

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
5:30-39

30. I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who has sent me. 31. If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. 32. There is another who bears witness of me, and I know that the witness which he witnesses of me is true. 33. Ye sent to John, and he bore witness to the truth. 34. But I receive not testimony from man, but these things I say that ye might be saved. 35. He was a burning and shining light, and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light. 36. But I have greater witness than that of John, for the works which the Father has given me to finish, the very works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father has sent me. 37. And the Father himself, who has sent me, has borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. 38. And ye have not his word abiding in you, for whom he has sent, him ye do not believe. 39. Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me.

30.--[*I can of myself, etc.*] This verse is perhaps one of the most difficult in Scripture. It is so because the subject of it is that great mystery, the unity of God the Father and God the Son. Man has no language to express adequately the idea that has to be conveyed. The general thought of the verse seems to be as follows:

"In consequence of the close relation between Me and the Father, I cannot do anything independently and separately from Him. 'I judge,' and decide, and speak on all points, in entire harmony with the Father, as though I *heard* Him continually at my side; and so judging and speaking, my judgment on all points is always right. It is right now, and will be seen right at the great account of the last day. For in all that I do, I seek not to do my own will only but the will of Him that sent Me, since there is an entire harmony between my will and His."

Let it be carefully noted that at this part of His address our Lord ceases to speak in the third person of Himself as "the Son of man," and begins to use the first person: "I can," "I hear," "I judge," etc.

"Of myself" does not mean "unhelped and unassisted," but "from myself"--from my own independent volition and action.

Chrysostom remarks: "Just as when we say it is *impossible* for God to do wrong, we do not impute to Him any weakness, but confess in Him an unutterable power; so also when Christ says, 'I can of my own self do nothing,' the meaning is that it is impossible--my nature admits not--that I should do anything contrary to the Father."

"As I hear" is an expression adapted to man's comprehension, to convey the

idea of the unity between the Father and the Son. It is like verse 19 where it is said, "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what *He* sees the Father do." It is also like the words used of the Holy Ghost: "He shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever He shall *hear*, that shall He speak." (John xvi.13.)

Chrysostom remarks: "Just as when Christ said, 'We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen,' and John the Baptist said, 'That which He has seen and heard He testifies' (John iii.11.32), both expressions are used concerning exact knowledge and not concerning mere 'seeing' and 'hearing;' so in this place, when Christ speaks of 'hearing,' He declares nothing else than that it is impossible for Him to desire anything save what the Father desires."

"I judge" applies not only to all Christ's judgments and decisions as Mediator when He was upon earth, but to His final judgment at the last day.

"My judgment is just" would probably remind the Jews of the prophecies about Messiah. (Isa. xi.3 and Dan. vii.13.)

"I seek not my own will" must be interpreted with special reference to our Lord's Divine nature as Son of God. Having as God one will with the Father, it was not possible for Him to seek His own will independently of the Father. Hence the judgment was not His only, but His Father's also. As Son of man, He had a human will distinct from His Divine will, as when He said "Let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt." (Matt. xxvi.39.) But the will here seems to be His Divine will.

Chrysostom remarks: "What Christ implies is of this kind: not that the will of the Father is one and His own another, but that as one will in one mind, so is mine own will and my Father's."

Once more we must remember the extreme difficulty of handling such a subject as the one before us. The distinction between the Persons in the Trinity, and the unity of their essence at the same time, must always be a deep thing to man--hard to conceive, and harder still to speak or write about.

31.--[*If I bear witness of myself, etc.*] This verse must be interpreted with caution and reasonable qualification. It would be folly and blasphemy to say that our Lord's testimony about Himself must be false. What the verse does appear to mean is this: "If I have no other testimony to bring forward in proof of my Messiahship but my own word, my testimony would be justly open to suspicion." Our Lord knew that in any disputed question a man's assertions in his own favor are worth little or nothing. He tells the Jews that He did not want them to believe Him merely because He said He was the Son of God. He would show them that He had other witnesses, and these witnesses He next proceeds to bring forward. A comparison of this verse with John viii.14 shows at once that the meaning of the words, "My witness is not true," must be qualified and restrained, or else one place of Scripture would contradict the other.

32.--[*There is another who bears witness.*] There are two distinct and

different views of this expression.

