

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

The King was surrounded by vast crowds of His future subjects, prepared to some extent to listen to His message but probably drawn for the most part by His miraculous power to heal. Instead of looking for a large stadium and a louder PA system or even a TV station, Jesus took His ‘cabinet’, His small group of disciples up a mountain. He saw that the most effective way to teach a multitude adequately was to train a small team thoroughly. In the next three chapters He set out His government programme. It was so simple that a crowd who were only half listening would have missed it. His policy was revolutionary - to change the heart of man!

His programme began with a series of conditional promises of blessing. ‘Blessing’ refers to resources, to knowing that we have what it takes for any situation. The conditions for blessing are a list of attitudes of heart. The attitudes are

- towards ourselves, ‘poor in spirit’,
- towards our sin, ‘those who mourn’,
- towards others, ‘gentle’,
- towards our behaviour, ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’
- towards failure in others, ‘merciful’,
- towards our thoughts, ‘pure in heart’,
- towards conflict between others, ‘peacemakers’ and
- towards persecution, ‘rejoicing’.

The consequences are again inner resources which will then show in behaviour by us or by others. The first consequence is in the present tense,

- ‘theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven’ the rest are in the future as we draw on what is ours in His kingdom, ‘they *shall*’
- be comforted, inherit, be satisfied, receive mercy, see God and be called sons of God.
- The final consequence returns to the first one in the present tense, ‘theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven’, because every discovery we make about what we have in Christ leads us back to want to discover more.(5:1-12)

Jesus used two pictures to illustrate how the revolution inside would affect the society outside. Salt was the first century equivalent of the deep freeze. It was used to stop food rotting, as our infiltration of a secular society has a partial effect in holding back moral decay. Light, to be effective in revealing the truth, needs to stand apart. One picture sees us becoming deeply involved; the other requires us to be separate. Both are needed from Christians. Notice that salt and light work silently.(5:13-16)

Would the revolution the King was introducing do as most revolutions do and sweep away the old ways built on the Old Testament Law? Jesus’ programme would not contradict what had gone before but lift His followers to a level which was far higher than the best of the old system. A change of heart produces quality, sincere behaviour rather than the outward show that came from trying to keep the Law.(5:17-20)

The rest of the chapter provides examples of the revolution in action. Jesus began with the biggest crime, murder. The real problem, He said, is anger in the heart which may show as words that put someone down, or just a look on the face that says ‘I wish

you were dead!’ The place to start is the place of sacrifice, for them an altar, for us the cross where our anger and all other sin is forgiven.(5:21-26)

The second example Jesus used was adultery. Jesus had a startling new definition which included lust in the heart as well as the sexual act which everyone recognised. His programme of changing the heart would also change this way of thinking about another person’s body. For lustful thoughts to stop there needs to be a choice about what we do with our eyes and our hands. We need to be willing to cut out our previous ways of looking and touching and replace them with God’s way of looking at people and helping them. Quite deliberately Jesus linked adultery in the heart to divorce. Divorce was permitted in the Old Testament,(Deut.24:1-3) as part of the civil law as a protection particularly for women, though God hated it.(Mal.2:16) It could be used as a respectable way of covering the adultery of the heart by finding an excuse to get rid of an unwanted wife or husband. Jesus recognised the real motive.(5:27-32)

The next example was of vows, usually employed as verbal contracts in making a bargain. Various sacred places or objects were used to indicate the seriousness of the promise. If a revolution has happened in the heart then simple words like yes or no would represent absolute commitment.(5:33-37) The fourth example re-examined the concept of justice which limited revenge to an equal repayment.(Exod.21:24) Blessing in the heart would make us want to give to those who harm us rather than to take.(5:38-42) The final example took what seemed a wonderfully caring command to ‘love your neighbour’(Lev.19:18) and showed how Christ as King in our hearts would extend the caring to all men.(5:43-48)

It is these qualities which would cause Christians to stand out from the rest of humanity, to look like Jesus. The Lord moved on in chapter six to examine just how this new inner attitude is to be established and maintained.

6:1-4 Q.1 Which example of looking good in the eyes of others did the Lord use first? What modern equivalents of sounding a trumpet in the street can you think of? How will the Lord in us change our ways of giving and motives for doing so? How can we keep secrets between our left and right hands?

6:5-15 Q.2 What was His second example? Again give modern examples of this behaviour? What instructions did Jesus give us about prayer from the heart? Re-write the Lord’s Prayer in your own words? What message does the Lord put on your heart when you read what you have written? What according to verses 14 &15 is the most obvious way by which others will know we have been praying?

6:16-18 Q.3 What example of giving something up did Jesus use? What else might this refer to apart from food? Again give modern examples of how we do the same as the hypocrites Jesus was describing? How will a new heart change our attention seeking behaviour?

6:19-34 Q.4 What three areas of anxiety did Jesus speak about? What examples did He give of why these are unnecessary? How will a heart changed by Him cease worrying? How can anxiety be compared to pagan worship?