

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
5:40-47

40. And ye will not come to me that ye might have life. 41. I do not receive honor from men. 42. But I know you, that ye do not have the love of God in you. 43. I am come in my Father's name, and ye do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him ye will receive. 44. How can ye believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from God only? 45. Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. 46. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me. 47. But if ye do not believe his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

40. [*And ye will not...life.*] The connection between this verse and the preceding one is not very clear. It is one of those abrupt elliptical transitions which occur frequently in St. John's writings. I conjecture the link must be something of this kind: "The Scriptures testify plainly of Me. *And yet* in the face of this testimony, ye have no will or inclination to come to Me by faith, that ye may have eternal life through Me."

This verse evidently begins the third part of our Lord's address to the Jews. He had declared the relation between Himself and God the Father. He had brought forward the evidence of His own Divine commission and His claim to be received as the Messiah. And now He concludes by a most heart-piercing appeal to the consciences of His enemies, in which He exposes the true state of their hearts and the real reasons why they did not believe in Him. If ever men were plainly dealt with and received home-thrusts as to their own spiritual condition, it was on this occasion. In reading the conclusion of this chapter, one cannot but feel that a miraculous restraint must have been put on our Lord's enemies. Otherwise it is difficult to understand how they could have allowed Him to bring such cutting and truthful charges against them. If ministers desire a warrant for dealing plainly with their hearers and addressing them directly and personally about their sins, they have only to look at their Divine Master's words in this passage.

The opening charge that our Lord makes, "Ye will not come to Me," misses much of its force in the English language. It is not the future tense of "come" that is used in the Greek. Two distinct verbs are employed. The right meaning is, "Ye do not will to come,"--"Ye have no heart, desire, or inclination to come to Me."

Let it be noted here that (1) we are all by nature dead in sins; that (2) spiritual life is laid up for sinners in Christ alone--He is the fountain of life; that (3) in order to receive benefit from Christ, men must come to Him by faith and believe--believing is coming; and, finally, (4) that the real reason why men do not come to Christ, and consequently die in their sins, is their lack of will to come.

Let it be carefully noted that both here and elsewhere the loss of man's soul is always attributed in Scripture to man's own lack of will to be

saved. It is not any decree of God. It is not God's unwillingness to receive. It is not any limitation of Christ's redeeming work and atonement. It is not any lack of wide, broad, free, full invitations to repent and believe. It is simply and entirely man's own fault, his lack of will. Forever let us cleave to this doctrine. Man's salvation, if saved, is entirely of God. Man's ruin, if lost, is entirely of himself. He "loves darkness rather than light." He will have his own way.

We should observe in this concluding part of our Lord's address that He charges the Jews with four distinct sins: (1) lack of real will to come to Him, (2) lack of real love to God, (3) undue desire of man's praise, (4) lack of real faith in Moses' writings.

41.--[*I do not receive honor from men.*] The connection between these words and the preceding verse is again not very clear. I conjecture that it must be as follows: "I do not say these things as if I desired the praise and honor of man. I do not complain of your not coming to Me as if I only came into the world to seek man's praise. It is not on my own account that I mention your unbelief, but on yours, because it shows the state of your hearts. Do not suppose that I stand in need of followers and am covetous of man's favor."

42.--[*But I know you...in you.*] The sense and connection here appear to be as follows: "But the plain truth is that I know and have long known the state of your hearts, and I know that you have no real love of God in you. You profess to worship the one true God and to give Him honor, but you show by your conduct that with all your profession you do not really love God."

To a Jewish hearer this tremendous charge must have been peculiarly galling. It was a charge that none but our Lord could make with equal decision, because He read men's hearts and knew what was in them.

The word "I know" is literally "I have known." Alford paraphrases the sentence: "By long trial and bearing with your manners these many generations, and personally also, I have known and do know you."

In another place we find our Lord naming this sin as one of the special sins of the Pharisees. "Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the *love of God.*" (Luke xi.42.)

Ferus remarks that the incredulity of the Jews did not arise from lack of evidence but lack of love towards God.

43.--[*I am come...do not receive me.*] This sentence contains a proof of the assertion made in the preceding verse. "You show that you have no real love for God by your not receiving Me, who has come in my Father's name and desire nothing so much as His honor. If you really loved and honored God as you professed to do, you would gladly receive and honor His Son."

[*If another...will receive.*] In this sentence our Lord supposes a case, to show the corrupt and carnal state of the Jews' hearts. "If another public teacher shall appear giving himself out to be some great one, not seeking

God's honor and doing all in God's name but aiming to exalt himself and get honor to himself, you will receive and believe him. You reject Me, the true Son of God. You are ready to receive any false pretender who comes among you though he may give no honor to the God whom you profess to worship. It is true, then, that you have no real love of God in you."

