

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
8:37-47

37. I know that ye are Abraham's seed, but ye seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you. 38. I speak what I have seen with my Father, and ye do what ye have seen with your father. 39. They answered and said to him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. 40. But now ye seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I have heard from God. This did not Abraham. 41. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then they said to him, We were not born of fornication; we have one father, *even* God. 42. Jesus said to them, If God were your Father, ye would love me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither did I come of myself, but he sent me. 43. Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word. 44. Ye are of *your* father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own, for he is a liar and the father of it. 45. And because I tell *you* the truth, ye do not believe me. 46. Which of you convinces me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? 47. He who is of God hears God's words; therefore ye do not hear *them*, because ye are not of God.

37.--[*I know that ye are Abraham's seed.*] In this verse our Lord takes up the arrogant boast of the Jews that they were Abraham's seed. He had replied to their assertion--"We were never in bondage to any man"--by showing the nature of true bondage and true liberty. He now returns to their opening statement "We are Abraham's seed," and begins by telling them that He knew and fully admitted their carnal descent from Abraham.

[*But ye seek to kill Me.*] This must mean, "Your relation to Abraham does you no good, for ye are seeking to murder Me at this very moment, though I have come to fulfill the promises made to Abraham."

Here, as well as at the 40th verse and chapter vii.19, our Lord shows His perfect knowledge of all the designs of His enemies. He gives us an example of steady perseverance in God's work, even though we know our lives are in peril.

[*Because my word has no place in you.*] This means, "Because the Gospel I preach, the message I brought from my Father, makes no way or progress in your hearts or among you." The Greek word, which our translators have rendered "has place," is never so rendered elsewhere. The idea here seems to be that of "going forward, spreading, and marching on."

This describes literally the condition of many who hear Christ's word in every age. It seems to come to a dead standstill or halt in their hearts, and to make no way with them.

38.--[*I speak, etc.*] The sense of this verse appears to be filled up thus: "The truth is, that there is an entire gulf and breach between you and Me. I speak and am ever speaking the doctrine which I have seen with my Father in our eternal councils about mankind, and which I am sent by Him to proclaim to the world. You, on the other hand, do and are always doing the things which your father the devil presents to your minds, and which you have seen and imbibed into your characters under his influence."

When our Lord speaks of what He has "seen" with His Father, we must remember, as elsewhere, that He uses language accommodated to our weak capacities to describe the relation between Himself and the first Person in the Trinity. Compare John iii.32 and v.19.

There can be no doubt, when we read the verses following, that the "father" of the Jews to whom our Lord here refers is "the devil." It conveys an awful idea of the state of unbelieving and wicked men, that they are doing what they have seen and learned from the devil. There may, however, be special reference to the design of the Jews to kill Christ. Our Lord's meanings may be, "Ye are doing what ye have seen with the devil your father. He has suggested to you to kill Me, and you are listening to his suggestion."

39.--[*They answered...Abraham is our Father.*] This is a repetition of what the Jews had already said. Startled at what our Lord said about their "father," they reassert emphatically their relationship to Abraham. "What do you mean by thus speaking of our father? Abraham is our father."

[*Jesus said...works of Abraham.*] Our Lord here tells them that it is possible to be Abraham's children according to the flesh and yet not Abraham's children according to the Spirit. "If ye were true spiritual descendants of Abraham, you would show it by doing such things as Abraham did. Your works would be like his, because springing from a like faith."

The distinction here drawn by our Lord is a very important one for Christians to notice. The utter uselessness of carnal relationship, or formal outward succession, is a truth which man does not like to admit, but one that needs to be constantly taught in the Churches. How common to hear men say, "We belong to the one true Church, we are in the direct succession from the Apostles." Such claims are utterly useless if not accompanied by "works."

We must never forget the importance of "works," if put in their right place. "They cannot justify us. They are at best full of imperfection. But they are useful evidences and serve to show whose we are and what our religion is worth.

