

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
7:14-24

14. Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. 15. And the Jews marveled, saying, How does this man know letters, having never learned? 16. Jesus answered them and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his who sent me. 17. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it is of God or *whether* I speak of myself. 18. He who speaks of himself seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. 19. Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keeps the law? Why do ye go about to kill me? 20. The people answered and said, You have a devil. Who goes about to kill you? 21. Jesus answered and said to them, I have done one work, and ye all marvel. 22. Moses therefore gave to you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man. 23. If a man on the sabbath day receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are ye angry at me because I have made a man completely well on the sabbath day? 24. Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.

14.--[*About the middle of the feast.*] This would be about the fourth day of the week, as the feast lasted seven days. Some who consider the feast of tabernacles a type of Christ's incarnation think this circumstance is typical of our Lord's earthly ministry lasting three years and a half, answering to the three days and a half during which our Lord taught publicly here in Jerusalem. I doubt myself whether the circumstance is typical at all. If the feast of tabernacles it typical, I believe it points to the second advent of Christ much more than to the first.

[*Jesus went up into the temple.*] This means the outer court of the temple, where pious Jews were in the habit of assembling in order to hear the doctors of the law and others and to discuss religious subjects. This is the place where our Lord was when Joseph and Mary found Him at twelve years of age "in the temple." (Luke ii.46.) It was probably a large open courtyard with piazzas or verandas around it for shelter against heat and cold.

[*Taught*]. What our Lord taught we are not told. Expositions of Scripture, as Luke iv.17-21 and such lessons as those contained in the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, were most likely the kind of things that He "taught" first on such occasions as this. It admits of doubt whether He taught such deep things as those contained in the 5th and 6th chapters of St. John, unless publicly attacked, or put on His defense.

Alford thinks this was "the first time" that our Lord "taught publicly at Jerusalem." Yet this seems at least questionable when we consider the 2nd and 5th chapters of John.

15.--[*The Jews marveled.*] The wisdom and knowledge of Scripture which our Lord showed must have been the principal cause of wonder. Yet, we may well believe, there was something wonderful in His manner and style of speaking.

[*How does this Man know letters?*] The word rendered "letters" here must probably be taken in the sense of "learning." It is so used in Acts xxvi.24. In John v.47 it is rendered "writings." In 2 Tim. iii.15 it is "Scriptures." The original idea is a "written character, a letter of an alphabet. It is thus used in Luke xxiii.38 of the inscription on the cross, written "in letters of Greek," etc.

[*Having never learned.*] The Jews must have meant by this that our Lord had never attended any of the great theological schools which the scribes and Pharisees kept up in Jerusalem (to which St. Paul refers when he says that he was "brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel," Acts xxii.3.) They did not, of course, mean that anyone brought up at Nazareth must necessarily have been totally ignorant. That our Lord could read and write is clear from Luke iv.16 and John viii.6. But the Jerusalem Jews, in their pride and self-conceit, set down anyone as comparatively ignorant who had not been trained in their great metropolitan schools. People are very apt to condemn anyone as "ignorant" who disagrees with them in religion.

According to Tholuck, it was a rule of the Talmud "that no man could appear as a teacher who had not for some years been a colleague of a Rabbi."

16.--[*My doctrine is not mine, but his who sent me.*] Our Lord meant by these words, "My doctrine is not mine only. The teaching that I am proclaiming is not a thing of my own private invention and the product of my own isolated mind. It is the doctrine of my Father who sent Me. It deserves attention because it is His message. He who despises it despises not only Me, but He whose messenger I am." The great truth of His own inseparable and mysterious union with God the Father is here once more pointed at. It is like, "I can of my own self do nothing" (John v.30), and "I have not spoken of myself; but the Father who sent Me, He gave Me a commandment what I should say and what I should speak." (John xii.49.)

Some think that our Lord only meant, "The sense of Scripture which I give is not my own, but the sense in which God at first gave it." But this is a very meager view of the sentence, though an Arian or Socinian may like it.

Cyril remarks: "In saying that He was sent by the Father, He does not show Himself inferior to the Father. For this mission is not that of a servant, though it might be called so, as He 'took on Him the form of a servant.' But He is 'sent,--as a word is out of the mind, or a sunbeam out of the sun."

