

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-ONE

On the Mount of Transfiguration,(17) the King's secret was finally out for the three disciples who were privileged to be there. His secret was not just who He was, the Son of God, but who lived in Him, the transforming Spirit of God. The best news for us was that He wanted this to be our secret also. We too can be transformed by His life inside us. In the following two chapters,(18,19) we were told of three obstacles which hinder transformation – pride instead of the humility of a child, bitterness instead of the forgiveness of the forgiven, and covetousness instead of the generosity of the rich in Christ. Chapter 21 explored two more not so obvious barriers to transformation.

The story of the labourers in the vineyard must be a challenge to any expert in employment law. There was plenty of work to do in the vineyard and a shortage of workers. The owner hired his first group of workers for what in those days was the standard daily wage for a labourer, a denarius. They accepted the boss' terms and started work. At intervals through the day the owner recruited more workers with the promise that they would be paid 'whatever is right'. Finally with only an hour left to work a last group were taken on with no mention of a price. When the day's work was done and everyone lined up to be paid the last group to be recruited had a pleasant surprise as they received a whole denarius each. The rest of the workers who had worked much longer got excited. They must be worth much more! To their horror every group received exactly the same, one denarius. They protested loudly. The owner reminded them of the terms they had accepted and sent them on their way, grumbling angrily. What was their problem and what was Jesus' message to us?

The workers assumed they should be paid according to how long and hard they had worked. A denarius provided a family's needs for a day. What the owner had promised to every worker was that he would meet their needs, just as the Lord promises us that He will meet every need of ours if we trust and serve Him.(Matt.6:11; Phil.4:19) The Lord meets our needs because He loves us and so demonstrates His grace, not because we have earned anything.(II Cor.3:5) We hinder transformation when we suppose we are deserving of God's blessing or that grace is the result of a bargain with God. Once again Jesus had illustrated His principle of His kingdom that the last shall be first and the first last.(20:1-16)

For the fourth time Jesus warned His disciples of His coming betrayal and death but gave the promise of resurrection.(12:40; 16:21; 17:22) Previously they had reacted badly hearing only the first half of His message about death, and missing the exciting second half. This time they were silent. They were beginning to hear but did not yet believe.(20:17-19)

The mother of James and John provided Jesus with another wonderful opportunity to explain how the first needed to be last. Talk of a coming kingdom caused the would-be politicians among His followers to sit up and take notice. Would they be in key positions in His cabinet? Their mother began lobbying for her two boys. Mention of authority and power brings a similar reaction in many of us. Where will we be in the hierarchy? How can we advance our careers? Jesus explained two important ideas. On His way to becoming King on earth He had to 'drink a cup'. Later He would use

the same picture to describe His coming death sentence.(26:39,42) The Old Testament prophets had referred to the common practice in the ancient world of executing a prisoner by making him drink a poisoned cup.(Isa.51:21-23; Jer.49:12) For James and John to be leaders with Jesus they would have first to follow Him in death. For all of us being crucified with Christ must be the starting point for Christian leadership.(Gal.2:20) Jesus then went on to turn the worldly view of leadership upside down. In the world men lead by putting themselves above. In Christ's kingdom we can lead only by putting ourselves below those we lead, like a slave. He Himself had come to serve not to be served. To be first we must be last. It is likely that Jesus' audience were stunned!(20:20-28)

The final event in this chapter demonstrated His revolutionary message beautifully. Two blind beggars, the lowest of the low, called out to Jesus for mercy as He was passing. The crowd told them to be quiet assuming Jesus was too busy and important, and would not want to be bothered with them. On the contrary, the least mattered greatly to Him so He put them first, asking what they wanted. They were not seeking money but sight, believing He could do this for them. He healed them and they joined His followers. As true servants of Jesus, no need of even the lowest in our society will be too much trouble for us.(20:29-34)

In chapter twenty-one the final phase of the story began. The King was about to enter His capital, Jerusalem. What response would He receive?

21:1-11 Q.1 Why did Jesus choose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey when He had walked everywhere else?(Isa.62:11; Zech.9:9) What can we learn from the example of the owner of the donkey? Why did Jesus borrow not just one donkey but two? How did most of the crowd respond to Jesus' entry into the city? What were they acknowledging about Him in their shouted greeting? What was the attitude of others?

21:12-17 Q.2 What did Jesus do when He entered the temple? Whose house was He claiming it to be? Was this one time when Jesus lost His temper? Were the traders dishonest? How can we today make the same mistake they made? To what two things did the chief priests react? How did Jesus answer them? How did His response illustrate His message about the last being first?

21:18-22 Q.3 Why did Jesus kill an innocent fig tree when it did not have any fruit at the wrong time of year? What was He teaching us about His plan for us?(II Tim.4:2; Gal.5:22,23; Rev.22:2) What does it take to make us continually fruitful?

21:23-32 Q.4 What lay behind the chief priests question about authority? How did Jesus answer them? How did this silence them for the moment? What story did Jesus tell to underline His message? How did it apply to His opponents? How does it apply to us?

21:33-46 Q.5 In this second story about the owner of a vineyard, who is the owner? Who are the vine-growers? Who are the owner's slaves and who is his son? What does this story teach us about the true purpose of Christian leadership? What is the fundamental mistake of those who set themselves up as God's leaders on earth? How did Jesus story illustrate Ps.118:22? What was the Lord's warning to the chief priests? How did they react? What held them back for the moment?