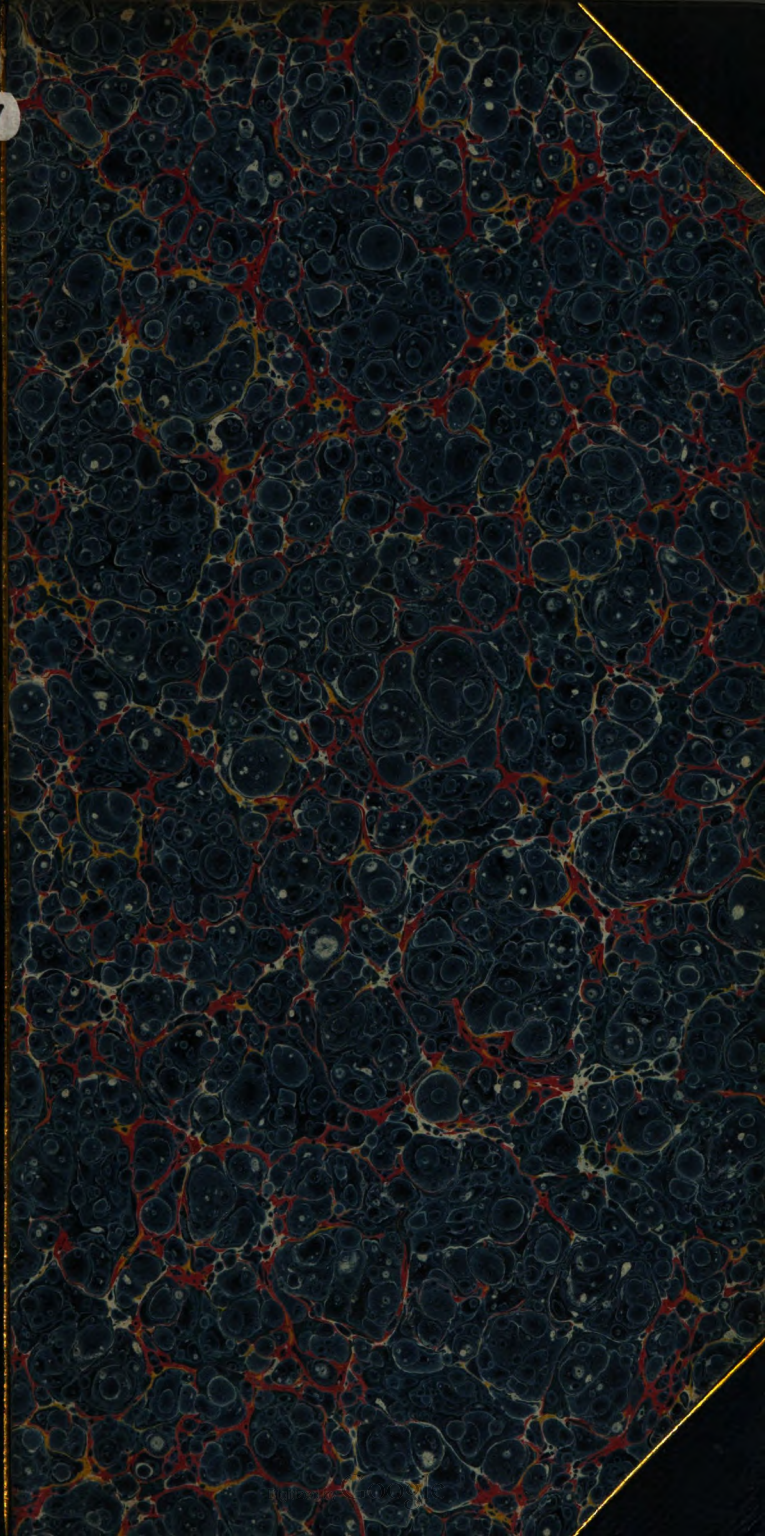


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SERMON,

DELIVERED MARCH 22, 1837, AT THE

ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION

OF THE

REV. MONTGOMERY T. GOODALE,

AS PASTOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN AMSTERDAM VILLAGE.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D.D.

MINISTER OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION IN ALBANY.

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1837.



ADVERTISEMENT.

