

# SERMONS

BY THE

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*RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.*

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## SERMON III.

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### *ON DIVINE GRACE AND HUMAN AGENCY.*

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PHIL. ii. 12, 13.

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

THE controversy about grace and free agency has been one of the most common and most lasting in the Church. The two doctrines have been supposed incompatible; for if it is God who, of his mere grace, works in us to will and to do, to what purpose, say some persons, is it to exhort man to work out his own salvation? And if, on the other hand, man has power to act freely, why, it is asked, do you assert his general inability, and maintain his whole sufficiency to depend upon the good pleasure of God? A difficulty there certainly is in holding both these doctrines in such a manner as not to contradict each other; and it is a difficulty which perhaps, in the present infirm state of human nature, may never be completely removed.

The Scripture, we may observe, never attempts, either to satisfy mere curiosity, or to answer metaphysical questions. Without aiming to show that the doctrines do not clash, or to explain the precise way in which they are to be reconciled, the sacred writers assert both. As though man were possessed of the most perfect free will, they exhort, rebuke, command, entreat, and promise; treat him as responsible, or condemn him as guilty. On the other hand, as though he possessed no power at all, they ascribe his whole power, wisdom, goodness, and salvation to the mere grace of God working in him. Nay, not only do they not attempt to reconcile these doctrines, but, taking for granted their perfect compatibility, they even unite and connect them. They speak of them at the same time, and in the same place: they ground one upon the other. Thus our Saviour says, “Abide in me, and I in you.” And, in my text, the Apostle makes the grace of God the very foundation for our exertion — “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

In like manner will every truly humble Christian, who acts rather than disputes, unite, in his practice, these two doctrines. He will be as diligent and active in his exertions—he will as sincerely condemn his faults, and own his responsibility for them—as though man were endued with the highest and most extensive powers. At the same time, he will be as humble, as fervent in prayer for Divine assistance, as thankful to God for any pro-

gress in grace, as though man were, in the fullest sense of the word, incapable of action. It has, on the contrary, been the error of some, who have perplexed themselves with speculation, rather than employed themselves in religious practice, and the crime of others, who have sought to indulge either their pride or their sloth, to separate what the Apostles have united. Holding one doctrine in its most rigid and absolute sense, they have either totally denied the other, or so explained it away as to deprive it of all practical influence.

If either doctrine had been revealed in Scripture without the other, it is evident there would have been a set of duties on the part of man in some measure different from what are now required of him. If God, for instance, had merely proclaimed his own grace without issuing any commands to mankind, it would have been our duty to have used no efforts: our case would then have resembled that of the Israelites upon the banks of the Red Sea, when the injunction given to them was;—“Fear ye not: stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will show you this day; for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.”—If, again, practical exhortations had been issued without any revelation of the grace of God, it would have been our duty to encourage ourselves to exertion with such arguments as the Philistines used when the ark of God was brought into the camp of Israel. “And the Philistines were afraid. And they said, Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Quit yourselves like men, and fight.” But, on the other hand, unite the two doctrines, and the sentiments and feelings of a Christian become like those of Hezekiah, when he gathered the captains of war together, and “spake comfortably to them, saying; Be strong and courageous: be not afraid or dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him: with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles,”

It is, then, the union of the two doctrines which tends to form the peculiar character of a Christian. Each serves to illustrate and strengthen the other; and if either be removed, not only are those duties and graces injured and destroyed which immediately result from that, but those also which appear to be derived wholly from the other. But this point I hope more fully to establish in the following discourse.

I. The grace of God, then, so far from being designed to relax or supersede our own efforts, tends to quicken our diligence. “Work out,” says the Apostle, “your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which

worketh in you.”— If we advert to the context, we shall find the argument to be of this nature. The Apostle, after having spent some time with the Philippians, and having rejoiced in the contemplation of their excellencies, had lately left them. With the tenderest affection for them, and a jealousy which that affection naturally inspired, he exhorts them to continue to conduct themselves, during his absence, in the same upright manner as when he was present with them. He reminds them, that, though *he* was absent, yet there was still present with them a Superintendent of their conduct, whom they should more fear to offend than the Apostle Paul. “Wherefore (he says) my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not in my presence only, so now, much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” Now a stronger or more appropriate argument the Apostle could not have used. The love which the Philippians felt for their pastor was a powerful motive with them to watch over their conduct. Unwilling, and even afraid to grieve him, they attended with scrupulous exactness to the kind instructions and admonitions which he gave them. With how much more solicitude then, nay, with what “fear and trembling,” he argues, ought they to “work out their salvation,” since it was God whom they resisted if they did not! It was God who by his Spirit admonished them; it was God who infused into them desires, which they should be afraid of stifling; it was God who gave them power “to do,” which power they should therefore be afraid to waste or abuse. Thus, the very grace of God in “working in us, not only to do, but even to will,” is made the foundation of our “working out our own salvation.” Upon this principle, we ought to blame, not our weakness, but our perverseness, if we are not saved. We should fear, nay, we should “tremble” at the thought of displeasing God by neglecting his gracious admonitions and quenching his Holy Spirit.

