

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS - PART FIFTEEN

Our new life, the life of Jesus Christ in us by the Holy Spirit, changes the way we think, chapter 8, so that above all else we become merciful, as God is merciful, chapters 9-11. When in the light of all that God has done for us, we present our bodies to Him, ready for action, change on the inside produces change on the outside, first towards other Christians, chapter 12, and then towards society as a whole, chapter 13.

The rest of the book is about how to help the weak whether inside the church or outside. In chapter 14 Paul insists that mercy will show in two basic ways.

Firstly we can accept those whom we consider to be weak spiritually because they think, speak and act differently from us.(14:1-12) Paul's particular examples of weakness or strength are in our diets (14:1-4), and our calendars.(14:5,6) Some observed rules for themselves about food based on the laws in Leviticus 11 which forbade certain foods mainly on the basis of health issues. Others went back to the Garden of Eden for their diet rules, to the time before there was any death and therefore when there no meat eaten. To be back under such rules was weakness because Jesus had been quite clear that all foods were now clean.(Mark 7:19) Food however is not the issue. What matters is another person's relationship with Christ. We are fellow servants of the same Master; when we judge each other's choices in these things we are behaving like masters!

The other popular group of rules Christians love to put themselves under as protection for their weak faith are the rules about certain days.(14:5,6) Again some would be using the Jewish calendar as in Leviticus 23 while others would be adding special Christian festivals. Jesus joined in with His fellow Jews in celebrating the special occasions in their calendar but He was already beginning to show them that something greater lay beyond.(Matt.12:1-14; Lk.14:1-6) Paul made his position quite clear that food and days were just a shadow of Jesus and that what mattered was the Person not the shadow.(Col.2:16,17)

The vital principle was that each of us should do what we believe in our relationship with God to be His calling to us. Then we must respect whatever conclusion someone else comes to even though it may be different from our own. Each of us is answerable to God, not to each other.(14:7-12) Minding our own business does not come easily to us as Christians. We love to control each other's lives!(I Thess.4:11) When we do so we have taken over God's job. It is helpful to think these ideas through in modern terms. The church today has its own equivalents of these rules about food and days.

The second issue in this chapter is the problem which underlies the first one. If we are not to judge each other's behaviour then presumably we are free to do what we like because no-one else is to criticise us if we do? The problem is that of the influence of example. In exercising our freedom we may lead someone else into a life-style which is damaging as far as he or she is concerned. (14:13-23) We are to be concerned about the effect of example if it might destroy someone else's faith. The principle is not of law against liberty, but of love.(14:13-15) Jesus also pointed out the terrible consequence of leading someone else astray by our example.(Matt.18:1-14) Our unwise example in personal behaviour can easily put people off trusting Christ. Another person's salvation is far more important than my freedom to do what I like.(14:16-18) Love wants to build others up in their faith, not damage them.(14:19-21; I Cor.8:1) The key question in any decision about life-style is not what do the rules say, or what do I feel like, it is "Lord what do you want me to do?" That alone is faith.(14:22,23)

If we do not help the weak by judging them on the one hand or ignoring their feelings on the other, how can we help? This is the theme of chapter 15.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER FIFTEEN

15:1,2 Q.1 What two things are the strong told to do for the weak in faith? How will these things be different from the two responses described in chapter 14? What does it mean to please one another? Should we therefore do what other people expect of us?(Lk.16:15; Eph.6:6)

15:3 Q.2 How did Jesus please the people of His day?(Lk.3:22; Matt.17:5) Did He behave as they expected? How does this quotation from Ps.69:9 explain how Jesus pleased the weak?

15:4 Q.3 How can the scriptures help the weak?(II Tim.3:15-17; I Thess.5:14) How can the appropriate use of the Bible produce a very different result from that described in chapter 14?

15:5,6 Q.4 What are the end results of the weak receiving the two kinds of help described here?

15:7-12 Q.5 Why does Paul keep talking about the Gentiles to illustrate his point about accepting the weak? What was his ministry? What bearing does this have on Christian service for us today?

15:13-16 Q.6 Paul turns now to the question of how to help the weak. What are the qualifications for a counsellor? Who should counsel whom? What is counselling if it is not telling people how they should change their behaviour?

15:17-21 Q.7 What were the priorities in Paul's ministry? Why was this so? How do these priorities help the weak? What does it mean to 'fully preach the gospel'?(Col.1:25-27)

15:22-29 Q.8 What insight does Paul give us here as to how he went about his ministry? What bearing does this have on Christian service for us today? What rewards are there in Christian service?(I Cor.9:24-27; Matt.25:21)

15:30-33 Q.9 How does Paul want the Roman Christians to pray for him? What effect did he expect their prayers to have? How could their prayers help the weak?