

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

LESSONS ON DIVINE GRACE.

A Sermon

INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, MAY 31ST, 1903,

DELIVERED BY

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

On a Lord's-day Evening, in the summer of 1861.

“But by the grace of God I am what I am.”—1 Cor. xv. 10.

THIS confession, suitable in the lips of Paul, is equally appropriate in the mouth of each one of us who have known and proved the grace of God. We must consider Paul, according to his own account of himself, as being “not meet to be called an apostle,”—though “not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles,”—because he had persecuted the Church of God. In respect of personal merit, he knew that he did not deserve to be accounted of at all; yet, when the sole ground of approbation was not the service he had rendered to his Sovereign, but the favour which his Sovereign had bestowed upon him, he could say, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” Take the meanest lamb in Jesu’s fold, the feeblest heir of grace, the most timid and fearing, the most hopeless and helpless of all disciples, the man most devoid of talent, the man who stands the very lowest on the list of the saints of God, surely he may and must say that “by the grace of God” he is what he is, so far as he is in Christ, a believer, with all the privileges that believers have a gracious right to claim. Let this be thy comfort, thou little one, that the same grace that made an apostle of Paul has made a Christian of thee. The selfsame power that hath quickened the mightiest man in the army of the Lord of hosts hath quickened thee also; the grace that saves the greatest saves the least. If the largest and brightest gem in the crown of Christ reflects his grace, and glorifies his love, even so shalt thou though thou be as the smallest pearl that shall be set in his glorious diadem of honour.

Then, next, take the apostle Paul in the other way, as he describes himself in our text. In the preceding verse, he says he is the least of the apostles, yet he also says, “I laboured more abundantly than they all.” It is equally true, whether you put him in the

meanest place among converts, or in the very forefront of the army of faithful soldiers of Christ,—among the feeblest of pensioners or the most zealous of all the labourers in the vineyard of the Master,—the acknowledgment must be made, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” Be our attainments never so eminent, our knowledge never so extensive, our usefulness never so great, yet still we stand, in the sight of God, on the same footing as the very meanest member of the Church of Christ. The song, which begins among the little and the timid, gathers strength among the great and the brave. It is not altered in the slightest degree; the language is the same, the strain the same, the song the same, “By the grace of God,” we all of us must say, “we are what we are.”

I am going to speak of my text, first, *doctrinally*; secondly, *experimentally*; and, thirdly, *practically*.

I. First, DOCTRINALLY. Each one of us, who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, can take this sentence as his creed, and say, “By the grace of God I am what I am.”

That is to say, first, I am not what I am *as the result of something good which God foresaw would be in me*. God has not vouchsafed his love, his favour, his mercy, to me because he foresaw that I should repent of my sin, and trust in his dear Son. No, there is a deeper cause for his love than anything that could be found in me. Indeed, there is nothing that could be found in me, that is lovely in his sight, but it would be proved, immediately, that he had, first of all, freely given that lovely thing to me, or himself created it within me. If I am a child of God, an heir of heaven, the well-spring of God’s love to me is in his own sovereign grace. Nothing in my disposition or character could move his heart to me. His heart must have moved spontaneously; it must have welled up, because of its own deep love; and it must have flowed towards me, in its own divine channel, simply because God in his sovereignty would have it so. “By the grace of God,” I am elected unto eternal life.

“Grace first inscribed my name,
In God’s eternal book.”

’Twas grace which set me apart, in distinguishing love, before the stars were made; ’twas grace that separated me from the mass of mankind; ’twas grace that laid hold of me while I was but as a pebble in the brook, and ordained that I should be a bright diamond in Christ’s crown. It was God who, in the beginning, by his own grace, decreed that I should be what I am; and, therefore, to begin there, we take this as our creed, “By the grace of God,”—as manifested in eternity, and by that alone,—have I been caused to be “what I am.”

Then, next, my text also means, I am not what I am *as the result of any creature strength, or any means of my own*. I am not what I am because I chose to be what I am; for if I had been what I chose to be, I should still have been “dead in trespasses and sins.” If I had followed my poor, blind free-will, it would have been, to this day, leading me to hell; but it would never have led me to

heaven. If I had made it my guide, I should have wandered further, and further, and further away from God. With my back to the Saviour, I should never have moved towards God. It is the same with all of us; if there is anything good in any of us, we must confess that God himself put it there. He taught our souls to pray. He made us feel our need of grace. He stripped us of our boastful pride. He delivered us from our refuges of lies. He levelled the legality of our hearts by bringing us low with labour, exhausting all our strength. 'Twas he who cast the first ray of hope into our soul. He opened our blind eyes to see the beauty of Christ. He gave us the first glimmering of faith; he enabled us to see that our sins were washed away by the precious blood of Jesus; and he has kept us alive unto this day, and will not let us go.

