

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
7:40-53

40. Therefore many of the people, when they heard this saying, said, Truly this is the prophet. 41. Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? 42. Has not the Scripture said that Christ comes from the seed of David and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? 43. So there was a division among the people because of him. 44. And some of them would have taken him, but no man laid hands on him. 45. Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, Why have ye not brought him? 46. The officers answered, No man ever spoke like this man! 47. Then the Pharisees answered them, Are ye also deceived? 48. Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him? 49. But this people who knows not the law are cursed. 50. Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, 51. Does our law judge *any* man before it hears him and knows what he does? 52. They answered and said to him, Are you also of Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet arises out of Galilee. 53. And every man went to his own house.

40.--[*Many of the people...said.*] The "people" here evidently mean the general multitude of common people who had come together to attend the feast, and not the chief priests and Pharisees. The "saying" which called forth their remarks appears to be the public proclamation that our Lord had just made inviting all thirsty souls to come to Him as the Fountain of Life. That any one person should so boldly announce himself as the reliever of spiritual thirst seems to have arrested attention; and taken in connection with the fact of our Lord's public teaching during the latter half of the feast, which many of the people must have heard, it induced them to say what immediately follows.

Brentius, Musculus, and others hold strongly that our Lord's words in the preceding three verses must have been greatly amplified at the time He spoke, and are in fact a sort of text or keynote to His discourse; and that this is referred to in the expression "this saying." Yet the supposition seems hardly necessary. The words were a conclusion to three days' teaching and preaching.

[*Truly, this is the Prophet.*] This would be more literally rendered, "This man is truly and really the Prophet." These speakers meant that He must be "the Prophet" like unto Moses, foretold in Deuteronomy. (Deut.xviii.15,18.)

41.--[*Others said, This is the Christ.*] These speakers saw in our Lord the Messiah, or anointed Savior, whom all pious Jews were eagerly expecting at this period and whose appearing the whole nation was looking for in one way or another, though the most part expected nothing more than a temporal Redeemer. (Psalm xlv.7, Isa. lxi.1, Dan. ix.25,26.) Even the Samaritan woman could say, "I know that Messiah comes." (John iv.25.)

[*But some said...Galilee?*] This ought to have been rendered, "But others said." It was not a few exceptional speakers only but a party probably as large as any. They raised the objection, which was not unnatural, that this new teacher and preacher, however wonderful He might be, was notoriously a Galilean of Nazareth and therefore could not be the promised Messiah. How utterly ignorant most persons were of our Lord's birthplace we see here, as elsewhere.

42.--[*Has not the Scripture said, etc.*] We should note in this verse the clear knowledge which most Jews in our Lord's time had of Scripture prophecies and promises. Even the common people knew that Messiah was to be of the family of David and born at Bethlehem, the well-known birthplace of David. It may, indeed, be feared that myriads of Christians know far less of the Bible than the Jews did eighteen hundred years ago.

43.--[*So...division...because of Him.*] Here we see our Lord's words literally fulfilled: He did not bring "peace, but division." (Luke xii.51.) It will always be so as long as the world stands. So long as human nature is corrupt, Christ will be a cause of division and difference among men. To some He is a savor of life and to others of death. Grace and nature never will agree any more than oil and water, acid and alkali. A state of entire quiet and the absence of any religious division is often no good sign of the condition of a Church or a parish. It may even be a symptom of spiritual disease and death. The question may possibly be needful in such cases, "Is Christ there?"

44.--[*And some...taken Him.*] This would be more satisfactorily rendered, "Some out of those" who made up the crowd "were desirous and wished to take our Lord prisoner." These were no doubt the friends and adherents of the Pharisees, and very likely were the common people who dwelt at Jerusalem and knew well what their leaders wanted to do.

