

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

Having claimed first His city, Jerusalem, as its rightful King, and then His home, the temple, Jesus now openly confronted the religious leaders who felt their grip on power slipping from them. He told them a series of stories in which they clearly appeared as key characters. He answered a range of questions, designed to embarrass Him, with devastating effectiveness. They had a murderous hate of Him, but they remained silent for the moment. In chapter 23 Jesus spoke no longer to His enemies but to His followers and the ordinary people about the huge trap into which those who seek leadership in the synagogue or the church easily fall.

The key pitfall in religious leadership was for Bible teachers to put themselves in ‘the seat of Moses’. Moses as God’s writer of the first five books of the Old Testament had been used by God to lay the foundation of His revelation throughout scripture. Teachers can easily put their own teaching on a level with the Bible. Moses was an inspiring example of his message in action. Beware those who say one thing and do another. It is easy to make huge demands on our audience that we have no intention of putting on ourselves. When Paul described himself as ‘the foremost of sinners’, (1 Tim.1:16) he was simply acknowledging that he was more convicted by his teaching than anyone, as we should be too. Leaders have to find ways to impress to keep control of others. Phylacteries were little leather pouches worn on the forehead containing Bible verses. Tassels on robes were supposed to be symbolic of items in the Law. So often they were only for show. Being treated as above others maintains an air of superiority. Titles are another way of doing the same. All of these devices are ways of taking God’s place in people’s lives. All are based on a wrong idea of leadership which, in a Christian sense, is the very reverse of worldly leadership. True greatness only comes through humble service of others.(23:1-12)

Jesus gave a series of ‘woes’ which are the reverse of the ‘blesseds’ of Matt.5:3-12. Whereas being blessed means we have joy because we have been given what it takes for every situation by God, and therefore have so much to give, woe is the misery of facing life empty-handed. The word ‘hypocrite’ comes from the Greek word for an actor who wore a mask to portray a character. Those for whom life is miserable and empty may try to hide it behind a mask of success or status. The first ‘woe’ was the misery of shutting themselves and others out of the kingdom of heaven. (Compare 23:13 and 5:3) The second ‘woe’ was about oppressing the needy behind a mask of prayer.(23:14) The third ‘woe’ was a misplaced zeal but it involved recruiting others for hell.(23:15) The fourth ‘woe’ sounded spiritual but had every excuse why apparently solemn promises need not be kept. Truth was not valued.(23:16-22) The fifth ‘woe’ made a great fuss of tiny detail but ignored major human need in others.(23:23,24) The sixth ‘woe’ hid a greedy inside behind a clean outside.(23:25,26) The seventh ‘woe’ had impressive beauty covering a dead and dirty interior.(23:27,28) The eighth ‘woe’ made a great show of honouring the spiritual heroes of the past while having a bitter hatred of such men in the present.(23:29-31)

Jesus’ devastating exposure of the hypocrisy of religious leadership ended with a terrible warning of the magnitude of the crimes they and their successors down through the centuries would commit in the pretence of serving God. They of all men

would be deserving of hell. These were far stronger words than Jesus ever used of the ordinary 'failures' of His society. He reminded them of the list of murders carried out in the name of religion from Abel killed by his brother Cain who was jealous that his best efforts were not acceptable to God,(Gen.4:8) to Zechariah executed at the command of King Joash because he dared to tell God's truth.(II Chron.24:21) It was the A to Z of Old Testament martyrdom.(23:32-36)

In the last few verses of the chapter Jesus expressed His sorrow for the whole city of Jerusalem whose leadership had so badly failed them. He suggested that when people allow themselves to be misled, they must share some responsibility for the wrong that follows. The consequences of the failure of the whole city to be faithful to God who loved them so much would be developed further in the next chapter. But despite all this God still had a future purpose for Jerusalem.(23:37-39)

In chapter 24 Jesus lifted, just slightly, the curtain on the future of Jerusalem and the world.

24:1,2 Q.1 How do these two verses illustrate the contrast between God's view of what man has created, and man's view? How can we today also have the wrong focus on what really matters?

24:3-14 Q.2 Why do you suppose Jesus' disciples asked Him three questions in the same sentence? Which of their questions did He answer? Which question did He not answer and why? What five kinds of events did Jesus tell His followers would happen before the end? Give examples of each of these events which have happened somewhere in the world during your lifetime. Consider how you might respond when they happen to you. As conditions become tougher what should be our priority?

24:15-20 Q.3 What according to Daniel 9:27; 11:31 and 12:11 had been warned about the 'abomination of desolation'? What do you suppose pagan invaders had done in the past when they captured the Jewish temple to show that their gods were the ones who counted? What would the Romans be likely to do when they finally captured Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70? What advice did Jesus give to His followers as to what they should do at such a time?

24:21-28 Q.4 In this next section was Jesus talking about the events of AD 70, which happened just as He warned, or was He looking further ahead? What two warnings did He give as to what we would face? Would these things happen just once more in the future, or over and over? How should we respond when such things happen in our time? What absolute certainty can we have about the future?

24:29-31 Q.5 What key events will surround the return of Jesus Christ? How will they affect the unbeliever and the believer?

24:32-44 Q.6 What illustrations did Jesus give of how people should respond to the indications of His imminent return? Can we expect to be able to predict the date of Jesus' return? Did even the Lord know Himself? If not, why not?

24:45-51 Q.7 Who was the master and who were the two slaves in this next parable? How did this story explain why we do not need to know when Jesus will return?