

The Gospel of John (57) True Children of Abraham

Introduction:

We have been considering the teaching of John 8:30-47 in this fourth Gospel for the past several weeks. There are many themes that are reflected in these words, which have necessitated that we work through the passage slowly and thoroughly.

We have addressed in some detail the meaning and implications of John 8:36, in which the Lord Jesus declared, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.” If you desire to understand more fully the truth set forth in this verse and taught elsewhere in the Scriptures, particularly regarding the matter of God’s law and grace, we commend to you the classic work of the Puritan, **Samuel Bolton**. The title of his book is *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*.¹ In order to provide a foretaste of this very helpful and thorough treatment of the nature and relation of God’s law to His grace, I included a copy of the table of contents in an appendix to these notes. It is a detailed outline which, if read, will give you a better understanding of the breadth and depth of this matter.

Let us now turn to another entirely different theme that is set forth in the passage under consideration. In this passage we read of our Lord Jesus distinguishing between two groups of people, all of which were physical descendants of Abraham, but only some, those being saved through Jesus Christ, were spiritual descendants of Abraham. This has some important implications for understanding the identity of the true people of God. And so, let us consider that...

I. Our Lord Jesus distinguished between the physical and spiritual children of Abraham.

Let us recall the setting in which our Lord declared these words. He was teaching the gathered crowds in the temple area. In verse 30 we had read that “many” from this large crowd had believed on Him. Not all of these “believers”, however, were actually true converts, who had embraced Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In verse 31 Jesus promised that only those who continued in His word would prove to be His true disciples. And then Jesus gave them this promise in verse 32: “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” This resulted in the reaction of many of the Jews present, for when they heard these words, they understood Jesus saying that they were in bondage and they need to be set free by Him. They protested, which resulted in our Lord’s response to them.

Let us now read verses 33 through 47. In this text I have highlighted several phrases that identify and classify two peoples. Although all of them were physical descendants of their father Abraham, only some of them were the spiritual descendants of Abraham, whose Father was God. All the others, although physical descendants of Abraham, had the devil as their father.

³⁰As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.

³¹Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³²And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

³³They answered Him, “*We are Abraham’s descendants*, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?”

¹ Samuel Bolton, **The True Bounds of Christian Freedom** [The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964 (orig. 1645)], pp. 224. The subject of law and grace is a very difficult and complex matter to understand rightly. In my opinion, it is the most difficult theological subject in the Bible. The referral here to Bolton’s classic work is not an endorsement of every assertion that he made, but we commend it as a most excellent treatment that addresses all the pertinent issues of the subject.

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. ³⁶Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

³⁷“***I know that you are Abraham’s descendants***, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. ³⁸I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with ***your father***.”

³⁹They answered and said to Him, “***Abraham is our father***.”

Jesus said to them, “***If you were Abraham’s children***, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹You do the deeds of ***your father***.”

Then they said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God.”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. ⁴³Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. ⁴⁴You are of ***your father the devil***, and the desires of ***your father*** you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. ⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. ⁴⁶Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? ⁴⁷He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore ***you do not hear, because you are not of God***.”

It is quite clear that the Lord Jesus set forth in our passage the distinction between ***physical Israel*** and ***spiritual Israel***. As Paul would later state, so our Lord set forth here: “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). In other words, they are not all members of spiritual Israel who are born of physical Israel.

This is a very informative passage. If it were properly and widely taught in the churches, it would correct much errant thinking about the identity of the true people of God. Many evangelicals (i.e. dispensationalists) believe wrongly that the “true” people of God are all the physical descendants of Abraham, that is, ethnic Jews.² They say what distinguishes them as the true people of God is their physical birth, which is in the lineage of Abraham. It is claimed since Abraham is their father, they will inherit God’s promises to Abraham and to his physical descendants. They assert as foundational to understanding the Bible that Israel, which is comprised of ethnic Jews, must be understood as distinct from the church, which they say began at Pentecost. They say that the Church is comprised of New Testament Christians only, believers in Jesus Christ. They argue that Israel was a nation entered by physical birth. In contrast and distinction is the church, which is a spiritual people. This distinction of two separate peoples, Israel and the Church, is foundational to their understanding of the Bible and of biblical prophecy. **Charles Ryrie** set forth what he believed was the primary emphasis and essence of dispensationalism, which he promoted and defended:

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalists’ consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.

