

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

In chapter seventeen Jesus demonstrated the miracle of transformation in which He invited us to share. While enjoying a taste of heaven we can make a difference for those who are tasting hell on earth. The most important way to make a difference is, like the fish with a coin in its mouth, with the message of grace which meets the needs of those around us. In chapter eighteen Jesus pointed us to two important ways in which transformation will be hindered, pride which needs to be replaced with child like humility and trust, and bitterness which needs to be replaced with forgiveness. Now in chapter nineteen He turned the challenge of His opponents into an illustration of the place where forgiveness needs to begin, the home.

As so often before, opposition came just when Jesus was most fully occupied with meeting the many and varied needs of ordinary people. The question seemed at first sight to be simple enough. Did the Old Testament law permit divorce? Everyone knew that according to Deut.24:1-4 the answer was 'yes'. We may assume from Jesus' response that He was aware that the religious keepers of the letter of the law used this passage as their respectable excuse for getting rid of wives they no longer wanted, to be free to marry someone else. He took them back, first to the original model for marriage in Gen.2:24 which was that a man should leave parents and cleave to his wife as one in every sense, for the rest of their lives. Marriages fail for just two reasons, either someone does not separate emotionally from parents' control, or else at least one does not remain faithful in body, soul and spirit.(19:1-6)

Jesus then explained that the law on divorce was a civil provision to make clear where a couple stood after a marriage failed. It was necessary because of someone's hard heart revealed in either unfaithfulness or unforgiveness. Hiding behind the law in following the legal process to get rid of husband or wife so as to have someone else is still adultery in the heart.(19:7-9; 5:27-32)

The disciples were shocked. If marriage was meant to be permanent it might be safer not to marry in the first place. Sadly this has become very much a Western way of avoiding commitment, to live in a de facto relationship, or to marry but not to expect to be committed even from the start. Jesus explained that the choice to stay single was not an easy one either, unless God led us to do so. He offered an interesting insight into the process whether genetic or through a dysfunctional family, which results in some people being unable to commit to marriage, including those with unnatural sexual preferences. He encouraged them actively to seek God's plan, first as to whether they should expect to marry and secondly with whom.(19:10-12)

Again there were children brought to Jesus whom He welcomed but others wanted to push away. Last time His warning had been about damaging them by false teaching and poor example.(18:1-14) This time we can assume He was talking about how divorce damages children and hinders them finding Him. Modern experience amply confirms the truth of His warning; children of broken homes are more likely to break the law, abuse substances, commit suicide or fail in their own marriages.(19:13-15)

In the final story of this chapter, Jesus demonstrated the third major obstacle to transformation, materialism. A rich young man came asking what good thing he had

to do to receive eternal life. Jesus began by pointing out that only God is good and therefore only God in us will produce goodness. He then took him back to the Ten Commandments. The young man was confident that judged by that standard he was doing fine after Jesus reminded him of 5 of the commandments. Somehow he had not noticed that the Lord had left out the other five. The first four commandments relate to God and can be summed up by 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.'(Deut.6:5) The last one he had overlooked was about not coveting. This was his problem. He loved his possessions and therefore he could not love the Lord with all his heart and so he was denying himself eternal life.(6:19-24) Faced with the challenge to let go of money and take hold of God, he went sadly away as many have done ever since.(19:16-22)

Jesus addressed the problem of those who are rich and the spiritual barrier they face. He used the colourful illustration of a camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle. It has been suggested that 'the eye of the needle' was actually a small gate in a city wall through which a camel could only enter unburdened and on its knees. If this is true it beautifully pictures the only answer for the rich, first to let go and then to submit to God. Just as with marriage and divorce, the disciples recognised that trusting God with their material possessions was very hard, even though most of them were probably poor. He reminded them that, as with every other aspect of the Christian life, this is too hard for us but not for God if we respond to His love. To encourage them He gave them, in answer to Peter's question, two glimpses of how it would be if they trusted God with their money. First this was preparing them for the authority they would be given when He returned. Secondly, even now, they would experience the delight of being part of the Christian family which opens its heart to all true believers. Becoming poor is the condition for becoming rich in fellowship.(19:23-30)

In chapter 20 Jesus continued His theme of the last being first.

20:1-16 Q.1 Why did the labourers in the vineyard think they had been unfairly treated by their boss? Who was the boss and who were the labourers? Why do we have the same problem in thinking of our service of God? What had they misunderstood? What may we also have misunderstood? How does this story illustrate the principle of the first being last and the last being first?

20:17-19 Q.2 Why did Jesus tell His disciples the same message now for the fourth time?(12:40; 16:21; 17:22,23) What was their response this time? How was it that when He did rise from the dead they were taken completely by surprise?

20:20-28 Q.3 How had John and James and their mother still missed the point about the last being first? What did Jesus mean by them drinking the same cup as He was to drink? What contrast did Jesus draw between secular leadership and Christian leadership? Why do we still struggle to accept His model of leadership?

20:29-34 Q.4 How does this story of the two blind beggars bring the principle of the last being first to life? What did they have to do to receive sight? What do we have to do to see the world God's way?