

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART SEVEN

As Paul moves on to deal with more moral problems which were troubling the Corinthian church he almost seems to be teasing them by returning repeatedly to the question of judging, but each time from a different standpoint. In chapter 4 he rebukes them for their judgement of him as a leader who, they thought, had obviously failed because of his poverty. Yet in chapter 5 he urges them to judge a situation of incest in the church where those responsible were arrogantly denying the word of God and so justifying their behaviour. We saw that Paul was not contradicting himself but setting out two important principles. We are not to judge each other's behaviour; that is God's business. We are, on the other hand, to judge the teaching we hear which may be used to justify outrageous behaviour, but we must do it with wide open Bibles.

In chapter 6 he again talks about judgement. This time the problem is that Christians are taking each other to secular courts to settle their differences.(6:1) In a business orientated city like Corinth there would be frequent use of the legal system as businessmen treated each other in ways that were less than honest and then tried to get justice through the courts. Such thinking easily spilled over into the church when believers differed. Paul's proposal is that wise Christians should be able to help one another settle differences without needing to go to court.(6:4-6) If we are one day to judge the world when Christ establishes His kingdom, then sorting out little conflicts now should be easy.(6:2,3) Were Christians then to put on the robes of a judge and turn the church into a court? If we are to apply the message of the previous two chapters then we will still not be judging the behaviour of our fellow believers but rather judging the meaning of the word of God as it applies to difficult human situations.(14:29; Jn.7:24) Paul is urging those who have important differences which they might otherwise have taken to court to agree on Christian brothers and sisters in whom they would have confidence to mediate.

Having set out this novel idea, Paul then asks us to go a step further in recognising a higher principle. Why when faced with cheats and liars do we not simply forgive them and allow them to defraud us and if necessary suffer financial loss?(6:7,8) Loving your enemy can have some very profound effects upon him including on his salvation. Isn't that so much more important than mere money?(Rom.12:19-21)

He then goes on to ask just what kind of people are Christ's followers. The moral swamp of Corinth with its sexual immorality, business dishonesty, wild living and idolatry, just has no place in God's kingdom.(6:9,10) Having aroused moral indignation among those who heard his letter read, Paul then gently reminds them that they were such people before they met the Lord Jesus. The only reason they have escaped from such behaviour is because of the work of Christ on the cross, and the Spirit in their hearts.(6:11,12)

There is another aspect of life in the Corinthian church which is bothering Paul. Just as they have been drawn into fighting in court over money, so they have also been led astray by the widespread acceptance of prostitution in the city, usually linked with heathen temples.(6:15,16) There was a convenient assumption among some Corinthian Christians that because the grace of God has set us free from the Law, now anything goes in personal behaviour.(6:12) They have missed the point of the gospel! First he reminds them of the purpose of the bodies God gave them.(6:13,14) They are God's houses on earth just as the temple was the place where God lived in past times.(6:19) He sets out a startling proposition. When two people enter into a sexual relationship they have become one flesh in the sense of Gen.2:24.(6:16) God intends marriage to be a oneness of spirit, soul and body acknowledged before society. If two people become one in body they have still married in a

Biblical sense even if not in the wisest way. So, a man who went with a harlot had married her! As Christians we have already, as the church, 'married' Jesus Christ. Would we really want to make Him part of such a union?(6:17,20)

This way of looking at a sexual relationship should cause us to have a major rethink about our modern casual attitude to such behaviour. Just because a sexual relationship is once only and does not continue does not diminish what we have done if we enter such a liason. We have 'married' in God's sense in which case it is only divorce which ends the relationship. We can marry one day and divorce the next with all the emotional damage this entails. Many people including Christians are inclined to take very lightly a relationship that falls short of a marriage ceremony.

While all sin is equal in that it is unbelief towards Christ, sexual sin in particular damages our bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 7 Paul moves back to marriage as God intended it to be.

7:1-5 Q.1 What reason for marriage does Paul offer here? Is it a good enough motive in marrying? How would his advice be particularly appropriate in a city like Corinth? Who according to this section is in charge in a marriage? What does 'authority over the body' actually mean in practice? What part of the other person are we not given authority over?

7:6-9 Q.2 Is Paul encouraging Christians to marry? If not, why not? Is he discouraging marriage? How can we reconcile this advice with Genesis 2:18-25? What advice would you give a young couple wondering about marriage, in the light of this passage?

7:10-13 Q.3 What advice does Paul give now to those who are already married and having trouble in their relationship? How is the situation different if the other one is an unbeliever? What does it mean for one partner to be sanctified through the other? How does the same happen for children in a marriage?

7:14-16 Q.4 If your spouse leaves you, what is your situation? How does being a believer in a difficult marriage make all the difference? Why does Paul sometimes speak for the Lord and sometimes for himself? How does the same thing happen in pastoral care today?

7:17-24 Q.5 What general advice does Paul give in this section? What is the overall reason behind his advice? How might we give the same advice today? How does his reasoning here help us to understand his earlier teaching about whether to marry?

7:25-35 Q.6 To whom is Paul's advice addressed now? What difficulties does he foresee for those who marry? Does his advice only apply to those who live in times of persecution? What helpful warning about any major life decision is he giving us? How does the principle set out here help us to handle any difficult situation in life today?

7:36-38 Q.7 What advice is Paul offering to fathers about their daughters? What cultural situation lies behind his advice? How might the same principle guide us as parents today in our own culture? How does this advice relate back to the rest of the chapter?

7:39-40 Q.8 To whom is Paul speaking in these final verses? How has he now given the same advice to the single, married, separated, divorced and widowed? How might we present these same ideas today? Are they church laws about marriage?