Here are seven propositions of dispensationalism that are derived from this belief in Israel and the church:

² By the way, I believe what our Lord taught in these verses is also quite devastating to the theology that is held by our paedobaptist friends. They maintain that the physical descendants of believing parents are children belonging to the new covenant in Christ, because God has promised, they claim, His blessing of salvation belongs to the physical descendants of believers. That could not be said of these physical descendants of Abraham in John 8, nor can that be said of physical descendants of believers today.²

1. God has two distinct programs in history, one for Israel and one for the church.
2. The church does not fulfill or take over any of Israel's promises or purposes.
3. The church age is a "mystery," and thus no Old Testament prophecies foresaw it.
4. The present church age is a "parenthesis" or "intercalation" during which God has temporarily suspended His primary purpose with Israel.
5. The church age began with Pentecost and will end at the pretribulation rapture of the church before Christ's second coming.
6. The church, or the body of Christ, consists only of those believers saved between Pentecost and the rapture.
7. The church as the body of Christ, therefore, does not include Old Testament believers.³

To show more clearly this errant teaching, here are a few statements of leading (classical) dispensationalists:

Lewis Sperry Chaffer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, stated, "The distinction between the purpose for Israel and the purpose for the Church is about as important as that which exists between the two testaments." That the Christian now inherits the distinctive Jewish promises is not taught in the Scriptures."

John F. Walvoord, former president of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote, "Dispensational ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) defines the church as a distinct body of saints in the present age having its own purpose and destiny and differing from the saints of the past or future ages."

Charles Ryrie wrote, "This is why the dispensationalist recognizes two purposes of God and insists in maintaining the distinction between Israel and the Church." "The Church is not fulfilling in any sense the promises to Israel."⁴

How do the words of our Lord in the passage before us inform us in addressing these issues? The Lord Jesus made it very clear that only His true disciples from among all of these Jewish people were the true children of Abraham, ones who would inherit God's promises to Abraham their spiritual father. The Lord Jesus declared that physical birth--Jewish ethnicity-- is not what constitutes or distinguishes the true people of God. Only those, who have the same faith that Abraham had, may rightly be called his children to whom God has promised His spiritual blessing. He distinguishes only people of faith as His people. Only those who have the same faith of Abraham are the true children of Abraham, who will inherit everlasting life.

Now it is true that in the Old Testament God had promised great blessing to the physical descendants of Abraham. But when reading the Holy Scriptures one must distinguish between God's promises to Abraham's physical seed and God's promises to Abraham's spiritual seed, for they are distinct from one another. The differences may be seen as follows:

- (1) God's promise to Abraham's physical descendants was that of a physical, earthly, political and temporal kingdom--Israel, which would occupy a physical land--Canaan. This nation of Israel would continue in its favored status before God if and as long as it ordered its national life according to the Mosaic covenant, which set forth God's rule of law over His people.
- (2) God's promise to Abraham's spiritual descendants (who are spiritually circumcised), was that of a spiritual, eternal kingdom--the church, which will one day dwell in the new heavens and earth-- the new Jerusalem, which would be ruled by a spiritual King--Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of David. The church is comprised of all people in history who are redeemed by Jesus Christ.

³ Keith A. Mathison, **Dispensationalism; Rightly Dividing the People of God?** (P&R Publishing, 1995), pp. 17f.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 19.

