

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART FOURTEEN

After a particularly unpleasant chapter of criticism from the religious people because He did not meet their expectations, it must have been a considerable relief to be back among the ordinary folk whose expectations, though sometimes inadequate, were much closer to the Bible. The natural amphitheatre of a fishing boat, anchored a little distance out to sea, with the audience standing on the beach and the hills, would have been much more comfortable than the hard seats and hard hearts of a synagogue. Jesus began to tell a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven.

There is something curious about these parables. Each one describes one or more problems developing. How can this be the 'kingdom of heaven'? Remember that the purpose of Jesus' coming was to establish His kingdom, not just one day in heaven, but right now in us where things go wrong. Here then is a catalogue of some of the difficulties we get into as Christians on earth with a touch of heaven inside us. All have to do with the truth.(13:1,2)

Jesus called His first parable the 'parable of the sower' but it could equally be known as 'the parable of the soils' because the 4 kinds of soil, in which the seed of the word of God might fall, were the real issue. The sower was the Lord Himself, and the Lord working through those who belong to Him, planting truth in men's hearts. The first kind of soil never got beyond the surface of the road, made hard by being trodden under many feet. The human heart may be immediately resistant to the gospel, often because of being trodden down by life. The birds of the air, the Devil and his agents, were quickly on the job removing the message before it could have any effect. The rocky ground seemed more receptive on the surface but the resistance was underneath and became apparent as soon as the sun was up and the heat was on. At the very time we need to be trusting Christ in adversity, we resist and our Christian growth withers. The third soil seemed deep and promising, but the problem lay in the other seeds it had received, of worry and deceit, particularly in relation to material things. As is usually the way with weeds, that seed grew faster than the truth and choked out the message of Christ. The final soil was no better than the other three but it was well ploughed and contained nothing else but the seed of truth, no rocks and no weeds. The result was exciting, a great harvest of seed multiplied in that life and the hearts of others. All this soil had to be was wholeheartedly open to the truth, and nothing else. It is tempting to think of the four kinds of soil as four different kinds of people we meet and to assume that we, of course, are the good soil! It might be more useful to realise that as believers we are, at times, all four types of soil in turn. In other words we should start with questioning our own heart condition.(13:3-9; 18-23)

Before explaining this first parable Jesus had to pause and deal with a more difficult question. Why use parables at all? Why not just state the truth in plain words? His answer has huge implications for all Christian teachers. Plain truth is immediately understood by some in which case they can build upon it their whole structure of gospel knowledge. For those who do not grasp the message at once, parables are the answer. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9,10 where Isaiah was facing a similar problem in his day. Parables plant a story in the minds of those who are not yet ready to meet Christ which will remain there until the heart becomes open, at which time it will have its effect. Sunday school teachers have often taught children and felt no-one was

really listening. The day comes years later when changing circumstances, problems or ideas bring about need and the words of the teacher come to life, like seed in the desert when it finally rains.(13:10-17)

The second parable still had seed and soil but this time we are introduced to a second sower, the Devil, who tried to sabotage the crop by sowing another kind of seed, his false message. Tares, also called darnel, are plants which look like wheat until they mature when it finally becomes apparent that they are something different. Tare seed ground up can be poisonous. What are we to do about this fake wheat? Pulling up the growing plants will damage the good wheat, as trying to uproot heretics will often damage believers. God will deal with false teachers in future judgement. The only answer is to continue taking good care of believers by planting still more good seed, and watering with the Holy Spirit so that truth crowds out error.(13:24-30; 36-43)

Notice how Jesus gave His students time to think about each parable before He explained it in response to their questions. The remaining parables were not explained presumably because the clues were already available elsewhere in scripture. The third parable involved yet another seed being sown in soil but there were new variations. This seed was mustard, also used in Lk.17:6 as a reminder of the huge potential of tiny faith in Christ. Again the 'birds of the air' were in operation, still the agents of the Devil. They were nesting in the branches of a tree that was never meant to have grown beyond an annual shrub which should have been harvested.(13:31,32) The fourth parable used the picture of meal, ground up wheat. Leaven in the Bible pictures wrong teaching.(Matt.16:11,12; Lev.2:11; I Cor.5:6-8) A woman either pictures the church, as the faithful bride of Christ,(Eph.5:22-33; Rev.21:2) or an unfaithful people, as the harlot.(Rev.17:1-7) This time she is unfaithful. False teaching readily takes over our understanding of the gospel.(13:33)

The fifth and sixth parables used different symbols for truth, a treasure and a pearl of great value. The man who found treasure in someone else's field and bought it without telling the owner had confused truth with the place he found truth. The merchant had spent years searching for pearls, which picture wisdom,(Job 28:18) when what he really needed was just one pearl. Jesus said 'I am the truth.'(Jn.14:6) The final parable changed the image from sowing seed and finding treasure to fishing in the sea, which Jesus had used previously,(Lk.5) to illustrate the secret of reaching out to bring others to Him. The problem this time was the choice of the dragnet, 'sagene' in Greek, instead of the normal net, 'diktoun'. The resulting catch was not only fish but all the debris from the bottom of the sea which God will need to sort out on the day of judgement.(13:44-50)

Jesus asked if they understood. Like all keen students they said 'Yes' though the answer was probably 'No'. Instead of giving them a test of their understanding, He gave them a goal to be able to have a resource of spiritual wisdom that combined old discoveries with new ones, as the questions they did not yet understand gradually became clear.(13:51,52)

As if to illustrate the problems which arise in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus went back to His home town and faced rejection of His teaching because of their familiarity with Him and His family. For the moment that seed seemed to fall on the pathway and be snatched away by the Devil.(13:53-58)

Chapter fourteen presents a stark contrast between a man who took away, and a Man who gave, the terrorist and the tea-party!

14:1-12 Q.1 Why had Herod had John arrested? What had John been doing that made him so hated?(Deut.17:17) What was the struggle going on inside Herod before and after John's death? What emotions led Herod to do to John what he knew was wrong? What insight does this story give us into the temptations which face leaders particularly?

14:13-21 Q.2 Why do you suppose Jesus went away alone? Why did He not send away those who interrupted His time of solitude? Was not the disciples' suggestion of sending the people away a matter of common sense? Why was Jesus' challenge to them so appropriate at this moment?(Mk.6:30) What method did Jesus use to feed the people from which we can learn today about teaching the spiritually hungry? What would have been the significance of having 12 baskets of bread left over?

14:22-33 Q.3 Why as the Son of God did Jesus need time alone to pray? What lesson were the disciples learning out at sea about facing the problems of life? What principle did Jesus demonstrate to them? What can we learn from Peter's experience? Why did Jesus rebuke them for having little faith?

14:34-36 Q.4 How does the end of this chapter contrast with the end of the previous one? Gennesaret was close to His home town.