(a) Some, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, Euthymius, Lightfoot, Brentius, Grotius, Ferus, Barradius, Quesnel, Whitby, Doddridge, Gill, think that the "other witness" is John the Baptist.

(b) Some, as Cyril, Athanasius, Calvin, Beza, Gualter, Bucer, Ecolampadius, Zwingle, Rupertus, Flacius, Calovius, Cocceius, Piscator, Musculus, Aretius, Toletus, Nifanius, Rollock, Poole, Leigh, Diodati, Hammond, Trapp, Hutcheson, Henry, Burkitt, Baxter, Blomfield, Lampe, Bengel, Pearce, A. Clark, Scott, Barnes, Stier, Alford, Webster, think that "the other witness," is God the Father.

I feel no doubt in my own mind that this last is the correct view. The use of the present tense, "witnesses," is a strong proof of it. John the Baptist's testimony was a thing past and gone. Our Lord declares that His Father had borne distinct testimony to Him and supplied abundant evidence, if they, the Jews, would only receive it. And He adds, "His testimony is true." He will never bear witness to a lie. Then having laid down this general proposition, He goes on to show the threefold testimony which God had provided: first, John the Baptist; second, the miracles which the Father had commissioned Him to work; and, third, the Scriptures.

The expression "I know" probably implies the deep consciousness which our Lord had, even in His humiliation, of His Father's perfect righteousness and truthfulness. It means much more than a mere man's "I know." "I know, and have known from all eternity, that my Father's testimony is perfect truth."

33.--[*Ye sent to John, etc.*] In this sentence the word "ye" must be taken emphatically. It is "ye yourselves." The meaning of the verse seems to be, "My first witness is John the Baptist. Now ye yourselves sent to him at any early period of his ministry, and ye know that he told you One greater than himself was coming, whose messenger he was, and that afterwards he said of Me, 'Behold the Lamb of God.' You cannot deny that he was a prophet indeed. Yet he bore faithful witness to Me. He told you the truth."

There can be no doubt that our Lord refers to the formal mission of "priests and Levites from Jerusalem," to John the Baptist, described in John i.19.

34.--[*But I receive not testimony from man, etc.*] This sentence seems meant to remind the Jews that they must not suppose our Lord depended either solely or chiefly on man's testimony. "Not that I would have you think I rest my claim to be received as the Messiah on the witness of John the Baptist, or of any other man. But I say these things about John and his witness to Me in order to remind you of what you heard him say, and that remembering his testimony to Me, you may believe and be saved."

Here, as elsewhere, we should note how our Lord presses home on the Jews the inconsistency of admitting John the Baptist to be a prophet sent from God while they refused to believe Himself as the Messiah. If they believed

John, they ought in consistency to have believed Him. (See Matt. xxi.23-27.)

35.--[*He was a burning...light.*] This is very high testimony to John. Doubtless he was not "the light," as Christ was. But still he was not an ordinary lamp lighted from above, as all true believers are. He was pre-eminently "the lamp;" a lamp of peculiar power and brilliancy, a "burning" and a "shining" light, like a flaming beacon of light-house seen from afar.

I think the expression "he was" shows that at the time when our Lord spoke John the Baptist was either in prison or dead. At any rate, his public ministry was ended. "He used to be a light. He is burning and shining no longer."

Chrysostom remarks, "He called John a torch or lamp, signifying that he had not light of himself but by the grace of the Spirit."

[*Ye were willing for a season to rejoice.*] This refers to the extraordinary popularity and acceptance of John the Baptist when his ministry first began. "Then went out unto him Jerusalem and all Judæa and all the country round about Jordan." (Matt. iii.5) "Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to his baptism." (Matt. ii.7.) It was an ignorant excitement that brought many of John's hearers to him. They thought, most probably, that the Messiah, of whom he spoke and whose way he came to prepare, would be a temporal king and conqueror and would give to Israel its old pre-eminence on earth. But be the motives what they might, the fact remains that John's ministry attracted immense attention and awakened the curiosity of the whole Jewish nation. "They willingly rejoiced in the light which John lifted up." They seemed to take pleasure in coming to him, hearing him, following him, and submitting to his baptism.

The expression "for a season" seems purposely used to remind the Jews of the very temporary and transitory nature of the impressions which John's ministry produced on them.