Now, although the entrance and occupation of Canaan by physical or national Israel was fulfilled due to the unconditional promise of God to the Patriarchs, the continuance of Israel in the land, and the continuance of the physical descendants as the earthly people of God was contingent on the Jews ordering their national life in the Promised Land according to God's law. If and when Israel failed and refused to so order its national life, God would eject this people from the land. And this is what happened historically when Israel was exiled from the Promised Land (722, 587 BC).

But thankfully, the Lord promised that He would save unto Himself a remnant of the physical descendants of Abraham. He promised to cause them to return to their land, which He fulfilled in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. He then sent the Messiah to them to establish the everlasting kingdom that He had promised to David, that one of his descendants would reign forever over the house of Israel. Jesus Christ came and through His life and death and resurrection brought into fulfilment this promised kingdom. Only the spiritual descendants of Abraham, true disciples of Jesus Christ, are granted citizenship in this kingdom. But not only are the spiritual descendants of Abraham comprised of ethnic Jewish people, but ***Gentile believers in Jesus Christ are also regarded as the promised children of Abraham.*** Both Jewish and Gentile believers inherit God's promises to Abraham.

We read this in many places in the New Testament. For example, Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians in the churches of Galatia, declaring them to be the promised children of Abraham who inherit the promises that God gave to Abraham.

²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— ²⁵for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— ²⁶but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ²⁷For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”

²⁸***Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.*** ²⁹But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. ³⁰Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” ³¹So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

When Paul referred to “we, brethren”, he was speaking of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus Christ. We are children of promise to Abraham (and Christ) just as Isaac was a child of promise to Abraham.

Paul declared to the church at Rome that all believers, even Gentile believers, were the promised children of Abraham. After speaking of the blessing that Abraham experienced of being justified by and before God through faith alone, he wrote of all believers, both Jewish and Gentile, that they were all children of Abraham. Here is Romans 4:9ff:

⁹***Does this blessedness*** (free justification) ***then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?*** For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. ¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, ***that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised,*** that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹²and the father of circumcision to

those who not only are of the circumcision, but *who also walk in the steps of the faith* which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

¹³For the promise that he would be *the heir of the world* was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to *all the seed*, not only to those who are of the law, *but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all* ¹⁷(as it is written, “*I have made you a father of many nations*”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; ¹⁸who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so *that he became the father of many nations*, according to what was spoken, “*So shall your descendants be.*”

We can return to Galatians 3:26-29, in which we read the following words written to Gentile Christians:

²⁶For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹*And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

It is wrong to believe that God’s promises to the Jewish people as ethnic Jewish people will be realized in history beyond what they enjoyed under the Old Testament economy. Their place and position in the world as a distinct nation in covenant relationship with God was a temporary relationship that only lasted as long as they had continued to keep that Mosaic covenant that God had established with them at Mount Sinai. They broke that covenant long ago, and what replaced that covenant was the fulfillment of God’s promise of a new covenant in Jesus Christ. God has established that covenant in Christ through His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus Christ is presently enthroned over all of the spiritual offspring of Abraham, those who believe and worship the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ Only those Jews who believe on Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior may now be regarded as citizens of true or spiritual Israel, over which Jesus Christ is King.

Dispensationalists teach that this present Church age is only a parenthesis in God’s true and full purpose in history, that we are presently in a temporary “dispensation” that will only continue until the “rapture” of the church, which they believe to be the first of two stages of the second coming of Christ. After the rapture, they claim, God will again work toward His primary goal in history of blessing the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people. They teach that there will be a restoration of a physical, political nation of Israel, that will become the prominent nation throughout a 1,000 year earthly Jewish millennium, with Jesus Christ the Son of David ruling over them from earthly Jerusalem. But there is no suggestion in the Scriptures that the Lord is going to return to a pre-Christian order of the world, favoring once again a people because of their physical lineage. With the judgment of God coming upon Israel for having broken its Old Testament covenant with God, God established His promised new covenant in Christ by which all people, whether Jewish or Gentile, have the same status as citizens of the kingdom of God. This is an everlasting kingdom. This is the kingdom that God had promised would come to Abraham, King David, and all spiritual descendants of Abraham, those who believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The apostle Paul wrote of the realization of God’s purpose coming to fulfillment in the Church. The Church is not a temporary parenthesis or aside in God’s purpose in history, but it is the final, full, realization of God’s purpose in history. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus which had both Jewish and Gentile members:

⁵ Paul reasoned that ethnic Jews who did not believe on the Lord Jesus were indeed children of Abraham, but whose mother was Hagar, not Sarah, through whom the eternal blessings of salvation were bestowed (cf. Gal. 4:21-31).

