

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
17:9-16

9. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. 10. And all mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I am glorified in them. 11. And now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to you. Holy Father, keep through your own name those whom you have given me, that they may be one, as we *are*. 12. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name. Those whom you gave me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13. And now I come to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14. I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15. I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil. 16. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

9.--[*I pray for them...not...the world.*] In this verse our Lord begins that part of His prayer which is specially intercessory and proceeds, from this point down to the end of the chapter, to name things which He asks for His disciples. It may be convenient to remember that the things He asks may be divided under four heads. He prays that His disciples may be (a) kept, (b) sanctified, (c) united, (d) and be with Him in glory. Four more important things cannot be desired for believers.

To say, as some have said, that our Lord's intercessory prayer is an exact specimen of what He does in heaven as our High Priest, is straining a point and going too far. To suppose that the Son literally asks things of the Father by prayer in heaven is in my judgment unreasonable, and a very limited, narrow view of Christ's intercession. We are reading a prayer made by our Lord during the time of His earthly ministry, before His ascension and session at God's right hand; and we are not reading an account of what He does for us, as our Priest, within the veil. Let it suffice us to believe that the intercession of this chapter exhibits accurately Christ's mind toward believers, His desires for believers, the active interest He takes in believers, and the graces He would fain see in believers. Above all, let us believe that if we seek for ourselves the same four things that Jesus here names, we have a Friend in heaven who will take care that we do not seek in vain and will make our prayer effectual.

There are two interpretations of our Lord's meaning when He speaks of praying for the disciples and "not praying for the world."

Some, as Bengel and Alford, think that our Lord meant, "At this present moment I pray specially for my disciples and not for the world." They will not admit that our Lord does not pray and intercede in any way for the wicked and unbelieving; and they quote with some show of reason His prayer at the crucifixion for His murderers--"Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Others, as Hutcheson and Lampe, think that our Lord meant, "I pray specially for my disciples, because now and always it is their special privilege to be prayed for and interceded for by Me." The advocates of this view maintain that it is derogatory to our Lord's honor to suppose that He can ask anything in vain; and that His intercession specially belongs to "those who come unto God by Him" (Heb. 7:25).

The point in dispute is a nice and delicate one, and will probably never be settled. On the one hand, we must take care that we do not forget that our Lord Jesus Christ does take a special interest in His believing people and does do special things for them, which He does not do for the wicked and unbelieving. On the other hand, we must not forget that our Lord pities all, cares for all, and has provided salvation *sufficient* for all mankind. There is no escaping the text that says of the wicked, they "deny the Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1). The most fair and honest interpretation of the text "God so loved the world" (John 3:16), is to regard "the world" as meaning all mankind.

The whole dispute turns, as is often the case in such disputes, on the meaning we put on a word. If by "intercession" we mean vaguely and generally the whole mediatorial work of Christ on behalf of mankind, it is then true that Christ intercedes for all, both good and bad, and this text before us must mean, "I pray at this moment specially for my people and am only thinking of them." If, on the other hand, we mean by "intercession" that special work which Christ does for His people in order to carry them to heaven (after calling, pardoning, justifying, renewing, and sanctifying them), it is then plain that Christ intercedes for none but believers and that the words before us mean, "I pray now, as always, specially for my disciples, and not for the world."

If I must give an opinion, I must own that I decidedly hold the second (or last view) of which I have spoken. I believe that Christ never, in the fullest sense of the word, "makes intercession" for the wicked. I believe that such intercession is a peculiar privilege of the saints and one grand reason of their continuance in grace. They stand because there is One in heaven who actively and effectually intercedes.

I will give place to no one in maintaining that Jesus loves all mankind, came into the world for all, died for all, provided redemption sufficient for all, calls on all, invites all, commands all to repent and believe; and ought to be offered to all--freely, fully, unreservedly, directly, unconditionally--without money and without price. If I did not hold this, I dare not get into a pulpit, and I should not understand how to preach the Gospel.

But while I hold all this, I maintain firmly that Jesus does special work for those who believe, which He does not do for others. He quickens them by His Spirit, calls them by His grace, washes them in His blood--justifies them, sanctifies them, keeps them, leads them, and continually intercedes for them--that they may not fall. If I did not believe all this, I should be a very miserable, unhappy Christian.

