

Discriminating Grace

by Gardiner Spring

The sermon explores the concept of God's discriminating grace, emphasizing the stark differences between the righteous and the wicked as determined by divine choice.

Scripture: John 6:44, Romans 8:30, Romans 9:15, 1 Corinthians 4:7, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Sovereign Grace", "Divine Mercy"

Description

Gardiner Spring preaches about the profound truth of God's discriminating grace, emphasizing the eternal difference between the righteous and the wicked, which is solely attributed to God's sovereign will and mercy. He delves into the theological and practical implications of this truth, highlighting the necessity of acknowledging our absolute dependence on God's grace for salvation. Spring underscores the importance of recognizing God's role in making individuals differ in character and state, ultimately pointing to the divine sovereignty that governs all aspects of life and eternity.

Transcript

God's truth is always the same. Moses was as staunch a believer in the doctrines of grace as Paul; no, Paul himself refers to Moses as himself inculcating the great doctrine of God's discriminating grace. There are those who would sincerely have us believe that there is no such thing. So the devil taught our credulous mother, when, with impudent and lying tongue, he uttered the words, "You shall not surely die." There are those also who would have us carried away by the modern notion, that God saves all he is able to save; and that if any are lost, it is because his almighty power cannot convert them. If this theory were true, instead of uttering the language, "I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy," we should somewhere have heard him say, I will have mercy upon whom I am able to have mercy.

It is not the most popular theme, when we speak of God's discriminating grace; yet it is very early brought to our consideration, and well deserves to be regarded as among the "first things" revealed by his Spirit.

Cain and Abel were brothers; the evidence from the sacred writings would seem to justify the conclusion, that they were twin brothers. Yet, how great was the difference in their characters! They were born with the same corrupt and totally depraved nature; they enjoyed the same parental solicitude, and the same religious nurture; yet the one was the confiding, the dutiful child of God, the other was a deist and a murderer. Where this difference? and who made it?

They are some of the "deep things of God" to which these inquiries conduct us; but we have no sympathy with those who, in this time-serving age, deem them unprofitable things, and unfitting the pulpit or the press. We confess ourselves wearied with this dwarfish theology; nor do we expect to see the church of God putting on her garments of strength and salvation, until her pulpits become more manly in asserting the great peculiarities of the Christian faith, and her presses, instead of "making a gain of godliness," deem "godliness with contentment great gain."

If there is a truth that humbles the lofty looks of man, it is that he is absolutely dependent on the discriminating grace of God. If the saved were made to differ from the lost, because they deserve it, they would have something to boast about. But to differ from the world that lies in wickedness, and be saved only by sovereign grace, is one of those truths that strips them of every rag of self-righteousness, and that may well banish every relic of pride from their hearts. It is a truth which exalts God on the throne, and humbles the sinner at his feet. A creature that is polluted--a sinner that is snatched from the pit by the outstretched hand of sovereign mercy, has nothing in which to boast, but the cross of Christ.

"If you take forth the precious from the vile," says God to the prophet, "you shall be as my mouth." It is not more true that there was a difference between Cain and Abel, than that there is a difference between all good men and bad.

There is no such thing as neutrality in the great contest which agitates the moral world. He that is not with me, says the Savior, is against me. The opposition is as direct and conflicting, as the difference between right and wrong. The righteous indeed are not so good, nor are the wicked so bad, either as they can be here, or will be hereafter; yet is there a radical difference between them. A good man is at best a very imperfect man; and yet he differs from one who is altogether sinful. He has some true holiness; which is more than can be said of any wicked man in the world. This is the point where the difference begins. The consequence of this moral divergency is, that the righteous are habitually holy, though sometimes sinful; while the wicked are always sinful, and never holy. Holiness begun, habitual holiness, is the character of the righteous; total, unmingled sinfulness, constitutes the character of the wicked.

Nor is this difference small. Imperfect as it is, the character of the righteous is the fruit of the Spirit. Every one who possesses it is a renewed man and born of God. The promises of the gospel are all made even to the least degree of grace; where this is lacking, instead of promises, there are all the curses written in God's book. We repeat the thought, that holiness thus begun in the soul is the first point in the dividing line between the friends of God and his foes, between the church and the world. Let men differ here, and continue to differ, and the difference will widen, until the one is "fit for the inheritance of the saints in light," and the other is a "vessel of wrath fitted to destruction." Let them differ here, and there is a perfect contrariety in their governing principles, their affections, their designs, their conduct, their whole character.