Whoever reads this Sermon must be struck with the fact that it has little to do with the occasion on which it was preached. The reason is somewhat singular. The author having been apprized that it might probably devolve upon him to preach on the occasion, had a sermon prepared with reference to it; but almost at the very moment when the sermon was needed, it was found to be missing, and its fate is involved in obscurity to this hour. This obliged him at the very last moment to select a sermon almost at random; and this was taken as having some remote bearing on the occasion, and as being perhaps not inapplicable to the general state of the times. This may do as a reason for preaching it, but what is the reason for printing? Why simply that the urgent and repeated request of the good people to whom it was addressed in connexion with their respected pastor, has prevailed over the author's better judgment; but if the sermon, by being printed, should contribute at all to their edification or profit, he will rejoice in having yielded his scruples to their solicitations.

SERMON.

PHILIPPIANS II. 12, 13.

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

There is a tendency in human nature to extremes, and in nothing is it more strikingly manifested than in religion. The Bible is an intelligible book; and nearly all the difficulties which men profess to find in it, are difficulties of their own creation. The way of life, which it exhibits, is indeed narrow, but it is plain; and no one ever doubts this, who contemplates it with the docility of a little child. The system of truth which it inculcates is consistent, is beautiful: but, in the natural tendency of the mind to rush to extremes, it has not unfrequently been distorted and stripped of all its glory. It is to this tendency, no doubt, in connexion with the positive aversion of the heart to God's truth, that we are to trace the numerous, and in many instances, monstrous, systems of error, that have sprung up in different ages of the church, and been baptized into the name of Christianity.

There is no part of the Christian system that has not, at some period, been sadly misrepresented by its professed friends; and if there be any one part which has shared a harder lot in this respect than any other, it is that, I imagine, to which our text introduces us. It is my design, in the present discourse, to endeavour to establish you in God's truth in relation to this subject, on the one hand, and to put you on your guard against two common and opposite errors, on the other. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

We will contemplate,

I., *The two things which the text represents as joined together in the economy of our salvation:*

II. *The fact that there is a disposition among mankind to separate these two things :*

III. *The grounds of this disposition :*

IV. *The evil effects of indulging it.*

I. I am, first, to call your attention to the *two things which the text represents as joined together in the economy of our salvation.* They are works and grace ; or divine and human agency. "Work out your own salvation." "It is God that worketh in you."

Man is active in his own salvation. The text contains a direct command that he *should* be so ; and the Bible every where asserts that he *is* so.

Do you ask what we are to understand by man's being active in the work of his salvation ? I reply by asking, what you understand by man's being active in the pursuit of any other object ? You surely do not mean that he composes himself to a state of listlessness and goes to sleep. You mean that he brings his faculties into exercise ; the power of reflection, the power of choice, all those powers which can be legitimately brought to bear on the object he has in view. If any great object were presented to you as an object of pursuit, you might indeed be at loss from your limited knowledge of it, in what manner precisely your faculties should be employed, but you surely could not hesitate on the question whether they were to be employed at all. You would conclude at once that, in some way or other, you must set yourself at work. The same is true in respect to your salvation. Here is an object proposed for your attainment ; and your faculties are to come into exercise just as they are in the pursuit of any other object ; that is, you are to read and hear,—to think, and choose, and desire ; these various exercises of the faculties being modified only by the character of the object you are pursuing, and the directions which God has given you in his word.

From first to last, then, the sinner, in the work of his salvation, is recognised as a moral agent. Every promise, every threatening, every command that the Bible exhibits, takes this for granted. He is active in his conviction ; active in his conversion ; active in his sanctification ; and he *will be* active in all the progress that he makes from glory to glory, through eternity.

But while man works in his own salvation, so also does *God* :

“it is God that worketh in you.” This is the other thing referred to in the text.

It is hardly necessary to say that, while the Bible throughout recognises the agency of the Holy Spirit in the *whole* work of man's salvation, so it does this in respect to the various parts of it; I mean so far as relates to his sanctification. When the sinner in the anguish of conviction, inquires what he shall do, the Spirit moves upon his soul then. When the rebellion of his heart is subdued, and he yields himself to the service of God, here too is the work of the Spirit. When he conquers his spiritual enemies; when he rejoices in tribulation; when he makes rapid advances in holiness; when he strives most earnestly and successfully to glorify God, as God's word is true, the Spirit is in it all. In every stage of his progress from the infancy of his existence as a Christian, up to that glorious manhood which he is destined to attain in Heaven, and through the everlasting ages of happiness which are to burst upon his soul, he will not hesitate to say, nay, he will say exultingly, “By the grace of God, I am what I am.”

