

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF JAMES – PART FOUR

Faith in Jesus Christ in the face of trials brings joy and wisdom, provided we are wholehearted in our faith. Wisdom changes the way we see ourselves, how we understand suffering, our response to our own suffering, and to the needs of others who are also suffering.(chapter one) God's wisdom changes how we value others to see them as God sees them, removes our partiality and prejudices which lead to false judgements, causes us to see the whole needs of the poor not just to preach at them, and leads us to understand the real nature of faith. Such faith alone saves us and shows in our good works, like Abraham and Rahab in the Old Testament.(chapter two)

Those in greatest need of wisdom are Bible teachers so we should be cautious about who becomes a teacher. The Bible is toughest on false prophets,(Matt.7:15; Lk.6:26) and teachers,(Matt.23; II Pet.2) because they have such power to do damage to others. The part of the body of the teacher, and of everyone of us, which is most in need of God's wisdom is the tongue. James uses a series of vivid pictures throughout the rest of this chapter to make his point. First he asks how we steer a horse, by putting a bit in his mouth to which the bridle is attached, not by pulling his ears or tail! If our mouths are controlled, the rest of our lives will follow.(3:1-3)

A large ship is controlled by only a small rudder which when a strong wind blows should make sure the ship is steered to safety not wrecked on the rocks. The pilot, in our case the brain, moves the rudder, representing the human tongue. The tongue is only a few centimetres long but its misuse can do great damage to 1-2 metres of its owner. It takes only one match to set an entire forest alight which may destroy people and homes in its path. Just a few hurtful, false words can destroy the lives of countless people, above all if they come from the teacher. Like a fire which jumps from one tree to another so the evil words from one tongue can be heard and repeated by many other tongues. Man alone has the power of intelligent speech with its huge potential to serve God or hell itself.(3:4-6)

Taming a lion, a shark or a snake is easy compared with trying to tame the human tongue. Paul on the same theme quoted two Psalms when he wrote, 'their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps in under their lips'.(Rom.3:13; Ps.5:9; 140:3) A few carefully chosen words of gossip, criticism or bad advice can drive another person to depression, suicide, violence or divorce.(3:7,8)

Never is the need for consistent wisdom more apparent than with the careful choice of our words. The problem for most of us is that the same mouth performs two opposite functions within the same day. We can sing hymns of praise one moment and put down someone else whom God loves, and for whom He has great plans, in the next moment. James compares this dual use of the mouth to a tap which discharges fresh water at one time and raw sewage at the next. Fruit trees produce fruit consistent with their natures and nothing else; only figs come from a fig tree or grapes from a grapevine. The tragedy of the mouth is that it is showing the fruit of two natures at different times. We have the mind of Christ, but we still have our old natures. Drinking water is not going to come out

of the sea. A message which really lifts others up and helps them is not going to be heard and trusted unless we let the Lord's wisdom, only, lead our minds and mouths.(3:9-12)

The real problem for the teacher and all of us is not the tongue but the mind which controls it. When God's wisdom changes the mind, it will become evident in the 'gentle wisdom' of the tongue. Gentleness does not push. The purpose of Christian teaching is not to change the behaviour of others to what we think it should be, but by the persuasive power of the gospel to introduce the mind of Christ. Jealousy, ambition and arrogance are the motives which lead us to try to force change. If we can alter others' behaviour we will be demonstrating our power over them. Dominance in leadership is the world's way of leadership.(Lk.22:24-27) It comes from the Devil who first established his power over man by persuading Eve and then Adam to change their behaviour. If we achieve conformity in the behaviour of other Christians we will have produced, not order as we suppose, but disorder because the man-centred mind will still be in chaos, which is evil.

On the other hand the tongue which expresses the pure wisdom of God has the power to persuade reasonably, to bring people to peace with God and each other, to encourage genuine, consistent, Christ-like living which can then be reproduced when the hearer becomes the next speaker who equally blesses someone else. The choice is dramatic!(3:13-18)

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. What consequence of the misuse of the tongue does James now move on to? What does he again show us lies behind the problems of the tongue? To what supposedly major sins does he compare quarrelling? To what simple solution does he again point us? When do we make God jealous?(4:1-5)
2. What is the secret of enjoying the grace of God? How does the same secret give us victory over the Devil? What mistake do we usually make in trying to deal with Satan? How does James tie this secret back to his original theme in 1:5-8? About what are we to be miserable and mourn?(Matt.5:3,4) How will this lead to true joy? Give practical examples.(4:6-10)
3. What is the next example of the tongue misused? Why is doing this described as 'speaking against the law.'? Whose job have we taken over when we judge one another? What have we already seen in 2:13 is lost as soon as we begin to judge one another? How does the wisdom of God change this destructive habit?(4:11,12)
4. What is the final example in this chapter of the trouble our tongues get us into? What may be wrong with our planning ahead? As we plan to do business and make a profit who could be likely to suffer? What aspect of the wisdom of God have we overlooked when we do this?(4:13-17)