

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
8:31-36

31. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed on him, If ye continue in my word, *then* are ye my disciples indeed. 32. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. 33. They answered him, We are Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man. How can you say, Ye shall be made free? 34. Jesus answered them, Verily, verily I say to you, whoever commits sin is the servant of sin. 35. And the servant does not abide in the house forever, *but* the Son abides forever. 36. Therefore, if the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

31.--[*Then Jesus said...believed on Him.*] It is clear, I think, from the tone of the conversation that runs from this verse uninterruptedly to the end of the chapter, that this "believing" was not faith of the heart. These Jews only "believed" that our Lord was One sent from heaven and deserved attention. But they were the same Jews to whom He says by and by, "Ye are of your father the devil."

[*If ye continue...disciples indeed.*] This sentence does not mean that these Jews had really begun to receive Christ's word into their hearts. Such a sense would be contradictory to the context. It must mean, "If you take up a firm stand on that Gospel and Word of Truth which I have come to proclaim and go on sticking firmly to it in your hearts and lives, not merely convinced and wishing but actually following Me, then you are truly my disciples." The word rendered "indeed" is more literally "truly." The converse throws light on our Lord's meaning: "You are not truly disciples unless you continue steadfast in my doctrine."

Our Lord teaches the great principle that steady continuance is the only real and safe proof of discipleship. No perseverance, no grace! No continuance in the word, no real faith and conversion! This is one of the meeting points between Calvinist and Arminian. He who has true grace will not fall away. He who falls away has no true grace and must not flatter himself that he is a disciple.

Let us note that it is not the "word continuing in us," but "our continuing in the word" which makes us true disciples. The distinction is very important. The word "might continue in us" and not be seen. If we "continue in the word," our lives will show it. In John xv.7 we have both expressions together: "If ye abide in Me, and my words abide in you."

32.--[*And ye shall know the truth.*] The expression "the truth" here cannot, I think, mean the Personal Truth, the Messiah. It must be "the whole doctrinal truth concerning myself, my nature, my mission, and my Gospel. Steady continuance in my Service shall lead to clear knowledge." It is a parallel saying to the sentence, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine." (vii.17.) Honest obedience and steady perseverance in acting up to our light and doing what we learn, are one grand secret of obtaining more knowledge.

Chrysostom, however, thinks that our Lord means by "truth," Himself. "Ye shall know Me, for I am the truth." So also does Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, and Lampe.

[*The truth shall make you free.*] This freedom can only mean spiritual freedom--freedom from the guilt, burden, and dominion of sin; freedom from the heavy yoke of Pharisaism, under which many Jews were laboring and heavy laden. (Matt. xi.28.) "The Gospel I preach, and its good news, shall deliver you from spiritual bondage and make you feel like men set at liberty."

I think these words must have been spoken with special reference to the bondage and spiritual slavery in which the Jews were kept by their principal teachers, when our Lord came among them. In the synagogue at Nazareth, He had said that He came "to preach deliverance to the captives." (Luke iv.18.) This, however, is the first place in the Gospels where He openly declares that His Gospel will give men freedom.

Until truth comes into a man's heart, he never really knows what it is to feel true spiritual liberty.

Augustine says: "To Christ let us all flee. Against sin let us call on God to interpose as our Liberator. Let us ask to be taken on sale, that we may be redeemed by His blood."

33.--[*They answered him, We are Abraham's seed.*] Here we see the usual pride of carnal descent coming out in the Jewish mind. It is just what John the Baptist told them when he preached, "Think not to say that we have Abraham for our father." (Matt. iii.19.)

[*And were never in bondage to any man.*] This is the blindness of pride in its strongest form. The seed of Abraham was in bondage to the Egyptians and Babylonians for many years, to say nothing of the frequent bondages to the Philistines and other nations as recorded in the book of Judges. Even now, while they spoke, they were in subjection to the Romans. The power of self-deception in unconverted man is infinite. These Jews were not more unreasonable than many nowadays who say, "We are not dead in sin; we have grace, we have faith, we are regenerate, we have the Spirit," while their lives show plainly that they are totally mistaken.

[*How can you say...made free?*] This question was partly asked in anger and resentment and partly in curiosity. Angry as the Jews were at the idea of being subject to anyone, they yet caught at the expression "be made free." It made them think of the glorious kingdom of Messiah, foretold in the Prophets. "Are You going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Are You going to set us free from the Romans?"

We should observe here, as elsewhere, the readiness of our Lord's hearers to put a carnal sense on spiritual language. Nicodemus misunderstanding the new birth, the Samaritan woman and the living waters, the Capernaïtes and the bread from heaven, are all illustrations of what I mean. (See John iii.4, iv.11, vi.34.)

Pearce thinks the Jews here spoke of themselves individually and not of the Jewish nation. Yet surely even when they spoke, they were subject to the Romans.

