

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN MARK'S GOSPEL - CHAPTER SEVEN

Mark's story returns to the third direction from which Jesus suffered attack. Repeatedly He was challenged by the religious people and the demons. Now it was again the turn of His home town. Jesus' family and neighbours were confused. On the one hand when they heard Him teach and saw Him at work they were deeply impressed by His wisdom and power. On the other hand, wasn't He someone they had known and watched grow up from a baby? He had learned His father's trade as a carpenter. He had taken over responsibility for His mother, brothers and sisters, presumably because Joseph had died. Surely someone so familiar could not be the Messiah? They wrote off His impressive ministry because He was one of them. Jesus sadly acknowledged their problem of unbelief by which they depended on their prejudices rather than responding to what they heard and saw. For the moment only a few benefited from His ministry which needed to be received by faith. But He persevered anyway as He had encouraged the man with the legion of demons to work first among his own people.(6:1-6)

Jesus' team of disciples were ready to start trying out what they had learned. First they needed to be briefed with Jesus' authority and instructions for their mission. They were to travel light, depending on God's provision. The encouragement to shake dust off their feet if they were rejected when their feet were not washed in the traditional welcome was to teach them not to take rebuff to heart. They began as John the Baptist had begun with the command to repent, to change our minds about self, sin and the Saviour. God chose to confirm their calling with miracles of healing and expulsion of demons. God was using them and they knew it.(6:7-13)

The intensity of opposition was rising, led from the top. John the Baptist like an Old Testament prophet had dared to confront King Herod with his sin and its example to God's people in taking his brother's wife. Herod responded like many other dictators in history, first by imprisoning his critic and then by murdering him. For some time he had hovered in indecision about what to do with his prisoner. Herod knew John was a man of God and wanted to hear him but at the same time was deeply disturbed by what he said. His hesitation was finally settled when two women laid a trap for him. Herodias had her daughter dance, presumably very suggestively, before Herod and his important guests who are likely to have had too much wine. When the girl was offered a reward, mother prompted her to ask for the head of John on a plate. Pride prevented Herod withdrawing his promise, and John died. John's memory continued to haunt Herod who thought Jesus might be John back from the grave. Others were wondering if Jesus was the fulfilment of Malachi's promise,(Mal.4:5) that Elijah would return. Everyone sensed that God was doing something hugely important.(6:14-29)

The twelve returned from their first outreach excited about 'all they had done and taught', forgetting that it had been the Lord working through them. Jesus realised that they needed a quiet time alone with Him to reflect and so He took them away in their fishing boat. Word got around and a huge crowd were waiting for Jesus when the boat touched land. So much for their day off! As always His compassion moved Him to teach them, tired though He was. After some time the crowd's spiritual hunger gave way to physical hunger. The disciples proposed sending them off to buy food, no doubt feeling hungry themselves. Jesus challenged them to feed their guests in the light of 'all they had done...'. They had to acknowledge that their own meagre resources were totally inadequate. All they had were 5 loaves and 2 fish, which according to John 6:9 was one small boy's lunch. Jesus had everyone sit down in groups ready to eat. He took the lunch, looked to heaven, said 'thank you' to His Father and handed it to the disciples who in turn passed the bread and fish to the crowd. He was teaching the disciples that what they had done on their mission was simply to pass on the message they had heard from Jesus. Five thousand people were fed and satisfied and each disciple had a basket of food for his own hunger. As we trust the Lord to use us to teach others we learn more than anyone.(6:30-44)

The Lord had one final lesson to teach the twelve for that day. He went up the mountain to have time alone with His Father, sending them off by sea on the return trip, knowing perfectly well there was a storm coming! As they struggled to cope with the wind against them, still trying to prove 'all they had done...' Jesus arrived on foot, walking on top of the waves, as He as Creator has the power to walk on top of but in touch with all our problems. Seeing Jesus on a wild, dark night was too good to be true and they assumed He was a ghost. He reassured them, joined them in the boat and the storm ceased. The presence of Jesus calms our inner storm and removes our fears. Why do we so often struggle alone without Him? Back in His home neighbourhood, the crowds immediately gathered again, as hungry as ever for His help. Modern day crowds are just as hungry for answers. Jesus is as willing as ever to meet their every need – through modern disciples.(6:45-56)

By now you should be into the habit of reviewing your titles for each section in the light of what you got from the questions on the previous chapter. Do it now for chapter 5. How would you like to divide chapter 7? What themes or titles can you see? My suggestion is that we have just three sections for this chapter, verses 1-23, 24-30, 31-37. This time there is a very obvious common theme based on one word. Can you see it?

