

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
5:16-23

16. For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day. 17. But Jesus answered them, My Father works hitherto, and I work. 18. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. 19. Then Jesus answered and said to them, Verily, verily, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do; for whatever he does, the Son also does likewise. 20. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself does; and he will show him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. 21. For as the Father raises up the dead and quickens *them*, even so the Son quickens whom he will. 22. For the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment to the Son, 23. that all *men* should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who honors not the Son honors not the Father who has sent him.

16.--[*For this reason...persecuted, etc.*] The verbs in this verse are all in the imperfect tense. It may be doubted whether the meaning is not, strictly speaking, something of this kind: "The Jews from this time began to persecute Jesus, and were always seeking to slay Him, because He made a habit of doing these things on the Sabbath day." It is some confirmation of this view that our Lord at a much later period refers to this very miracle at Bethesda as a thing which had specially angered the Jews of Jerusalem, and for which they hated Him and sought still to kill Him. It was long after the time of this miracle when He said, "Are ye angry at Me because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day?" (John vii.23.)

17.--[*But Jesus answered.*] This seems to have been the first reply which our Lord made when charged with breaking the fourth commandment. It was a short, simple justification of the lawfulness of doing works of mercy on the Sabbath. There seems to have been an interval between this reply and the long argumentative defense which begins in the 19th verse.

[*My Father works hitherto, and I work.*] The words rendered "hitherto," are literally, "until now;" that is, from the beginning of creation up to the present time.

I can only see one meaning in this pithy sentence: "My Father in heaven is continually working works of mercy and kindness in His providential government of the world, in supplying the needs of all His creatures, in maintaining the whole fabric of the earth in perfection, in giving rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, in preserving and sustaining life. All this He does on Sabbaths as well as weekdays. Were He to cease from such works, the whole world would be full of confusion. When He rested from His works of creation, He did not rest from His works of providence. I also, who am His beloved Son, claim the right to work works of mercy on the

Sabbath. In working such works I do not break the Sabbath any more than my Father does. My Father appointed the fourth commandment to be honored, and yet never ceased to cause the sun to rise and the grass to grow on the Sabbath. I also, who claim to be One with the Father, honor the Sabbath, but I do not abstain from works of mercy upon it."

Two things should be observed in this sentence. One is the plain practical lesson that the Sabbath was not meant to be a day of total idleness and of entire cessation from all kinds and sorts of work. "The Sabbath was made for man"--for his benefit, comfort, and advantage. Works of mercy and of real necessity, to man's life and animal existence, on the Sabbath day were never intended to be forbidden. The other thing to be observed is our Lord's assertion of His own Divinity and quality with God the Father. When He said, "My Father works and I also work," He evidently meant much more than bringing forward His Father's *example*, though that of course is contained in His argument and justifies all Christians in doing works of mercy on Sundays. What He meant was, "I am the beloved Son of God; I and my Father are One in essence, dignity, honor, and authority. Whatever He does, I also do and have right to do. He works and I also work. He gave you the Sabbath, and it is His day. I too, as one with Him, am Lord of the Sabbath." That the Jews saw this to be the meaning of His words seems clear from the next verse.

Chrysostom remarks on this verse: "If anyone says, 'How does the Father work, who ceased on the seventh day from all His works,' let him learn the manner in which He works. What is it? He cares for, He holds together all that has been made. When you behold the sun rising, the moon running in her path, the lakes, the fountains, the rivers, the rains, the course of nature in seeds and in our own bodies and those of irrational beings and all the rest (by means of which this universe is made up), then learn the ceaseless working of the Father." (Matt. v.45; vi.30.)

Schottgen quotes a remarkable saying of Philo Judæus: "God never ceases to work. Just as it is the property of fire to burn and of snow to be cold, so is it the property of God to work."

Ferus remarks on the great variety of arguments used by our Lord on various occasions in reply to the superstitious views of the Jews about the Sabbath. One time He adduces the example of David eating the showbread, another time the example of the priests working in the temple on the Sabbath, another time the readiness of the Jews to help an ox out of a pit on the Sabbath. All these arguments were used in defense of works of necessity and mercy. Here He takes higher ground still--the example of His Father.