Augustine remarks: "This sentence undoes the Sabellian heresy. The Sabellians have dared to say that the Son is the same as the Father: the names two, the reality one. If the names were two and the reality one, it would not be said, 'My doctrine is not mine.' If Thy doctrine be not Thine, Lord, whose is it, unless there be another whose it may be?"

Hengstenberg thinks that our Lord had in view the famous prophecy of Moses

in which God says of Messiah, "I will put my words in His mouth." (Deut. xviii.18.)

Let us carefully note with what peculiar reverence we should receive and study every word that fell from our Lord's lips. When He spoke, He did not speak His own mind only, as one of His Apostles or prophets did. It was God the Father speaking with and through Him. No wonder, when we read such expressions as this, that St. John calls our Lord "the Word."

17.--[*If any man will do his will.*] The English language here fails to give the full force of the Greek. It is literally, "If any man is willing to do, has a mind and desire and inclination to do God's will." It is not the simple future of the verb "do". There are two distinct verbs. The stress, therefore, in reading the sentence must not be laid entirely on "*doing*" God's will. It is "if any man is *willing* to do."

[*He shall know of the doctrine.*] This means he shall know "concerning and about" the doctrine I am proclaiming.

[*Whether it is of God, or whether I speak of myself.*] This means, "whether the doctrine is from God, as I say it is--the doctrine of God the Father which He has commissioned and sent Me to proclaim to man,--or whether I speak from myself, on my own isolated responsibility without any license or commission." The translation "speak of myself" is unfortunately equivocal. The expression does not mean "about and concerning" myself, but "from" myself.

By "doing the will of God" our Lord must mean "obeying and performing as far as in us lies that will of God" which we have expressly declared to us in the Word of God." (17th Article.) Such "doing" He declares is the way to knowledge. It is the same idea as the "doing truth" of John iii.21.

The principle here laid down is one of immense importance. We are taught that clear knowledge depends greatly on honest obedience, and that distinct views of Divine truth cannot be expected unless we try to practice such things as we know. Living up to our light, we shall have more light. Striving to do the few things we know, we shall find the eyes of our understanding enlightened and shall know more. Did the Jews profess to feel perplexed and not to know whether our Lord was sent from God? Let them honestly do God's will and seek knowledge in the path of sincere obedience in such matters as were clear and plain. So doing they would be guided into all truth and find their doubts removed.

We learn from these words how greatly they err who profess to be waiting till their mental difficulties are removed before they become decided Christians. They must change their plan. They must understand that knowledge comes through humble obedience as well as through the intellect. Let them begin by honestly doing God's will, as far as they know that will, and in so doing they will find their minds enlightened.

We learn, furthermore, that God tests men's sincerity by making obedience part of the process by which religious knowledge is obtained. Are we really willing to do God's will so far as we know it? If we are, God will

take care that our knowledge is increased. If we are not willing to do His will, we show clearly that we do not want to be God's servants. Our hearts and not our heads are in fault.

We learn, finally, the great principle on which many will be condemned at the last day. They did not live up to their light. They did not use such knowledge as they possessed and so were left dark and dead in sins. There is probably not one in a thousand among unconverted people who does not know far better than he practices. Such men surely, if lost, will have none to blame but themselves!

In interpreting this verse, I believe we must be careful not to lay more meaning on the expression "do His will" than our Lord meant it to bear. I say this because I observe many respectable commentators place such a very wide and comprehensive sense upon "doing God's will" that they miss entirely our Lord's purpose in speaking the words. They start with saying that to "do God's will" we must have faith in Christ, new hearts, grace reigning within us, and the like, and thus represent our Lord as saying in effect, "If any man will become a true believer and a converted man, he shall 'know of the doctrine,'" etc. I venture to think that such interpretation completely misses the mark and is going round in a circle. Of course, any true believer knows true doctrine. I believe that our Lord's object was simply to encourage the honest-minded, sincere, single-eyed *inquirer* after truth. To such a man, though at present very ignorant, He says, "If you really have a desire to do God's will, to please Him, and to follow any light He gives you, you will be taught of Him, you will find out the truth. My doctrine may be hid from the wise and prudent, but it is revealed to babes." (Matt. xi.25.) I hold, in short, that we should take as simple a view as possible of the sentence "If any man will do His will" and be very careful that we do not mar its usefulness by putting more meaning on it than our Lord intended.