I believe decidedly that our Lord spoke these words prophetically. He had in view the many false Christs and false Messiahs who arose within the first hundred years after His death, and by whom so many of the Jews were invariably deluded. According to Stier, no less than sixty-four false Messiahs appeared to them and were more or less believed.

The readiness with which they believed these imposters is a remarkable historical fact and a striking fulfillment of the words before us. They proved as forward to believe these pretenders to a Divine mission who came in their own names as they had been backward to believe our Lord.

I may add, however, that I am one of those who doubt whether the words of our Lord have even yet received their complete fulfillment. I think it highly probable that the world may yet see a personal Antichrist arise who will succeed in obtaining credence from a vast portion of the Jewish nation. Then, and not till then, when Antichrist has appeared, this verse will be completely accomplished. Chrysostom, Cyril, Theophylact, Euthymius, Alcuin, Heinsius, take this view.

Stier remarks: "He of whom the Lord here prophesies is finally Antichrist with his open and avowed denial of God and of Christ; with his most daring 'I' before which all the proud will humbly bow down, because they will find themselves in him and will honor him as their true God. As the Father reveals Himself in Christ, so will Satan manifest himself in Antichrist and give him all his work and witness and his own honor as the prince of their world; and the wicked will yield themselves to him, because through unbelief they have already fallen into his nature and fitly belong to him."

Wordsworth remarks: "The Fathers were generally of the opinion, grounded on this passage, that Antichrist would be received by the Jews."

44.--[*How can ye believe, etc.*] This verse contains a very important principle. The substance of the meaning seems to be as follows: Our Lord tells the Jews that they were not likely to believe so long as they cared more for the praise of man than the praise of God. The true cause of their unbelief was a lack of honesty and godly sincerity. With all their professed zeal for God, they did not really care so much for pleasing Him as for pleasing man. In this state of mind they were never likely to have faith or to come to the knowledge of the truth. "How can ye believe, receiving and seeking honor from one another as ye do now?" It is not possible that you can believe until you cease from your present earthly-mindedness and honestly desire God's praise more than man's.

The great principle contained in the verse is the close connection between the state of a man's heart and his possessing the gift of faith. Believing or not believing, to have faith or not to have faith, is not a thing that depends only on a man's head being satisfied and his intellect convinced.

It depends far more on the state of a man's heart. If a man is not thoroughly honest in his professed desire to find out the truth in religion, if he secretly cherishes any idol which he is resolved not to give up, if he privately cares for anything more than God's praise, he will go on to the end of his days doubting, perplexed, dissatisfied, and restless, and will never find the way to peace. His insincerity of heart is an insuperable barrier in the way of his believing. There is a mine of wisdom in the expression, "An honest and good heart." (Luke viii.15.) For lack of it, many a one complains that he cannot get comfort in religion and cannot see his way towards heaven, when the truth is that his own dishonesty of heart is the cause. There is something he loves more than God. The consequence is that he never feels an honest will to believe.

The "can" in this verse should be compared with the "will" in the fortieth verse. "Ye cannot because ye will not."

[*From God only.*] This expression would be more literally rendered "from the only God"--the one true God whom the Jews boasted that they alone knew and worshiped.

Doddridge remarks that the whole verse "has much more spirit in it if we consider it as applied to the members of the Sanhedrim, who had such distinguished titles of honor, than if we only take it as spoken to a mixed multitude." If, as many suppose, our Lord was making a formal defense of Himself and His divine mission before the great Ecclesiastical Assembly of the Jews, His words in this verse would come home to His hearers with stinging power.

45.--[*Do not think that I will accuse, etc.*] We must not suppose that our Lord literally meant that there was any real likelihood of Moses or Himself standing up to make a formal accusation against the Jews. What He did mean was that not to believe Him was not to believe Moses. There was no need for Him to accuse them of unbelief. Moses himself, for whom they professed such respect, might be their accuser and prove them guilty. "Even now," He says, "Moses accuses you. His writings, daily read in your synagogue, are a constant witness of your unbelief." There may also, it is highly probable, be a reference here to the Song of Moses, where he predicts the unbelief of the people, and desires the book of the law to be "put in the side of the ark, that it may be there for a witness against thee." (Deut. xxxi.26.)

