

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

For the moment Jesus went off in one direction while His disciples went in another. The day would soon come when they would always have His presence when they did His work. They had His instructions and authority but for now they did not have Him. They would discover the possibilities and limitations of this situation.(11:1)

John the Baptist had been sitting in Herod's prison for sometime for telling God's truth openly as the disciples had now been sent to do.(14:3-5) For the present Herod could not make up his mind what to do with John. He was offended and attracted by his message at the same time.(Mark 6:20) John had had the amazing privilege of being the herald of the King of Heaven. He had heard God speak and seen the Spirit come on Jesus.(3:16,17) But alone in his prison cell at night he could still have niggling doubts. Was Jesus really the Messiah, the Christ? If John could have doubts, we will, however mature and experienced we are. John did the right thing with his doubts. He told Jesus about them. We need to do the same. Doubts need to be dealt with promptly. Jesus' answer was very simple. John was to check reality against the Bible. Isaiah had promised what the Messiah would do when He came.(Isa.35:5; 61:1) Jesus' ministry had exactly fulfilled the Bible. He will always do in our lives precisely what He promises. Realising that afresh removes doubt.(11:2-6)

One of the most common causes of doubt is disappointment that our false expectations have not been fulfilled. Jesus asked the crowd what they had expected John to be like. Would he be a fashionably dressed man living in the desert? Of course not! He reminded them of what the Bible had said to expect – simply a messenger who came to prepare people. Yet rough man though he was, John was a great man because he was God's man. As born again sons of God through faith, with the Spirit living in us, we will have even greater potential than he had. What do we expect of ourselves? Are we disappointed? Some will try to force their way into prominence by violence but it is God who appoints His prophets according to His choice. John was the promised prophet who would be like Elijah.(Mal.4:5) Jesus then compared the crowd to a group of children at play whose expectations would always be contradictory. John's simple lifestyle did not please them. Jesus' mixing with drunks and dropouts did not please them either! It was no wonder they doubted.(11:7-19)

God also has expectations of us. If we have the privilege of seeing Him at work and hearing the gospel clearly, how much more He could expect of us in terms of a response of repentance and faith. Jesus developed further His warning in 10:15 to those who had seen and heard more of Him than the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They would be judged one day not for how big their sins were, but what they did with the gospel.(Rom.2:11-16) Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum were Galilean cities in which Jesus spent much time. Sodom was famous for its sexual perversion, (Gen.19) Tyre for its arrogance.(Ezek.28:2) Man will be judged not for his behaviour but for unbelief towards Jesus.(Jn.16:9) This view of sin turns upside down our tendency to grade the sin of others. The more we know the bigger our responsibility.(11:20-24)

So then how do we come to have true expectations of God? Is it a matter of intelligence and qualifications? How is it that children will often understand the gospel better than university academics? Because truth is revealed by God! Like all blessing from God, truth must be received. Children know how to receive undeservedly; successful people only know how to take because they think they have earned. But before we can receive we have to come. Jesus invited us to come to Him as we are, tired and burdened. Much of our burden has to do with sin and failure, but much also has to do with disappointment with false expectations of ourselves, others and Him. His promise of 'rest' sounds contradictory because He talked about taking on His yoke. That sounds like an even bigger burden. The image Jesus used was of the yoke placed on a pair of oxen which allowed them to pull their burden together. The normal practice was to put the wise, experienced, old ox in one side of the yoke and the rebellious young ox on the other side. The old ox was the one really doing the work and carrying the burden. The young ox simply needed to learn to walk in step with the old one. Until he did it was a hard, fruitless struggle. The young ox needed to learn to follow the old ox's expectations instead of his own. So do we.(11:25-30)

In chapter 12 there were more people who struggled because of their false expectations of the Messiah.

12:1-8 Q.1 What behaviour of Jesus' disciples was criticised this time? Why did the Pharisees disapprove? What three answers did Jesus give them? Look up the story about David in I Sam.21. What was surprising about David's actions on that occasion? How do we show similar attitudes to the Pharisees today?

12:9-14 Q.2 What grounds did the Pharisees have to complain this time? Why did Jesus not give them a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to their question? What illustration did He use this time? Why did they not answer His question at all? How did His action show their attitude to be hypocritical and contradictory? What was their response? Again how do we behave in similar ways at times?

12:15-21 Q.3 Why did Jesus tell those He healed to keep quiet about Him? Are we not meant to be His witnesses? How had Isaiah told us to check God's expectations of His Servant against what He did? What should we do about our expectations of Jesus?

12:22-30 Q.4 How was this demon-possessed man like us before we became Christians? How did Jesus healing him expose the conflicting expectations of those who looked on? What was the Pharisees' explanation of what Jesus did? How did Jesus answer their argument? In the light of Jesus' reply how would you respond to someone who said that a Christian could be demon possessed?

12:31-37 Q.5 What did Jesus mean by the 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'? About whom was He saying this? Does it refer to Christians who 'drop out' of the church? What explanation did Jesus give of why the Pharisees talked in the way they did? How was this an example of His illustration in Matt.15:11-20?

12:38-45 Q.6 What false expectations did the Pharisees reveal this time? Why did Jesus use Jonah inside the sea monster to answer their question? How do verses 41 and 42 provide further examples of Jesus' warning in 11:20-24? Why did Jesus return to the question about demon-possession at this point? Why according to this story may casting out demons be dangerous?

12:46-50 Q.7 What expectations did Jesus' family have of Him at this stage in the story?(Mark 3:21,31-35) Did He go along with their expectations? How can His response help us when our families disapprove of our Christian ministry? Who are Jesus' family?