These, then, are the two things which God hath joined together in the economy of our salvation; human activity and a divine influence. They are joined together in God's word. They are joined together in actual experience. Nevertheless,

II. *There is in man a strong disposition to separate them.*

This disposition discovers itself in *sinners*; operating differently according to their different states of mind. Go to a man who is *neglecting altogether his immortal interests*, and press him with the obligation to enter upon the religious life, and it is not improbable he will put you off by saying that salvation is of God, and that, in urging him to do this, you urge him to do God's work; that if God has decreed his salvation, he will take care that it is accomplished; and if he has not decreed it, nothing that *he* can do will be of any avail. Or else, on the other hand, he will begin to tell you of his honesty and of his charity, how punctually he pays his debts and how liberally he gives to the poor; and will plainly intimate, if he does not directly assert, that if these things will not carry him to Heaven, he does not expect to get there. In either case, you observe the disunion of which I am speaking. In the former, grace is made to exclude works; in the latter, works to exclude grace.

But this disposition is often discovered in the *awakened*, as well as the careless, sinner. Under the terrours of a guilty conscience, he sets about a course of self-righteous effort; he relies upon his own prayers and strivings; he goes to work in the spirit of the law rather than of the gospel; and sometimes he labours long in this way before he discovers his mistake. And then, on the other hand, the sinner, in these circumstances, instead of placing his sole dependance on his own efforts, not unfrequently comes to imagine that his efforts are useless; and sinks down into a state of despair, or else rushes back to a habit of carelessness, on the ground that he has found by experience that *he* cannot work out his salvation, and that as it must all be the work of God, he may as well sit down and quietly wait God's time. Do you not see that precisely the same thing takes place here as in the case of the careless sinner; that the two things which our text brings to view are separated?

That *sinner*, both careless and awakened, are chargeable with the evil we are contemplating, is too manifest to admit of question. Would to God that the same charge could be sustained in no degree against *good men*, and even *ministers of the gospel*! I do not mean to intimate a belief that any true Christian is a stranger in his own experience to the truth that there is both divine and human agency in the work of our salvation; nor should I expect to find any one so much blinded by prejudice, as soberly to contend, either that we are operated upon as mere machines on the one hand, or that we are in the highest sense independent agents on the other. Nevertheless, I am constrained to believe that there is much in the conversation of many good men, and much in the preaching of some good ministers, at the present day, which has a direct tendency towards this practical result. While they really acknowledge both sides of the subject to be true, yet they look so exclusively at the one or at the other, that it occupies the whole field of their vision; and actually talk and preach in a manner which produces precisely the same effect as if they believed man could do nothing, or that he could do every thing.

On the one hand, the sinner hears the doctrine of divine influence insisted upon in such an insulated form, and the doctrine of man's activity so rarely and cursorily adverted to, that he comes to the conclusion that his whole duty consists in waiting for God to

make him a better man. On the other hand, he hears it as distinctly stated by another set of teachers, that the whole work rests upon himself; that it is a perfectly easy work effected by a single volition; and perhaps those who inculcate a different doctrine are charged with hedging up the way to Heaven with the rubbish of an antiquated orthodoxy. Here you have the two extremes. In the one case, salvation is so difficult a work that man can do nothing towards it: in the other it is so easy a work, that he can do the whole of it alone. *God* has joined works and grace together; but *men*, even *good men*, sometimes seem dissatisfied with the union, and labour to effect a separation.

III. *What are the grounds of this disposition of which we speak?* Wherefore is it that men are disposed to exclude works, or to exclude grace, in the affair of their salvation?

The grounds of this disposition are of course different in bad and good men.

As it respects *sinner*s—it often results in no small degree from *pride of intellect*. It is exceedingly natural to depraved man, especially in religious things, to ask a reason for whatever is proposed to him as a matter of faith. He proudly aspires to be like God in knowledge, though he as proudly resists the command to be like him in holiness. Now where the agency of God and the agency of man are represented as combined in the work of our salvation, there is a proposition presented to the mind which involves something too high for it; and that disposition which would refuse to believe what it cannot comprehend, prompts to an effort to get rid of the mystery by getting rid of the doctrine; for if the truth may only turn out to be that man performs the work of his salvation independently of a divine influence, then there is nothing here which is not to be fully explained by the common laws of human nature. Hence you perceive there is a strong temptation to deny the operation of grace, for the sake of bringing the gospel down to a level with the human understanding; in other words, of ministering to man's intellectual self-complacency.

Again: That *spirit of self-righteousness* which is natural to man,—a reluctance to be saved in God's way,—is another ground of this conduct in the sinner. Reason and conscience, as well as God's word, distinctly declare to man, that he cannot be saved by the law; that if he is saved at all, he must be dependant on grace.