[*No man laid hands on Him.*] This must be accounted for primarily by the Divine restraint which was at present laid on our Lord's enemies because His hour was not yet come, and, secondarily, by the fear in which the Pharisees' party evidently stood of a rising in our Lord's defense on the part of the Galileans and others who had come up to the feast. Thus we read that at the last Passover "the priests and Scribes sought how they might kill Him, for they feared the people." (Luke xxii.2.) Again: "They said, Not on the feast day lest there be an uproar of the people." (Mark xiv.2 and Matt. xxvi.5.)

45.--[*Then the officers came, etc.*] It is not clear what interval of time elapsed between verse 32 where we read that the officers were sent by the priests to take our Lord, and the present verse where we are told of their coming back to their masters. At first sight, of course, it all happened in one day. Yet, if we observe that between the sending them to take our Lord and the present verse there comes in the remarkable verse--"In the last day, that great day of the feast," it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that an interval of two or three days must have elapsed. It seems highly probable that the officers had a general commission and warrant to take our Lord prisoner whenever they saw a fitting opportunity about the fourth day of the feast. They found, however, no opportunity on

account of the temper and spirit of the crowd, and dared not make the attempt. And at last, at the end of the feast (when the multitude was even more aroused than at first by our Lord's open testimony), they were obliged to return to those who sent them and confess their inability to carry out their orders.

46.--[*The officers answered, etc.*] The answer of the officers has probably a double application. They themselves felt the power of our Lord's speaking. They had never heard any man speak like this man. It tied their hands and made them feel incapable of doing anything against Him. They had, besides, marked the power of His speaking over the minds of the multitude which gathered round Him. They had never seen anyone exercise such an influence over His hearers. They felt it useless to attempt arresting one who had such complete command over His audience. We cannot doubt that they had heard much more "speaking" than the few things recorded between verses 32 and 46. These are only specimens of what our Lord said and furnish a keynote to us indicating the general tenor of His teaching.

What it was precisely that the officers meant when they said "No man ever spoke like this man," we are left to conjecture. They probably meant that they had never heard anyone speak such deep and important truths in such simple yet striking language and in so solemn, impressive, and yet affectionate style. Above all, they probably meant that He spoke with a dignified tone of authority, as a messenger from heaven, to which they were entirely unaccustomed.

47.--[*Then the Pharisees answered...also deceived?*] The word rendered "deceived" means literally "led astray, or caused to err." Have you too been carried off by this new teaching? The question implies anger, sarcasm, ridicule, and displeasure.

48.--[*Have any of the rulers...believed in Him?*] This arrogant question was doubtless meant to be an unanswerable proof that our Lord could not possibly be the Messiah: "Can a person be deserving of the least credit as a teacher of a new religion if those who are the most learned and highest in position do not believe Him?" This is precisely the common argument of human nature in every age. The doctrine which the great and learned do not receive is always assumed to be wrong. And yet St. Paul says, "Not many wise, not many noble are called." (1 Cor. i.26.) The very possession of rank and learning is often a positive hindrance to a man's soul. The great and the learned are often the last and most unwilling to receive Christ's truth. "How hardly shall a rich man enter the kingdom of God." (Matt. xix.23.)

It seems clear from this that at present the Pharisees did not know that one of their own number, Nicodemus, was favorably disposed to our Lord.

49.--[*But this people...cursed.*] This sentence is full of contempt and scorn throughout. "This people"--a mob, a common herd--"who knows not the law"--is not deeply read in the Scriptures and have no deep Rabbinical learning--"are cursed"--are under God's curse and given over to a strong delusion. Their opinion is worthless, and what they think of the new Galilean teacher is of no moment or value. Charges like these have been

made in every age against the adherents of all reformers and revivers of true religion. The multitude who followed Luther in Germany, our own Reformers in England, and the leaders of revived religion in the last century, were always attacked as ignorant enthusiasts whose opinion was worth nothing. When the enemies of vital religion cannot prevent people flocking after the Gospel and cannot answer the teaching of its advocates, they often fight with the weapons of the Pharisees in this verse. They content themselves with the cheap and easy assertion that those who do not agree with themselves are ignorant and know nothing, and that therefore it matters nothing what they think. Yet St. Paul says, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty." (1 Cor. i.27.) The poorer and humbler classes are often much better judges of "what is truth" in religion than the great and learned.