Holding this opinion, I regard the text before us as one that describes our Lord's special intercession for His people, and I take the meaning to be simply: "I pray for them, as my peculiar people, that they may be kept, sanctified, united, and glorified; but I do not pray for the world."

The famous text, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34), is at best a doubtful one. Will anyone undertake to say that those for whom our Lord prayed were never forgiven and saved? Have we forgotten that within fifty days after that prayer 3,000 souls were converted at Pentecost, of whom Peter said, "By wicked hands ye crucified and slew Jesus of Nazareth"? (Acts 22:23.) Who can prove that the very men who crucified our Lord were not among the number converted and were thus the answer to our Lord's prayer? These, however, are conjectures at the very best. The matter is one which is not necessary to salvation, and one about which Christians must agree to differ, and must not excommunicate one another. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

Hengstenberg remarks: "The world may be viewed under two aspects. First, there is the susceptibility of grace, which, despite the depths of the sinful depravation of Adam's race, still remains in it. Of the world in this sense Jesus says, 'I came not into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.' (John 1:29, 3:17.) Viewed under this aspect, the world is the subject of Christ's intercession. The disciples themselves were won from the world. But the world may also be viewed as ruled by predominantly ungodly principles. Of the world in this sense we read that it cannot receive the 'Spirit of truth.' (John 15:27.) To pray for the world, thus viewed, would be as vain as to pray for the prince of this world."

Manton suggests that we must draw some distinction between the intercession of Christ as a Divine Mediator and the prayers of Christ as a man, wherein He is an example to His people. Yet, however just this remark, it hardly seems to apply to this peculiarly solemn prayer.

[*For those...given...Yours.*] Our Lord here repeats the description of His disciples that He had given before. They were men whom "the Father had given Him" to teach and feed, and save. They were His Father's sheep, entrusted to His charge. Therefore, He seems to argue, "I am specially bound to pray for them and ask for them everything that their souls need. Like a good Shepherd, I must give an account of them one day."

10.--[*And all mine...Yours are mine.*] This sentence seems to come in parenthetically, and to be a reassertion of the great truth of the perfect unity of the Father and the Son. The words in the Greek mean literally "things" and not "persons." "All my things are Your things, and all Your things are my things. As with everything else, these eleven disciples are not mine more than Yours, or Yours more than mine." This continual assertion of the doctrine of the perfect unity of the Godhead and the distinction of the Persons in the Trinity is very remarkable and instructive.

[*I am glorified in them.*] In this sentence our Lord seems to return to the disciples. "I have been and am glorified in them by their faith,

obedience, and love, when the vast majority of their countrymen have hated and rejected Me. They have honored Me and brought glory to Me by continuing with Me in my tribulation. Therefore I now make special prayer and intercession for them."

Let us mark here that the weakest faith and love to Christ brings Him some glory, and is not overlooked by Him.

11.--[*And now I am...come to You.*] In the beginning of this verse, our Lord describes the position of the disciples and shows the special reason why they required prayer and intercession to be made for them. They were about, for the first time, to be left alone like orphans and thrown on their own resources, in a certain sense. Hitherto they had always had their Master at their side and could turn to Him in every case of need. Now they were about to enter on a totally different condition of things. "The time of my departure from the world is at hand. I am very soon about to ascend into heaven and come to You. But these few sheep, these weak disciples, are not coming to heaven with Me. They are going to be left alone in a wicked, cold, persecuting world."

Poole observes: "Christ here speaks of Himself as one who had already died and was already risen and ascended, though none of all these things were past, because they were so soon and suddenly to come."

Let us not fail to note how our Lord remembers the position of His people here on earth: He cares tenderly for them, and will make all needful provision for their safety and comfort. "I know your works, and where you dwell" (Rev. 2:13).

[*Holy Father.*] This is the only place in the Gospel where we find our Lord addressing the Father by this epithet. There is doubtless some good reason for it. It may be that there is a fitness in asking the "Holy" Father to keep the disciples holy and free from the dominion of evil. "As You are holy, so keep these my disciples holy."