18.--[*Therefore the Jews...kill him.*] This short defense which our Lord made seems to have rankled in the minds of the Jews and to have made them even more bitter against Him. What length of time is covered by this verse is not very plain. I am inclined to think that it implies some little pause between the 17th and 19th verses. Here again, as in the 16th verse, we have the imperfect tense all the way through. It must surely point at something of habit, both in the designs of the Jews against our Lord, in our Lord's conduct, and in His language about His Father.

[*Said God...Father...equal with God.*] It is clear that our Lord's words about His Sonship struck the Jews in a far more forcible way than they seem to strike us. In a certain sense all believers are "sons of God." (Rom. viii.14.) But it is evident that they are not so in the sense that our Lord meant when He talked of God as His Father and Himself as God's Son. The Greek undoubtedly might be translated more clearly, "said that God was His own particular Father." (Compare Rom. viii.32.) The Jews, at any rate, accepted the words as meaning our Lord to assert his own peculiar Sonship and His consequent entire equality with God the Father. Their charge and ground of anger against Him amounted to this: "You call God your own particular Father, and claim authority to do whatever He does. By so doing You make Yourself equal with God." And our Lord seems to have accepted this charge as a correct statement of the case and to have proceeded to argue that He had a right to say what He had said, and that He really was equal with God. As St. Paul says, "He thought it not robbery to be equal with God." (Phil. ii.6.)

Augustine remarks, "Behold, the Jews understood what the Arians would not understand."

Whitby remarks that the Jews never accused our Lord of blasphemy for saying that He was the Messiah, but for saying that He was the Son of God, because they did not believe that Messiah when He appeared was to be a Divine Person.

Ferus remarks that the Jews probably took notice of our Lord calling God "My Father," and not "our Father." Cartwright also thinks that there is much weight in the expression "my," and that the Jews gathered from it that Christ claimed to be the only-begotten Son of God, and not merely a Son by adoption and grace.

19.--[*Then Jesus answered and said to them.*] This verse begins a long discourse in which our Lord formally defends Himself from the charge of the Jews of laying claim to what He had no right to claim. (1) He asserts His own Divine authority, commission, dignity, and equality with God His Father. (2) He brings forward the evidence of His Divine commission, which the Jews ought to consider and receive. (3) Finally, He tells the Jews plainly the reason of their unbelief and charges home on their consciences their love of man's praise more than God's, and their inconsistency in pretending to honor Moses while they did not honor Christ. It is a discourse almost unrivaled in depth and majesty.

There are few chapters in the Bible, perhaps, where we feel our own shallowness of understanding so thoroughly, and discover so completely the insufficiency of all human language to express "the deep things of God." Men are often saying they want explanations of the mysteries of the Christian faith, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the person of Christ, and the like. Let them just observe, when we do find a passage full of explanatory statements on a deep subject, how much there is that we have no line to fathom and no mind to take in. "I want more light," says proud man. God gives him his desire in this chapter and lifts up the veil a little. But behold, we are dazzled by the very light we wanted and find we

have not eyes to take it in!

It has always been thought by many commentators that this solemn discourse of our Lord's was delivered before the Sanhedrim, or general Ecclesiastical Assembly of the Jews. They regard it as a formal defense of His Divinity and Messiahship, and a statement of evidence why He should be received before a regularly constituted ecclesiastical court. It may be so. Probabilities seem in favor of the idea. But it must be remembered that we have nothing but internal evidence in favor of the theory. There is not a word said to show that our Lord was formally brought before the Sanhedrim and made a formal defense. Some writers lay much stress upon the opening words of the 19th verse--"Then answered Jesus and said"--and consider that these words imply a formal charge in court and a formal reply from our Lord. It may be true. But we must remember that it is only a conjecture.

