

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

NO. 77

A SERMON

DELIVERED ON SABBATH MORNING, MAY 4, 1856,

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AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK.

“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”

Matthew 20:15.

THE householder says, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?” and even so does the God of heaven and earth ask this question of you this morning, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?” There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children of God ought more earnestly to contend than the dominion of their Master over all creation, the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands, the throne of God, and His right to sit upon that throne.

On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the sovereignty of the infinite JEHOVAH. Men will allow God to be everywhere except on His throne. They will allow Him to be in His workshop to fashion worlds and to make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense his alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean. But when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth, and when we proclaim an *enthroned* God and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter, then it is that we are hissed and cursed, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. They love Him anywhere better than they do when He sits with His scepter in His hand and His crown upon His head.

But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust. It is God upon His throne of whom we have been singing this morning. And it is God upon His throne of whom we shall speak in this discourse. I shall dwell only, however, upon one portion of God’s sovereignty and that is God’s sovereignty in the distribution of His gifts. In this respect I believe He has a right to do as He wills with His own and that He exercises that right.

We must assume, before we commence our discourse, one thing certain, namely, that all blessings are gifts and that we have no claim to them by our own merit. This I think every considerate mind will grant. And this being admitted, we shall endeavor to show that He has a right, seeing they are His own, to do what He wills with them—to withhold them wholly if He pleases, to distribute them all if He chooses, to give to some and not to others, to give to none or to give to all, just as seems good in His sight. “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”

We shall divide God’s gifts into five classes. First, we shall have *temporal* gifts. Second, *saving* gifts. Third, *honorable* gifts. Fourth, gifts *useful* and fifth, gifts *comfortable*. Of all these we shall say, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with *mine own*?”

I. In the first place then, we notice GIFTS TEMPORAL.

It is an indisputable fact that God has not, in temporal matters, given to every man alike, that He has not distributed to all His creatures the same amount of happiness or the same standing in creation. There is a difference. Mark what a difference there is in men personally (for we shall consider men chiefly). One is born like Saul, a head and shoulders taller than the rest, another shall live all his life a Zaccheus,

a man short of stature. One has a muscular frame and a share of beauty, another is weak and far from having anything styled comeliness. How many do we find whose eyes have never rejoiced in the sunlight, whose ears have never listened to the charms of music, and whose lips have never been moved to sounds intelligible or harmonious? Walk through the earth and you will find men superior to yourself in vigor, health, and fashion, and others who are your inferiors in the very same respects. Some here are preferred far above their fellows in their outward appearance and some sink low in the scale, and have nothing about them that can make them glory in the flesh.

Why has God given to one man beauty and to another none, to one all his senses and to another but a portion? Why, in some, has He quickened the sense of apprehension, while others are obliged to bear about them a dull and stubborn body? We reply, let men say what they will, that no answer can be given except this, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight." The old Pharisee asked, "Did this man sin or his parents, that he was born blind?" We know that there was neither sin in parents nor child, that *he* was born blind, or that others have suffered similar distresses, but that God has done as it has pleased Him in the distribution of His earthly benefits. And thus He has said to the world, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?"

Mark also in the distribution of *mental gifts*, what a difference exists. All men are not like Socrates. There are but few Platos. We can discover but here and there a Bacon. We shall but every now and then converse with a Sir Isaac Newton. Some have stupendous intellects wherewith they can unravel secrets, fathom the depths of oceans, measure mountains, dissect the sunbeams, and weigh the stars. Others have but shallow minds. You may educate and educate, but can never make them great. You cannot improve what is not there. They have not genius and you cannot impart it.

Anybody may see that there is an inherent difference in men from their very birth. Some, with a little education, surpass those who have been elaborately trained. There are two boys educated, it may be, in the same school, by the same master, and they shall apply themselves to their studies with the same diligence, yet one shall far outstrip his fellow. Why is this? Because God has asserted His sovereignty over the intellect as well as the body. God has not made us all alike, but diversified His "gifts." One man is as eloquent as Whitefield. Another stammers, if he but speaks three words of his mother tongue. What makes these various differences between man and man? We answer, we must refer it all to the sovereignty of God, who does as He wills with His own.