II. The grace of God has a tendency not merely to increase the efforts of man, but to direct them in a right channel.—Were man left to his own endeavours, he would combat his spiritual enemies with carnal weapons alone. He would employ, perhaps, the arguments of the ancient philosophers, encourage himself by the imperfect or corrupt motives which they used, and strengthen himself by the means which they employed. Pride would be made the chief instrument of repressing other vices: vanity and self-love would exclude from his breast other passions: the utility of virtue to his health, to his convenience, to his reputation, and to his comfort, would be the exclusive source whence arguments would be drawn, and means furnished for its acquirement. But not such is the Christian armour. From the grace of God the real Christian derives his resources. This directs the mode of his exertions: this teaches him, that, as all the benefit is derived

from God, he must seek all from God, and hope to accomplish his end by seeking it in the way which God has appointed. This explains the nature of Christian diligence. I say, *Christian* diligence; for it is not mere diligence which is required of us, but diligence exerted in a Christian manner.—To distinguish, for instance, between the two cases: The person who depends upon his own endeavours will not be solicitous to pray to God, but will depend chiefly upon his own resolutions, and the unassisted powers of his mind. But the man relying upon the grace of God will consider prayer as one of the principal instruments of success. He will not indeed neglect other means, but prayer will hold the first place in his esteem. Hence he will be active, constant, and earnest in pouring out his heart before God, in lamenting to him his weakness, and begging aid at his hands. In like manner, the reading of the word of God, neglected or perverted by the first class, will be diligently practised by him who considers that it is God only who “works in us to will and to do.” He will read it, not merely to acquire some new ideas of Christian doctrine, not merely to enlighten his understanding; but, knowing that God blesses the diligent inquirer by the teaching of his Holy Spirit, and the application of his word to the conscience, he will read with expectation of profit, though the truths and arguments he meets with are already familiar to his mind.—Thus the means of grace which God has been pleased to appoint for our edification will be conscientiously used by a real Christian; because it is in the use of these means he chiefly expects that the grace of God will be communicated. In all his endeavours, this grace will be the principal object of pursuit. Others employ the appointed means solely on account of their proper force; and they look no further than their natural effect, independent of the grace of God working in them. But the Christian looks beyond this, and seeks for the power of God to be exerted through them. Thus, sensible of their value, he feels also the necessity of *caution*. Think not that he says in his heart, “It is God only who works in me, and therefore I need not be anxious about my success.” His language is, Since it is God who alone worketh in his people—since he blesses only a diligent use of the appointed means—since he refuses his Spirit to the slothful and profane—it becomes us to beware lest any man “fail of the grace of God”—lest, by our negligence, we forfeit his blessing—lest, by our sloth, we provoke him to leave us to the natural hardness and corruption of our hearts.

III. The belief of the grace of God also implants *humility* in the mind.—He who laboured diligently and successfully in the work of the Lord might, perhaps, be in danger of being puffed up by it, if the knowledge of the Source of his success had no tendency to repress boasting and pride. This knowledge secures his humility. For what has he, that he has not received?

Has he been active—who gave him that activity? Has he been successful—who is the Author of success? Has he persevered?—it is God who hath kept him from falling. Hence the Apostle, speaking of his labour in the Church, adds, in a truly Christian spirit, “I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was in me.” Though we are enabled to serve God, yet no praise is due to man on account of it. All boasting is utterly excluded. It is God who wrought in us “to will as well as to do.” Nothing could be claimed by us as a reward of merit or debt of justice, and, therefore, it is by the grace of God that we are what we are.

IV. In like manner, a persuasion of the grace of God has a tendency to produce *gratitude*.—He who esteems himself indebted to his own prudence, wisdom, and resolution alone, for the safety of his state, will feel little disposition to thanksgiving and praise. But he who has known and experienced the grace of God in Christ Jesus, will be qualified and disposed to offer up the most grateful thanks to God Almighty. Taught to ascribe every holy desire to his influence, and every victory over sin to his grace, under what obligations will he not esteem himself to his Preserver and Benefactor? “It was his kind hand,” he will say, “which protected me from the power of sin. To myself I can ascribe nothing but perverseness, sloth, and folly. My part has too often been to resist his holy influence, and to turn from the path of his commandments. If, therefore, I have been quickened and strengthened; if I have been brought back when I wandered; if I have been supported when in danger of falling; to the Lord’s goodness I would ascribe it, and bless his holy name.” Thus the saints of old ascribed all the glory and praise to God. “Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name, O Lord, be the praise!” “If the Lord himself had not been on our side when men rose up against us, it had not failed but we had been put to silence.” Thus, also, the saints in heaven ascribe the whole glory of their salvation to God, “saying, with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever.” And, surely, if this life is to be considered as a school of preparation for another world, in which we are to honour and serve God with our whole heart, and soul, and strength; in no way can we more effectually promote the end of our being, than by calling to mind his benefits, who “forgiveth all our iniquities, who healeth all our diseases, who redeemeth our life from destruction, who crowneth us with loving-kindness and tender mercies.”