40.--[*But now ye seek to kill Me, etc.*] Our Lord in this verse confirms the charge made in the preceding one, that His enemies were not Abraham's spiritual children although carnally descended from Abraham. "At this very moment you are wishing and endeavoring to put Me to death, not for any crime, but simply because I have spoken to you that mighty message of truth which I heard from my Father, and am sent to proclaim to the world as the Messiah. This is the very opposite of what your great forefather Abraham

would have done. He longed to see my day. He rejoiced in the prospect of it. He would have hailed my appearance and message with delight. Your conduct, therefore, is an unanswerable proof that you are not Abraham's spiritual children."

Our Lord's argument is the same that St. Paul uses to the Romans. "He is not a Jew which is one outwardly." "They which are the children of the flesh are not the children of God." (Rom. ii.28,29; ix.8.) The importance of it cannot be overrated. It establishes the great principle that fleshly relationship or ecclesiastical connection is nothing without grace in the heart, and indeed only adds to a man's condemnation.

The expression "this did not Abraham" is a Hebraism. Of course, literally Abraham could not "seek to kill" Christ, because he never lived with Him on earth. The meaning must be, "Your conduct is the very opposite of what Abraham would have done and utterly contrary to the general tenor of what he did while he lived." Compare Deut. xvii.3, Jer. vii.22-31, xix.5, xxxii.35, where the same form of speech is used.

When our Lord calls Himself here simply "a man," He uses an expression which He nowhere else employs in the Gospels. As a rule, He calls Himself "the Son of man" when speaking of His human nature. Here, however, He seems to speak of Himself in the point of view in which His unbelieving enemies ought to have regarded Him, if they could not yet acknowledge His divinity. "I am among you a man speaking the truth, and yet ye seek to kill Me." The attempt of Jews and Socinians to show that our Lord was not really God, founded on this text, is futile. Our Lord's real and true humanity no sound Trinitarian thinks of denying.

41.--[*Ye do the deeds of your father.*] This means, "You are doing the things that your father the devil approves and suggests to you. You are showing yourselves genuine children of the devil by doing his works." The word "ye" in the Greek is emphatic and may possibly be intended to contrast with "I" at the beginning of the 35th verse.

[*Then they said...fornication.*] These words can hardly be taken literally. Our Lord was speaking to the Jews, not as individuals but as a nation and a class, and was speaking of their descent in a religious point of view. The question was, "Who was their father? From whom did they get their spiritual character? To whom were their proclivities and tendencies to be traced?" This our Lord's hearers understood and said, "We are not born of fornication; we are not heathens and idolaters, at any rate, even if we are not as good as Abraham." That idolatry was called fornication, because it was unfaithfulness to the covenant God--a forsaking Him for false gods--is, I think, clear from many places in the Old Testament. See for instance Jeremiah ii.1-20 and iii.1-3. I think this was in the minds of the Jews when they spoke to our Lord here. This is Augustine's view.

The notion of Euthymius, Rupertus, and others, that the Jews refer to other children of Abraham by Hagar and Keturah and boast themselves his true children by Sarah, is not satisfactory. It is surely too much to charge Abraham with the sin of fornication because he took Hagar to be his wife at the insistence of Sarah and married Keturah after Sarah's death!

The notion of some, that the Jews refer here to the many marriages between Jews and Gentiles in the Old Testament times (as seen in Ezra x.1, etc.) and repudiate them, is not probable.

Some have thought that the Jews insinuated wicked doubts of our Lord's legitimate birth in this phrase. But it seems unlikely.

[*We have one Father, even God.*] The Jews here lay claim to be regarded as God's children. That God is called "the Father" of Israel in several places in the Old Testament is undeniable. See Deut. xxxii.6, 1 Chron. xxix.10, Isa. lxiii.16, lxiv.8, and Mal. i.6. But it is very clear that these texts specially refer to God's relation to Israel as a nation and not to Israelites as individuals. The Jews, however, in their pride and self-righteousness, made no such nice distinction. They did not see that national sonship and covenant sonship without spiritual sonship are worth nothing. Hence they brought on themselves the stern rebuke of the next verse.

42.--[*Jesus said...If God were your Father...love me.*] Our Lord here tells the Jews that although they might be children of God by covenant and nationality, they were evidently not God's children by grace and spiritual birth. If God was really their Father, they would show it by loving the Son of God, even Himself.

Let us note carefully the great principle contained in this sentence. Love to Christ is the infallible mark of all true children of God. Would we know whether we are born again, whether we are children of God? There is one simple way of finding out: Do we love Christ? If not, it is vain and idle to talk of God as our Father and ourselves as God's children. No love to Christ, no sonship to God!