¹¹Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—¹²that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, ¹⁵having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

¹⁷And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:11-22)

To teach that God will one day return to a pre-Christian, Old Testament religious and political system is absurd. It would mean that God would once again cause Gentiles in a future millennium to have second class status, once again subordinated to Jewish people based on their physical lineage. It would revert the Gentiles from being “brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13) to their standing as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (v. 12). It would mean that God will once again erect that spiritual “middle wall of separation” between Jews and Gentiles, that “wall” that He had “broken down” through the cross of Christ (v. 14), that He would again cause the Gentiles to be “strangers and foreigners”, no longer “fellow citizens with the (Jewish) saints.” It is theological nonsense. God does not go backward in history to a previous, temporary and failed system of dealing with the people of the world. Jesus Christ brought an end to all that formerly existed and a new and living way was opened to all the world. This is what God had promised to Abraham, that he would be the father of many nations.

Let us now consider more directly...

II. The details of our passage (8:37-47)

In **verse 37** the Lord acknowledged that these unbelieving people before Him were the physical offspring of Abraham. We read, ***“I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.”*** Our Lord declared to these people that though they had been born in a place and position of privilege, being the physical offspring of Abraham, they were spiritually bankrupt and were opposed to the purpose of God in Christ. The Lord indicated that their outward and physical lineage did not bring them into favor with God. A true relationship with God could only be received through believing on Him, even as they received and responded to His words.

Now their intention to kill Jesus had not been overtly manifested before the people. Yes, the Jewish leaders had repeatedly counselled with one another on how to destroy Jesus, but the people at large had been ignorant of their desires and intentions. When Jesus confronted them, ***“you seek to kill Me”***, the common people must have thought that Jesus was delusional, but the Jewish leaders probably felt that they had been exposed and condemned for their murderous intentions.

What the Lord was suggesting in this verse, which He would shortly state more directly, was that their attitudes and desires were very unlike Abraham whom they claimed to be their “father.” His word had no place in them. In other words, they had no interest in knowing, no desire to know, and no intention to know the meaning and implications of His words that He had been proclaiming to the people.

Now, again, these people claimed to be the people of God, ones to whom the favor of God belonged. God was their Father, or so they thought. But their true condition was one of spiritual bankruptcy. This was

betrayed in their absence of interest and desire to know the word of God that He has made known through His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus said to them, “but you seek to kill Me, *because* My word has no place in you.” Apart from the knowledge of the truth of the Holy Scriptures and the faith and desire to be conformed to it, the sin that indwells us would erupt in the most hideous form of sinning against God. The Word of God is a preservative against all forms of hatred and violence, bigotry and malice.

We see from our lord’s words that the Holy Scripture, the written Word of God, will only be transformative, *if it is read and understood*. And yet, these men would have claimed that they loved the Holy Scriptures and that they studiously studied them. But they did not see Christ or learn of Christ through them, and therefore the Scriptures had brought no spiritual change or benefit to them. Here we see, therefore, *the great importance to understand the Word of God that we are to be reading regularly*.

Charles Spurgeon wrote of the need of understanding while reading the Scriptures. He wrote of this need in contrast to the Jewish leaders who failed to consider our Lord’s words.

The scribes and Pharisees were great readers of the law. They studied the sacred books continually, pouring over each word and letter. They made notes of very little importance, as to which the middle verse of the entire Old Testament, which verse was half-way to the middle, and how many times such a word occurred, and the size of the letter, and its particular position. They have left a mass of notes upon the mere words of Holy Scripture...