We will maintain this truth against all comers, that saints are what they are "by the grace of God," and not by their own free-will. I have sometimes heard men preach doctrines contrary to this. They have said that men are what they are as the result of the improvement of universal grace, and that the distinction which is apparent in them is made by themselves; God gave them a grace which they were to use,—not a grace which operated upon them, but a grace which they operated upon. According to that teaching, grace is given to men as a tool with which they are to work, not as a seal which God sets upon a man; grace is subservient to him, but he is not subservient to grace. Yet I must say that, although I have heard such doctrine as that preached from the pulpit, I have never known it to be practically received in the heart of a child of God. When you come to the point, and ask a true believer, "Why are you now a child of God, and an heir of heaven?" he tells you, once for all, "God made the difference." He will, perhaps, tell you that men can do much towards their own conversion, but he will deny that he has done anything towards his own; he will loyally put the crown on the head of Christ, even though—being beclouded in his understanding,—he may have talked as if he denied the truth. But, brethren, what we hold is the doctrine of the effectual working of God in the hearts of his chosen ones, as the Lord said to Zerubbabel, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts;" and as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places."

Now let us look at our text in another aspect. *Some suppose that, even if divine grace begins the work, we must at least carry it on.* It cannot be denied that the living child of God has power, but it must not be forgotten that the power of the living child of God is not in himself, but in his Heavenly Father. For it is as true of him as of any sinner "dead in trespasses and sins" that, without Christ, he can do nothing. The living child of God is still as powerless as the dead sinner apart from the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the constant inflowing of the divine life

into his soul. "By the grace of God" we not only are what we are, but we also remain what we are. We should long ago have ruined ourselves, and damned ourselves, if Christ had not kept us by his almighty grace. There has not been one hour in our whole Christian experience in which we have preserved ourselves; we cannot look back to any stage in our history, and say, "Here I wrought mighty marvels by my own unaided power." We dare not say, when we have been made to stand on our high places, that we stood there by our own wisdom; nor can we say, when we have run without weariness, that we did it in our own strength. Nay, beloved, whenever we discover our own strength in our pilgrimage, it is in going backward, and in tumbling down, but never in going forward, or in mounting upward. With the psalmist, we have to say to the Lord, "All my springs are in thee;" and, as all the springs are in the Lord, so are all the streams as well. As for myself, I must continually sing,—

"Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!"

Not only am I debtor to grace once for all, but each day adds to the debt, and each hour the bulk of my obligation grows. I must still say, "By the grace of God I am what I am." Some of you could say this twenty years ago, but you can say it with even greater emphasis now; and when you get grey-headed, and totter down to Jordan's brink, you will not be able to say, "By my own goodness I am what I am." Even there must you give all the glory to that grace which, having been the Alpha, will also be the Omega,—which, having been the beginning, will also be the end.

So, doctrinally, I state the truth of my text thus, "By the grace of God I am what I am." I am elect;—my election is of grace. I am redeemed;—redemption is a mighty masterpiece of grace. I am called,—called by grace. I am preserved,—preserved by grace; and whatever there is in me that is commendable and virtuous,—whatever there is in me which the Son of God can admire, and which gives to my own soul real comfort,—must be all of grace, and of grace alone. I have spoken so much in the first person because the text is in the first person. Will every one of you also speak in the first person, and say in your heart, "By the grace of God I am what I am," endorsing the text from your own experience, setting your seal to this part of God's Word, and declaring it to be true, and going forth with this motto emblazoned on your banner as the doctrine which you will hear, and which, if you are called to the ministry, you will preach, "By the grace of God I am what I am"?

II. Now, in the second place, I am going to take the text EXPERIMENTALLY.

By this I mean that there are times, in our experience, when this truth starts up in letters of light, and we recognize it as an indisputable fact, not only taught to us as a Scriptural doctrine, but proved to us by our own personal experience. Let me just narrate a few instances.