One thing only is certain: Nowhere else in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His Divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship as we find in this discourse. To me it seems one of the deepest things in the Bible.

[*Verily, verily, I say to you.*] Here, as elsewhere, the remark applies that this form of expression always precedes some statement of more than ordinary depth and importance.

[*The Son can do nothing of Himself, etc.*] This opening verse declares the complete unity there is between God the Father and God the Son. The Son, from His very nature and relation to the Father, "can do nothing" independently or separately from the Father. It is not that He lacks or *wants* the power to do, but that He *will* not do. (Compare Gen. xix.22.) When the angel said, "I cannot do anything till Thou be come higher," it means, of course, "I will not do." "Of Himself" does not mean without help or unassisted, but "from Himself," from His own independent will. He can only do such things, as from His unity with the Father and consequent ineffable knowledge, He "sees" the Father doing. For the Father and the Son are so united--one God through two Persons--that whatsoever the Father does the Son does also. The acts of the Son, therefore, are not His own independent acts but the acts of His Father also.

The Greek word which we render "likewise" must not be supposed to mean nothing more than "also, as well." It is literally "in like manner."

Bishop Hall paraphrases this saying of our Lord thus: "I and the Father are one indivisible essence, and our acts are not less inseparable. The Son can do nothing without the will and act of the Father; and, even as He is man, can do nothing but what He sees agreeable to the will and purpose of His heavenly Father."

Barnes remarks: "The words 'what things soever' are without limit. All that the Father does, the Son likewise does. This is as high an assertion as possible of His being equal with God. If one does all that another does or can do, then there is proof of equality. If the Son does all that the Father does, then, like Him, He must be almighty, omniscient, all-present,

and infinite in every perfection; or, in other words, He must be God."

Augustine remarks: "Our Lord does not say, whatsoever the Father does the Son does other *things like* them, but the very *same things*...If the Son does the same things and in like manner, then let the Jew be silenced, the Christian believe, the heretic be convinced: the Son is equal with the Father."

Hilary, quoted in the "*Catena Aurea*," remarks: "Christ is the Son because He does nothing of Himself. He is God because whatsoever things the Father does, He does the same. They are one because They are equal in honor. He is not the Father because He is sent."

Diodati remarks: "The phrase, 'what He sees the Father do,' is a figurative term, showing the inseparable communion of will, wisdom, and power between the Son and the Father in the internal order of the most holy Trinity."

Toletus remarks: "When it is said 'the Son can do nothing of Himself,' this does not mean lack of power, but the highest power. Just as it is a mark of omnipotence not to be able to die or to be worn out or to be annihilated (because there is nothing that can injure omnipotence), so likewise, 'to be unable to do anything of Himself' is not a mark of impotence but of the highest power. It means nothing less than having one and the same power with the Father, so that nothing can be done by the One which is not equally done by the Other."

20.--[*The Father loves the Son, etc.*] This verse carries on the thought begun in the preceding verse--the unity of the Father and the Son. When we read the words "the Father loves" and "the Father shows," we must not for a moment suppose them to imply any superiority in the Father or any inferiority in the son as to their Divine nature and essence. The "love" is not the love of an earthly parent to a beloved child. The "showing" is not the showing of a teacher to an ignorant scholar. The "love" is meant to show us that unspeakable unity of heart and affection (if such words may be reverently used) which eternally existed and exists between the Father and the Son. The "showing" means that entire confidence and cooperation which there was between the Father and the Son, as to all the works which the Son should do when He came into the world to fill the office of Mediator and to save sinners. The "greater works" which remained to be shown were evidently the works specified in the two following verses--the works of quickening and of judging. That the Jews did "marvel" and were confounded at the works of "quickenings" we know from the Acts of the Apostles. That they will "marvel" even more at our Lord's work of judgment we shall see when Christ comes again to judge the heathen, to restore Jerusalem, to gather Israel, to convince the Jews of their unbelief, and to renew the face of the earth.