Unless we understand what we read we have not read it; the heart of the reading is absent. We commonly condemn the Romanists for keeping daily service in the Latin tongue; yet it might as well be in the Latin language as in any other tongue if it is not understood by the people. Some comfort themselves with the idea that they have done a good action when they have read a chapter, into the meaning of which they have not entered at all; but does not nature herself reject this as a mere superstition... If you had a New Testament in Greek it would be very Greek to some of you, but it would do you as much good to look at *that* as it does to look at the English New testament unless you read with an understanding heart.⁶

And so, the Word of God will only be transformative, if it is read and understood. But it will only be read and understood, *if it is loved supremely*. This is one of the sure signs of conversion, of new life in Jesus Christ. I have often quoted my dear friend who is now with the Lord—Doug Moore. He was converted in a southern revival meeting when he was a young man. But after the meeting was over, the preacher did not see Doug in church for several weeks. He went to his home and there learned Doug had been sick. But when the pastor entered his home, he found Doug reading the Holy Scriptures, desiring and delighting to understand its contents. The pastor knew that he would be okay. One evidence of being a true Christian is love for God’s holy, written Word.

J. C. Ryle wrote of the love for the Word of God as an evidence of the new birth.

There never was a man or woman truly converted, from one end of the world to the other, who did not love the revealed will of God. Just as a child born into the world desires naturally the milk provided for its nourishment, so does a soul “born again” desire the sincere milk of the Word. This is a common mark of all the children of God—they “delight in the law of the Lord” (Psalm 1:2).

Show me a person who despises Bible reading, or thinks little of Bible preaching, and I hold it to be a certain fact that he is not yet “born again.” He may be zealous about forms and ceremonies. He may be diligent in attending sacraments and daily services. But if these things are more precious to him than the Bible, I cannot think he is a converted man. Tell me what the Bible is to a man, and I will generally tell you what he is. This is the pulse to try (test)—this is the barometer to look at—if we would know the state of the heart. I have no notion of the Spirit dwelling in a man and not giving clear evidence of His presence. And I believe it to be a signal evidence of the Spirit’s presence when the Word is really precious to a man’s soul...

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, **How to Read the Bible** (Gospel Mission Press, 1980), pp.1, 3, 4.

Love to the Word appears preeminently in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He read it publically. He quoted it continually. He expounded it frequently. He advised the Jews to “search” it. He used it as His weapon to resist the devil. He said repeatedly, “The Scripture must be fulfilled.” Almost the last thing He did was “to open the understanding of His disciples, that they might understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Ah! Reader, that man can be no true servant of Christ, who has not something of his Master’s mind and feeling toward the Bible.⁷

Now in **verse 38** Jesus went on to contrast His hearers with Himself. We read our Lord’s words, ***“I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.”*** Back in John 8:29, Jesus spoke of His intimate relationship with His Father. There Jesus said, “And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.” Here in verse 38 Jesus declared that the source of His message was His Father. He taught what His Father had taught Him to teach the people. Later in John 12 we read our Lord stating, “For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak” (John 12:49). All that the Lord Jesus taught, had been given to Him by His Father to communicate to His people.

If the Jews are falsely claiming Abraham as their father, Jesus is rightly claiming God as His: He is passing on what He has seen in His Father’s presence (i.e. He always acts like His Father: cf. 3:11-13, 34; 5:19ff; 6:46). Jesus’ conduct displays His true paternity. Sadly, the same is true of the Jews: they do what they have heard from their father—only they have not yet grasped that Jesus is referring to the devil himself (v. 44).⁸

We next consider **verses 39** through **41a** together. Those verses read:

³⁹They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹You do the deeds of your father.”

