

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART EIGHTEEN

After a series of compelling stories intended mainly for His religious critics, whom He loved greatly and longed to see seek mercy in place of their self-righteousness, Jesus turned back to His disciples, wanting to be sure that they really understood. He presented two difficult scenarios to draw a vital question from them. The first looked back on the judgemental attitudes He had witnessed from the Pharisees. We are answerable to God for our sin which is serious enough but even more important is the effect our example has on others. The younger they are in years or in the faith, the more damaging our influence will be. A 'stumbling block' was the stick which held a trap open ready for an unsuspecting animal or passer-by. The suggestion that such a person deserved to be dropped into the sea with a rock tied round his neck, underlined the responsibility we have for the spiritual care of each other. The second test was equally difficult. Suppose, not a stranger but someone you considered your brother hurts us, how will we react? We can tell him we believe he is wrong but then we are to forgive him. Now suppose that he does the same thing again, and again and again, how are we to respond? In exactly the same way, as if we have no knowledge of the previous time. Instead of anger or bitterness we are to let the hurt go even from our emotional memories, and to let him know that we have done so.(17:1-4)

Troubled by these two impossible demands the disciples reacted with an urgent demand of their own, 'Increase our faith!'. Surely bigger faith would be the answer to such tough standards. Jesus responded with two stories and a parable in action. The seed had already been used as a picture of the word of God.(Lk.8:11) The mustard seed was the smallest of seeds known to the Jews.(Matt.13:32) If our faith is a response to the tiniest knowledge of truth then the possibilities would be immense, like the tree flying through the air into the sea. The secret of faith is not its size but its object, Jesus Christ. Faith in Whom or what?(17:5,6)

The slave who came home after a hard day's work, not to be waited on by the master, but to continue serving him, was promised that when he had served, every need of his would be met. The secret of his own need being met was not in his demands but in the faithfulness of his good master. Faith is not our way of manipulating our Master in heaven to care for us but the attitude in which we serve Him continually, confident in Who He is. Again the key is the object of our faith, a loving Master. So often faith is presented as a way of pressing the Lord into serving us in whatever way we think fit.(17:7-10)

The parable in action was provided by 10 lepers who called out to Jesus for mercy, probably a request for money. He sent them off to the priest as required by the Old Testament law if a leper was to be accepted as cleansed from his disease.(Lev.14:1-32) We have already seen how leprosy was a graphic picture of sin which makes us progressively more and more ugly and lonely.(5:12) On the way to the priest, the leprosy was cleansed. We often think of faith as a cry for help, but this story illustrates that it is so much more. One man only was commended for his faith. When he saw that he had been healed, he turned back, glorified God, fell at the feet of Jesus and said thank you. True faith does all this. We recognize what He has done for us, repent of going our own way, acknowledge that it is all God's doing, submit to Him and thank Him for all He is, and will be and do, in us. To underline the point even more strongly Luke reminded us that this man was a Samaritan, a foreigner, definitely not someone approved of by the religious people. Jesus commended his faith as the secret of his transformation.(17:11-19)

Possibly again to distract attention from the embarrassment which continued to be inflicted on them the Pharisees tried another side track. When, they asked, was the kingdom of God coming? To them it was a future political event when they envisaged themselves as key people in the

Messiah's take-over on earth. The kingdom, Jesus answered, was already happening in and among His followers because He, the Messiah, had come already. Faith in the true sense is the attitude that lets the King take control within our hearts.(17:20,21)

Jesus addressed the rest of His answer to His disciples rather than the Pharisees because it would have been wasted on them. If they had not recognized Him the first time He came they would certainly not welcome Him when He returned. Guesses about the future will be an ongoing source of confusion because of wrong teaching. All kinds of false claims will be made. Believing them is not Christian faith. When He does return it will be without warning. Faith starts with our response to His coming to suffer and die for us, not wild speculation about the future. His return will be a total surprise to unbelievers as the flood was to people in the days of Noah, and the destruction of Sodom to its people. Noah's family were expecting the flood and trusted themselves to the ark, their means of salvation. Lot and his daughters were anticipating the eruption which destroyed their city and took God's warning to leave. His wife's half-hearted response to God was not faith. Neither Noah nor Lot knew which day judgement would come but they were prepared. Ordinary people who trust God will be plucked out of daily life without warning, to the amazement of their unbelieving neighbours.(17:22-36)

The disciples moved from one unhelpful question, 'when?' to another one, 'where?' What they needed to ask was 'who?' and 'why?' Jesus' answer was one of those mysterious answers He gave at times to leave His disciples including us with a puzzle to work on. Vultures or eagles gather around a corpse.(Job 39:30; Ezek.39:17) Was Jesus talking about His own death? Eagles were the symbols of the Roman legions who in AD 70 would surround and destroy the city of Jerusalem. Perhaps in future it will happen one last time? Faith in Christ means we will be ready.(17:37)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does the story of the woman and the judge teach us about prayer? Is God like the judge? What is the secret of effective prayer?(18:1-8)
2. What is the message from the two men praying in the temple? How do we make the same mistake as the Pharisee?(18:9-14)
3. What can we learn from Jesus' reception of the children who were brought to Him?(18:15-17)
4. What misunderstanding did the rich ruler have about inheriting eternal life? How did Jesus use the commandments to teach him his real problem? How could he have eternal life? Did Jesus mean that all of us must give everything away to be one of His followers? Why is it difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? What encouragement did Jesus give to His disciples who had left the little they had to follow Him? Are all the benefits when we get to heaven?(18:18-30)
5. What does this next section have to do with receiving eternal life? Why did Jesus' disciples not catch on?(18:31-34)
6. When a blind beggar called out for mercy what was he normally asking for? How was this man different? What did Jesus say was the key to his healing? What is pictured in the Bible by blindness? Does this story mean that sick people with enough faith will be healed?(18:35-43)