The disposition of the Jews to pronounce those "accursed" who differed from themselves in religious controversy is exhibited in this verse. Jewish converts to Christianity in modern times are often sadly familiar with cursing from their own relatives.

50.--[*Nicodemus...came to Jesus by night.*] This would be more literally rendered, "He who came to *Him* by night." The omission of our Lord's name here is very peculiar. The fact of Nicodemus having come to see Jesus "by night" is always mentioned by St. John, where his name occurs. (See John xix.39.) It is, to my mind, a strong proof that he was a coward when he first came to our Lord and dared not come openly by day.

[*Being one of them*] This means that he was a chief man, or ruler among the Pharisees, and as such was present at all their deliberations and counsels. His case shows that the grace of God can reach men in any position however unfavorable it may be to true religion. Even a chief Pharisee, one of that company of men who, as a body, hated our Lord and longed to kill Him, could believe and speak up for Him. We must never conclude hastily that there can be no Christians among a body of men because the great majority of them hate Christ and are hardened in wickedness. There was a Lot in Sodom, an Obadiah in Ahab's house, a Daniel in Babylon, saints in Nero's palace, and a Nicodemus among the Pharisees. He was "one out of their number," but not one of them in spirit.

51.--[*Does our law judge any man, etc.*] This was undoubtedly speaking up for our Lord and pleading for His being treated justly and fairly, and according to law. At first sight it seems a very tame and cautious mode of showing his faith, if he had any. But it is difficult to see what more could have been said in the present temper of the Pharisees. Nicodemus wisely appealed to law. "Is it not a great principle of that law of Moses, which we all profess to honor, that no man should be condemned without first hearing from him what defense he can make, and without clear knowledge and evidence as to what he has really done? Is it fair and legal to condemn this person before you have heard from His own lips what He can say in His defense, and before you know from the testimony of competent witnesses what He has really done? Are you not flying in the face of our law by hastily judging His case and setting Him down as a malefactor before you have given Him a chance of clearing Himself?" (See Deut. i.17 and

xvii.8, etc., and xix.15, etc.) Nicodemus, it will be observed, cautiously takes up his ground on broad general principles of universal application and does not say a word about the Lord's particular case.

The Greek words would be more literally rendered, "Does our law condemn the man unless it hears from him first?"

I think there can be no reasonable doubt that these words show Nicodemus to have become a real, though a slow-growing disciple of Christ, and a true believer. It required great courage to do even the little that he did here and to say what he said.

Let us carefully note that a man may begin very feebly and grow very slowly and seem to make very little progress, and yet have the true grace of God in his heart. We must be careful that we do not hastily set down men as unconverted because they get on slowly in the Christian life. All do not grow equally quick.

Let us learn to believe that even in high places and most unlikely positions Christ may have friends of whom we know nothing. Who would have expected a chief ruler among the Pharisees to rise at this juncture and plead for justice and fair dealing in the case of our Lord.

52.--[*They answered...you also of Galilee?*] This was the language of rage, scorn, and bitter contempt. "Are you too--a ruler, a learned man, a Pharisee, one of ourselves--become one of the Galilean party? Have you joined the cause of this new Galilean prophet?"

The tone of this bitter question seems to me to prove that Nicodemus had said as much as was possible to be said on this occasion. The temper and spirit of the Pharisees, from disappointment and vexation at our Lord's increasing popularity and their own utter inability to stop His course, made them furious at a single word being spoken favorably or kindly about Him. They must indeed have been in a violent frame of mind when the mere hint at the desirability of acting justly, fairly, and legally made them ask a brother Pharisee whether he was a Galilean!

