

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS - PART THIRTEEN

After three chapters struggling with the difficult but very necessary question of the justice of a God who relates to us on the basis of His grace not our efforts, we return in the final few chapters to the simple, vital question of what does grace look like in our daily lives.

Paul begins by urging a clear response from us to God's mercy. The problems we have grappled with over the last three chapters are evidence not of God's injustice but of His mercy. The first eight chapters were also about His mercy, first at the cross,(1-4) and then in giving His Spirit to indwell us.(5-8) We are to review all we know about God's mercy and then respond accordingly by presenting our bodies to God.(12:1) He will then change our minds.(12:2) The implication of the last three chapters has been that the real problem is not with God's justice but with our hardness of heart. He wants our hands for service,(9) our mouths for witness,(10) and our eyes and hearts free of prejudice, for welcoming.(11) Because we have been cleansed at the cross we are acceptable to God. Real worship is not singing in church, it is availability to God on the job. When we belong totally to Him, He can change us from the inside, which is transformation. This is so much more than the grudging adjustment we make to our way of thinking, which is conformity. It is the first step to beginning to see the world from God's totally different point of view. It makes us ready to move out into a new life.(12:1,2)

Having made our bodies available to God, we are to take a careful look at ourselves to have an accurate view of what we have offered Him. Just what is the 'measure of faith' which decides how big a view we should have of ourselves? Does this mean that those who have a big faith will have a big picture of their abilities, and vice versa? Jesus Christ is the 'measure', as in the plumb line of Amos 7:8. If by faith we compare Him with us, we come right down to size! Remember that our standing is all about grace not our works.(12:3) Paul now uses his favourite illustration when discussing spiritual gifts, the parts of a living body.(I Cor.12; Eph.4) Very simply, we belong together, and to the same Lord Jesus who is the head, but we are meant to be different.(12:4,5) He describes 7 gifts, three of which - prophecy, teaching and exhortation - necessarily involve speaking, and four - service, giving, leading and showing mercy - may not. In each case Paul reminds us of the effect of grace received by faith in the exercise of a gift. The effect is that we use the gift in a caring not a mechanical way. There is the same basic division of gifts which Peter describes.(I Pet.4:10,11) All are about serving; we can serve by speaking and we can serve by serving. The key point is the one Paul makes in I Cor.12:7, that gifts are for the common good, not the selfish benefit of the one exercising the gift.(12:6-8)

Spiritual gifts are about what we have to give, but equally important is how we do it. Paul reminds us that the real evidence of the Spirit's work in our lives is the fruit of the Spirit which he describes in more detail in Gal.5:22,23. In the rest of this chapter he takes the first three characteristics, love, joy and peace and expands them. His point is that all the spiritual activity in the world is worthless if Jesus does not show through us. He wants love without hypocrisy, in other words the real thing. More than anything Paul sees this to be about our attitude to good, to each other, to ourselves and to the Lord.(12:9-11)

Joy is so much more than a happy feeling which, as all of us know, can so quickly fade when times are tough and our resources run out. Joy is based on hope, the eternal certainty of what we have in Christ, and means that as we depend on the Lord, we not only have enough for our own troubles but can give without limit to others whether emotionally or materially. We even have enough to keep giving to the very people who make life hard for us.(12:12-15)

The real test of peace is not how we feel on a good day when everyone is treating us well. God's kind of peace describes our hearts when people are persecuting us, being rude, leaving us hungry - and watching to see how we will take it. There is at such times an overwhelming urge to hit back and get even. The peace of God allows us not just to refrain from revenge because we recognise that judgement is God's business, but calmly to reach out to meet the need of our enemy whatever it costs us. The convicting effect of such a loving response, arising from a peaceful heart is compelling, and clearly only God can do it.(12:16-21)

Chapter 13 considers how this will work out in a secular society.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THIRTEEN

13:1-7 Q.1 Does this section apply only to democratically elected, honest governments? What kind of government did Paul live under?

Q.2 Some monarchs like James I and Charles I of England claimed, on the basis of passages like this one, that they ruled by divine right and therefore everything they decided was right. Is this what Paul meant? Should we regard the government as always being right?

Q.3 What does it mean to be in subjection to the governing authorities? Should we obey them at all times? Is this what Peter and John thought? (Acts 4:19,20)

Q.4 How do the changes that happen on the inside of us enable us to have this attitude towards the state? What kind of practical issues did Paul have in mind? How does this kind of attitude to the state affect our ability to do the task that God has given us in the world?

Q.5 Is there therefore no place for being a revolutionary, for trying to change the system we live under?

13:8-10 Q.6 What according to the previous section is the most significant demand the state makes upon us? Is the first part of verse 8 realistic in the modern world? What does the question of a debt have to do with loving our neighbour? What happens to our Christian witness if we are owned by a finance company? What happens to the freedom God wants us to have to carry out His programme for us?

13:11,12 Q.7 What picture does Paul use here to describe Christians in a secular world? What does this mean in practical terms?

13:13,14 Q.8 What were the social problems of the world of Paul's day? What solution does he suggest to those problems then and now? How will being 'transformed by the renewing of your mind' result in us being able to handle the pressures of the world we live in and having something constructive to offer?