

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART EIGHT

King Jesus' statement of His government's policy began with a startling proposition – His plan was to change the inside of us, His people.(chapter 5) This would mean a radical new attitude as far as we are concerned – there would be no need to impress with outward show and therefore no need to be anxious about things, our image and the future.(chapter 6) In chapter 7, He moved on to the next logical step – the pressure we put on each other by our expectations of 'correct' behaviour. We judge and in return are judged. We try to remove a speck of dust from someone else's eye while almost totally blind because of the log in our own eye. We pick on little things others get wrong while unaware of our own huge failings. All this aggravates the problem of chapter 6.(7:1-5)

We try to force our pearls of wisdom on those who do not want to listen, the 'pigs' and 'dogs' who are determined to stick with false teaching.(II Pet.2:22; Phil.3:2) We call it witnessing. Each group of religious people has their own brand of 'pearls'. We feel persecuted when no-one will listen.(7:6)

Jesus' answer was very simple. Ask Him for wisdom and He will give it.(James 1:5) Seek His opportunity and He will show us. Knock on people's hearts with His authority and they will open to Him.(Rev.3:20) Instead of forcing our message on unwilling listeners, we will be feeding hungry children with exactly what they need. This was the message of the Old Testament as much as the New. When we start to share Christ's wisdom in His way and time, something exciting happens. They also share truth with us in return so all of us are blessed and grow.(7:7-12)

This way of life which looks for every opportunity to give truth rather than to criticise is narrow in two senses. The Greek word used for the 'narrow' gate is 'stenos' which means small or restricted as in the word stenographer. We come to know Jesus alone not as part of the crowd. The word for the 'narrow' way is 'thlipsis' which means 'under pressure'. Having started down the Christian road we will be under attack. There will be pressure on us to be judgemental like everyone else.(7:13,14)

The pressure will come from the false prophets, the pigs and the dogs of verse 6. They will come to us in impressive disguises but underneath the masks they are wolves, wild dogs, whose purpose is to destroy us. What they teach is the result of who they are. Just as the nature of the tree determines the nature of the fruit it bears so what is happening on the inside is expressed in the teaching of a prophet. Jesus was simply applying the theme of chapters 5 and 6 to ministry. If we are not blessed inwardly by the presence of the King in our hearts, we will be incapable of blessing others by our words. More than anyone else the false prophet is deserving of judgement and condemnation. It is not the big criminal who is in greatest danger of hell but the false teacher.(Matt.23:1-36) The judgement of God is not about performance but identity. Hearing and believing Jesus Christ and becoming His children is the only way to escape judgement.(Jn.1:12; 5:24) Jesus gave a chilling warning to religious teachers. Using the name of Christ in teaching, publicly opposing the Devil, and even being a miracle worker does not make us children of God.(Acts 8:9-24; 13:6-8; 19:13-16) The only way to be blessed and be able to be a blessing to others is to know Him – inside us!(7:15-23)

Jesus changed His illustration one more time. We can build impressive houses with wonderful features to them but neglect first to lay a solid foundation to the house. The foundation of a house is unseen just as the heart is unseen. The choice is between rock and sand. Paul told us later that 'the rock was Christ', (I Cor.10:4) referring back to the stories of the Exodus,(Exod.17; Num.20) when Moses struck a rock which broke open giving water, elsewhere used as a picture of the Holy Spirit.(Jn.7:37-39) The only foundation for a Christian life is Jesus Christ.(I Cor.3:11) The foundation beneath the house only becomes apparent when times are tough. Adversity is like a storm which batters us. We certainly do not enjoy it, but it reveals whether we are children of God. False prophets crumble under persecution; real believers survive.(7:24-27)

What began as a private time of teaching to the small group of disciples somehow grew to be a much larger gathering. The crowd may not yet have understood much of what Jesus had said but something was apparent to them. This man was different from anyone they had ever listened to before. He had authority. Their usual teachers, the scribes, who talked in the synagogues considered that they had the authority of God because of their training, qualifications and titles. They would have communicated their self-confidence in their superior manner and tone of voice but somehow the ordinary people had never been convinced. Jesus on the other hand was for real. Without any of the outward trappings of theological standing or the tricks of the orator, when He spoke people realised that God was speaking through Him. As they looked at Him they saw someone different and absolutely consistent with what He taught. They were amazed. They were looking for the first time at someone in whom God was King. A blessed inside was producing a blessed outside and blessed teaching.

From the mountain top Jesus came down with His disciples into the real world of struggling people. In the stories that followed He began to demonstrate how the principles of His government's policy would work out in the face of human need.

8:1-4 Q.1 Leprosy in the Bible often pictures sin. For what then was this man asking? What did Jesus do for him? Why did He tell him immediately afterwards to go and offer a sacrifice? What was the essential condition for Jesus being able to help the leper? What can we learn from this story about the first necessary step if Jesus is to be the king in us?

8:5-13 Q.2 Paralysis in the Bible often pictures being unable to walk or live the way God wants. What therefore was the centurion seeking on behalf of his servant? Can we do the same for others? What was so remarkable about the centurion's response to Jesus? What had he learned about authority towards a king which we also need to know?

8:14-17 Q.3 What was Peter's mother in law prevented because of her sickness from doing? How therefore did Jesus meet her need? How does He do this for us also? How then did Jesus show His authority over spiritual and physical weakness? Does the quotation from Isaiah mean that Jesus will today heal all sickness if we have faith?

8:18-22 Q.4 What does it really mean to follow Jesus? What often gets in the way?

8:23-27 Q.5 How this time did the King demonstrate His authority? Why were the disciples rebuked for having little faith? How does this story help us in tough times?

8:28-34 Q.6 Once again the King of the Universe challenged the ruler of this world? What can we learn from this story about dealing with the Devil's hold over others?