

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

Opposition from the religious people had been growing for some time. They had repeatedly challenged Jesus and been embarrassed by His ability to answer them well.(9:10-13) They had begun to plan to kill Him.(12:14) They had publicly accused Him of being an agent of the Devil.(12:24) They had demanded evidence of His claim to be the Christ, ignoring His miracles, and unwilling to wait for His resurrection as the ultimate proof.(12:38) Word had spread to Jerusalem and more senior Pharisees now arrived to check Him out. Their judgements started where the local Pharisees had begun, with criticism of His disciples' failure to follow the customs about meal times. As a group they had extended Old Testament commandments far beyond what God had given, into details of behaviour which were without a Biblical basis, and then judged those who did not measure up.(15:1,2)

Jesus turned the question back on them to show how their traditions could actually cause them to break the Law they said they stood for. For example, to avoid supporting needy parents in old age, they claimed poverty by dedicating their possessions to God. Now they were saying the money did not belong to them so they could not help their parents. Jesus referred to Isaiah 29:13-16 where God talked of those who used words that sounded good but did not reflect the heart. The real problem was that the clay had taken over the role of the potter. We should stop at times and ask to what extent our expectations of our fellow Christians are actually Biblical or are they man made?(15:3-9)

The Lord again addressed the crowd rather than His critics with another parable they would not, for the moment, understand. The problem with our mouths is not what goes in but what comes out. The Pharisees knew they were being rebuked. The disciples were confused. What did He mean? First Jesus used two illustrations to explain why the Pharisees were false teachers; God had not been allowed to plant truth in their hearts; we do not ask a blind man to guide us. Then He explained; food only goes into our mouths and out as waste. Words come from the heart and can be the first step towards us and those who hear those words breaking every command God gave. The heart not the stomach is the real problem.(15:10-20)

What followed was the second of only two occasions when Jesus travelled outside His small country.(9:28) His visit to Tyre and Sidon, two coastal cities north of Israel, seemed to be for the benefit of just one family, a mother and daughter. Yet when the Canaanite mother called out to Him for help, the Lord did not respond. The disciples were irritated by her loud demands and wanted her sent away. Jesus appeared to refuse her request for help for her demon-possessed child, first by saying He had come only for Israel, and then referring to those who were not God's children as dogs. Remarkably she persisted, being prepared to be called a dog for her daughter's sake. Jesus real purpose became clear. Humbling ourselves as unworthy of God's grace is the essential condition for receiving that grace. He acknowledged her faith and healed her child. Seeing ourselves as 'dogs' is the only way to become His children.(15:21-28)

Again Jesus withdrew from the crowd, this time up a mountain. Again the needy were brought to Him, carried by others. Once more His compassion meant that He

would not refuse help to those who sought it from Him. Day after day they showed their persistence by remaining with Him rather than going off to find food and shelter. Like the Canaanite woman they showed that faith forgets self interest, reputation or our own comfort. As so often before, His grace gave far more than they sought. They had come for healing not for food, but He fed them anyway. As in chapter 14, the disciples protested that the problem was too big, but they had forgotten who He was and what He had done before for an even greater crowd. He asked them first to present their meagre food supply to Him as He asks us to present our totally inadequate resources to Him before He will work.(Rom.12:1,2; II Cor.8:1-5) Expecting that His Father would work, Jesus told the crowd to sit down ready to eat, said thank you, and began to distribute food. He handed the food first to the disciples who passed it on to the crowd, as He puts truth into our lives to be passed on to others. Even after everyone had eaten well, 7 loaves had become 7 basketsful. It is interesting to wonder why there are two stories recorded which are so similar. On the one hand they illustrate that what God can do once, He can do over and over again. On the other hand they remind us that doubt causes us to forget who God is and to think in terms only of our pathetically limited resources.(15:29-32)

Chapter 16 answers some important questions.

16:1-4 Q.1 Which extra group joined the attack on Jesus this time? Why was it strange that the two groups would come together? What was so foolish about the religious people's question in the light of all that had just happened? How do we ask similar things of God these days? Why did He not give them a miracle to shut them up? What was the meaning of His answer?

16:5-12 Q.2 What can we discover from this conversation about how to learn effectively and why we often do not? How did Jesus take a problem and turn it into a teachable moment?

16:13-20 Q.3 Why did Jesus ask two questions about what they thought of Him rather than one? How does this story show us how we become believers? What rock is Jesus building His church upon?(Deut.32:4,15; I Cor.10:4) What are 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven'?(Isa.22:22; Rev.1:18; 3:7) How can we use them while we are still on earth? Why did Jesus tell his disciples not to share what they had just learned? When should we also keep quiet about Him?

16:21-23 Q.4 What did Jesus tell His disciples about His future? Why did He do this? What was puzzling about Peter's reaction? What does this story show us about how the Devil can use even Christians? How have we all made similar mistakes to Peter's?

16:24-26 Q.5 What are the essential steps to becoming a follower of Jesus? Do we actually have to get ourselves crucified? If not what did Jesus mean? What is the real issue which hinders discipleship?

16:27,28 Q.6 What brief glimpse of His future coming did Jesus give? Why did He say it at this point in the story? Did He mean that He expected to return again within the lifetime of His disciples? If not how and when would Jesus' kingdom on earth begin?