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged” (1 Corinthians 11:31). If we judge ourselves, if we put right what is wrong, God does not have to chasten us. But because of our immaturity and our human nature, God inevitably has to chasten us all in some areas. So “when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (1 Corinthians 11:31,32). If we will judge ourselves, God does not have to chasten us in this life. If we let him judge and chasten us in this life, if we let him purge and prune our lives so that we bear fruit, we avoid the judgement of our works being burned up. And if we judge ourselves as sinners in need of grace and in need of Christ, we avoid the ultimate judgement of “being condemned with the world”.

Judgement is not God’s normal or preferred work. God is love; he would rather not judge. But because he is love, he will always judge us for our benefit, so that we are not condemned with the world. He will cut off things in our lives that are not profitable for us; and even his ultimate judgement is a part of his love: to cut away the bad in order to keep the good pure is also a part of love.

### **Our chastening Father**

God’s chastening is part of being a good Father. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Hebrews 12:6,7). Paul tells us that if we are not being chastened, it proves that we are not really God’s children: “But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons” (verse 8). And he points out that God is chastening us “for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness” (verse 10). It is part of his purpose and part of his goodness. So let us not shrink from the fire: it is doing us good! Its purpose is not to destroy us but to purify us. Peter says, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Peter 4:12). It’s nothing strange, nothing unusual for a Christian – in fact it’s a cause for rejoicing, because it means God is dealing with you, purifying the gold, burning away the wood and hay and stubble, purging the tree, pruning the branch so that it will bear more fruit.

All that Jesus says about the good and the bad tree is still within the context of false prophets. In fact everything in the second half of Matthew 7 is confronting us with the choice. The false prophets lead us one way, Jesus leads us another. The false prophets are corrupt trees, “clouds without water, trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit” (Jude 12). They are messengers bearing gifts but bearing

no fruit. The false prophets lead us onto the broad way, Jesus onto the narrow way. The choice confronts us: which way will we take? The easy way of the broad road which seems so inviting and pleasing, where so many Christians are going? Or the narrow way which seems so hard and bitter, where self is denied, and on which there seem so few travellers?

### **A significant parallel**

The Sermon on the Mount parallels the Old Testament law in many significant ways. The law of Moses began with God showing Israel his character in the Ten Commandments. Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by showing the disciples his character in the Beatitudes. And Moses ended the law by confronting Israel with a choice: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice ..." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Jesus also confronts all who would be his disciples with this same choice, life or death. We have heard the Sermon on the Mount. The message is clear, and the choice is clear: will we take the narrow way which leads to life, or the broad way that leads to the destruction of everything we have built and done? God's advice is simple: choose life! Choose the narrow way! Choose the hard way, the costly way, the way that is littered with obstacles, difficulties, hindrances, trials and persecutions! Why? Because it leads to life! Because it will be worth it all, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 – "for our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!"

## **EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE**

*by Joanna Barratt*

### **God Does Not Give Anaesthetic!**

It can be pretty daunting to find out that God loves us so much He is not prepared to leave us the way we are. You see, He doesn't just put us in a bath of hot, soapy water to clean us up, then put fresh clean clothes on us to make us look presentable ... like you would expect Him to do if we had just been playing a game of rugby on a wet, muddy field. No! God goes much deeper than that. He performs surgery on us, because our problems do not stem from outside conditions and circumstances, our problems stem from the very heart and root of us.

I find also that God is not one to use anaesthetic. Indeed, I have been very much awake and aware when He has applied the knife. Not because He is cruel and masochistic, but He wants us to know what is happening so that we can remember for the future and not have to undergo the same surgery twice. I have been absolutely amazed at how many people can go through an operation and yet continue doing the very thing which caused their sickness in the first place, e.g carrying on smoking after an operation for cancer. If, like these people, we carry on in our old ways after God

has applied the knife, and still suffer the same sickness even though He has dealt with it once, God will just perform another operation and cut a bit more away from us (without pain relief) until hopefully, we learn from our experiences. And boy, does God know how to operate!!

### **Throw the gold overboard**

Some years ago I had a vision over one of Maurice's daughters to his first marriage. God had been calling her to leave work and be full time for Him. She truly loved God, but she was struggling trying to make this decision. In my vision I saw her in a motor boat but the boat wasn't moving. No matter what she did the boat just would not respond. Eventually she went down into the hull where was hidden an enormous bar of gold. It was tremendously heavy and was weighing the boat down so much that all movement was hindered. She knew she had to get rid of this gold somehow. It took a while but she struggled to get it on deck and then with an almighty heave she threw it overboard. Suddenly the boat lurched forward and almost flew across the water, never to be seen again. Maurice and I didn't know what this vision was talking about, but apparently his daughter did.