Chemnitius remarks: "What the Lord says to the Jews is exactly as if I were to say to the Papists, It is not I, but the very Fathers whose authority ye allege in favor of your superstition, who will accuse you of impiety. Or as if we were to say to the Pope, It is not we who accuse and condemn thee but Christ Himself, whose vicar thou callest thyself; and Peter whose successor thou wilt have thyself; and Paul whose sword thou pretendest to bear; they it is who will accuse thee." Beza makes much the same remark, and observes that none will be more opposed to the Roman Catholics in the judgment day than the Virgin Mary and the saints in whom they profess to trust!

The notion of some Romanists that the expression "Moses, in whom ye trust,"

justifies the invocation of saints and putting confidence in them as mediators, is, as Chemnitius observes, too weak and groundless to need refutation.

46.--[*For had ye believed Moses...Me.*] These words are simply an amplification of the idea in the preceding verse. If the Jews had really believed Moses, they could not have helped believing Christ. The witness of Moses to Christ was so distinct, express, and unmistakable that true belief in his writings must inevitably have led them to belief in Christ.

[*He wrote of Me.*] These words are very remarkable. In what sense our Lord used them, we cannot exactly know. At the very least we may conclude He meant that throughout the five books of Moses, by direct prophecy, by typical persons, by typical ceremonies, in many ways and in divers manners, Moses had written of Him. There is probably a depth of meaning in the Pentateuch that has never yet been fully fathomed. We shall probably find at the last day that Christ was in many a chapter and many a verse, and yet we knew it not. There is a fullness in all Scriptures far beyond our conception.

Let us note carefully that our Lord distinctly speaks of Moses as a real person (who, as a matter of history, lived and wrote books) and of his writings as true genuine writings deserving of all credit and of undeniable authority. In the face of such an expression as this, it is a mournful fact that any man called a Christian can throw doubt on the existence of Moses or on the authority of the books attributed to him.

To say, as some have done, that our Lord was only accommodating Himself to the conventional language of the times and that He did not really mean to assert His own belief either in the existence of Moses or the authority of his writings, is to charge Him with downright dishonesty. It represents Him as One aiding and countenancing the dissemination of a lie!

To say, as some have done, that our Lord, born of a Jewish woman and brought up among Jews, was not above the ignorant prejudices of the Jews and did not really know that Moses ever existed and that his writings are full of mistakes, is to talk downright blasphemy and nonsense. Fancy the eternal Son of God at any time talking ignorantly! Fancy, above all, that any trace of Jewish ignorance would be likely to be found in this chapter of St. John's gospel in which, above all other chapters perhaps, our Lord's divine knowledge is most strikingly brought out!

47.--[*If ye do not believe his writings, etc.*] This verse is an extension of the thought contained in the preceding one and a solemn and mournful conclusion of the whole address. There is evidently an intentional contrast between "writings" and "words," as if our Lord would remind the Jews that "writings" are generally more relied upon than "sayings." "If you do not really believe what your own honored lawgiver Moses WROTE--and it is plain that you do not--it is not likely that you will believe what I SAY. If you have no real faith in the things written in your Scriptures by that very Moses for whom you profess such reverence, your favorite teacher and lawgiver, it is not to be wondered at that you have no faith in what I say, and that I speak to you in vain.

The Greek word used here for "writings" is very remarkable. It is generally translated "letters," as Luke xxiii.38 In 2 Tim. iii.15, it is rendered "Scriptures." To my mind it is a strong indirect evidence in favor of the verbal inspiration of Scripture.

There is a sense in which these words should ring painfully in the ears of all the modern assailants of the Mosaic writings. It is just as true now, I firmly believe, as it was eighteen hundred years ago. They cannot divide Moses and Christ. If they do not believe the one, they will find sooner or later that they do not believe the other. If they begin with casting off Moses and not believing his writings, they will find in the end that to be consistent they must cast off Christ. If they will not have the Old Testament, they will discover at last that they cannot have the New. The two are so linked together that they cannot be separated. "What God has joined together let no man put asunder."

In concluding the notes on this wonderful chapter, one would like to know how this marvelous address was received by those who heard it. But here we meet with one of the peculiar "silences" of Scripture. Not one word is written to tell us what the Jews at Jerusalem thought of our Lord's argument or what effect it had upon them. Our own duty is clear. Let us take heed that it has some effect on ourselves.

The amazing fullness of our Lord's teaching appears most strikingly in the address contained in this chapter. Within the short span of twenty-nine verses, we find no less than eleven mighty subjects brought forward. (1) The intimate relation of the Father and the Son. (2) The divine commission and dignity of the Son. (3) The privileges of the man who believes. (4) The quickening of the spiritually dead. (5) The judgment. (6) The resurrection of the body. (7) The value of miracles. (8) The Scriptures. (9) The corruption of man's will the secret of man's ruin. (10) The love of man's praise the cause of unbelief. (11) The importance of the writings of Moses.