

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

The previous chapter began with another challenge from the family and neighbours whose unbelief towards someone familiar caused them to miss out on the blessing they could have had from Jesus. In chapter 7 the religious critics returned to the attack once again. The excuse this time was the disciples' neglect of the custom of ceremonially washing hands before eating. The practice makes good sense as a health habit to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis but it was never part of the Old Testament law. The Pharisees had turned useful culture into religious observance and regarded neglecting it as sin against God. We all of us readily do the same in our various cultural practices. European missionaries have made this mistake all over the world in insisting on European customs, in relation to dress, eating or social behaviour, as if they were more pleasing to God than local customs. Even good health practices are for our benefit not God's.

Jesus responded first by rebuking the Pharisees for putting human tradition before God's commandments by quoting Isa.29:13. Verse 14 which follows in Isaiah 29 is worth remembering as the Lord promised to 'deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous' as He showed the futility of human wisdom. His coming into our lives to be our wisdom from inside would be so much better than social rules.(7:1-8) The Lord then went a stage further in demonstrating the hypocrisy of their use of customs to avoid God's law. They had developed a convenient device of transferring assets to a category, supposedly dedicated to God, so that they could say they had no money to help needy parents presumably in old age. The modern Western trick for doing this is a Family Trust. By doing this the Pharisees were breaking the commandment to honour parents and deserved under the law to be put to death.(7:9-13)

Finally He called the crowd together to teach them a better way. We are to consider carefully not what goes into our mouths but what comes out. Alone with Him later the disciples wanted to know what the parable meant. He explained that what we eat and drink goes in one end and out of the other without affecting the kind of people we are. The disciples were later to catch onto these words spelling the end of the Old Testament food laws from Lev.11 which were designed for one nation in one time. They would be replaced by the wisdom of Christ in us for each situation, place and time. What comes out of the mouth however is what began in the heart as godless, selfish thoughts to be expressed by words then actions that will damage us and those around us.(7:14-23)

For only the second time in His ministry, Jesus went out of Israel, this time to Tyre, a coastal city to the north, for the sake of just one child. Such is the love of God. He went into a home where the girl's mother came and found Him to plead for help for her demon-possessed daughter. He seemed to be putting her off by His response that the children's bread should not be thrown to the dogs, meaning that she was not a Jew and therefore not one of God's children. She acknowledged that as an unbeliever she deserved nothing and threw herself on His mercy. He healed the child based on her recognition of their unworthiness, just as He blesses us on the same basis.(7:24-30)

Back in His home country the crowd were waiting for Jesus again with a different kind of need, a man totally deaf and therefore difficult to understand. As before his disability pictures our spiritual problem, if we are deaf to God's word we will have nothing worth saying which will make any sense. The touch and saliva of Jesus on the man's tongue gave him hearing and speech. Contact with the living Christ and His Spirit, symbolised by water from His mouth, gives us a message for our world also.(7:31-37)

I hope you like the theme of chapter 7 'the mouth - what goes into it and what comes out.' Begin as usual by reviewing your section titles in the previous chapter in the light of your answers to the questions. My suggestion for dividing chapter 8 is verses 1-13, 14-21, 22-26 and 27-38. Notice that the first half of this chapter continues the theme of chapter 7. Can you see a new theme beginning after that? Give each section a title.

8:1-13

Q.1 When we pray and Jesus moves our hearts with compassion for a needy person, what should we expect to happen next? This story is similar to the one in chapter 6:30-34 but there are some differences of detail. What are the five most obvious differences? How has the response of the disciples to the problem changed - a little bit? What should we learn from the fact that the details of the situation have changed? What are the similarities between the two events? Find 10 features in common if you can? What important principle for us lies behind these common features? What matters most in these stories, the differences or the similarities? What mistake do we commonly make when we come into a new crisis in our Christian lives? What should be our response?

Q.2 What was so strange about the Pharisees request for a sign? How could they have failed to recognise the meaning of what He had just done? How does this explain people today who say 'if there is proof of God, show me'? What did Jesus mean by 'no sign shall be given' when He performed so many miracles? In Matt.12:39,40 He put it slightly differently. What was He pointing to as the sign they were to follow? How can we use this as a guide as to how to answer those today who ask for evidence of Jesus Christ?

8:14-21

Q.3 A simple problem arose among Jesus' disciples which He used as a teaching situation as He so often does with us. What was the problem? Why should it not have seemed a problem in the light of what they had just been through together? What therefore had they forgotten more than bread? What does leaven picture in the Bible?(Matt.13:33; 16:11,12; I Cor.5:6-8; Lev.2:4-11) How is it an appropriate picture? What would be the 'leaven of the Pharisees'?(Mark 7:5-9; Matt.23) What is 'the leaven of Herod'? The family of Herod ruled Israel in succession by permission of the Roman Emperors? What would be modern examples of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod? What is wrong with them? Clearly the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant by 'leaven'. What did they do to try to find out? How did it help? How do we make the same mistake?

Q.4 The disciples' question only began to be answered when Jesus moved in. Notice that He simply asked them a series of 8 questions. Why is this often a more effective way of teaching than simply giving the answer? Write down the 8 questions and against each one note whether the question is about their understanding or His work. What was the key to their lack of understanding? To make His point Jesus referred them back to Jer.5:21. What according to Jeremiah was the reason why people were 'foolish and senseless' and so without understanding?(Jer.5:22-24)