[*Keep...whom you have given me.*] Here is the first petition that our Lord puts up for His disciples. He asks that they may be kept and preserved from evil, from falling away, from false doctrine, from being overcome by temptation, from being crushed by persecution, from every device and assault of the devil. Danger was around them on every side. Weakness was their present characteristic. Preservation was what He asked.

The expression, "Keep through Your own name," is remarkable. I take it to mean, "through Your own attributes of power, love, and wisdom." The "name" of God, as before remarked, is frequently used in Scripture to signify His character and attributes.

[*That they may be one, as we are.*] Here our Lord mentions one special object for which He desires that His people may be kept, viz., their unity: that they may be one. "Keep them, that they may be of one heart and one mind, striving together against common foes and for common ends, and not broken up, weakened, and paralyzed by internal quarrels and divisions."

He adds the highest model and pattern of unity, "one as we are"--the unity of the Father and the Son. Of course there cannot be literally such union between Christian and Christian as there is between two Persons in the Trinity. But the unity that Jesus prays the disciples may aim at should be a close, intimate, unbroken unity of mind, will, opinion, and feeling.

Burgon remarks here: "The word rendered 'as' both here and in verse 21 does not denote strict correspondence but only general resemblance, as in the Athanasian Creed where the union of two natures in the one Person of Christ is popularly illustrated by the union of the 'reasonable soul and flesh' in man." (Comp. Matt. 5:48 and Luke 6:36.)

The importance attached by our Lord to "unity" among Christians is very strikingly illustrated by the prominent place assigned to it in this verse. The very first object for which He desires the preservation of the disciples is that they may be kept from division. Nor can we wonder at this when we consider the interminable divisions of Christians in every age, the immense harm they have done in the world, and the astounding indifference with which many regard them, as if they were perfectly innocent things, and as if the formation of new sects was a laudable work!

12.--[*While...kept them in Your name.*] Our Lord here recites what He had done for the disciples during His ministry. "Throughout the three years in which I have been with these eleven disciples in the world, I used to keep them from all harm, through Your power and name." I can see no reason why the same Greek words should not be rendered "*through* Your name" in this verse, as well as in the preceding one. In both cases the idea seems the same--a preservation through the grace, power, and attributes of God the Father.

[*Those whom You gave...none of them is lost.*] The word rendered "kept" in this clause is quite different from the word so rendered in the first part of the verse. There it means simply "I have preserved." Here it means "I have guarded," like a shepherd guarding a flock or a soldier guarding a treasure. "I have so carefully guarded those disciples whom You have given Me that not one of them has perished, or is lost."

[*Except the son of perdition.*] This remarkable expression of course refers to Judas Iscariot, the traitor, the only one of the Apostles who was lost and cast away in hell. The name given to Judas is a strong Hebraism and means "a person worthy of perdition, or only fit to be lost and cast away by reason of his wickedness." David says to Saul's servants, "Ye are worthy to die," or as the margin says, "sons of death" (1 Sam. 26:16). Again, he says to Nathan, "The man who has done this thing shall surely die," or, "is a son of death." (2 Sam. 26:5; see also Ps. 79:11, Matt. 13:38, Luke 16:8.) It is a tremendously strong expression to come from the lips of our merciful and loving Savior. It shows the desperate helplessness of anyone who, living in great light and privileges like Judas, misuses his opportunities and deliberately follows the bent of his own sinful inclinations. He becomes the "child of hell" (Matt. 23:15).

A question of very grave importance arises out of the words before us. Did our Lord mean that Judas was originally one of those whom the Father "gave

to him" and was primarily a true believer? Did he therefore fall away from grace? Many maintain, as Hammond, Alford, Burgon, and Wordsworth, that Judas was at one time a true believer like Peter, James, and John, and that the text is an unanswerable proof that grace may be *lost*, and that a man may be converted and have the Holy Ghost and yet finally fall away and perish forever in hell. This is not only a very uncomfortable doctrine, but one which it is hard to reconcile with many plain texts of Scripture, to say nothing of the seventeenth Article of our own Church. But does the text before us clearly prove that Judas was one of those who were "given" to Christ by the Father? I believe firmly that it does not. I maintain that the "but" in the text is not an "exceptive" word but an "adversative" one. I hold the right meaning to be: "Those whom You gave Me I have kept, and out of them not one is lost. But there is one man who is lost, even Judas, the son of perdition; not one who was ever given to Me, but one whom I declared long ago to be a 'devil,' a man whose hardened heart fitted him for destruction."