Brethren and sisters, have you ever had times *when the fountains of the great deep of your depravity have been broken up*? Have you ever been taken into the chambers of imagery, and has the Spirit of God there said to you, "Son of man, I will show you greater abominations than these;" and has he taken you first into one room, and then into another, and made you stand aghast while he has shown you the idols of your heart, the deep depravity that still remaineth in you, the pride, and sloth, and various forms of sin which still lurk and find shelter there? Have you ever had the filthy rags unrolled before your eyes? Have you heard the chattering of the unclean birds in the cage of your heart? Have you ever been fully conscious of the stench arising from your Old Adam nature? Has your spirit sickened at the very thought of the depravity of manhood in general, and of yourself in particular? Have you ever had your secret sins set in the light of God's countenance? Have you ever been made to see the blackness of your own sin side by side with the brightness of divine favour? Have you ever been made to taste the exceeding bitterness of your sin even at the communion table,—even while you realized the preciousness of the blood of Christ, and renewed your former fellowship with him? If so, then I know that my text has been true to you, as it has been also to me, and that you have said, as I have often been compelled to say, "By the grace of God I am what I am." You have looked at your heart, and you have seen its barren soil; and if there has been any wheat growing upon it, you have said, "This is the result of the grace of God." You have looked at the huge black rock of your Old Adam nature, and when you have seen rivers of living water flowing out of the very midst of it, you have been obliged to say, "This mighty miracle could only have been wrought by the grace of God." Flimsy views of human depravity lead to very indistinct ideas of the grace of God. There is nothing but deep sub-soil ploughing that ever makes a man sound in the doctrines of grace; and I will defy any man, who has had a deep experience of his own odious depravity, to believe any other doctrines but the doctrines of grace, which are commonly called Calvinism. Nay, more than that, the mind, unless it be most graciously taught by the Spirit of God, will be apt to go beyond the true Scriptural doctrine, and to push the term beyond its legitimate sphere.

There have been other occasions on which you and I have been forced to cry, "By the grace of God I am what I am;" namely, *after some strong and terrible temptation*. Have you never known what it is to feel some old lust, which you thought was dead, suddenly come upon you with a whirlwind power, and drive you before it, like a sere leaf of the forest, that could not resist its might? I have, sometimes, had this trying experience. When quietly meditating upon the things of God, some fierce and fearful impulse to sin has assailed me, as if a giant had seized me by the neck, and pushed me onward until, at last, I came to the very brink of some awful iniquity, and looked down upon it; and, just as it seemed as if I must plunge into it, my eyes have been

opened, and I have seen the horror of great darkness, and I have exclaimed, "O God! how is it that I have not committed that sin? How is it that thou hast come to save me just in the nick of time, and stretched out thy hand to rescue me just when 'my feet were almost gone,'—when 'my steps had well-nigh slipped'?" Not only had I thought of slipping, but "my steps had well-nigh slipped. Then, thy mercy, O God, held me up!" I do not know whether you have had strong impulses of that kind; many of God's people have, and especially those who, before conversion, plunged deeply into sin. You have sometimes had almost on your lips the oath which you have hated in your inmost heart; iniquity has come before you in a fascinating guise, and although you abhorred it, yet, for the moment, a strange hallucination of dazzling bewitchery seemed to lay hold of your spirit, and if you had yielded to it, you would have been like Samson when he fell into the hands of the Philistines. So it is that we are often compelled to say, as we look back upon marvellous providences and divine interpositions, "Truly, by the grace of God we are what we are, and by that grace alone have we been preserved from falling into sin."

I think, too, that this truth has often been brought home to us *when we have witnessed the fall of others*. You have, perhaps, walked to and from the house of God with some notable professor of religion, and he has instructed you on many points. He seemed to be a man of deep experience and devout life. Your heart has been knit to him, and you have said, "Here is a brother indeed;" and you have, possibly, envied him his great attainments and his fluent speech. Then, on a sudden, you heard that he had fallen into some terrible sin; you made enquiries, and you found that it was only too true. You were present, one night, at the church-meeting, when the solemn sentence of excommunication was pronounced upon him; and while the minister uttered it, all the members wept, and prayed that the poor fallen one might be brought to repentance, and that his soul might not be the prey of Satan. At such a time as that, you have said, "By the grace of God I am what I am," and you have said, with good John Newton,—

"When any turn from Zion's way,
(Alas, what numbers do!)
Methinks I hear my Saviour say,
'Wilt thou forsake me too?'"

"Ah, Lord! with such a heart as mine,
Unless thou hold me fast,
I feel I must, I shall decline,
And prove like them at last."

Such instances may act as beacons to warn us of pride, and to teach us again the lesson that by the grace of God we are what we are.