Some time after this vision she had been sorting out her things in her bedroom, putting important items all together in one handbag as they had been scattered in various places. Before retiring for the night she placed her bag and car keys on the chest of drawers nearest her door so that they would be easily accessible the next day when she went to work.

### **A thief in the night**

It is our custom to double lock the front door with mortise key, especially when Maurice and I are away on ministry, but on this particular occasion she didn't bother. During the night a thief broke in through the front door. He made straight for her room and opened the door. She was fast asleep in her bed, but as the bag and keys were in full view as soon as her door was opened he didn't bother with anything else and made off with them. She awoke to the sound of her car being driven out of our grounds, and almost fainted when she realised what had happened. Fortunately, there were other people in the house she was able to rouse from sleep who rallied round to comfort her.

The funny thing was, though, that she suddenly felt a strange sense of relief at the incident. God had been calling her into full time ministry, but the car (the first brand new car she had ever bought) was the thing which was stopping her. She needed an income to keep the car on the road. If she had no income, she would have no car, and this was the hindrance. She had been unable to give it up, but now that God had taken it away from her in this theft (and we believe that nothing can happen to us unless God gives specific permission for it), she felt tremendous relief because God had done in a moment what she had been unable to do for herself.

### **No more ties**

Sometime after this the insurance company paid out the money to cover the cost of her loss and she went straight to her dad and handed him the cheque to use for the ministry. Maurice was

concerned and told her he didn't want her money, but she was adamant. She told him of her relief when God took the car because now she could obey Him, she certainly didn't want to buy another and get herself tied up again. She was throwing the gold overboard.

Maurice and I were regularly ministering in Holland during this period and took her with us to baby-sit our first child whilst I was at the meetings. Being in Holland she was exposed to the work the people at this mission foundation were doing and stated she would like to join them. Maurice spoke to the brother who headed up the organisation and a place was found for her immediately. She literally got on a boat and has never returned to England to live as God not only found her a job, but has blessed her with a lovely Christian husband and three healthy children. God doesn't make mistakes.

### **Judgement time**

When I was in my twenties I attended a prayer meeting at my church which at that particular time was being run by the Assistant Minister. After the initial usual prayers the meeting seemed to take on a different tone and people started praying and prophesying in a very serious manner. I sensed an awe in the building and had a vision myself which I didn't speak out publicly. I saw the word 'JUDGEMENT' in bold red letters in my mind, there was blood dripping from them as though they had been written in blood. It was very strong and I looked around the building as people were weeping and confessing before God. The Assistant Minister was aware that something was going on and asked if people would like to come out for prayer. Nearly everyone in the meeting came forward, myself included, and he began to lay hands and pray softly for each individual in turn.

The Pastor of the church was in the meeting and at this point could sit in his seat no longer. He strode to the front of the church and, completely taken over by the Spirit of God, lunged at people with his hands outstretched shouting, "Receive the Power of God" as he laid his hand on their head. I knew he was under the control of Almighty God and was terrified. As he came towards me I trembled. "Receive the Power of God", he said and with a cry I fell backwards and lay on the floor. I was fully aware of what was going on, but completely unable to move. Then I began to sob, and sob, and sob. Half an hour later, still lying on the ground, the sobbing continued ... And it continued for the next 3 days and nights. I couldn't go to work.

### **A "deep work"**

The sobbing stopped and over the following days I wondered what God had done in my life but couldn't pin point anything, and just thought 'He was doing a deep work in me'. But I have come to realise that these 'deep works' are more than mere comforting words.

Circumstances tragically changed for me in the church. Whereas I had been the church secretary, organist and a member of a music band, within a matter of weeks things had changed so dramatically that I was no longer doing any of these things. Indeed, I did not even attend the church, and went through the worst trial of my life which almost put a stop to me even calling myself a Christian. For the next 3 years I was a nomad in the Kingdom. No church, no ministry, and

apparently no spiritual future. But it was during this period that I really found God. You never really know God until all the trappings have been taken away. Job went through the same process. Stripped of everything, except his breath (which he asked God also take) and his wife, who couldn't comfort him as she was grieving herself, it was then that God spoke to him personally and gave Job a true revelation of Himself.

When God turned the tables for me after 3 years I knew I was different. I sobbed for 3 days and nights but went through my trial 3 years - a year for each day I sobbed. But now my sobbing has been turned to joy for I have found MY God. Not the God everyone preaches about. I know Him for myself. My greatest trial turned out to be my greatest blessing for which I praise and thank the Lord. I have learned to put my limbs on the chopping block now because even I am delighted when I see and smell the fragrance of the beautiful fruit God is able to produce through a sinner like me.