

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

In chapter seventeen the King revealed His master plan, transformation, by which He would change us from the inside. The Bible characters would come alive. We would be able to bring Jesus into the lives of those for whom existence on earth is hell. When we opened our mouths, out would come exactly what those around needed to hear with nothing wasted. In the next two chapters Jesus explained what could get in the way of His brilliant plan to establish His kingdom in the hearts of men.

Every time the disciples heard something more about Jesus' coming kingdom they started to think like politicians and to jockey for position. Where were they on the career ladder? His answer turned their ambitions upside down. Taking one small child from the crowd, He used childlike humility to illustrate the secret of greatness in His kingdom. Following up the shocked look on the faces of His followers, Jesus took the opportunity to warn those who damage children and adults, with a childlike trust in Him, of the terrible consequences of child abuse of whatever kind. Even worse than physical or sexual abuse of children, on which our modern world obsesses, is the abuse of teaching them wrongly, spiritual abuse.(18:1-6)

Taking His warning a stage further, Jesus expanded the idea of the stumbling block, the Greek word 'skandalon' from which comes the English word 'scandal'. The skandalon was the stick which held a gin trap open. When an animal's leg knocked the stick away, the trap would close preventing his escape and sentencing him to a slow, painful death. Jesus gave the same warning as He had given men about adultery.(5:29,30) It was to any who would harm children by the places their feet led them, the directions their hands pointed them and the look of despising their eyes gave them. Cut it out before the damage is done, Jesus urged them, or be deserving of hell! Instead He pleaded with them to be good shepherds, searching for even one lost sheep, or needy child.(18:7-14)

From the barrier of pride Jesus moved to the hindrance of unforgiveness. When people hurt us whether as children or later, we can carry bitterness for the rest of our lives. There is a simple three step process to deal with those who harm us. Step one is to go to the offender in private, not for the purpose of winning our point but to win the person back into a relationship with Christ, and with us. It only begins to be possible to do this if we have forgiven first. Step two, if step one fails, is to take one or two, not ten or twenty, others with us who can be witnesses because they have observed the offence first hand. Still the purpose is restoration not revenge. The final step is to tell the church, not so that the offender will be pushed out like a leper but so that he will be treated as a tax-gatherer or a Gentile, in other words a needy unbeliever, the kind with whom Jesus spent much time! The God-directed, wise little group of even two or three caring believers can act on earth towards a struggling brother with all the authority of heaven, limiting the Devil and freeing the sinner.(18:15-20)

Peter caught on at once. Jesus wanted him to forgive those who harmed him – but how many times did he have to do it? Seven seemed a generous number. The Lord told him to multiply by 70, a total of 490 times. Long before we reach 490 we will have lost count of the offences because real forgiveness does not keep records.

Forgiving once is hard but 490 times is utterly impossible. Jesus told a story which reminded His followers of the principle He taught in the Lord's prayer.(6:12-15) Our forgiveness of others is both a consequence and a condition of our forgiveness by God. Because He has forgiven us through the cross, He in us can forgive others endlessly. Letting Him do this is necessary if we are truly to enjoy forgiveness ourselves. The story of the king and two of his slaves not only shows how being forgiven must lead to forgiving, it also emphasises the huge difference in size between what we need to have forgiven by God and the comparatively trivial sin of others against us about which we manage to make such an issue.(18:21-35)

In chapter nineteen, Jesus began with the place where forgiveness has to start, marriage and the family. He then addressed one more major barrier to transformation.

19:1-6 Q.1 With what question did the Pharisees interrupt Jesus' ministry this time? What do you suppose was their real motive in this question? Did they know the answer to their own question? How did Jesus deal with their challenge? How did Gen.2:24 provide a whole new and better way of looking at the problem than just asking 'what am I permitted to do?' How does this principle apply to many other ethical questions?

19:7-9 Q.2 How do you suppose the Pharisees were using Deut.24:1-4 to suit themselves? What did Jesus show was the real problem? What according to the last half of chapter 18 is God's alternative when our husband or wife fails? Did Jesus ban divorce? How might we use this passage to help someone struggling with what to do about an unfaithful partner?

19:10-12 Q.3 What did Jesus' disciples conclude was the safest course in the light of what He was teaching them? How had they missed the point? If 'eunuchs' are understood to refer to those who remain single, what answer was Jesus giving about whether or not to marry?

19:13-15 Q.4 When the issue of Jesus welcoming children came up again how did the Lord use it this time to illustrate His message of forgiveness? How does divorce hinder children from coming to Him?

19:16-22 Q.5 What misunderstanding did the young man in this story have about eternal life? What did Jesus teach him about true goodness? Which commandments did Jesus tell him to keep? Which of the 10 commandments had He left out and why? What did the missing commandments reveal about the state of his heart? What was his god? How did Jesus' instruction to him bring the problem into the open? How can we have the same problem? How can we solve it?

19:23-30 Q.6 What third major hindrance to transformation did Jesus discuss in this section? Can a rich man enter heaven? If 'the eye of the needle' referred to a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem how did Jesus answer His own question? If like Jesus' first group of disciples we do dare to let go of our love of earthly possessions what will be the consequences both in eternity and even now on earth? Give personal examples of how God actually does this for us today. How in verse 30 did Jesus return to the question He was asked at the beginning of chapter eighteen?