

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

Paul has begun to lead us on a journey of discovery of the changes which will result on the outside when, firstly, we know that Jesus Christ put right our standing before God in heaven,(1-4) secondly the Holy Spirit has changed our thinking on the inside,(5-8) and thirdly we realise how merciful God has been, and how He is waiting to use us.(9-11) In chapter 12 we explored how our attitude to God, to ourselves and to our fellow Christians will be transformed. Now in chapter 13 we consider how Christ in us will change our attitude to our society as we learn to live by faith.

The chapter begins with the statement, 'be in subjection to the governing authorities', which is extraordinary when we remember the kind of society Paul lived in. Rome was a military dictatorship based on the assumption of the superiority of one race. Women had very little standing; slaves were the majority of the population and had few rights; punishment was cruel and often a means of public entertainment. It was about as far from a just, caring democracy as it is possible to imagine. Why then does Paul urge the Christians to be subject to this kind of state? Not because it was good but because order gives greater opportunity for the gospel than chaos.(13:1-7) In Paul's time it was possible to travel freely without passports or frontiers to half the world's population of those days. There was an economic system which functioned. The common man was reasonable safe, and at least some of the time there was freedom of speech. There were good, straight roads. The gospel travelled faster while the Roman Empire continued than it would do for over a thousand years after the Empire ended. But why not work for a fairer system? Because the kingdom with which God is concerned is His kingdom in the hearts of men,(Lk.17:21) not any earthly kingdom. Both Jesus and Paul were persecuted by Rome and eventually executed by her but neither attempted to change the government for their own protection.

Some European governments have at times in history assumed that this chapter gave them authority to speak to their people on God's behalf. Just because God recognises that any government is better than no government, does not make it godly government. There were times even in Acts when Christians disobeyed the government and suffered for it because the government's orders were clearly contrary to God's orders.(Acts 4:19,20) Jesus drew a clear distinction between the matters over which the government has authority and the issues which are only God's business.(Lk.20:25) He instructed Peter to go fishing for His and Peter's tax money on the one hand,(Matt.17:27) and put Pilate, the Roman governor in his place on the other hand.(Jn.19:11)

Paul did not hesitate to make full use of his privileges as a Roman citizen when it benefited the gospel.(Acts 16:37; 21:39; 22:25; 25:10,11) His concern was not his own comfort and fate but the freedom of others to preach the gospel.

Having urged us not to fight the political system, Paul now pleads with us not to be trapped by the economic system.(13:8-10) He points out that debt motivated by greed hinders our freedom to love our neighbours by being able to meet their need. He explains too that preoccupation with money wastes opportunity for the gospel. Time is too short to fill it with material things when there is God's work to be done.(13:11,12) In the same way letting our old human nature dictate our behaviour leaves us wide open to the Devil instead of equipped for God's battle for the hearts of men.(13:13,14)

In chapter 14 we return to our relationships within the church, our views of others' behaviour and their view of ours. The issues seem trivial but the effect of mishandling the problems among us is disastrous.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER FOURTEEN

14:1-12 Q.1 What two examples does Paul use of being 'weak in faith'? What would be modern examples of the same issues?

Q.2 What was Paul's view on these two questions?(Col.2:16,17; Mark 7:19) Why was Paul not trying to push his view of these matters on to others? Why do we think we have to? What is wrong with our attitude when we do this?

Q.3 Whose responsibility is it to change a person's view of details of life-style? How does He do this? How can we help that process to come about in each other? How might James 5:14 apply here? The word 'sick' in James 5 is the same as the word 'weak' in Rom.14:1.

Q.4 Chapters 9-11 were about God's mercy. How does mercy affect our view of differences of conviction over life-style? Doesn't mercy lower standards of behaviour in the Christian church? Look up Isa.45:23. How is handling these issues mercifully going to result in this promise being fulfilled?

14:13-23 Q.5 How may our behaviour put a stumbling block in another person's way? A stumbling block was the stick that kept a gin trap open. In the light of verses 1-12 shouldn't I be free to behave as I like without worrying about what anyone else thinks?

Q.6 How should we work out the details of our life-style? Have we not gone back to trying to please men rather than God if we do it in this way? What should be our priorities?

Q.7 What according to verses 22 and 23 is faith and what is sin? How are these definitions different from our usual understanding? How do they help us to resolve our decisions about life-style?