

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

In chapter 5 the King introduced the first part of His government programme, to change the inside as His secret for changing the outside. By doing so He raised the standard impossibly high. In this next chapter He began to answer the question which comes immediately to mind – how? If looking good to others is not the answer to gaining God's approval, then what is?(6:1)

Jesus went on to give three examples of how we try to impress, and His alternatives. First we think there is merit in giving, so we make sure as many people as possible are aware of how generous we are. In Jesus' day, big donors on their way to the synagogue or the temple were preceded by a trumpeter who left no-one in doubt as to what they were doing. Men admired them. God did not. His way was to give so secretly that not even our other hand would know what one hand was doing. God would then be delighted.(6:2-4)

A second way of showing people how spiritual we are is to pray publicly, loudly and repeatedly, supposing that God is interested in visibility, length and volume. This was also popular in Jesus' time as a way of demonstrating supposed influence with God. The fact is that they were talking to themselves. Prayer is meant to be private and simple to a God who knows all about us and our problems before we even get started. Jesus gave as an example what have become probably the best known words in the whole Bible, the Lord's Prayer. The first half of the prayer talked only about God; the second half about us and our needs. We do not know our real needs until we know who He really is. There are 4 things we should know about God; who He is – 'our Father'; where He is – 'heaven'; how great His authority is – 'His hallowed name'; and what He plans – 'to bring His kingdom from heaven to earth'. Our needs now become very obvious. First we need everything – 'our daily bread'; particularly we need to be forgiven – 'forgive us our debts'; which leads immediately to our need to be able to forgive – 'as we have forgiven our debtors'. Our final need is to have a God guided life which will be away from temptation not into it – 'and do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil'. In closing, remember that the outcome of prayer will be entirely God's doing so He alone deserves the credit. Just to make sure we have grasped the point, Jesus repeated again the vital connection between being forgiven and forgiving others.(6:5-13)

The third way of gaining religious credit in the eyes of others is to give something up with as much media exposure as possible. The example Jesus gave was fasting, abstaining from food. Certain people fasted at times in the Bible including Jesus Himself but there was no command to do so. Today we are more likely to be dieting according to the latest fashion, or giving up smoking, drinking or some other bad habit. We want everyone to know. God is not very interested in what we do not do but in whether we are enjoying Him in our hearts.(6:16-18)

So the choice is credit on earth, whether dollars or reputation, or credit in heaven. The first rots and rusts and brings us worry; the second does not. Another way of asking the same question is to reflect on which way we are looking, to the Devil and darkness, or to God and the light. There is no way we can do both.(6:19-24)

One simple test of which way we are looking, towards the world or the King, is our level of anxiety. We have three basic worries – the necessities of life – ‘food and drink’; ‘clothing’ - which largely determines how others see us, and the unknown – ‘tomorrow’. Jesus reasoned from creation. Look at how God feeds the birds, clothes the flowers, and decides each day whether we live or die. The unbeliever assumes no one will look after him if he does not put himself first. The subject of the King knows every detail of his life is in the hands of His Father. Why settle for less? Why worry when we can pray?(6:25-34)

The answer to the question, ‘how?’ is prayer, listening to a Father who loves us, knows us and totally provides for us, beginning on the inside. Instead of telling God about His world and how He should fix it, we can relax and let Him change our hearts to see, care and plan the way He does.

The third part of the government programme describes the new kind of leadership which emerges when the revolution has begun on the inside.

7:1-5 Q.1 What does it mean to judge someone? How does Jesus’ teaching about not judging complete His teaching in chapters 5 and 6? Why are we not to judge? If we do succeed in removing the log from our own eye, how will we then approach someone else’s failure?

7:6 Q.2 What do you think are the pearls Jesus is talking about?(Job 28:18) Who are the dogs and the swine?(Phil.3:2; II Pet.2:22) What is Jesus warning us against?

7:7-12 Q.3 What, instead, are we to do with the gospel message? For what are we to ask?(James 1:5) For what are we to seek and knock? How will this change the way we treat people and are treated by them?

7:13,14 Q.4 What is the gate and what is the way?(Jn.10:7; 14:6) Why are they both described as narrow? How do these two verses relate to our witness to others?

7:15-23 Q.5 If we follow Jesus’ advice in verses 1-14 how will we avoid being wolves, thorn bushes or thistles? What does it take to be true witnesses? What behaviour of false prophets does He describe in verses 21-23? How can we be sure this does not apply to us?

7:24-27 Q.6 What are the rock and the sand in this illustration?(I Cor.10:4) How is Jesus summing up the whole policy of His government given in the last three chapters?

7:28-29 Q.7 What was so different about Jesus’ teaching compared with what the disciples had normally heard before? How did they recognise that He had authority? How may people recognise authority when we speak?