The Jews re-assert what they had claimed earlier, that Abraham was their father. Although the Lord had affirmed that they were Abraham’s descendants (v. 37), here He challenges their legitimacy to make that claim. If they were Abraham’s true children, that is, his spiritual descendants, they would exhibit the same values, desires, and delights that Abraham had exhibited.

Abraham obeyed God’s voice and followed His requirements, commandments, decrees and laws (Gen. 26:5). By contrast, the rising antipathy Jesus’ interlocutors display to the one who has passed on the truth that he heard from God can only mean that, unlike Abraham, they have no real heart for God, no sensitivity to His voice. Their ‘father’ must therefore be someone else.⁹

Their response is in **verse 41b**, which reads, ***“Then they said to Him, ‘We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God.’”*** This was their reaction to the charge of Jesus that they were not “Abraham’s children” (v. 39). Jesus had accused them of being illegitimate children of Abraham—their conduct proved His charge. They claimed forthrightly that they were not illegitimate children. They asserted that God was their Father.

Now some have suggested that this response was a not so subtle charge and insult of Jesus, in that they had heard or thought that Jesus had been born illegitimately. This was due to misunderstanding and the

⁷ J. C. Ryle, **How Readest Thou?** (Charles Nolan Publishers, n.d.), pp. 42f.

⁸ Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 351.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

twisted explanation of the events surrounding Jesus' natural birth. Some commentators deny that these Jews were making this charge.¹⁰ Others, however, make it to be a possibility on the part of these Jews.

It is not at all impossible that the Jews are alluding to the irregularities connected with Jesus' birth. From their perspective, He displays considerable cheek to talk about paternity: *they* were not born of fornication (wink, wink). If this is a correct reading, then it is a further instance of Johanine irony, irony which extends beyond the virginal conception of Christ to the question of His ultimate origin in the Father (1:1-18; 3:17).¹¹

If Jesus would deny them the claim that Abraham was their father, they would go one more step, by declaring that God was their Father. The Jews believed God as the Father in the times of the Old Testament. But God as Father was viewed in His relationship to Israel as a nation, not as individual Israelites. God was Father due to creation (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 64:8; Jer. 3:4). God was Father in His covenant relationship with Israel (Jer. 3:19; Mal. 2:10). God was Father in His kingship over the nation (Isa. 63:16; Psa. 89:27; 2 Sam. 7:14).

“Jesus' description of His adversaries as children of an alien father would be to their minds the most offensive accusation He could advance against them. It is quite possible, therefore, to interpret the statement by the Jews as an argumentative maneuver; Jesus can try to disassociate them from Abraham, but He certainly cannot disassociate them from God.”¹²

But our Lord would not grant them this claim. We read in **verse 42**, ***“Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me.’”***

Here we see that a quality of a true child of God is love for the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ***“If God were your Father, you would love Me.”*** “Jesus can only conclude that if the Jews do not enthusiastically embrace Him and love Him, it must be because they themselves do not know the Father.”¹³

Our Lord reasoned that those who know God as Father would love Him, for He declared, ***“for I proceeded forth and came from God.”*** Jesus was referring to His incarnation as the eternal Son of God who came forth from His Father to assume His human nature and become Jesus of Nazareth. There is such a close connection between Jesus Christ as the Son of God His Father that you cannot claim to know God as Father unless you know and love Jesus Christ as His Son.

Salvation belongs only to those who love the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter wrote of Christians' love for Christ: “Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). If a man does not love the Lord Jesus, God is not His Father. He does not know God. He does not have salvation. Paul wrote, “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22). Only those who love Jesus Christ truly love God the Father, for Jesus Christ was sent to us by the Father.

The Lord Jesus then declared forthrightly their utter lost condition, ones who were estranged from God, whose father was the devil. We read in **verses 43** through **47**:

⁴³Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. ⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. ⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do

¹⁰ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 418.

¹¹ Carson, p. 352.

¹² Klink, p. 418.

¹³ Carson, p. 352.

not believe Me. ⁴⁶Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?
⁴⁷He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."

The contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil could not be more sharply defined and described.