This is not merely a philosophical, but a great practical truth. Where there is the least degree of holiness, there is that supreme love to God, which is the germ of every holy affection; where this is lacking, there is that carnal mind which is enmity against God, and which, as occasions and incitements are furnished, will express itself in every affection that is sinful. The righteous are penitent; the wicked are impenitent. The former is a believer in the Lord Jesus; the latter rejects the Savior, and treats the offers of mercy with indifference and contempt. The former is clothed with humility; the latter inflated with pride. The former denies himself and takes up the cross; the latter cherishes the habits of self-indulgence, and esteems the cross a burden and reproach. That is cheerfully resigned to the will and designs of God; this is displeased that his will and purposes are not different from what they are. The righteous looks abroad into the world,

rejoicing that God is on the throne; the other contends with his Maker, has the heart of a rebel, and would sincerely make the will of God subservient to his own. The righteous are attracted to something more than their own selfish interests; their love is large and diffusive, and terminates on objects that are endeared to the Infinite Mind; the wicked are attached to interests that are private and partial; their love is contracted, and their heart revolves in that little circle of which self is the center. The righteous are habitually obedient to the divine commands; the wicked always disobedient. The righteous make progress in this divine life, and persevere in it; the wicked persevere and wax worse and worse in their wickedness. The wicked live for time; the righteous for eternity.

The one bears "the image of the heavenly," and puts on "the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness," the other bears "the image of the earthly," and retains all the resemblance of the "old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." While the one is alive in Christ, the other is dead in trespasses and sins; and while the former possess a character, dignified, amiable, and lovely, the latter are deformed by sin, degraded, and odious. While the righteous are prepared for the elevated service and enjoyment of heaven, the wicked are prepared for the vile employment and deplorable wretchedness of hell. The saint is already an "infant angel;" the sinner an "embryo fiend."

Nor is the difference in their state less considerable than the difference in their character. The righteous are reconciled to God, and made near by the blood of the cross; the wicked are alienated from him, and afar off. The reconciliation between God and his people is mutual; they are friends to him, and he is a friend to them; and the alienation between God and his enemies is mutual; they are enemies to him, and he is an enemy to them. The righteous are pardoned, liberated from the condemning sentence of the law, accepted and justified; the wicked are in a state of condemnation, and the wrath of God abides on them. The righteous are tranquil, because they have the relief of pardon and grace; the wicked are like the troubled sea, because they bear the weight of unpardoned sin.

The one knows the preciousness of the blood of sprinkling; the other the misery of rejecting it. The unbeliever is an outcast; the believer an adopted child. The one enjoys the liberty of the sons of God; the other is a prisoner, fast bound in chains of iniquity. The one enjoys all that protection, and discipline, and communion with his heavenly Father which is the privilege of sons; the other is without God and without hope in the world. The Christian is an heir of God, and joint heir with Christ, to an unfading inheritance; the sinner is an heir of hell, and fellow-heir with reprobates and fiends to interminable woe. Seasons of tribulation and darkness the righteous may endure; yet do they enjoy that animating hope, those blissful communications of the divine favor, and that sweet foretaste of the celestial banquet which makes this valley of tears a mount of rejoicing; and notwithstanding their security and cheerfulness, the ungodly suffer that consciousness of guilt that spoils their mirth and embitters their joys.

Covered with the banner of mercy, compassed about with favor as a shield, the Christian passes through the wilderness in safety and in peace; and though he may sometimes pass away under the cloud, he more usually enters the dark valley in all the sweetness of resignation, the serenity of hope, and the triumphs of faith. While alas! unprotected, uncovered and unclothed, the sinner passes through the wilderness devoid of consolation and without a refuge, and at the close of his guilty career, without a smile from the face of Jesus, is forced away in all the bitterness of grief, and agonies of despair.

If we lift the veil and follow them still farther, we find that the difference that began in the present world is augmented and becomes eternal. Released from the fetters that fastened him to earth, the Christian wings

his upward flight to the mansions of light and joy; while the sinner as rapidly descends the gloomy valley of darkness and woe. The Christian rises to that brightness, that splendor of moral purity that augments the luster of heaven; while the sinner plunges in that blackness of moral pollution that adds obscurity to the gloom of the pit. The Christian rejoices; the sinner mourns. The former beholds the face of his Redeemer; sees adoring hosts cast their crowns at his feet; and as he listens, swells their song; while the latter listens only to wail and gnash his teeth, and add a deeper groan to the sighs that echo through the caverns of despair.