Stier remarks: "Man generally, even a prophet, can only give light by burning, like a lighted candle, until he is burnt out and his mission on earth ceases. Thus did the Baptist burn, brightly but rapidly."

Burkitt remarks: "It has been an old practice among professors not to like their pastors long, though they have been never such burning and shining lights. John was not changed, but his hearers were changed. He did burn and shine in the candlestick with equal zeal and luster to the last, but they had changed their thoughts of him."

36.--[*But I have greater witness than that of John.*] This means, "although John the Baptist was a witness to my being the Messiah and the Son of God, his was not the only testimony I bid you receive. There is testimony even more important than his, namely, that of my miracles." The Greek means literally, "the greater witness;" "the witness that I have is greater."

Flacius suggests that our Lord here and in the preceding verse reminds the Jews how willing they were at first to receive John's ministry, and almost

seemed to think he was the Messiah. Yet all this time "John did no miracle." But when the true Messiah appeared doing mighty "works," the Jews did not show Him even as much attention as they had shown to John.

[*The works...Father has given, etc.*] This is a distinct appeal to miracles as an important proof of our Lord's Messiahship and Divinity. Four times in this Gospel we find the same appeal. (John iii.2; x.25; xv.24.) The evidence of miracles should never be lightly esteemed. We are apt to underrate their value because they were wrought so long ago. But in the days when they were wrought, they were great facts which demanded the attention of all who saw them and could not be evaded. Unless the Jews could explain them away, they were bound, as honest and reasonable men, to believe our Lord's Divine mission. That they really were wrought the Jews never appear to have denied. In fact, they dared not attempt to deny them. What they did do was to ascribe them to Satanic agency. All who attempt to deny the reality of our Lord's miracles in the present day would do well to remember that those who had the best opportunity of judging, namely, the men who saw these miracles and lived within hearing of them, never disputed the fact that they were wrought. If the enemies of our Lord could have proved that His miracles were only tricks, legerdemain, and impostures, it stands to reason they would have been only too glad to show it to the world and to silence Him forever.

Five things should always be noted about our Lord's miracles. (1) Their *number*: they were not a few only but very many indeed. (2) Their *greatness*: they were not little but mighty interferences with the ordinary course of nature. (3) Their *publicity*: they were generally not done in a corner but in open day, and before many witness and often before enemies. (4) Their *character*: they were almost always works of love, mercy, and compassion, helpful and beneficial to man and not mere barren exhibitions of power. (5) Their *direct appeal to men's senses*: they were visible and would bear any examination. The difference between them and the boasted miracles of the Church of Rome, on all these points, is striking and instructive.

The manner in which our Lord speaks of His miracles is very remarkable. He calls them, "The works that the Father has given Me that I should finish." He carefully avoids the appearance of lack of unity between the Father and Himself, even in the working of miracles. They are not works which He did of His own independent will, but "works which the Father has given Me," works which it had been arranged in the eternal counsels the Son should work when He became man and dwelt upon earth. Precisely the same expression is used elsewhere about "the words" our Lord spake as here about "the works:"--"I have given unto them the words which *Thou gavest Me.*" (John xvii.8.)

37.--[*And the Father Himself...witness of Me.*] There is undeniable difficulty about these words. It is not clear to what "witness of the Father" our Lord here refers.

(a) Some, as Chrysostom, Brentius, Bullinger, Gualter, Ferus, Toletus, Barradius, Cartwright, Chemnitius, Rollock, Jansenius, Trapp, Baxter, Hammond, Burkitt, Lampe, Bengel, Henry, Scott, Gill, think that our Lord

refers to the audible testimony borne to Him by the Father at His baptism and at the transfiguration, when he said, "This is my beloved Son, hear Him." (Matt. iii.17; xvii.5.) But it surely is a capital objection to this theory that this voice of the Father was in all probability heard by nobody excepting John the Baptist at the baptism, and Peter, James, and John at the transfiguration. At this rate, it would be entirely a private testimony and of no avail to the general body of the Jewish nation.

(b) Some, as Theophylact, Euthymius, Rupertus, Calvin, Cocceius, Pearce, Tholuck, Blomfield, Tittman, A. Clark, D. Brown, Alford, Burgon, think that our Lord refers to the testimony the Father has borne to Him generally throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, and that the sentence before us should be taken in close connection with the next verse but one, beginning, "Search the Scriptures." In fact, that expression would then be the explanation of our Lord's meaning.