Both in this and the preceding verse, we must carefully remember the utter inability of any human language or human ideas to express perfectly such matters as our Lord is speaking of. Language is intended specially to express the things of man. It fails greatly when used to express things about God. In the expression, "sees the Father do," "loves the Son," "shows Him all things," "will show Him greater works," we must carefully

bear this in mind. We must remember that they are expressions accommodated to our weaker capacities. They are intended to explain the relation between two Divine Beings who are one in essence though two Persons, one in mind and will though two in manifestation, equal in all things as touching the Godhead though the Son is inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. There must needs be immense difficulty in finding words to convey any idea of the relation between these two Persons. Hence the language used by our Lord must be cautiously handled with a constant recollection that we are not reading of an earthly father and son, but of God the Father and God the Son, who though one in essence as God are at the same time two distinct Persons.

Augustine wisely remarks, "There are times when speech is deficient even when the understanding is proficient. How much more does speech suffer defect when the understanding has nothing perfect!"

Augustine and Bernard both remark that it is far "greater work" to repair ruined human nature than to make it at first, and to re-create it than to create it.

21,22.--[*As the Father raises up the dead, etc.*] Our Lord here proceeds to tell the Jews one of His mighty works which He had come to do in proof of His Divine nature, authority, and commission. Did they find fault with Him for making Himself equal with God? Let them know that He had the same power as God the Father to give "life" and quicken the dead. Let them know furthermore that all "judgment" was committed to Him. Surely He who had in His hand the mighty prerogatives of giving life and judging the world had a right to speak of Himself as equal with God!

When we read "the Father raises up the dead and quickens them," we must either understand the words to refer generally to God's power to raise the dead at the last day, which the Jew would allow as an article of faith and a special attribute of divinity; or else we must understand it to apply to the power of spiritually quickening men's souls, which God had from the beginning exercised in calling men from death to life; or else we must simply take it to mean that to give life, whether bodily or spiritual, is notoriously the peculiar attribute of God. The last view appears to me the most probable one and most in harmony with what follows in after verses.

When we read "the Son quickens whom He will," we have a distinct assertion of the Son's authority to give life at His will, either bodily or spiritual, with the same irresistible power as the Father. The highest of all gifts He has but to "will" and to bestow. The Greek work translated "quicken" is very strong. It is, literally, "makes alive," and seems to imply the power of making life of all kind, both bodily and spiritual.

Burkitt remarks that it is never said of any prophet or apostle that he did mighty works "at his will."

When we read "the Father judges no man but has committed all judgment to the Son," we must understand that in the economy of redemption, the Father has honored the Son by devolving on Him the whole office of judging the world. It cannot, of course, mean that judgment is work with which the

Father, from His nature, has nothing to do, but that it is work which He has completely and entirely committed to the Son's hands. He that died for sinners is He who will judge them. Thus it is written, "He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he has ordained." (Acts xvii.31.)

Burgon remarks: "There is an original, supreme, judicial power; and there is also a judicial power derived, given by commission. Christ, as God, has the first together with the Father; Christ, as man, has the second from the Father."

I think it highly probable that the "all judgment committed to the Son" includes not merely the final judgment of the last day, but the whole work of ordering, governing, and deciding the affairs of God's kingdom. "To judge" is an expression constantly used in the Old Testament in the sense of "to rule." The meaning then would be that the Father has given to the Son the office of King and Judge. The whole administration of the Divine government of the world is put into the hands of the Son, Christ Jesus. Everything connected with the rule of the church and world, as well as the last judgment, is placed in the Son's hands.

We should carefully mark the distinction between "quickenings" and "judging" in the language of these two verses.

(a) It is not said that "the Father quickens no man," but has committed the power of giving life to the Son. Had this been said, it would have contradicted the texts "no man can come unto Me except the Father draws him" and "the Spirit gives life." (John vi.44; 2 Cor. iii.6.) Quickening is the work of all three Persons in the Trinity, of one as much as another.