Bishop Hall thus paraphrases the text: "If any man shall, with a simple and honest heart, yield himself over to do the will of my Father, according to the measure of that he knows, God shall encourage and bless that man with further light so as he shall fully know whether my doctrine be of God or of myself."

Burton remarks: "The perception of truth depends on the practice of virtue. It is a favorite maxim of the present day that increased knowledge will bring with it growth in godliness. Scripture at all events entirely reverses the process. The way to know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, is to do His will." (See John v.44, viii.12.)

Hengstenberg remarks: "Whosoever would lead souls to Christ should not tarry long about the specious argument with which the natural man seeks to disguise the hateful perversion of his state of will, but should above all things try to excite willingness to do the will of God."

18.--[*He who speaks of himself, etc.*] In this verse, as in the preceding verses, "He who speaks of himself" would be more literally rendered "speaks from himself." The verse contains a general principle, applicable not only to our Lord's own case but to teachers of religion in every age. The

meaning seems to be as follows: "He that undertakes on his own responsibility, and without being sent by God, to speak to men about religion, will naturally seek to advance his own importance and get honor for himself. Speaking *from* himself, he will speak *for* himself and try to exalt himself. He, on the contrary, who is a true messenger of God and in whom there is no dishonesty or unrighteousness, will always seek first the glory of the God who sent him." In short, it is one mark of a man being a true servant of God and really commissioned by our Father in heaven, that he ever seeks his Master's glory more than his own.

The principle here laid down is a very valuable one. By it we may test the pretensions of many false teachers of religion and prove them to be unsound guides. There is a curious tendency in every system of heresy or unsound religion to make its ministers magnify themselves, their authority, their importance, and their office. It may be seen in Romanism and Brahminism to a remarkable extent.

Alford's remark, however, is very true: that in the highest and strictest sense "the latter part of the sentence is only true of the Holy One Himself, and that owing to human infirmity, purity of motive is no sure guarantee for correctness of doctrine;" and therefore in the end of the verse it is not said "he who seeks God's glory," but "he who seeks His glory that sent Him", specially indicating Christ Himself.

Burgon thinks that "true" is a word used intentionally, in contrast with the expression "He deceives the people."

19.--[*Did not Moses give you the law?*] Our Lord here appeals to the well-known reverence with which all Jews regarded Moses and the law. But it is highly probable that He had in view the practice of publicly reading the law of Moses to the people during the seven days of the feast of tabernacles, which was observed once in every seven years at that feast. (Deut. xxxi.10.) If, as is possible, this was one of the seventh years in which the law was so read, there would be a singular significance and aptness in His appeal. "This very day you have been hearing that law which you profess to honor so much. But do you honor it in your lives?"

[*None of you keeps the law...kill me.*] This would be more literally rendered, "none of you *does* the law." It is the same word that is used in the expression, "if any man will do His will." (v. 17.) The meaning seems to be, "You reject Me and my doctrine and profess to be zealous for the honor of Moses and the law. And yet none of you really obey the law in heart and in spirit. For instance: why do you seek to kill Me? You are full of hatred of Me and want to put Me to death unjustly, in the face of the sixth commandment. This is not keeping the law."

The Greek word rendered "go about" is the same that is rendered "seek" in v.1 of this chapter and in ch. v.16,18.

20.--[*The people answered, etc.*] It seems probable that those who said this were the common people, the multitude of Jews gathered from all parts of the world to many of whom our Lord was a stranger. We can hardly suppose that the rulers and leaders of Jerusalem would have spoken in this

way.

The expression "You have a devil" may possibly be a repetition of the old charge that our Lord wrought His miracles by Beelzebub and was in league with the devil, as John viii.48. In that sense it would be the strongest form of reproach, blasphemy, and contempt. But considering who the speakers were, it is more likely that it simply means, "You are beside Yourself, and mad." (So. John x.20.)