The favorite notion of many--that baptism makes us sons and daughters of God and that all baptized people should be addressed as God's children--is utterly irreconcilable with this sentence. Unless a baptized person loves Christ, he has no right to call God "Father" and is not God's child. He has yet to be born again and brought into God's family. Before the point and edge of these words, the doctrine--that spiritual regeneration always accompanies baptism--cannot stand.

The modern notion about God's universal Fatherhood, which finds such favor with many, is no less irreconcilable with this sentence than baptismal regeneration. That God the Father is full of love, mercy, and compassion to all is no doubt true. But that God is really and truly the spiritual Father of anyone who does not love Christ can never be maintained without contradicting our Lord's words in this place.

The sentence is full of condemnation to all who know nothing experimentally of Christ, and neither think, nor feel, nor care anything about Him. Crowds of so-called Christians are in this unhappy state and are plainly not God's children, whatever they may think. The sentence is equally full of comfort for all true believers, however weak and feeble. If they feel drawn towards Christ in heart and affection and can truly say "I do love

Him," they have the plainest mark of being God's children, and "if children, then heirs." (Rom. viii.17.)

[*For I proceeded forth, etc.*] Our Lord here shows the Jews His own divine nature and mission. He had proceeded forth and come from God, the eternal Son from the eternal Father. He had not come of His own independent will and without commission, but specially sent and appointed by the Father as His last and dearest Messenger to a lost world. Such was His nature. Such was His position and relation to the Father. If, therefore, they really were children of God the Father, they would love Him as the Father's Son, the Father's Messenger, the Father's promised Messiah. Not loving Him, they gave the plainest proof that they were not God's children. A true child of God will love everything belonging to God, and especially he will love God's only begotten and beloved Son. He can see and find nothing nearer to the Father than the Son, who is the "brightness of His glory and the express image of His person." (Heb. i.3.) If, therefore, he does not love the Son, it is clear that he is no true child of the Father.

Calvin remarks: "Christ's argument is this: Whoever is a child of God will acknowledge his first-born Son. 'But you hate Me, and therefore you have no reason to boast that you are God's children.' We ought carefully to observe in this passage that there is no piety and no fear of God where Christ is rejected. Hypocritical religion presumptuously shelters itself under the name of God; but how can they agree with the Father who disagree with His only Son?"

43.--[*Why do ye not understand, etc.*] In this verse our Lord seems to me to draw a distinction between "speech" and "word." The expression "word" is deeper than "speech." By "speech" He means "my manner of speaking and expressing myself." By "word" He means generally "my doctrine." The sense is, "How is it that ye do not understand my manner of expressing myself to you when I speak of such things as freedom and of 'your father'? It is because ye will not receive and attend to my whole message--the word that I bring to you from my Father." Lightfoot takes this view.

This explanation seems to me to describe most accurately the state of things between our Lord and His hearers. They were continually misunderstanding, misinterpreting, and stumbling at the expressions and language that He used in teaching them. Did He speak of "bread"? They thought He meant literal bread. Did He speak of "freedom"? They thought He meant temporal and political freedom. Did He speak of "their Father"? They thought He meant Abraham. How was it that they so misunderstood His language and dialect? It was simply because their hearts were utterly hardened and closed against the whole "word of salvation" which He came to proclaim. Having no will to listen to and receive His doctrine, they were ready at every step to misconstrue the words and figures under which it was conveyed and placed before them.

Anyone who preaches the Gospel now must often observe that precisely the same thing happens in the present day. Hearers who are strongly prejudiced against the Gospel are constantly perverting, wresting, and misinterpreting the language of the preacher. None are so blind as those who will not see, and none so stupid as those who do not want to understand.

The "cannot" here is a moral inability. It is like "No man can come unto Me," and "His brethren could not speak peaceably unto him." (John vi.44 and Gen. xxxvii.4.) It means, "Ye have no will to hear with your hearts."

Chrysostom remarks, "Not to be able, here, means not to be willing."