But this is a truth which he most cordially disrelishes. Man in his unrenewed state would fain be his own saviour; a fact which, as we have already seen, is evidenced by the conduct of the anxious, as well as the careless, sinner; and this disposition will of course lead him to magnify the importance of works, and to keep grace as far out of view as possible. And in doing this, he does the very thing of which I am speaking: he forces a disunion between things which God hath joined together.

And then again, a *habit of indolence*, and a consequent unwillingness to begin this work, you will readily perceive must lead to the same result. When the work of salvation rises up before the sinner, oh how mighty it appears! How much effort it demands! How much self-denial it involves! How like a mountain the thought of it oppresses him! How convenient to get rid of all this labour and responsibility by reflecting that though there is much to be done, yet *he* can do nothing; and that, when God begins to work within him both to will and to do, no doubt the work will be in a way to be accomplished. Oh he has a purpose to answer in the honour which he *seems* to put upon the divine influence, in excluding works from the economy of salvation: it is to administer an opiate to his conscience: it is to bring a film over his eyes which shall keep him from looking into the pit. And Satan has a purpose too, though *he* knows it not:—it is to weave a web around him from which he shall never extricate himself till he shall lift up his eyes in torment.

If such are the reasons which prompt *sinners* to the course of which I am speaking,—that is, to exclude either grace or works from the economy of our salvation,—by what considerations are *good men* governed in the errors into which they fall on this subject;—errors, I mean particularly, in their addresses to the ungodly? I answer, on the one hand, they are prompted by *jealousy for God's honour*. They have known much, it may be, in their own experience of the powerful operation of God's Spirit; and they desire that the praises of God's grace may be upon every tongue; and the thought that man should derogate a particle from the glory of the Highest, strikes them with a kind of horror; and by keeping their eye too singly and exclusively fixed upon this, they practically lose sight of the fact that man is after all a moral agent. In their commendable caution to give God all the

glory, and to keep down human pride by disproving human merit, they practically strip man of his accountableness; and sometimes most unintentionally leave the impression that, as they can merit nothing, so also they can do nothing. I should only express my honest conviction if I should say that many a minister who has longed for the salvation of his people in Christ Jesus, has actually, by this partial exhibition of the truth, kept them quiet in the neglect of their salvation.

But there are others, as we have seen, who invest the sinner with *all* power, and practically keep the doctrine of divine influence out of view:—and they are drawn into this error by the apprehension that in any other way they shall *leave the sinner with some apology for indolence*, and shall fail in impressing him with a sense of his obligation. Tell him, they say, that he is in any degree dependant on God's grace, and in the same degree you discourage him from exertion; you arm him with an excuse by which he will repel the most weighty motives that can be brought to bear upon his conscience. And acting under these impressions, they do virtually exclude God from any share in the work of salvation; and in their efforts to convert men, hardly ever speak of that blessed agent by whom every conversion after all is effected.

IV. It only remains, in the fourth place, to exhibit briefly *the evil effects of separating these two great Christian doctrines*;—of practically denying either the one or the other. This branch of the subject has already been necessarily, to a considerable extent, anticipated.

These evils may be reduced to two:

1. The first is, that *it mars the system of divine truth*. The gospel as God has given it to us, is all glory. There is a *harmony* in its doctrines, which is beautiful to the eye of taste and reason, as well as grateful to the sanctified heart. These doctrines are like the colours of the bow; each of them possessing an independent beauty, but the whole assemblage rendered incomparably more beautiful from being blended together, and thus borrowing and reflecting each others' lustre. If you commit either of the errors of which I have been speaking, you destroy this consummate perfection: if the gospel were really what you would thereby make it, it would no longer be a system into which angels would desire to look.

Besides; no small part of the glory of the Christian system results from the fact that *it is exactly accordant with experience*: in all its features, it is true to life. But by separating these two doctrines, you produce something of which there is no counterpart in the experience of the Christian. The Christian's experience is that God works within him both to will and to do, and that he works out his salvation with fear and trembling; but this you would make the gospel contradict: you would either bind his soul with the chains of physical necessity, or else you would give him the honour of being his own saviour. Both of these with a holy indignation he disclaims. Show him the gospel as it is, and he will tell you that he has the witness within to the truth of every line of it; but show him the gospel with the doctrine of a divine influence, or the doctrine of human agency, blotted out, and he will turn from it as another gospel, and say "the glory is not there!"

2. The other evil to which I adverted is that this partial view of Christian truth, so far as it prevails, *utterly defeats the practical design of the gospel*; and that, both as it respects *man* and *God*.