"He that is holy, shall be holy still; and he that is filthy shall be filthy still." They differ both in character and state, throughout interminable ages, and to an extent which surpasses the largest stretch of thought. Not until death draws aside the curtain, can we form any adequate conception of the difference between the righteous and the wicked. One glance at the glories of heaven, one at everlasting burnings, will show more than ten thousand volumes wherein the righteous and the wicked differ.

So great is this difference, that it becomes the subject of interesting inquiry. Who makes it? There is some cause for this great diversity of character and condition. It is either self-produced, or produced by some extraneous agency. If by extraneous agency, what is that agency? This is a theological as well as a practical question; and it is one in which there is some discordance of human opinions.

It is sometimes said that the difference is owing to the intrinsic efficacy of truth. The human mind is supposed to be so constituted, that when once it sees the truth as it is, even though it does not discover its moral beauty, it yields to its appropriate influence. There are so many powerful motives suggested by it to induce men to become holy, that when clearly and forcibly exhibited, the truth itself is supposed to cause all the difference of moral character throughout the world. But the very opposite of this supposition is the one maintained in the Bible, and confirmed by experience. Instead of yielding to the truth of God when it is clearly exhibited, the Scriptures tell us that "Light has come into the world, and men have loved darkness rather than light." They are not converted without the truth; the truth of God is the appointed instrumentality in their conversion.

Yet is it not in the power of truth to control the depraved heart. If it were, why should this difference of character remain among those who have the same religious instruction, and enforced with the same energy? Why are not the same motives at all times equally effectual? Why did Moses and the prophets, Christ and the apostles, ever preach in vain? And if this supposition be true, what becomes of the office-work of the Holy Spirit, of which so much is said in the sacred writings?

Sometimes it is affirmed that the difference is owing to the superior improvement which the righteous make of their religious instruction and privileges. All, it is asserted, have opportunities enough; and by a due improvement of them, there would be no essential difference of character between one man and another. This is true; and the wicked are without excuse for not improving their religious privileges. But this does not answer our question; because it fails to inform us how it comes to pass that one man improves his privileges, and another does not. And if this supposition accounted for the difference, then would it be exclusively the work of men, and the creature would become the author and finisher of his own salvation.

For the purpose of avoiding these difficulties, it has been said, that in addition to the power of moral suasion, and the influence of religious privileges, God gives his Holy Spirit to all men, and that by cherishing, and not grieving his influences, some gradually become Christians, and differ from others. According to this theory, the difference between the righteous and the wicked, is not made by an act of

discriminating grace, but by a wise improvement of grace indiscriminately communicated. This view of the subject is equally far from accounting for the difference; because it does not inform us why one man cherishes, and another grieves the Spirit of God. Still the question is unanswered, Who makes them to differ?

To obviate, as is supposed, this difficulty, it is said, some choose to improve, and cherish, and obey the divine influence, and others do not. We know this: all men act freely in this matter. But why do some choose, and others refuse? The will is not the sovereign arbiter of its own acts; the will does not produce the will. There is no greater absurdity, than that every volition of the human mind is the effect of a previous volition. If so, what is the cause of this previous volition? If one still previous, how came the parent volition into existence, and where the first in the series?

How then does it happen that some are holy, and others sinful?--that some choose to love God, and others to hate him?--that some choose life, and others death? Who makes this wide and eternal difference? In answering this question, we turn to the Bible, and abide the decisions of the law and the testimony. This Book of God teaches us that the righteous and the wicked possess by nature the same character, and are in the same state. They are totally destitute of true love to God, and under the entire dominion of a depraved heart. And in this sinful and guilty state they continue until the one is convinced of his sins, renounces his enmity to God, and exercises a saving faith in the Lord Jesus. From this period in their history, the lines of their moral character perpetually diverge. The one is a changed man; he is turned from sin to holiness, and from the power of Satan unto God; while the other is left to live and die in his iniquity. The entire difference between them, therefore, is to be attributed to the discriminating grace of God toward the righteous. The righteous are taken, and the wicked are left. The righteous are renewed and sanctified, and the wicked are left to themselves. It is not necessary that anything more be done than thus leave them.