(b) It is said that judgment is the special work of the second Person in the Trinity. It is not the peculiar office either of the Father or of the Spirit, but of the Son. There seems a fitness in this. He who was condemned by an unjust judgment and died for sinners is He whose office it will be to judge the world.

(c) It is said that "the Son quickens whom He will." The power of giving life is as much the prerogative of the Son as of the Father or of the Spirit. Surely this teaches us, that to place the election of God the Father or the work of the Spirit before men, as the first and principal thing they should look at, is not good theology. Christ, after all, is the meeting-point between the Trinity and the world. It is His office to quicken as well as pardon. No doubt He quickens by the Spirit whom He sends into man's heart. But it is His prerogative to give life as well as peace. This ought to be remembered. There are some in this day who in a mistaken zeal put the work of the Father and the Spirit before the work of Christ.

23.--[*That all men should honor the Son, etc.*] By these words our Lord teaches us that the Father would have the Son to receive equal honor with Himself. We are to understand distinctly that there is no inferiority in the Son to the Father. He is equal to Him in dignity and authority. He is to be worshiped with equal worship. If any man fancies that to honor the Son equally with the Father detracts from the Father's honor, our Lord

declares that such a man is entirely mistaken. On the contrary, "He that honors not the Son honors not the Father who sent Him." It was the mind and intention of the Father that the Son, as the Mediator between God and man, should receive honor from all men. The glory of His beloved Son is part of the Father's eternal counsels. Whenever, therefore, anyone through ignorance, pride, or unbelief, neglects Christ but professes at the same time to honor God, he is committing a mighty error, and so far from pleasing God is greatly displeasing Him. The more a man honors Christ and makes much of Him, the more the Father is pleased.

Evangelical Christians should mark the doctrine of this verse and remember it. They are sometimes taunted with holding new views in religion because they bring forward Christ so much more prominently than their fathers or grandfathers did. Let them see here that the more they exalt the Son of God and His office, the more honor they are doing to the Father who sent Him.

To the Deist and Socinian, the words of this verse are a strong condemnation. Not honoring Christ, they are angering God the Father. The Fatherhood of God, out of Christ, is a mere idol of man's invention and incapable of comforting or saving.

Alford remarks: "Whosoever does not honor the Son with equal honor to that which he pays to the Father, however he may imagine that he honors or approaches God, does not honor Him at all; because He can only be known by us as "the Father who sent His Son."

Barnes remarks: "If our Savior here did not intend to teach that He ought to be worshiped and esteemed equal with God, it would be difficult to teach it by any language."

Rollock remarks: "The Jews and Turks in the present day profess to worship God earnestly, not only without the Son but even with contempt of the Son Jesus Christ. But the whole of such worship is idolatrous, and that which they worship is an idol. There is no knowledge of the true God except in the face of the Son."

Wordsworth remarks: "They who profess zeal for the one God do not honor Him aright unless they honor the Son as they honor the Father. This is a warning to those who claim the title of Unitarians and deny the divinity of Christ. No one can be said to believe in the Divine unity who rejects the doctrine of the Trinity."

The entire unity of the three Persons in the Trinity is a subject that needs far more attention than many give to it. It may be feared that many well-meaning Christians are *tritheists*, or worshipers of three distinct Gods, without knowing it. They talk as if God the Father's mind toward sinners was one thing and God the Son's another--as if the Father hated man and the Son loved him and protected him. Such persons would do well to study this part of Scripture and to mark the unity of the Father and the Son.

After all, that deep truth--"the eternal generation" of God the Son--whatever proud man may say of it, is the foundation truth which we must never forget in trying to understand a passage like that before us. In the Trinity, "none is afore or after other. The Father is eternal; the Son eternal; the Holy Ghost eternal. The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Ghost is God. And yet there are not three eternal but one eternal; not three Gods but one God." As Burgon remarks, "There never was a time when any one of the three Persons was not. " And it might be added, there never was a time when the three Persons were not equal. And yet the Son was begotten of the Father from all eternity, and the Holy Ghost proceeded from all eternity from the Father and the Son.