44.--[*Ye are of your father the devil, etc.*] This verse deserves special attention, both for the sternness of the rebuke it contains and the deep subject which it handles. The general sense is as follows: "Ye are so far from being spiritual children of Abraham or true children of God, that, on the contrary, ye may be rightly called the children of the devil; and ye show it by having a will set on doing the evil things which your father suggests to you. He, from the beginning of creation, was a being set on the destruction of man and did not abide in the original truth and righteousness in which he was created; for now truth is not in his nature. When he now speaks and suggests a lie, he speaks out of his own peculiar inward nature, for he is eminently a liar and the father of a lie."

When our Lord says to the wicked Jews, "Ye are of your father the devil," He does not mean that the wicked are made wicked by the devil in the same sense that the godly are made godly by God, created anew and begotten of God. But He uses a common Hebraism by which persons, who are closely connected with or entirely under the influence of another, are called "his children." It is in this sense that the wicked and unbelieving are truly the children of the devil. This must be carefully remembered. The devil has no power to "create" the wicked. He only finds them born in sin and, working upon their sinful nature, obtains such an influence that he becomes practically the "father of the wicked." (See Matt. xiii.38, 1 John iii.10, Matt. xiii.19, Luke xvi.8, xx.34, Isa. lvii.4, Num. xvii.10.)

Augustine says, "Whence are those Jews sons of the devil? By imitation, not by birth." He also refers to Ezek. xvi.3 as a parallel case.

When our Lord says "Ye will do the lusts of your father," we must remember that "Ye will" is emphatic in the Greek. "Ye have a will, mind, purpose, and disposition." By "doing the lusts" He means, "Ye follow those evil inclinations and desires" which are peculiarly characteristic of the devil and according to his mind--such as to commit murder and to love and tell a lie. The desire of the devil can only be for that which is evil.

When our Lord says the devil was a "murderer from the beginning," I do not think He refers exclusively to Cain's murder of Abel, though I think it was in His mind. (See 1 John iii.23.) I rather think He means that the devil, from the beginning of creation, was set on bringing death into the world and murdering man, both body and soul.

Origen remarks: "It was not one man only that the devil killed, but the whole human race, inasmuch as in Adam all die. So that he is truly called a murderer."

When our Lord says that the "devil abode not in the truth," I think He teaches that the devil is a fallen spirit, and that he was originally made very good and "perfect," like all other works of God's hands. But he did

not continue in that state of truth and righteousness in which he was originally created. He kept not his first estate but fell away. "Truth" seems to stand for all righteousness and holiness, and conformity to the mind of God who is "Truth itself." This verse, and Jude 6, are the two clearest proofs in the Bible that the devil fell and was not created evil at the beginning.

The word "abode" would be more literally rendered "stood."

When our Lord says "Because there is no truth in him," He does not mean that this was the reason why the devil "abode not in the truth." If this had been His meaning, He would have said "Truth was not in him." But He says "is." His words are meant to describe the present nature of the devil. "He is now a being in whom truth is not." It seems to me a somewhat similar expression to that of St. Paul when he says, "I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly," where "because" does not mean the *reason* why he obtained mercy. (1 Tim. i.13.) The Greek word for "because" in both cases is the same.

Calvin remarks: "As we are called the children of God not only because we resemble Him but because He governs us by His Spirit (because Christ lives and is vigorous in us so as to conform us to His Father's image), so, on the other hand, the devil is said to be the father of those whose understandings he blinds, whose hearts he moves to commit all unrighteousness, and on whom, in short, he acts powerfully and exercises his tyranny."

When our Lord says that "the devil speaks of his own," He does not mean that he "speaks about his own" but that he speaks "out of his own things." It is like, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matt. xii.34.) He speaks out of those things of which he is full.

When our Lord says that the devil "is a liar," I think He refers to the great original lie by which he deceived Eve at the beginning: "Ye shall not surely die." (Gen. iii.4)

When our Lord says here of the devil that "he is a liar and the father of it," I think the most likely and natural meaning is, that "he is the father of every lie." A lie is specially the result and work of the devil. The expression "of it" is undeniably difficult and is variously interpreted.

(a) Some think that it means "he is the father of him:" viz., of the liar-- of everyone that tells a lie. This is the view of Brentius, Bengel, Stier, Hengstenberg, and Alford.