This scriptural statement accounts for the difference between them. It originates in the Great First Cause. We trace the streams of mercy up to the fountain-head, and see them issuing from that eternal, immutable purpose which took its rise from the fullness of the divine mind, and the overflowings of those god-like compassions which could not be gratified without saving a portion of our fallen race; while the fountain of wickedness in the unrenewed heart is left to flow on. To the righteous, God gives his Holy Spirit, effectually calling them; to the wicked he does not give it. Time and opportunity are all the wicked need in order to fill up the measure of their iniquity, and become ripe for destruction. Were there any holiness in their hearts, time and opportunity might improve it. But there is none; and with such a heart, they are sure to grow worse rather than better. Let them enjoy what religious opportunities they will, they are sure to pervert and abuse them, and make them the means of sin. The longer they live, the more sinful they grow, and the more aggravated their sinfulness. Time, talents, health, Sabbaths, prosperity and adversity, perverted and abused, are all the means of their easing in sin.

If we ask for evidence of this, we have but to open the Bible and read such declarations as these--"The preparation of the heart in man is from the Lord. By grace are you saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the Gift of God. It is GOD that works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. He that has wrought us for the self-same thing, is GOD. We are HIS workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. No man can come unto me, except it were GIVEN him of my Father." The difference is made by God in opposition to every other way of making it, and his giving that to the righteous which he does not give to the wicked. As though the Holy Spirit meant to exclude everything from the conversion of sinners as its efficient cause, except the immediate power of God, he speaks of those who had received Christ, as born,

NOT of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but OF GOD. So then, it is NOT of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but OF GOD that shows mercy.

The difference, therefore, between the righteous and the wicked, is made by God. By him, it is begun; by him, it is continued; by him, it is perfected. At a time when both were dead in trespasses and sins; when both were enemies; when, through their own obduracy, the instructions and motives of divine truth served only to rouse and strengthen their opposition; when they were equally stout-hearted and far from righteousness; God, of his mere good pleasure, uninduced by anything in either, and alike disregarded by both, made some to differ from others by taking the hard and stony heart out of their flesh, and giving them a heart of flesh. From this point, their character and their condition diverge to all eternity. The righteous would have been just like the wicked if God had left them to themselves. Where God is "willing then to show his wrath, and make his power known," he has but to "endure with much patience the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." The righteous are "prepared unto glory" by discriminating grace; the wicked fitted to destruction by the divine long-suffering, and thus becoming their own destroyers. Both have been partners of the same guilt; both might have been condemned with equal justice: but the one is taken and the other is left.

This is one of the great features of the divine government; it is the royal prerogative of his throne. Every glance at the history of the divine operations discovers the hand of discriminating grace. You cannot cast your eyes over the world without recognizing God as a holy Sovereign. You see a difference between the angels who kept their first estate and those who did not keep it; between Cain and Abel; between Noah and the antediluvian world; between Abraham and the idolatrous nations around him; between Lot and Sodom, and between Jacob and Esau: and the difference was made by God. As you extend your views, you see one age and climate differing from another. One is an age of darkness and sin, another the age of light and purity; and the difference is made by God. One land is favored with plentiful effusions of the divine Spirit; another is like the barren heath. One minister labors, and has little else to do than stand still and see the salvation of God; while another labors in vain, and spends his strength for nothing and in vain. So that wherever you look, you see the sovereign Arbiter of all events and all worlds himself drawing the line between the righteous and the wicked, bringing to the view of men his own supremacy, and magnifying his own "most holy, wise and powerful ordering and governing all his creatures and all their actions."

How amiable, how dreadful this exhibition of God's holy sovereignty! In what strong and bright colors it shines, and how will it be felt through interminable ages, in making some the monuments of mercy, and leaving others to hardness of heart! As the saints rise in glory and blessedness, with what a deep conviction of the sovereignty of God will they look down upon the regions of darkness, and feel that it is God who made them to differ! Throughout all eternity, it will be seen and felt, that the wide, the augmenting difference is made by God. We have but to look forward to the end of time, when the light dawns, and the heavens open, and the multitude which no man can number are casting their crowns before the throne; and then to look down upon that dark and dismal world, from which the smoke of the torments of the damned is ascending forever and ever; to learn how wondrous the grace that makes the righteous differ from the wicked.

This is a most important truth; it is a most effective truth, because it throws all impenitent men into the hands of God. They are dead in trespasses and sins. If ever they are made to differ from what they now are, and from a world that lies in wickedness, it will be an act of mere grace--discriminating grace. Their dependence does not diminish their obligations; for in all their moral conduct, they act for themselves, and