Musculus remarks that Nicodemus got little favor from the Pharisees though his favorable feeling towards our Lord was so cautiously expressed. He observes that this is generally the case with those who act timidly as he did. People may just as well be outspoken and bold.

[*Search and look.*] This seems to be meant sarcastically. "Go and search the Scriptures again and look at what they say about the Messiah, before you say one word about this new Galilean prophet. Examine the prophets and see if you can find a tittle of evidence in favor of this Galilean whose cause you are patronizing.

[*No prophet arises out of Galilee.*] This would be rendered more literally, "a prophet out of Galilee has not been raised." About the meaning of the words, there are three very different opinions.

(1) Some think that the words only mean, no "prophet of great note or

eminence has ever been raised up in Galilee." This, however, is a tame and unsatisfactory view.

(2) Some, as Bishop Pearce, Burgon, and Sir N. Knatchbull, think that the Pharisees only meant that "THE Prophet like unto Moses, the Messiah, has nowhere in the Scripture been foretold as coming out of Galilee." According to this view, the Pharisees said what was quite correct.

(3) Others, as Alford, Wordsworth, Tholuck, and most other commentators, think that the Pharisees, in their rage and fury, either forgot or found it convenient to forget that prophets had arisen from Galilee. According to this view, they made an ignorant assertion and said what was not true.

I find it very difficult to receive this third opinion. To me it seems quite preposterous to suppose that men so thoroughly familiar with the letter of Scripture, as the Pharisees were, would venture on such a monstrous and ignorant assertion as to say that "no prophet had ever arisen out of Galilee!" Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Jonah, and perhaps Nahum are all thought by some to have been Galilean prophets. Moreover, Isaiah distinctly prophesied that in Messiah's times Zebulon and Naphtali and Galilee of the Gentiles should be a region where "light should spring up." (Matt. iv.14-16.)

On the other hand, I must frankly admit that the Greek of the sentence must be much strained to make it mean "the true prophet is not to arise out of Galilee." I do not forget, moreover, that when men lose their tempers and fly into a passion, there is nothing too foolish and ignorant for them to say. Like a drunken man, they may talk nonsense and say things of which in calm moments they may be ashamed. It may have been so with the Pharisees here. They were no doubt violently enraged, and in this state of mind might say anything absurd.

The point, happily, is not one of first-rate importance, and men may afford to differ about it. Nevertheless, if I must give an opinion, I prefer the second of the three views I have given. The improbability of the Pharisees asserting anything flatly contrary to the letter and facts of Scripture is, to my mind, an insuperable objection to the other views.

53.--[*And every man went to his own house.*] These words seem to indicate that the assembly of Pharisees, before whom the officers had appeared reporting their inability to take our Lord prisoner, broke up at once without taking any further action. They saw that they could do nothing. Their design to put our Lord to death at once could not be carried out and must be deferred. They therefore separated and went to their own houses. We may well believe that they parted in a most bitter and angry frame of mind, boiling over with mortified pride and baulked malice. They had tried hard to stop our Lord's course and had completely failed. The "Galilean" had proved for the time stronger than the Sanhedrim. Once more, as after the miracle of Bethesda, they had been ignominiously foiled and publicly defeated.

Hutcheson remarks: "There is no council nor understanding against Christ, but when He pleases He can dissipate all of it. Here every man went to his

own house without doing anything."

Maldonatus thinks the verse proves that though the Pharisees sneered at Nicodemus and reviled him, they could not deny the fairness and justice of what he said. He thinks, therefore, that they dispersed in consequence of Nicodemus' interference. Even one man may do something against many when God is on his side.

Besser quotes a saying of Luther's: "Much as the Pharisees before had blustered, they dared do nothing to Jesus; they became still and silent. He goes up to the feast meek and silent and returns home with glory. They go up with triumph and come down weak."

Trapp remarks: "See what one man may do against a mischievous multitude. It is good to be doing, though there be few or none to second us."

Baxter remarks: "One man's words may sometimes divert a persecution."