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" (John Calvin)

The Lord Jesus spoke of the devil. He stated that the devil rules over his people, that their own sinful desires are his desires. The devil was a murderer from the beginning, in that he was instrumental in murdering the entire human race through enticing Adam to sin. And certainly he was inciting the first recorded murder of Cain rising up to kill his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8). The devil is malicious, having no desire for the good of anyone, but he is only evil, always evil.

Matthew Henry wrote of this charge of our Lord:

If they were not God's children, they were the devil's, for God and Satan divide the world of mankind; the devil is therefore said to work in the children of disobedience (Eph. 2:2). All wicked people are the devil's children, children of Belial (2 Cor. 6:15), the serpent's seed (Gen. 3:15), children of the wicked one (Matt. 13:38). They partake of his nature, bear his image, obey his commands, and follow his example. Idolaters said to a stock, "Thou art our father" (Jer. 2:27). This is a high charge, and sounds very harsh and horrid, that any of the children of men, especially the church's children, should be called children of the devil, and therefore our Saviour fully proves it.

1. By a general argument: The lusts of your father you will do. (1) "You do the devil's lusts, the lusts which he would have you to fulfil; you gratify and please him, and comply with his temptation, and are led captive by him at his will: nay, you do those lusts which the devil himself fulfils." Fleshly lusts and worldly lusts the devil tempts men to; but, being a spirit, he cannot fulfil them himself. The peculiar lusts of the devil are spiritual wickedness; the lusts of the intellectual powers, and their corrupt reasonings; pride and envy, and wrath and malice; enmity to that which is good, and enticing others to that which is evil; these are lusts which the devil fulfils, and those who are under the dominion of these lusts resemble the devil, as the child does the parent. The more there is of contemplation, and contrivance, and secret complacency, in sin, the more it resembles the lusts of the devil. (2) You will do the devil's lusts. The more there is of the will in these lusts, the more there is of the devil in them. When sin is committed of choice and not by surprise, with pleasure and not with reluctance, when it is persisted in with a daring presumption and a desperate resolution, like theirs that said, We have loved strangers and after them we will go, then the sinner will do the devil's lusts. "The lusts of your father you delight to do."¹⁴

J. C. Ryle wrote of him:

There is a devil! We have a mighty invisible enemy always near us,—one who never slumbers and never sleeps,—one who is about our path and about our bed, and spies out all our ways, and will never leave us till we die.—He is a murderer! His great aim and object is to ruin us forever and kill our souls. To destroy, to rob us of eternal life, to bring us down to the second death in hell, are the things for which he is unceasingly working. He is ever going about, seeking whom he may devour.—He is a liar! He is

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, **Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible**, vol. 4 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 999.

continually trying to deceive us by false representations, just as he deceived Eve in the beginning. He is always telling us that good is evil and evil is good,--truth is falsehood and falsehood truth,--the broad way good and the narrow way bad. Millions are led captive by his deceit, and follow him, both rich and poor, both high and low, both learned and unlearned. Lies are his choicest weapons. By lies he slays many.¹⁵

The Lord Jesus could call upon His own holy life to give weight to His words. He posed the question, “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” There was no one that spoke up, for no one could justly testify of Jesus sinning against His Father. And then the Lord challenged them as to why they failed to believe on Him. We read in **verse 46**, “*And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?*” Jesus was not enquiring why they did not believe. He was challenging them to reflect upon themselves why they refused to believe on Him.

Jesus then answered His own question which challenged them. In **verse 47** we read, “*He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.*” Jesus spoke of both their unwillingness and their inability to “hear” His words. They could not hear the words of God the Father. They could not hear the words of Jesus, so as to understand and believe them.

Only a work of God’s sovereign grace would bring any of them to change their minds regarding the identity of Jesus. Only a work of God’s sovereign grace would bring any of them to love the Lord Jesus, believe on Him as their Savior, and submit to Him as their Lord.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.
The Lord be with you all. (2 Thess. 3:16)

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 125.