V. I add, lastly, that the knowledge of the grace of God has a powerful tendency to *encourage* us in our exertions.—Were we commanded only to work out our own salvation: were we merely required to be holy, and taught that God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity; the very commands and motives to obedience might, perhaps, have an effect directly opposite to their intention. Man, full of pride and conceit when he undertakes a work, becomes irresolute, timid, and despairing when he finds his success disproportionate to his labours. And, therefore, in the great work of salvation, in which so many difficulties unite, and often seem to increase at every step, he requires great encouragement: and such encouragement the Gospel bestows. When a person begins in sincerity to serve God, he will dwell chiefly upon the duties and powers of man; but when he has had much experience of his own heart, he will fix his attention and rest his hopes upon the grace of God. Novelty, terror, and hope, may combine, for a time, to make him earnest “to work out his salvation;” but soon these will cease to affect the mind. Then the only resource (but, blessed be God, it is both a sure and abiding resource) is in the grace of God. Here is the encouragement of a Christian. We labour, not from any high opinion of our own powers, but because we trust in that God who inspires us with desire, and whose grace and goodness are immeasurably great, and who has promised not to forsake those who call upon him. Thus, with the Psalmist, when the Lord says, “Seek ye my face,” our hearts reply, “Thy face, Lord, will we seek.”

In these particulars, my brethren, we see the genuine effect of a reliance upon the grace of God; we see that it does not relax our endeavours. We are required to use them with as much earnestness as if they were available of themselves with God, and as if our salvation depended solely upon them. Nor is this all. The doctrine of the grace of God has a powerful effect upon them. It encourages, and it increases them: at the same time, it gives them their proper direction; it prevents their being derived from false principles or tending to corrupt ends; it purifies them from pride, and sanctifies them by humility and gratitude. In fine, it associates with them those peculiar dispositions which it was the design of the Gospel to implant in man.

Let me conclude this subject with a few suitable reflections.

1. I would call upon you then, my brethren, to *acknowledge the goodness of God in providing for the salvation of man*.—Behold what help he has afforded you! Even He himself “worketh in you to will and to do.” No one, therefore, has a right to allege his inability as an excuse for him. It is true, that God must do all things in us; that he must “work in us to will, as well as to do;” but what is the true inference from this fact? “Therefore work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Be afraid of refusing the

calls and invitations of God, and of despising his agency on the soul. He calls you, generally, by his word; and if you feel any convictions of guilt, or desires after the knowledge and favour of God, in these instances he calls you more particularly by the actings of his Spirit upon your conscience. Do not then slight these admonitions. Do not reject the offers of Almighty God. Receive them as you ought, "with fear and trembling." At the same time, let these offers, these most gracious offers of Divine help, be the greatest encouragement to your souls. "With him you can do all things." Depend upon his aid. Seek it in the way he has appointed. Know that your salvation is not only of God, but that the manner of attaining it is so appointed as to manifest it to be wholly of him. It is a way of dependence, of faith, of ascribing to God all the glory, of labouring in the strength of the Lord, of ascribing to him all the praise. It is a way of humiliation on man's part, but of exaltation on that of God. Let it be your care, therefore, to derive all your hope and encouragement from God, and to consecrate all your endeavours to his glory.

Lastly, *Charge not God with the consequences of your own perverseness.*—Say not, that he refuses his aid, and therefore you can do nothing; but inquire seriously, whether you have not been guilty of resisting his motions, and opposing his intentions. He has "wrought in you to will and to do;" but have you therefore "wrought out your salvation with fear and trembling?" Has the sense of this unspeakable favour on God's part made you humble and earnest to do his will, and jealous of yourself lest you should grieve him? Here, perhaps, you may plead guilty. Say not, then, that God does not vouchsafe you his grace; but, rather, humble yourself before him for your past neglect. When God works in you "to will," it is often by strong convictions of past unworthiness and unfruitfulness. These you may now have, and, perhaps, be resisting them. God, therefore, may be working in you, though you consider it not, and are even opposing his gracious intentions. What you want may be humility and repentance; and these God may be teaching you, though you are too dull of understanding to perceive the movements of his hand. Pray, therefore, to God, and humble yourself before him, and he will lift you up. And be assured, that, at the last day, all our proud and presumptuous thoughts will vanish before him: that, on the one hand, God will appear to have been both just and merciful to his creatures; and, on the other, the destruction of men will clearly appear to have proceeded wholly from themselves, and to be the natural and just effect of their own transgressions.