

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS -PART 7

When we see someone else struggling with moral or ethical problems, most people assume we have just two alternatives, to judge, criticise and correct them, or to ignore what we see as being none of our business. We do the first if we look from the standpoint of the Law. So does grace mean that we do the second? Many people see grace as weakness, tolerance of sin and compromising. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul has already laid the basis for his answer by explaining that grace is so much more than a freedom from the Law. It frees us to love, and love motivates us to be involved in the struggles of others. Step by step he now sets out his plan.

First there is our attitude of gentleness to the sinner. Second will be humility when we admit that we fail just as easily. Third we need a willingness to see someone else's problem as ours, not just theirs. Fourth we are to let the Spirit give us an honest look at ourselves which will show us we have absolutely no reason to feel superior to the offender.(6:1-5)

Paul demonstrates on numerous occasions in his letters what he means by 'restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.' 'Gentleness' for Paul could be very direct as in I Corinthians where he reviews a long list of problems among the Corinthians but always in the light of the grace of God. In many respects the Philippian Christians were a great inspiration but the conflict between the two leading women,(Phil.4:2) was causing damage and Paul wanted the whole fellowship to deal with it, again in the light of the grace of God. The Thessalonian Christians were a cause of rejoicing because of their growing faith and love,(I Thess.1:2-9) but when they stopped work because of wrong teaching that the Lord's return was imminent, Paul corrects them firmly.(II Thess.3:10-13) By far his strongest words however are reserved for the Galatians who had been misled by false teaching. He describes himself as being like a mother in labour,(4:19) but at the same time warns those who persisted with another gospel that they would be accursed.(1:8,9)

Such a revolution in attitude to each other's shortcomings has a profound effect on the quality of fellowship between us. We will care so much more about the practical needs of those whose teaching has blessed us. We will realise more deeply the consequences of our own actions on our relationship with God and each other. We will see much more clearly the potential benefit of being committed long term to helping our brothers and sisters in Christ.(6:6-10)

One last time in this letter Paul spells out, in large letters, the vital issue at stake. Manipulating others' behaviour to the standard we set may look impressive to others and avoid persecution or ridicule from them as we take credit for the 'good behaviour' of our flocks, but this is not the gospel! There is only one reason to be excited. He died for me and rose again to live in me. Paul returns to his theme of 2:20. If this is our 'Law' we will be new people,(II Cor.5:17) changed from the inside, enjoying and showing His peace and mercy.(6:11-16)

Paul wants the issue of living by the Law instead of grace resolved quickly and forever. He hoped that his suffering had not been without purpose. He closes where he started on the theme of grace.(6:17,18)

A FINAL ASSIGNMENT ON THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

In one paragraph of no more than 100 words summarise what God has taught you through studying this book.

Then write a second paragraph to a friend who has shared his or her problem with you in this way: “When I first became a Christian I was so excited and life was wonderful but lately it is a struggle however hard I try to live up to the standards other Christians have taught me.”