It is easy, of course, to say that this view is a far-fetched and non-natural one. I ask those who say this to observe that the same Greek words here rendered "but" are used in other places in the New Testament where it is impossible to put an "exceptive" sense on them, and where the "adversative" meaning is the only one they can possibly bear. I challenge anyone to deny that "but" in such texts as Matt. 12:4--"but only for the priests," Mark 13:32--"but the Father," Rev. 9:4--"but only those men, Rev. 21:27--"but they which are written," must be interpreted as an "adversative" and cannot possibly be an "exceptive" word. (See also Acts 27:22 and 2 Kings 5:17.) And so it is here. Our Lord does not mean, "No one of those given to Me is lost EXCEPT the son of perdition." What He does mean is, "Not one of those given to Me is lost. On the other hand and in contrast, Judas--a man not given to Me, a graceless man--is lost."

Let me add, in confirmation of the view I maintain, that in the very next chapter the expression here used is referred to by St. John in his account of our Lord's capture. He says: "The saying was fulfilled which He spoke: 'Of them who You gave me have I lost none' (John 18:9); and not one hint does he give of any exception having been made by our Lord, when he heard Him use the expression before.

The view I advocate is maintained by DeDieu, Gomarus, Lampe, Hutcheson, and Manton.

It is a curious fact that even in our own English language, Milton, writing in the seventeenth century (when the last revision of our Bible took place) has used the word "except" in the same way. He says of Satan, in *Paradise Lost*,

"God and His Son *except*, created thing
Nought valued He or shunned."

"Except" there must clearly be adversative. God and His Son are not *created* things! Both Brown (on John 17) and Doddridge quote this sentence of Milton.

Bishop Beveridge, quoted by Ford, remarks: "Judas, here called the son of perdition, though he seemed to be given to Christ and to come to Him yet really did not. Therefore, though he was lost, as the Scripture had foretold, yet Christ's word is still true that He never casts out nor loses any who really come to Him."

[*That the Scripture might be fulfilled.*] Here, as in many places, it does not mean that Judas was lost in order to fulfill Scripture, but that the Scripture was fulfilled by the loss of Judas. The place referred to is Psalm 109:8.

Let us not fail to note the high honor put on Scripture in this place. Even in a prayer of the utmost solemnity addressed by the Son to the Father, we find reverent allusion to the written word of the Old Testament and to that oft-quoted book, the Psalms.

13.--[*And now I come to You, etc.*] This is a somewhat elliptical verse. I take the meaning to be something of this kind: "I am now soon leaving the world and coming to You. Before leaving the world, I speak these things openly in prayer in the hearing of these my disciples, in order that they may be cheered and comforted, and feel the joy that I give to them filled up and abounding in their hearts."

I can hardly think that our Lord is referring to the discourse that preceded this prayer. It seems more natural to apply "these things I speak" to His prayer.

The expression "my joy" occurs before in 15:11. It must mean that peculiar, inward sense of comfort that Christ imparts to believers, and which no one knows excepting him who receives it.

14.--[*I have given them Your word, etc.*] In this verse our Lord appears to describe more fully the position of the disciples as an introduction to a more full repeated prayer for their preservation. It is as though He said: "I do not pray that my disciples may be kept without good reason. I have given them the Word of the Gospel, and they have received it and have been at once persecuted and ill-treated for receiving it. In short, the world has hated them ever since they became my disciples because, like myself, they are not of the world, neither holding the world's principles nor walking in the world's ways."