7:1-23

Q.1 Why on this occasion did the Pharisees criticize Jesus and His disciples? Surely there is nothing wrong with good hygiene is there? In what way did the Pharisees' custom go far beyond this? What was their teaching saying about how to be clean or right before God? How do people today put similar demands on each other that also give a misleading picture of how to have a relationship with God? What did Jesus say is wrong with turning a good health practice into a religious custom? What does such wrong teaching take the place of? The Lord quotes from Isaiah 29:13. What did Isaiah say in the following verse God would do about the teaching of religious customs in place of hearts open to Him? How did Jesus fulfil this promise?

Q.2 What is Jesus' example of religious people using their custom as a convenient way of avoiding a much more demanding command of God? 'Corban' was a word they could use to dedicate something valuable to God so that it was not available to help their aged parents. How do people do the same thing these days to avoid responsibility for helping needy relatives? According to Jesus our obsessions with what we eat and drink are likely to hide far more important activities of the mouth. What are they and what do our words reveal about us?

Q.3 Jesus issued the challenge of verse 16 a number of times. What do you suppose He meant? How can we have ears but not use them in our relationship with God? When the disciples did not understand something whom did they ask? Whom should we ask when the meaning of the Bible or a life situation is not clear? What will happen when we do?(I John 2:27)

Q.4 In one sentence Jesus dramatically changed a major part of Jewish religious observance. What was it? Where else in the New Testament confirmed the same revolutionary development?(Acts 10:9-16) How could this be consistent with Matthew 5:17-20? How can having Jesus living in us, being our wisdom and strength, 'fulfil' the food laws of Leviticus 11?

Q.5 Jesus now explained what He meant by "the things which proceed out of the man". What is His explanation? Give a simple explanation and example of each term He used in the list that follows. Write out the last six of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and then link each of this list in Mark 7 to one of the commandments. If 'evil thoughts'(v.23) is intended to be a heading and the twelve items in the list that follow are examples, show how each one is first a way of thinking before an action - in other words, how it begins in the heart. Now after each item where the mouth, what we say, is likely to be involved add a capital T for tongue. Surprised? Now compare your list with James 3. Can you see how right James was when he described the tongue as "restless evil full of deadly poison". What did Jesus imply is the answer to any one of these problems in our behaviour?

7:24-30

Q.6 This is one of probably only two occasions when Jesus left Israel during His ministry. It seems that He went for the sake of just one troubled family. Why did He bother? What is unusual about this story? Once again Jesus wanted to avoid the public eye as a miracle worker so the people would not come for the wrong reasons. Whom did He want to come to Him?(John 7:37; Matthew 11:28) For what reason did the Gentile woman come to Him?

Q.7 Jesus seemed at first hard-hearted in the way He put the woman off. He never is hard-hearted so what was His purpose in answering her in this way? Who are 'the children'? Who are 'the dogs' and what is 'bread'?(Phil.3:2; II Pet. 2:22; John 6:35) What was the woman acknowledging about herself? In what way is this expressing what we too need to acknowledge about our state before God if He is to meet our need also?(Acts 2:38; Rom.3:10-18) Having acknowledged that people who follow false gods are 'dogs' and deserve nothing, the woman has her daughter's need met. How does this story develop the same theme as the section before, concerning what goes into or out of the mouth?

7:31-37

Q.8 After travelling to Tyre, so far as we know just for one child, Jesus returned to Galilee for one man who was deaf and consequently dumb. What does deafness picture in the New Testament?(Mark 4:9) How does being spiritually deaf make us spiritually dumb?(I John 1:1-3) The dumb man could not ask for himself so others had to entreat Jesus for him. When is it appropriate to do the same for someone we know who is spiritually deaf? Remember how Jesus made it plain that there is no point in us continuing to shout about Him to those who do not want to hear.(Matt.7:6)

Q.9 In what way do the touch and the saliva of Jesus represent what enables us to hear and so speak of Him? Why does Jesus look to heaven and sigh?(Rom.8:26) How is this the secret of effective prayer? On many occasions Jesus told people to keep quiet about what He had done for them. Why do you suppose He did it this time? What problem would it cause to hear what miracles Jesus had done without understanding who He was and why He came?