Of the two views, I decidedly prefer the second one. It certainly seems the least difficult and open to the fewest objections. There is a third view, supported by Olshausen and Bucer: viz., that the "witness" here means the inward witness of the Spirit in the hearts of believers. This, however, appears to me wholly out of the question. It is a witness that would be useless to the world at large.

Both here and elsewhere we must take care that we do not attach the idea of "inferiority" to the expression "sent by the Father." Rollock remarks, "It is quite possible that an equal may send an equal to discharge some office." Cyril remarks, "Mission and obedience, being sent and obeying, do not take away equality of power in the sender and the sent one."

[*Ye have neither heard...seen His shape.*] This appears to be a parenthetical sentence as well as the verse that follows. It certainly seems to strengthen the view that when our Lord spoke of His Father "bearing witness," He could not have meant the audible witness of His voice at the baptism or transfiguration. In fact, the sentence seems purposely to preclude the notion. It is as though our Lord said, "Do not suppose that I mean any audible testimony of voice or apparition or vision when I speak of my Father bearing witness to Me. I mean testimony of a very different kind, even the testimony of His Word."

The expression, "not seen His shape," teaches the same great truth we find elsewhere: viz., that the Father is invisible and has never been seen by mortal man. He who appeared to Abraham was the Second Person of the Trinity and not the Father. St. Paul says distinctly of the Father, "Whom no man has seen nor can see." (1 Tim. vi.16.) The idea of artists and painters, when they represent the Father as an aged man, is a mere irreverent invention of their own brains, without the slightest warrant of Scripture.

Rupertus and Ferus suggest that the latter part of this verse was spoken to prevent the Jews thinking that our Lord spoke of Joseph, His supposed father. This, however, seems a rather improbable and fanciful idea.

38.--[*And ye have not his word, etc.*] This verse seems meant to remind the

Jews that with all their pretended reverence for God and affected zeal against blasphemies of Him, they were really ignorant of God's mind. Their reverence for Him was only a form. Their zeal for Him was a blind fanaticism. They knew no more of His mind than of His shape or voice. They were not acquainted with His word; it did not dwell in their hearts and guide their religion. They proved their own ignorance by not believing Him whom the Father had sent. Had they really been familiar with the writings of the Old Testament, they would have believed.

Our Lord evidently implies that real knowledge of God's Word will always lead a man to faith in Christ. Where there is no faith, we may rightly assume the Bible is either not read or read in a wrong spirit. Ignorance and unbelief will go together.

Locke holds the curious opinion that the "Word" in this verse means the "Personal Word," as at John i.1. "Ye have not Me, the eternal Word, dwelling in your hearts." But Christ nowhere calls Himself "the Word," and the idea does not harmonize with the context.

Ecolampadius thinks that in this and the preceding verse there is a reference to Deut. xviii.15-19, where the Lord promised a prophet to the Jews like unto Moses, because they had said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not." He thinks our Lord reminds them of this. God had fulfilled His promise and sent them a prophet like unto Moses, and now they would not believe on Him!

39.--[*Search the Scriptures.*] This famous sentence is interpreted two different ways.

(a) Some, as Cyril, Erasmus, Ecolampadius, Beza, Brentius, Piscator, Cameron, Poole, Toletus, Lightfoot, Lampe, Bengel, Doddridge, Blomfield, Tholuck, A. Clarke, Scholefield, Barnes, Burgon, D. Brown, Webster, think that our Lord spoke in the indicative mood, simply making an assertion: "Ye do search."

(b) Some, as Chrysostom, Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, Luther, Calvin, Cartwright, Gualtier, Grotius, Rollock, Ferus, Calovius, Jansenius, Cocceius, Barradius, Musculus, Nifanius, Maldonatus, Cornelius à Lapide, Leigh, Whitby, Hammond, Stier, Alford, Wordsworth, think that He spoke in the imperative mood, giving a command: "Search," as our version gives it.