The expression "who goes about to kill You?" can easily be understood if we suppose the speakers to be the common people and not the rulers. The common people probably knew nothing about the intention of the rulers to put Jesus to death and would think Him beside himself to say that anyone wanted to kill Him.

21.--[*Jesus answered...I have done one work.*] Our Lord can only refer here to the miracle He had wrought on a former occasion at the pool of Bethesda. (Ch. v.1, etc.) This was at present the only great miracle that had been publicly performed in Jerusalem; and from its having led to our Lord being brought before the Sanhedrim (or great Council of the Jews) and to His defense made before them, it would be a miracle that all would know.

[*Ye all marvel.*] This strong present tense seems to mean, "Ye are all still wondering" not only at the greatness of the miracle, but also at my working it on the Sabbath day. Schleusner maintains that the Greek word rendered "marvel" means here, "Ye are indignant, ye take amiss." He thinks the word is used in this sense in Mark vi.6, John v.28, and Gal. i.6.

22.--[*Moses therefore gave to you circumcision, etc.*] There is a difficulty in this verse in the expression we translate "therefore." It is literally, "on this account--for this reason--on account of this." It is not easy to say how the expression comes in and with what it is connected. (1) Some, as Theophylact, Beza, Poole, Whitby, Hammond, Maldonatus, Pearce, Doddridge, Bloomfield, Olshausen, Tholuck, Hengstenberg, and Stier propose to alter the stopping and to connect it with the end of the preceding verse: "Ye all marvel because of this one work." (Compare Mark vi.6.). But it is doubtful whether the Greek language will fairly admit this. (2) Some would connect "therefore" with "are ye angry" in the following verse: "Are you really angry with Me on account of this one work when you yourselves break the Sabbath, in a sense, by circumcising on the Sabbath day?" But this connection seems very distant indeed. (3) Some, as Grotius, Calovius, Jansenius, and Webster think the expression altogether elliptical and would fill up the sense after "therefore" by supposing some such connection as this: "On account of this work and your anger at it, let me remind you of your own practice about circumcision." (See Matt. xviii.22, xii.30, Luke xii.22.) (4) Some, as Chemnitius, Musculus, and DeDieu interpret "therefore" as "because" and make the sentence mean, "Because Moses gave you circumcision, you circumcise a man on the Sabbath day," etc. But it seems a violent strain to make the Greek word we render "therefore" mean "because." (5) Some, finally, as Alford, Burgon, Barradius, Toletus, and Lyranus would connect "therefore" with the middle of this verse and would have it mean, "For this reason Moses gave you circumcision: viz., not because it was an ordinance appointed first by him, but because it was

given to the Fathers," *i.e.*, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This last is perhaps as tenable a view as any. But it is undeniably a difficulty and must remain so. Adopting this view, the whole verse may be paraphrased as follows: "Moses, whose name and law you highly reverence, gave you among other things the ordinance of circumcision. He gave it, remember, for this reason: because it was an old ordinance handed down to him by your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not an ordinance first communicated to him like the Levitical law. Now you, in obedience to the ordinance of circumcision, which ought to be administered on the eighth day after a child's birth, think it no breach of the fourth commandment to circumcise a child on the Sabbath day. In fact, you postpone the law of the Sabbath to the law of circumcision. You admit that a work of piety and necessity may be done on the Sabbath day. You admit that the fourth commandment which was given on Mount Sinai was not so important as the older law of circumcision."

Burton shows that "therefore" is used just in the same way as here, at the beginning of a sentence and pointing forward, in John v.16,18, viii.47, x.17, xii.18,39.

We should note how here, as elsewhere, our Lord refers to Moses as a real person and to the Old Testament history as real true history.

23.--[*If a man, etc.*] The argument in this verse is as follows: "Even among yourselves you circumcise a child on the Sabbath day, when it happens to be the eighth day after his birth, in order that the law of circumcision, which your great lawgiver Moses sanctioned and re-ordained, should not be broken. You thus admit the whole principle that there is some work which may be done on the Sabbath day. Is it then just and fair to be angry with Me because I have done a far greater work to a man on the Sabbath than the work of circumcision? I have not wounded his body by circumcision but made him perfectly whole. I have not done a purifying work to one particular part of him but have restored his whole body to health and strength. I have not done a work of necessity to one single member only but a work of necessity and benefit to the whole man."