(b) Some think that it means "he is a liar, and his father." This was an error of the Manicheans and justly reprov'd by Augustine. Yet Grotius seems to hold this view and maintains that he who deceived Adam and Eve was not the prince of the devils but one of his messengers! (See 2 Cor. xii.7.) This seems an untenable idea.

Neither of these views is at all natural and satisfactory, and the one I have given--"father of a lie"--seems to me much more probable. It is the

view of Augustine, Theophylact, Rupertus, Calvin, Bucer, Beza, Bullinger, Rollock, Burgon, Wordsworth, and the great majority of all commentators.

Let us note, in this verse, how strongly and directly our Lord rebukes His enemies. There are times when strong condemnation becomes a positive duty, and we must not refrain from it through fear of being charged with severity, personality, and harshness.

Let us note how clearly this verse establishes the personality of the devil. The expression before us can never be explained by those who think he is only a vague evil influence.

Let us note how the fall of angels is recognized and taught by our Lord as one of the great truths that we must believe.

Let us note how murder and lying are specially mentioned as characteristics of the devil. They are sins most opposite to the mind of God, however lightly regarded--and lying especially--by man. An indifference to the sin of lying, whether among old or young, rich or poor, is one of the most unmistakable symptoms of an ungodly condition.

Luther says: "The world is a den of murderers subject to the devil. If we desire to live on earth, we must be content to be guests in it; and to lie in an inn where the host is a rascal, whose house has over the door this sign or shield--'For murder and lies.' For this sign and escutcheon Christ Himself hung over the door of his house when He said, 'He is a murderer and a liar.'"

45.--[*And because I tell you, etc.*] Our Lord in this verse puts in strong contrast His own teaching and the lying suggestions of the devil, and the readiness of the wicked Jews to disbelieve Him and believe the devil. "The reason why you do not believe Me is your thorough dislike to the truth of God. You are genuine children of your father the devil. If I told you things that are false, ye would believe Me. But because I tell you things that are true, you do not believe Me."

We see here how little cause faithful ministers of Christ have to feel surprise at the unbelief of many of their hearers. If they preach the truth, they must make up their minds not to be believed by many. It is only what happened to their Master. "If they have kept my saying, they will keep your's also." (John xv.20.)

46.--[*Which of you convinces me of sin? etc.*] Our Lord in this verse asks two questions to which it was impossible for them to give an answer: "Which of you can reprove or convince Me as an offender concerning sin of any kind? You know that you cannot lay any offense to my charge. Yet if I am free from any charge, and at the same time speak to you nothing but what is right and true, what is the reason why ye do not believe Me?"

Let us note here the perfect spotlessness and innocence of our Lord's character. None but He could ever say, "I have no sin. I challenge anyone to find out any imperfection or fault in Me." Such a complete and perfect Sacrifice and Mediator is just what sinful man needs.

47.--[*He who is of God, etc.*] Our Lord in this verse supplies an answer to His own questions, and conclusively proves the wickedness and ungodliness of His hearers. "He who is a true child of God hears with pleasure, believes and obeys God's words, such as I bring to you from my Father. You, by not hearing, believing, and obeying them, prove plainly that you are not God's children. If you were, you would hear gladly, believe, and obey. Your not hearing proves conclusively that you are what I said-- children, not of God, but of the devil."

Let us note here that the disposition to hear and listen to truth is always a good sign, though not an infallible one, about a person's soul. It is said in another place, "My sheep hear my voice." (John x.16,27.) When we see people obstinately refusing to listen to counsel and attend to the Gospel, we are justified in regarding them as not God's children, not born again, without grace, and needing yet to be converted.

Let us note here, as elsewhere, how carefully our Lord speaks of His teaching as "God's words." It consisted of words and truths which God the Father had commissioned Him to preach and proclaim to man. It was not "His own words" only, but His Father's as well as His own.

Rollock observes that there is no surer mark of an unsanctified nature than dislike to God's Word.

Musculus, Bucer, and others maintain here that the phrase "He who is of God hears God's words" must be confined to God's election, and means "He who was chosen of God from all eternity." I cannot, however, see reason for confining the sense so closely. I prefer to consider "of God" as including not only election, but calling regeneration, adoption, conversion, and sanctification. This is Rollock's view.