

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

In chapter eleven, Jesus dealt with the confusing expectations of ordinary people and how frustration could lead to doubt, as it did even for John the Baptist, and to a heavy burden of failure, as it can for the rest of us. In chapter twelve He confronted the false expectations of religious people which are so much more damaging and harder to deal with.

First a group of Pharisees watched disapprovingly as Jesus' disciples picked ears of grain as they walked through the fields, ground them in their hands and ate them. This was permitted in Deut.23:25 as part of God's loving social provision for the poor who owned no fields or vineyards of their own. The Pharisees may have been the grudging owners of the grain-fields watching some of their wheat disappear and looking for an excuse to stop this happening. They quickly found it because this day was the Sabbath on which no work was permitted.(Exod.20:8-11; 34:21; Deut.5:13) The religious people, anxious to prove their fanatical obedience to the letter of the Law, had carried a wise provision of a day of rest from normal work to a ridiculous extreme. They had added a huge list of details to the commandment by which they even forbade the poor to gather a few handfuls of food. Jesus answered with two Bible illustrations and a new insight into why God gave such commandments. First He reminded them of the time David, in I Sam.21:1-5, asked the priest for the consecrated bread from the tabernacle for his hungry followers, bending the truth a little in the process. Next He pointed out that the priests were allowed to work in the tabernacle on the Sabbath. His disciples were to be the new order of priests.(I Pet.2:5,9; Rev.1:6) God is love and the Sabbath is one way of showing His love in providing for the needy. God owns the Sabbath and can use it how He chooses.(12:1-8)

Walking from the fields into the synagogue, Jesus faced a new dilemma. On the one hand, looking hopefully towards Him was a man with a useless, withered arm, probably the result of either an injury or of polio. The man was expecting the impossible; but the Pharisees were determined to prevent such a miracle. Surely their God would not break His own rules about work on the Sabbath, even for such a good cause! Jesus asked them a question, showing them again His brilliant insight into human behaviour. If their sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath what would they do? Assuming no-one was watching, would they not rescue the sheep? Which does God value most, men or sheep? He healed the man's hand and they were left speechless – but ready from that time on to kill Him. He did not meet their expectations of the Messiah.(12:9-14)

He did not meet the expectations of ordinary people, His disciples, His family or the religious people. But He entirely met His Father's expectations. His Father was pleased with Him and that was all that really mattered.(Isa.42:1; Matt.3:17; 17:5) He knew what He had to do, to bring good news to the world, even if no-one approved. He therefore did not have to argue, fight or push those who did not want Him. He had just to get on with the job His Father had given Him to do. To know that God is pleased with us because of Jesus is a marvellous liberty which sets us free from the expectations others put on us. Self consciousness was the first consequence of sin in the Garden of Eden.(Gen.3:7) Unselfconsciousness is an immediate consequence of being justified by faith in Christ.(12:15-21)

The third clash with the Pharisees led to the ultimate contradiction. Jesus healed a demon-possessed, blind and dumb man, who again pictures to us what the Devil does in making us blind to God and so having nothing worth saying. Once more His enemies attributed His work to Beelzebul, the 'Lord of the Dung-heap', the ruler of the demons.(9:34; 10:25) So twisted was their thinking that they were expecting the Messiah to be like the Devil and so they accused Him of being the Devil. At the same time ordinary people were starting to wonder if Jesus fitted their expectations of the Messiah. Jesus pointed out the obvious. The Devil would not cast himself out or else he would be fighting a civil war. He gave Christians

reassurance. With God, the strong one, living in us, His house, there is no way the Devil, the burglar, could climb in the window. Christians cannot be demon-possessed. Those whose expectations are as upside down as the Pharisees, are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and are the only ones who will not be forgiven because they choose not to be. It is important to remember that Jesus was not giving this warning to dropouts but to religious leaders. Faced with the question, 'what do we think about Jesus?', what is inside us, our true expectations, inevitably come out.(12:22-37)

For the fourth time the Pharisees challenged Him to meet their expectations of the Messiah as a miracle worker, apparently blind to the significance of the miracles He had just done in front of them. They wanted Him to do tricks like a magician on stage. He pointed them to the sign constantly foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament of His coming death and resurrection. In doing so He confirmed the historical truth of the story of Jonah in the sea monster. The people of Ninevah had responded in repentance to the message of the 'resurrected' Jonah.(Jonah 3) The Queen of Sheba had acknowledged the wisdom of God which she heard through Solomon.(I Kgs.10) The Pharisees had no excuse. Jesus then returned to the issue of demons with a warning about the danger of expelling a demon and so creating a vacant 'house' that became headquarters for a whole gang of demons. Jesus needs to be welcomed into us as the King.(12:38-45)

We do not know why Jesus' earthly family came this time. They may still have had plans to lock Him up because they thought He was crazy!(Mk.3:21) His family simply expected Him to be the big brother, and probably the bread winner. Preaching and helping other families was not part of their expectations. Jesus taught them that as Christians we are part of a much bigger family, the family of God.(12:46-50)

In chapter 13, the Lord returned to the subject of His expectations of us, His kingdom on earth. Gently, with a series of illustrations, He explained how we will get it wrong.

13:1-9 Q.1 How were Jesus' own actions at this time a precise example of what He now taught? What would be a more fitting title for this story than the parable of the sower? What were the four kinds of soil? What were the outcomes of sowing?

13:10-17 Q.2 What did Jesus say was the purpose of using parables rather than plain statements to teach? Look up His quotation from Isa.6:9,10. Are parables intended to hide truth so that it becomes harder to understand?

13:18-23 Q.3 How did Jesus explain this first parable? Who is the sower? What is the seed? Who are the four conditions of soil? Relate all four to your own heart at different times in your life.

13:24-43 Q.4 What is the same and what is different in this next parable? Why did Jesus not immediately explain it? What was Jesus wanting to teach us this time? How are the third and fourth parables of the mustard seed and the leaven further developments of the first two parables? Use the explanations you already have of the various symbols such as seed and meal to interpret them.

13:44-52 Q.5 Jesus gave three further parables. The images have changed but the key message remains the same. What is it? Looking back over all 7 parables, what has their message been? What does Jesus expect of us? Did they really understand Him?(verse 51) How is Bible teaching meant to make us like the 'head of the household'?

13:53-58 Q.6 What were the expectations of Jesus' neighbours concerning Him? How do we make the same mistake? What does this section tell us about Jesus' home life?