I decidedly prefer this latter view. It is more forcible and more in keeping with our Lord's general style of address. Above all, it seems to me to agree far better with the context. Our Lord had told the Jews that His Father had borne witness of Him, though not by audible voice nor by visible apparition. How, then, had He borne witness? They would find it in His Word. "Go and search your own Scriptures," our Lord seems to say. "Examine them and become really acquainted with their contents; you will find that they testify clearly and distinctly of Me. If you wish to know God the Father's testimony to Me, search the Scriptures."

The word rendered "search" means "search minutely and diligently." It

appears to me intentionally used, to show that the Jews should not be content with mere reading. The Septuagint version of Prov. ii.4 has an expression like it.

Chrysostom remarks: "When Christ referred the Jews to the Scriptures, He sent them not to a mere reading but to a careful and considerate search. He said not 'read,' but 'search.' Since the sayings about Him required great attention (for they had been concealed from the beginning for the advantage of men of that time), He bids them now dig down with care, that they might discern what lay in the depths below. These sayings were not on the surface, nor were they cast forth to open view, but lay like some treasure hidden very deep."

Some who think the word "search" should be taken as an indicative, "ye search," maintain that our Lord spoke ironically and meant, "Ye pretend to make a minute investigation of Scripture and search into the letter of it, but never get any further." I can see little ground for this view. The word "search" is never used in a bad sense in Scripture. (I Pet. i.11.) The chief argument in favor of the "indicative" side of the question is the notorious Rabbinical custom of minutely scrutinizing and reverencing every syllable of Scripture. To this custom of honoring the letter of Scripture while neglecting its spirit, many advocates of the "indicative" here think that Our Lord referred. Brentius gives a full account of the length to which the Jews went in their reverence for the letter of Scripture, such as counting the letters of each book, etc., and thinks that this was in our Lord's mind. I cannot, however, agree with this view.

[*In them...eternal life.*] In this sentence the first "ye" must be taken emphatically, as in the 33<sup>rd</sup> verse. "Think" does not imply that it was a doubtful point or mere matter of opinion. It is rather, "Ye yourselves think, and think rightly—it is one of the dogmas of your faith—that ye have in the Scriptures the way to eternal life pointed out."

Chemnitius remarks: "The words 'ye think' mean that common persuasion and opinion of all men concerning Scripture, which, like an axiom in science, is established, firm, and certain."

Let it be noted that many Christians are just in the unsatisfactory state of the Jews here described. Like them, they "think" and hold it as a dogma of their creed that they "have eternal life in the Scriptures." But like them, they never read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what Scripture contains.

Ecolampadius remarks: "Scripture alone does not make a man any the better, nor even preaching, by itself, except by the Holy Ghost aiding. It is the peculiar office of the external Word to supply testimony; but it is the Spirit of God alone that can make the heart of man assent."

[*These are they which testify of Me.*] This sentence is a strong and weighty declaration of the value of the Old Testament Scriptures. It was to them exclusively, of course, that our Lord referred. He says, "they testify of Me." In direct prophecies, in promises, in typical persons, in typical ceremonies, the Old Testament Scripture all through testifies of

Christ. We read them to very little purpose if we do not discern this.

Ferus remarks that there are three ways in which the Scriptures testify of Christ. (1) Generally: they are as it were the voice of the uncreated Word, ever speaking to man in every part of them. (2) In figures: the paschal lamb, the brazen serpent, and all the sacrifices of the law were witnesses of Christ. (3) In direct prophecies.

Let us note in this verse the high honor which our Lord puts on the Old Testament Scriptures. He distinctly endorses the Jewish canon of inspired writings. Those modern writers who labor to depreciate them and bring them into disrepute show very little of Christ's mind. Much infidelity begins with an ignorant contempt of the Old Testament. Stier remarks, "Israel, possessing still the Old Testament, will enter into the kingdom, when the despisers of Scripture in the final unbelief of Christendom will be judged and condemned."

Let us note further what a plain duty it is to read the Scriptures. Men have no right to expect spiritual light if they neglect the great treasury of all light. If even of the Old Testament our Lord said, "Search," "it testifies of Me," how much more is it a duty to search the whole Bible! An idle neglect of the Bible is one secret of the ignorant formal Christianity which is so widely prevalent in these latter days. God's blessing on a diligent study of the Scriptures is strikingly illustrated in the case of the Bereans. (Acts xvii.11.)