Henry observes: "Carnal hearts are sensible of no other grievances than those that molest the body and injure their secular affairs. Talk to them of encroachments on their civil liberty and property, tell of waste committed on their lands or damage done to their houses, and they understand you very well and can give you a sensible answer; the thing touches and affects them. But discourse to them of the bondage of sin or captivity to Satan and a liberty by Christ, tell them of wrong done to their souls, and you bring strange things to them."

34.--[*Jesus answered, etc.*] In this verse our Lord shows His hearers what kind of freedom He had meant by showing the kind of slavery from which He wished them to be delivered. Did they ask in what sense He meant they should be made free? Let them know, first of all, that in their present state of mind--wicked, worldly, and unbelieving--they were in a state of bondage. Living in habitual sin, they were the "servants of sin." This was a general proposition which they themselves must admit. The man who lived willfully in habits of sin was acknowledged by all to be the slave of sin. Sin ruled over him, and he was its servant. This was an axiom in religion which they could not dispute, for even heathen philosophers admitted it. See Rom. vi.16-20 and 2 Pet. ii.19.

"Commits," we must remember here, does not mean "commits an act of sin" but habitually lives in the commission of sin. It is in this sense that St. John says, "He who commits sin is of the devil," and "He who is born of God does not commit sin." (1 John iii.8,9.)

35.--[*And the servant does not abide, etc.*] This is a difficult (because a very elliptical) verse. The leading object in our Lord's mind seems to be to show the Jews the servile and slavish condition in which they were so long as they rejected Him, the true Messiah, and the free and elevated position which they would occupy if they would believe in Him and become His disciples. "At present, living under the bondage of the ceremonial law and content with it and Pharisaic traditions, you are no better than slaves and servants, liable, like Hagar and Ishmael, to be cast out of God's favor and presence at any moment. Receiving Me and believing on Me as the Messiah, you would at once be lifted to the position of sons and would abide forever in God's favor as adopted children and dear sons and daughters. You know yourselves that the servant has no certain tenure in the house and may be cast out at any time, while the son is heir to the father and has a certain tenure in the house forever. Know that I wish you to be raised from the relation of servants to that of sons. Now, under the bondage you are in, you are like slaves. Receiving Me and my Gospel, you would become children and free."

Something like this seems the leading idea in our Lord's mind. But it is vain to deny that it is a dark and difficult sentence and requires much filling up and paraphrasing to complete its meaning. The simplest plan is to take it as a parenthesis. Then it becomes a comment on the word

"servant," which to a Jew familiar with the story of Hagar and Ishmael, would be very instructive and would convey the latent thought that our Lord wished them to be not servants but sons. I cannot for a moment think that "the Son" in the last clause means the Son of God, or that the whole clause was meant to teach His eternity.

It is certainly possible that a deep mystical sense may lie under the words "servant" and "son" in this verse. "Servant" may mean the Jew content with the inferior and servile religion of Moses. "Son" may mean the believer in Christ who receives the adoption and enjoys Gospel liberty. He who is content with Judaism will find his system and religion soon pass away. He who enters into Christ's service will find himself a son forever. But this is at best only conjectural and a somewhat questionable interpretation.

One thing, at any rate, is very clear to my mind. The latent thought in our Lord's mind is a reference to the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael being cast out as bondservants while Isaac, the son and heir, abode in the house. He wished to impress on His hearers' minds that He desired them, like Isaac, to have the privilege of sons forever and to be free to all eternity. Keeping this thought in view and regarding the verse as a parenthesis, its difficulties are not insuperable.

Chrysostom says: "'Abides not' means 'has not power to grant favors, as not being master of the house;' but the son is master of the house." The Jewish priests were the servants, and Christ was the Son. The priests had no power to set free, the Son of God had. Theophylact and Euthymius take the same view.

Maldonatus calls attention to the expression in Hebrews where Moses and Christ are put in contrast, and each in connection with the word "house"--Moses as a servant, Christ as a Son. St. Paul certainly seems there to refer to this passage. (Heb. iii.2,5,6.)

36.--[*If the Son shall make you free, etc.*] In this verse our Lord explains what He had meant by freedom. It was a freedom from sin--its guilt, power, and consequences--which believers in Him were to receive. "If I, the Son of man, make you free in the sense of delivering you from the burden of sin, then you will be free indeed!" This was the freedom that He wished them to obtain. Here, as elsewhere, our Lord carefully avoids saying anything to bring on Himself the charge of rebelling against constituted authorities and of heading a popular rise for liberty.

The word rendered "indeed" here is not the word so rendered at the 31st verse. Here it means "really, in reality," from the participle of the verb "to be." There it means "truly."

Let us not forget in these days that the only liberty which is truly valuable in God's sight is that which Christ gives. All political liberty, however useful for many purposes, is worthless unless we are children of God and heirs of the kingdom by faith in Jesus. He only is perfectly free who is free from sin; all beside are slaves. He who would be free in this fashion has only to apply to Christ for freedom. It is the peculiar office and privilege of the Lord Jesus to enfranchise forever all who come to Him.

Augustine carries the freedom here promised far into the future. He remarks: "When shall there be full and perfect liberty? When there shall be no enemies; when the last enemy shall be destroyed, even death."