

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

We have already established in chapter one that God's wisdom changes my view of who I am. Success in the world's terms does not impress God, but He loves me anyway. Failure in human terms is not important because He values me so much. James now picks up the same theme to consider how God's wisdom changes how I value other people. If I value myself in dollar terms I will do the same for others. Someone with wealth, power and celebrity status is seen as an asset to our fellowship, family or community because of the potential advantages they bring us. It could be money, a better job or just a boost to our own image. We make a fuss of the rich man to keep him in our circle. The poor man offers us no advantage so he can be ignored. Receiving God's wisdom makes the rich no more important than the poor. James reminds us that in fact often the poor man will offer more if he has discovered how to be rich in Christ. The rich man is more likely to be the one suing us in court. The end result of our favoritism will be dishonour to Christ as people see our behaviour as inconsistent with the gospel we preach.(2:1-7)

Partiality is contrary to the command to love our neighbours as ourselves, which sums up the last 6 of the Ten Commandments. Partiality covers all our human prejudices of which wealth is just one. We also look down on people of a different race, colour, age, gender, accent, occupation, height or weight. All of it is a contradiction of the message of grace.(Acts 10:34,35) To harbour prejudice is as damaging to our witness as murder or adultery. Love for our neighbour is all or nothing. As in the story of the Good Samaritan,(Lk.10:30-37) we either walk by on the other side or stop to help and become involved. Partiality is a judgement on another person and is the opposite of mercy.(Rom.2:1-11) Judgement says a poor person deserves his poverty. Mercy looks only to see how we can help. God's wisdom reminds us that God has forgiven us though we are totally undeserving.(Matt.18:21-35) We have been set free from judgement,(Matt.7:1-5) to be able to show grace and mercy.(2:8-13)

We began this book by learning how wholehearted faith in Christ leads to wisdom. Now James reverses the process to demonstrate that God's wisdom leads to a deeper understanding of real faith. We are saved only through faith by grace according to Ephesians 2:8. Faith however is not just verbal agreement with God's statement. When we learn something new of Christ, faith means saying, 'Lord be that in me.' In the gospels we see Jesus faced with 5000 spiritually and physically sick and hungry people first teaching them, then healing them and finally breaking five loaves and two fish to feed them.(Matt.14:13-21) If He lives in us we should expect in the same way to be involved in whatever way is needed. Faith which selects only the task which appeals to us is not faith.(2:14-17)

Mankind has argued since the time of Cain and Abel about what pleases God, works or faith. The religious people of Jesus' time, like Cain, thought their good works would save them. When asked what were the works of God, Jesus answered 'This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'(Jn.6:28,29) Believing in Him means

that we then let Him work out His plan in us.(Phil.2:12,13) The demons are believers, James said. They know very well who He is and the judgement they face! If that is all our so-called faith consists of, we are in big trouble.

Abraham is so often in the New Testament used as the example of faith.(Rom.4; Gal.3; Heb.11:8-19) The Pharisees on the other hand saw themselves as sons of Abraham,(Jn.8:39) supposing that they followed his example of good works. When Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac to God on Mt.Moriah,(Gen.22) he was demonstrating faith in action. God had promised him that he would have a son through whom the whole world would one day be blessed,(Gen.12:1-3; 15:4,5) and at the same time given him a command which would lead to the death of that son. The only solution to the apparent contradiction was faith that God could keep His promise by, if necessary, raising Isaac to life again.(Heb.11:17-19) This was simply an example of Abraham's saving faith, recognized in Gen.15:6.

How was the life of Rahab of Jericho to be measured by God? After a life of immorality would she be saved by hiding the Israelite spies and then lying to the police about which way they had gone?(Josh.2) Her salvation was the result of faith in the promise that she and her household would be saved if they identified with the people of God. But again it was a faith which had to be worked out by risking her life for the spies.(2:18-26)

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THREE

1. To which group of people is this chapter particularly addressed? What is the warning James gives them? How does Jesus also warn the same people about the consequence of their activity?(Matt.23) What kind of mistake in life does the greatest damage to others? To what is our responsibility for our tongues compared?(3:1-3)

2. What three further illustrations does James use to describe the potential damage or benefit of the activity of our tongues? What is the special emphasis of each picture? What point do all three ideas have in common? Give examples of how the tongue can hurt or help others based on the pictures in this section.(3:4-6)

3. To what challenge in nature is the activity of the tongue now compared? How can it be similar to the bite of a poisonous snake?(Matt.3:7; 12:34; 23:33) How have our tongues been so damaging to others at times?(3:7,8)

4. James uses five more pictures of the contradictory activity of the human tongue. What are they and why are they so dangerous? Again think of examples in modern life.(3:9-12)

5. What essential element has been missing in all the images James has used to make his point? What are the attitudes which lie behind the wrong activity of the tongue? What on the other hand is the new way of thinking which God's wisdom will produce in us? Consider how each attribute of God's wisdom will change our response to those around us. How will this affect the use of the tongue?(3:13-18)