Then, brethren, I think there are other seasons when we learn this lesson; that is, *in times of great dulness in spiritual matters*. Heavenly trade is not always brisk, even in the best market, that

is, in the breast of the believer. Spiritual mariners do not find that the wind always blows; and thus, though we should always have our sails up, (which, alas! is not always the case with us,) even then the wind would not always blow, for it "bloweth where it listeth." Like the sea, we have our ebb as well as our flood-tide. Do you not know what it is to go to the throne of grace, when—as for words, you can find plenty of them; but as for heart, and soul, and vigour in prayer,—if your salvation depended upon your fervency, you must perish? Have you not gone to the mercy-seat, and groaned there,—and groaned most of all because you could not groan as you ought? You have taken your wants to the throne of grace, but you have had to bring them away again. You have gone up to the house of God; and though you could find no fault with the sermon, there was, somehow or other, nothing in it for you. You went home to read your Bible; and though you knew that it was a precious book, it did not seem precious to you. It might be like a honeycomb, but you could not get any of the honey out of it. You had lost all spiritual appetite, and you felt as if you were drawing near to the gates of death. You remember, too, how you then sought the society of the godly, yet you received no consolation from them. Heavenly things seemed to be but dreams, the substantial things of eternity did not affect your spirit as they should have done; and you could only cry, with the psalmist, "My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word." And at such times, and especially if your prayer has been graciously heard, you have been compelled to say, "It is my natural state to be cold and dull; and if, at any time, I run swiftly in the heavenly race,—if my sails are filled, and my bark is wafted towards paradise,—surely this is by the grace of God."

Just one more remark upon this point. *Times of great mercy* often operate upon some of us so as to bring us very low, and to make us feel, "By the grace of God we are what we are." Simon Peter had this experience. When his boat was full of fish, so that it began to sink, he fell on his knees before his Master, and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The greatness of God's mercy to him convinced him of his own undeservedness; and it has been the same with some of us. The more the glory of God's grace has been revealed to our souls, the humbler have we been made to lie at his feet. When the Lord has piled up his mercies till they were like the great mountains, and his faithfulness has been like the bottomless depths, then have we been obliged to say, "These great things are indeed of God, they could not have come of man." At such times, we have felt that we could sit before the Lord, as David did, and say, "Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?" God sometimes overwhelms his children with mercy quite as completely as he ever does with affliction. Pride may be overcome in two ways. It is sometimes overcome by trouble that crushes a man; but, at other times, the same result is produced by almighty grace, which, in overwhelming waves of love, rushes in upon the man's

spirit, till, submerged in love and mercy, he can only resign himself to its depths, and feel—yet ever feel that he cannot feel enough—the wonders of God's grace, and his own littleness in comparison with God's amazing favour. God sometimes humbles his children by putting them in the dark, but he sometimes does it in another way, as David said, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" How often have we also had to say, with David, "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!" So I hope it will be with each one of us, that the greatness of God's mercy to us, as a church, and as individuals, will lead us to say, "By the grace of God we are what we are."

III. Now, in closing, let us consider our subject PRACTICALLY. What is the practical use of this text, "By the grace of God I am what I am"?

Surely, as I have already reminded you, it is designed *to keep us humble*. Depend upon it, if we do not take this text for our motto every day, there is the rod of the covenant ready for us. He will soon be in a storm who does not see God's grace in the sunshine. If his mercies surround us, and our days roll happily along, but we begin to ascribe our greatness and our riches to ourselves, it will not be long before God will bring us down. It may be so in your experience, especially if you soar upon the wings of self-confidence. As surely as you begin to get strong in your own strength, there is an hour of weakness close at hand. Whenever you are full of self, it will not be long before you learn your own emptiness; for he who begins to grow rich in himself is next door to poverty; nay, he is already clothed in rags. No, my brethren, there is no safe walking unless we make this the staff on which we lean, "By the grace of God we are what we are." While we stick to this as our hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, everlasting motto, we shall not go astray, nor shall we experience those terrible down-castings which are the inevitable result of our up-flyings in self-confidence. Come then, beloved, from this day let us learn humility, let us tread our pride in the dust, and say, "Why should we be proud? By the grace of God we are what we are."

Then, in the light of our text, *let us learn charity*. Why should I be harsh towards those who are not what I am? I wish that some persons, who think themselves very sound in doctrine, would recollect our text. If another brother is thought to be unsound, they are ready to cut him in pieces; it would be better if they were to say, before using their sword for such a purpose, "By the grace of God we are what we are." Though you should be never so sound and right yourselves, be gentle with the brother who has not received so much grace as you have. Good John Newton used to say that, for a Calvinist to be proud, was the most inconsistent thing in the world; because, by his own profession, there were truths which no man could receive or understand of himself; so, why should he boast of his own attainments, and why should

he blame others for not doing what he knows they cannot do of themselves? If our brethren cannot see as well as we can, why should we be angry with them because our eyes are better than theirs? I see no reason for being angry with a blind man because he cannot see; that is the very reason why we should pity his infirmity. So, let us seek to relieve those who are burdened, to bring back those who have wandered, to strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees, and, to the best of our power, to lead others into that glorious light in which we ourselves are walking, for by the grace of God we are what we are.