Appendix
The True Bounds of Christian Freedom¹⁶
by Samuel Bolton

I. True Christian Freedom

- The nature of Christian freedom
- The quality of Christian freedom
- The branches of Christian freedom

- 1. Freedom in its negative aspects
 - (i) Freedom from satan
 - (ii) Freedom from sin
 - (iii) Freedom from the law
 - (a) Freedom from the law as a covenant
 - (b) Freedom from the curses of the law
 - Five reasons why the law cannot condemn the believer
 - True and false appeals from the court of the law
 - (c) Freedom from the accusations of the law
 - (d) Freedom from the rigour of the law
 - (iv) Freedom from obedience to men
 - (v) Freedom from death
 - (vi) Freedom from the grave
- 2. Freedom in its positive aspects

II. The moral law a rule of obedience

- Query 1: Are Christians freed from the moral law as a rule of obedience?"
 - The Scriptural use of the word 'law'
- Proposition 1: The law remains as a rule of walking for the people of God
 - The testimony of Reformed confessions
 - The testimony of the New Testament
- Five proofs of the binding nature of the law
- Five further arguments for obedience to the law
- Application:
 - (i) Against papists
 - (ii) Against antinomians
 - (iii) To all believers

III. Law and grace

- Proposition 2: The law is not incompatible with grace
 - Seven purposes for which the law was given
 - Five reasons why the law is not incompatible with grace
 - Objections answered:
 - (i) That the law as a covenant is incompatible with grace
 - (ii) That the law is not the covenant of grace, nor a third covenant and must therefore be a covenant of works
 - (iii) That as the covenants of law and of grace are opposites, the law cannot be linked to grace

IV. Chastisements for sin

- Query 2: Are Christians freed from all punishments and chastisements for sin?
 - Does chastisement pertain to the Old Testament only?
 - New Testament teaching about chastisement

¹⁶ The full text may be downloaded at
<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/bolton/The%20True%20Bounds%20of%20Christian%20Freedom%20-%20Samuel%20Bolton.pdf>

- Various cavils answered
- Main arguments against chastisement stated and answered
- Five reasons why God chastens people
- Concluding considerations

V. Performance of duty

- Query 3: If a believer is under the moral law as a rule of duty, is his liberty in Christ infringed?
 - Three mistakes with regard to the performance of duty
 - (i) The case of such as wait for the Spirit to move them to obedience
 - (ii) The case of such as think they are to do nothing else but pray
 - (iii) The case of such as think that they are to perform duty because their own hearts incline them in it
 - Four ways in which the believer is free from duty
 - Nine differences between legal obedience and evangelical obedience
 - Delight in duty

VI. Partial bondage

- Query 4: Can Christ's freemen sin themselves into bondage again?
 - Two kinds of bondage:
 1. Universal bondage
 2. Partial bondage
 - (i) A bondage in respect to comfort
 - The five-fold peace of a Christian man
 - (ii) A bondage in respect of the manner of obedience

VII. Obedience for the sake of reward

- Query 5: May Christ's freemen perform duties for the sake of reward?
 - Three opinions respected this stated and examined.
 - What is meant by rewards
 - What is meant by the eyeing of rewards
 - Is the eyeing of rewards an infringement of Christian liberty?
 1. With reference to temporal blessings
 2. With reference to spiritual benefits
 3. With reference to eternal rewards
 - (i) The lawfulness of it
 - (ii) The necessity of it

VIII. Obedience to men

- Query 6: Are Christians freed from obedience to men?
 - Two kinds of subjection
 - Obedience to the civil magistrate

IX. The application to believers and unbelievers

- The miserable bondage of the unbeliever
 - (i) To sin
 - (ii) To satan
 - (iii) To the law of God
- The duty of the believer
 - (i) To maintain Christian liberty
 - (ii) Not to abuse Christian liberty

Appendix: Historical background to the treatise