I cannot see any ground for the idea suggested by Alford that our Lord implies in this verse that the law of the Sabbath is a mere Judaical practice and comparatively a modern ordinance, and that as such it properly gave way to the older and higher law of circumcision which was "of the Fathers." It might be replied, firstly, that the Sabbath is so far from being a Judaical institution that it is actually older than circumcision and was appointed in Paradise. It might be replied, secondly, that our Lord seems purposely to guard against the idea by speaking of circumcision as "given by Moses" and as a part of "the law of Moses." In fact, He does this twice with such curious particularity that one might think He meant to guard against anyone wresting this passage into an argument against the perpetual obligation of the Sabbath day. He is pleased for the occasion to speak both of circumcision and the Sabbath as part of "the law of Moses." He did this purposely because the minds of His hearers were full of Moses and the law at this particular period. And His argument amounts to this: that if they themselves allowed that the Mosaic law of the Sabbath must give way in a case of necessity to the Mosaic law of circumcision, they

admitted that some works might be done on the Sabbath day, and therefore His work of healing an entire man on the Sabbath day could not be condemned as sinful.

The marginal reading, "without breaking the law of Moses," instead of "that the law of Moses should not be broken," appears to me inadmissible and unnecessary. It is inadmissible because it is a forced and unnatural interpretation of the Greek words. It is unnecessary because our Lord is evidently speaking of circumcision as part of "the law of Moses."

The idea of some commentators as Trapp, Rollock, Hutcheson, Beza, and Stier, that "every whit whole" means "wholeness" of soul as well as body and implies conversion of heart as well as restoration to entire health and strength of the physical man, appears to me unlikely and far-fetched. It is a pious thought, but not apparently in our Lord's mind. Moreover, it is not quite certain that the man healed at Bethesda was healed in soul as well as body. There is no clear proof of it.

24.--[*Do not judge, etc.*] The sense of this verse must be sought in connection with the subject of which our Lord has just been speaking. The Jews had condemned our Lord and denounced Him as a sinner against the fourth commandment because He had done a work on the Sabbath day. Our Lord refers to this and says, "Judge not the deed I did according to the appearance. I did a work on the Sabbath unquestionably. But what kind of a work was it? It was an act of necessity and mercy and therefore an act as lawful to be done as circumcision, which you yourselves perform on the Sabbath day. In appearance the Sabbath was broken. In reality it was not broken at all. Judge fair and just and righteous judgment. Do not hastily condemn an action, such as this, without looking below the surface."

There is perhaps a reference here to Isaiah's prophecy about Messiah: "He shall not judge after the sight of His eyes." (Isa. xi.3.)

The principle here laid down is one of vast importance. Nothing is so common as to judge too favorably or too unfavorably of characters and actions from merely looking at the outward appearance of things. We are apt to form hasty opinions of others, either for good or evil, on very insufficient grounds. We pronounce some men to be good and others to be bad, some to be godly and others to be ungodly, without anything but appearance to aid our decision. We should do well to remember our blindness and to keep in mind this text. The bad are not always so bad, nor the good so good, as they appear. A potsherd may be covered over with gilding and look bright outside. A nugget of gold may be covered with dirt and look like worthless rubbish. One man's work may look good at first and yet turn out, by and by, to have been done from the basest motives. Another man's work may look very questionable at first and yet, at last, prove Christ-like and truly godly. From rashly "judging by appearances" may the Lord deliver us!

Whether our Lord meant "judge not persons" or "judge not actions" according to appearance, is a point on which commentators do not agree. If we take the application to be to "persons," the sentence means: "Do not hastily suppose that Moses and I are at variance, and that, therefore, I must be

wrong because Moses, the great lawgiver, must be right." But it seems far simpler and more natural to apply the expression to "actions:" "Judge not the thing done by the appearance only. Look below the surface and weigh it justly."