Let us not fail to remark that true believers must expect the hatred and enmity of the wicked in every age. They must not be surprised at it. Christ and His disciples had to endure it, and all real Christians must endure it too. The reason of this enmity is the continual testimony which believers bear against the world's opinions and practices. The world feels itself condemned and hates those whose faith and lives condemn it. If believers were more bold, decided, and consistent, they would soon find these things out more than they do now. The good opinion of the world is about the last thing a true Christian should expect or desire. If all men speak well of his opinions and ways in religion, he may well doubt whether there is not something very wrong and defective about them. We are not to court the world's enmity. A narrow, morose, discourteous, and exclusive

spirit is downright wrong. But we are never to be the least surprised by the world's enmity if we meet with it; and the more holy we are, the more we shall meet with it. Christ was perfect in holiness; but the world hated Him.

15.--[*I do not pray that You, etc.*] In this verse our Lord repeats and develops more fully His prayer that His disciples may be kept. His meaning appears to be this: "Wicked and persecuting as the world is, I pray not that You would take my disciples immediately out of it. Such removal would be bad for themselves and bad for the world. What I do pray is, that remaining in the world, You would keep them from the evil of the world. Though in it, let them not be spoiled or corrupted by it."

The deep wisdom of this prayer is very instructive. There are few Christians who would not like to go to heaven without trouble, conflict, and persecution. Yet it would not be for their own sanctification, and it would deprive the world of the benefit of their teaching and example. Believers would never value Christ and heaven as much as they will do one day if they were not kept here on earth a good deal, taught to know their own hearts, and, like their Master, "perfected by suffering" (Heb. 2:10).

Hutcheson remarks: "However much we ought to have our eye upon our rest, and make ready for it, yet we are not anxiously to long for it till God's time come, nor to be weary of life because of any trouble, persecution, or inconvenience we meet with in His service."

There is a strong indirect argument here, as Bullinger and Gaultier remark, against the favorite theory of many--that retreat from the world by going into monasteries and convents is the secret of eminent holiness. Eminent holiness is most seen by publicly winning a victory over evil, and not by a cowardly desertion of our post in society.

Three of the only prayers not granted to saints, recorded in Scripture, are the prayers of Moses, Elijah, and Jonah, to be "taken out of the world."

Gerhard remarks that the Apostles were to be the first preachers of the Gospel and the light of the world. If they had been taken away immediately after their Lord, the world would have been left in darkness. Moreover, the cross is the school of faith and patience, and without remaining in the world they could not have become eminent saints.

George Newton remarks: "The world is the place where we bring glory to the Lord; in the world to come we are glorified by Him. Oh, let us be so ingenuous as to desire to be awhile where we may glorify God, rather than where we may have glory from Him. Let us not be so eager for our wages and our rest till we have finished our work and served our generation. When we have done so, God will glorify us with Himself forever."

The meaning of the phrase "the evil" is a point on which there is much difference of opinion.

Some think that it means simply, as our translation of the Bible has it, evil in the abstract, all evil of every kind, like "deliver us from evil"

in the Lord's prayer; and they think that it includes all evil that may assail us from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Others think that the words would have been better rendered "the evil one" and apply the expression to the devil, as the first great cause and beginner of evil. The word is so rendered in Matt. 13:19-38, 1 John 2:13,14, 3:12, and 5:18.

The question is one that will probably never be settled, and the Greek phrase may be translated either way. Nevertheless, I decidedly incline to think that our translation is right. It is "evil" in the abstract, and not the devil, that our Lord means. I think so partly because the devil is not anywhere brought forward in this prayer, and partly because it is more consistent to reason to suppose our Lord would have His disciples kept from all kind of "evil" than from the devil only. This is the more clear to my mind from the fact that it is "the world" and its hatred and enmity of which our Lord has just been speaking, and not the devil. However, I freely admit that it is an open question.

16.--[*They are not of the world, etc.*] These words are a literal repetition of the end of the 14th verse and need no further comment. Our Lord seems to repeat them in order to add emphasis to the request He has just made; and the repetition strengthens my opinion that it is "the evil in the world" that He specially desires His people to be kept from. "They need to be specially kept and preserved because, I repeat, there is an entire lack of harmony, a gulf of separation between them and this wicked world, in which I leave them. They are much hated and need to be much kept."

Repetitions in real, earnest prayer, we may observe, are not wrong; Christ's example warrants them. It is "vain repetitions" such as were common among the heathen--repeating the same words over and over again without thought or feeling--against which we are warned in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt. 6:7.)