As it respects *man*, the grand design of the gospel is to secure his salvation. But do you not perceive that either of the errors of which you have now heard, admitting it to become thoroughly practical, must stand in the way of his salvation? Suppose he yield to the notion that there is nothing for him to do, and that he must wait to be operated upon by a divine influence:—The consequence will be that he will do nothing; and the result of this neglect to work out his salvation must be that he will perish. Or suppose that he be impressed with the idea that a single volition makes him a Christian, independently of the agency of the Spirit:—One of two things you may calculate upon with great confidence;—either that he will make this a ground for delaying repentance to a future season on the presumption that it is so small a matter that it may be attended to at any time, and in *this way* will probably lose his soul; or else that he will work himself into a conviction that he actually does repent when he does not, and will go out into the world a flaming enthusiast, and will go to the grave a miserable self-deceiver, and will stand in the judgment to receive his portion with hypocrites. Is it not manifest then that either side of this alternative of error puts the souls of men in

fearful jeopardy; and that the preaching of *such* a gospel has in it the elements of death rather than the elements of life?

I have spoken all along of these great errors in their influence upon the unrenewed world: let me say that though no *Christian* ever *will* yield to their influence in such a way as to keep him out of Heaven, or in one sense, to endanger his salvation, yet, just in proportion as he does yield to them, his Christian character will be marred; he will be a presumptuous Christian on the one hand, or an indolent one on the other. There are many men no doubt in the church who will be saved so as by fire. If you knew the true reason why one professing Christian acts as though he was born into the kingdom only to take his ease, and another as if the conversion of the whole world depended upon himself, you would probably know that each was in a greater or less degree under the influence of one or other of the errors which I have endeavoured to expose.

But what becomes of the *glory of God* in this partial view of the gospel? God is glorified chiefly in the salvation of men. In the same degree that any thing exerts an influence in preventing **this, it interferes, in a certain sense,** with the manifestation of God's glory. He is especially glorified in this very constitution of things which is here attempted to be set aside; which puts man's highest powers in requisition on the one hand, and brings his own Omnipotence to the work on the other. Here, if any where, his wisdom, his goodness, his love, are conspicuous. Let none then, attempt to substitute any thing else in the place of God's constitution. He is glorified most when the gospel is preached, when the gospel is believed, when the gospel is felt, precisely as he has given it to us in the lively oracles.

On this fruitful theme I will detain you with but two brief remarks.

1. The first is that *we need have no fear that we shall magnify either grace or works too much in the concern of our salvation, provided we keep each in its right place.* If indeed you suffer one to stand in the place of both,—if you consider grace as superseding works, or works as superseding grace, then most assuredly you fall into a fatal mistake. But if you regard the influences of the Spirit as operating in that course of action which is properly man's own, and if, on the other hand, you regard man's efforts as

made in humble dependance on God's grace, and without any expectation that they will succeed independently of his blessing, then no matter how entire your dependance on the Spirit, no matter how active and earnest your own exertions. You have now every thing in its place; and here lies the secret of your becoming a Christian, and of all your progress in holiness.

Finally: Learn from this subject that *the way to make Bible Christians is to exhibit, in all its parts and in its proper connexions, Bible truth.* I do not say that by telling a man that he is an independent agent and has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit in his conversion, you may not lead him to *think* he is a Christian; for as, upon this principle, it is a small matter for a man to become a Christian, so it is a still smaller one to persuade himself that he is one; but I will not dissemble my fears that while you take to yourself the credit of having made him a Christian, and he takes to himself the credit of being one, the Searcher of the heart beholds him inflated with spiritual pride, and sets him down as a Pharisee. Yes, I repeat, Brethren, I am exceedingly jealous of those conversions which take place under that kind of preaching from which, to say the least, it is thought prudent in a great measure to exclude the doctrine of the Spirit's influence. Shall I be pointed to visible fruits? I answer all this is equivocal; but here is something that is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. And here I find the blessed doctrine of God's Spirit in the conversion of sinners, written on every page in letters of light; and yet I hear it talked of as a matter of expediency whether this doctrine should be preached in revivals of religion. Christians, let go this doctrine, and you let go the foundation of your hope. Ministers, let go this doctrine, and you may preach to the winds; for there is that in a heart of stone which will resist all you can say. Sinners, let go this doctrine, and you perish. Abuse it and you perish. Receive it practically, as God has revealed it, and your salvation will be secure. Rise up and exert all your powers to the utmost, and yet let this very exertion be made in a spirit of dependance on God, and as the Redeemer's word is true, you shall be found among those who shall sit down with him upon his throne.

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