Moreover, this should teach us *hopefulness concerning other men*. There is a drunken man; you think he can never be converted, but why not? The grace that saved you is sufficient to save him. You sometimes meet with an infidel; perhaps you have one in your family,—a father, or brother, or sister,—and you are apt to say, “Well, it is no use trying to get such an one to go to the house of God; all he would do would be to mock and jeer. If the minister should make a mistake, he would seize upon it, and use it as his stock-in-trade for the abuse of a week. If there be a fault among God’s children, he is sure to notice it, and to make it the theme of his reproach, so he had better be kept away from them.” But again I say, the grace that saved you is sufficient to save him; never give anyone up, even as God did not give you up. I always think that, as God has converted me by his grace, he can convert anybody; the conversion of any other sinner is not any more difficult to omnipotence, neither is it any easier, for omnipotence knows nothing of degrees. What marvellous things Christ has done, and done in some of us, too! Some of you must weep over that verse in which the apostle says, “And such were some of you, but ye are washed;” and you say, “Yes, and to God be all the glory that he hath made us what we are.” Therefore, let us continue to look after those whom Satan has ensnared, even the most hard-hearted sinners, and seek to bring them under the saving influence of the grace of God.

Then, lastly, if we are what we are “by the grace of God,” this should *teach us greater thankfulness*. Children of the Heavenly King, never forget to praise your God. We sometimes fail in this duty. We have had many meetings for prayer, to ask God to bless us in our manifold labours; now let us have some meetings for praise, to bless the Lord for his great goodness to us. I have heard that, in some parts of New England, there used to be a day of fasting every month, to mourn for the iniquity of the land, and so on; and, at last, some senator proposed that they should have a feast, and thank God for the mercies which they had received; and, truly, he was in the right. It is not good always to be fasting, we must feast sometimes. An old Puritan says that we take in breath by prayer,—by a sort of heavenly inspiration,—and that we breathe it out again by praise. Dear brethren and sisters, if you and I were to sing as heartily as we ought to sing, what a joyous song of praise there would be! If our voices could but be tuned to the deservings of God, what songs and sonnets

would make glad this wilderness! You remember Ralph Erskine's sonnet on the battle in heaven,—the great contention of the bards in paradise. He pictures them all contending as to who should have the lowest place, and which should most loudly praise the Lord. There were the babes snatched from their mothers' breasts; they claimed the lowest place because they had gone straight to heaven without any trials or troubles. But the grey-headed men, who had been divinely supported under the afflictions of many years, said that they owed the most to sovereign grace. Then came those who had been converted in their early years, and who said that they had already had a heaven below, so they could sing the loudest of all. Then came the penitent thief, who said that he had the greatest cause to praise the Lord for he had been converted at the last. While some declared that they must praise God most because they had been the blackest sinners, others said that they would praise him most for the restraining grace which had kept them from sin; and so the strife went on until they agreed, each one, to sing with all his might to the praise of that everlasting love which inscribed their names in the Lamb's book of life, that great love which bought them with Jesu's precious blood, and that omnipotent love which attended them all their journey through, and landed them at last in heaven.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

NUMBERS IV. 1—33.

Verses 1, 2. *And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families, by the house of their fathers,—*

There were three families,—those of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari, and to each of these families a different service was allotted. First, they were to be numbered. "The Lord knoweth them that are his," and he takes count of all his people.

3. *From thirty years old and upward even unto fifty years old, all that enter into the host, to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation.*

They were to take up this work as a warfare; for, though it was a peaceful work, yet it is described as being a warfare; and he who serves the Lord, though that service be perfect peace, will not serve him without finding it to be also a warfare.

4. *This shall be the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation, about the most holy things:*

They were to have to do with the most holy place,—to carry it, and to carry the vessels of it,—a very honourable position.

5, 6. *And when the camp setteth forward, Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering vail, and cover the ark of testimony with it: and shall put thereon the covering of badgers' skins, and shall spread over it a cloth wholly of blue, and shall put in the staves thereof.*

These Kohathites might not so take the ark as to handle it, much less might they ever look at it. But the priests, and the sons of Aaron, went in first, and after carefully covering the holy place, they covered up the