without constraint. Yet such is their character, that all means, all motives, without this special, almighty, and sovereign influence, will leave them hardened in sin. Nothing can convert them, but the power of God. They will not be taught into religion; nor terrified into it; nor encouraged and soothed and flattered into it. Their dearest interests for time and eternity are suspended on God's sovereign will. Everything within them, and everything without them serves only to throw them into the hands of God. And if they complain of this, and murmur at dependence so absolute, we can only say, let them do without the grace of God if they can. Let them throw themselves upon their own resources, influence their own choice, change their own heart, and become converted men without the interposition of God's special grace, if in their own judgment, they think they can do so. But if they despair of this, then we say to them, Do not quarrel with your own mercies, and complain of that which is your only hope. Take heed how you contend with God in this matter. It may be that you are secretly saying, with sinners of other times, "why does he yet find fault for who has resisted his will?" "No, but O man! who are you that replies against God? Has not the potter power over the clay of the same lump, to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor?" If wicked men truly saw and felt their condition as it is, they would have no hope of salvation but from that very sovereignty they now oppose. Here you are a dying man, in the hands of that God whose forbearance you have so long provoked, and beyond the reach of help on this side heaven. Ministers can preach to you; they can pray for you; they can follow you with their entreaties to your graves; but if God does not lift you from the pit, in defiance of all that means and men can do, nothing is more certain, than that you will choose death rather than life. O that you did indeed feel yourselves cut off from every refuge and hope except omnipotent and discriminating grace! You would then know what it is to despair of help EXCEPT from God; you would bow yourself low before the throne, and cry, Lord! save me, or I perish.

We have said, that this is an important and effective truth, because we see not where else to build our hopes for the prosperity of Zion. We rest them on the truth, that the difference between the righteous and the wicked is made by God.

This is the only hope of a lost world. The work is God's. This is the only and last resort. There is no hope, if it be not here. It is upon this rock that the church rests; and by this she will live and triumph, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. No heart is so hard, that God cannot break it; none so unyielding, that he cannot make it bow. No sinner, and no congregation of sinners is beyond the reach of sovereign grace. We magnify this blessed truth, though it is a stumbling-block and foolishness to the world. God has the hearts of all in his hands. As the rivulets of water are turned, he turns them wherever he will. We cast the souls of dying men on this his immeasurable and sovereign grace. When ministers have instructed, and admonished, and entreated them, and prayed for them, their last resort is to leave them with God. Thrice blessed encouragement! When iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxes cold; when under a clear and affecting impression of the deplorable state of perishing sinners, and a humbling consciousness of our own unfruitfulness; there is encouragement in casting the burden on him who has never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek you my face in vain! My soul! wait only upon God; for my expectation is from him!

Observe and mark the indications of God's discriminating grace in the world in which we dwell. Has he not been in the midst of it, making some differ from others? Has he not bowed his heavens and come down, and called some to the knowledge of his dear Son, and left others to reject the offers of his mercy? Has not his discriminating arm been made bare throughout the land, in these churches, and in the midst of these families, and made some rejoice, and left others to mourn? Is he not now plucking some as brands from the burning, and leaving others to lie down in sorrow? And will he not continue thus to manifest his sovereignty and make it felt forever, himself drawing the line between pagan and Christian lands, between

the husband and the wife, the father and the son, the mother and her daughter, the brother and the brother! Solemn, unspeakably solemn thought! "His fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather the wheat into his garner, and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." The cords of earthly affection bind men together for a little while; these frail bodies will indeed lie down alike in the grave, and the worms will cover them; but the final separation hastens on. Few are the years before the judge on his throne shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And then--O the stupendous difference! The dreadful gulf will roll, while on its rapid tide some ascend, no more to look down, but to remember who made them to differ; and others descend, no more to look up, but to remember that the difference remains.

We speak for God, we plead for God, when we utter our thoughts on such a theme. We say to all men, "Give glory to the Lord your God before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains." To Christian men we say, give all the glory of your salvation to him to whom it belongs. You see who has made you to differ from all his incorrigible enemies. You look back to the ages of eternity, and see to what you owe your hopes. You come down to the ages of time, and see every part of your salvation pointing to the agency of the king eternal, immortal and invisible. You look around you, and you look forward, and see how he that begun the good work in you will carry it on to the day of Jesus Christ. God and his eternal, ever-enduring grace are the moving cause of the whole. Surely shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory! He was under no obligation to have mercy upon you, more than upon the rebel angels, or upon the thousands of your fellow-men, who are without God in the world. Well may you say, "By the grace of God, I am what I am! Not unto me, not unto me, O Lord! but to your name give glory, for your mercy and your truth's sake! Your best honors be to his name! Let his glory be the animating theme. The spiritual temple rests on him. Built on his grace, it has risen; it rises now; and it shall rise; while every arch is vocal with the song, "worthy is the Lamb that was slain!"

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