Note again, what are the differences of *men's conditions in this world*. Mighty minds are from time to time discovered in men whose limbs are wearing the chains of slavery and whose backs are laid bare to the whip. They have black skins, but are in mind vastly superior to their brutal masters. So, too, in England—we find wise men often poor, and rich men not seldom ignorant and vain. One comes into the world to be arrayed at once in the imperial purple, another shall never wear anything but the humble garb of a peasant. One has a palace to dwell in and a bed of down for his repose, while another finds but a hard resting place and shall never have a more sumptuous covering than the thatch of his own cottage. If we ask the reason for this, the reply still is, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight."

So in other ways you will observe, in passing through life, how sovereignty displays itself. To one man God gives a long life and uniform health, so that he scarcely knows what it is to have a day's sickness. While another totters through the world and finds a grave at almost every step, feeling a thousand deaths in fearing one. One man, even in extreme old age, like Moses, has his eyes undimmed, and though his hair is grey, he stands as firmly on his feet as when a young man in his father's house. What, again we ask, is this difference? And the only adequate answer is, it is the effect of JEHOVAH's sovereignty. You find, too, that some men are cut off in the prime of their life, the very midst of their days, while others live beyond their threescore years and ten. One departs before he has reached the first stage of existence and another has his life lengthened out until it becomes quite a burden. We must, I conceive, necessarily trace the cause of all these differences in life to the fact of God's sovereignty. He is Ruler and King and shall He not do as He wills with His own.

We pass from this point, but before we do so we must stop to improve it just a moment. O you who are gifted with a noble frame, a comely body, boast not yourself therein, for your gifts come from God. O glory not, for if you glory, you become uncomely in a moment. The flowers boast not of their beauty, nor do the birds sing of their plumage. Be not vain, you daughters of beauty. Be not exalted, you sons of comeliness. And O you men of might and intellect, remember, that all you have is bestowed by a Sovereign Lord. He did create. He can destroy.

There are not many steps between the mightiest intellect and the helpless idiot, deep thought verges on insanity. Your brain may, at any moment, be smitten and you may be doomed henceforth to live a madman. Boast not yourself of all that you know, for even the little knowledge you have has been given you. Therefore, I say, exalt not yourself above measure, but use for God what God has given you, for it is a royal gift and you should not lay it aside. But if the Sovereign Lord has given you one talent and no more, lay it not up in a napkin, but use it well, and then it may be that He will give you more. Bless God that you have more than others and thank Him also that He has given you less than others, for you have less to carry on your shoulders. And the lighter your burden the less cause will you have to groan as you travel on towards the better land. Bless God then if you possess less than your fellows and see His goodness in withholding as well as in giving.

II. So far, most men probably have kept up with us, but when we come to the second point, GIFTS SAVING, there will be a large number who will go from us, because they cannot receive our doctrine.

When we apply this truth regarding the divine sovereignty to man's *salvation*, then we find men standing up to defend their poor fellow-creatures whom they conceive to be injured by God's predestination. But I never heard of men standing up for the devil, and yet if any of God's creatures have a right to complain of His dealings, it is the fallen angels. For their sin, they were hurled from heaven at once and we read not that any message of mercy was ever sent to them. Once cast out, their doom was sealed, while men were reprieved, redemption sent into their world, and a large number of them chosen to eternal life. Why not quarrel with sovereignty in the one case as well as the other?

We say that God has elected a people out of the human race and His right to do this is denied. But I ask, why not equally dispute the fact that God has chosen men and not fallen angels, or His justice in such a choice? If salvation is a matter of right, surely the angels had as much claim to mercy as men. Were they not seated in more than equal dignity? Did they sin more? We think not. Adam's sin was so willful and complete that we cannot suppose a greater sin than that which he committed. Would not the angels who were thrust out of heaven have been of greater service to their Maker if restored than we can ever be? Had we been the judges in this matter, we might have given deliverance to angels but not to men. Admire then, divine sovereignty and love, that whereas the angels were broken into shivers, God has raised an elect number of the race of men to set them among princes, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Note again the divine sovereignty in that *God chose the Israelitish race and left the Gentiles for years in darkness*. Why was Israel instructed and saved, while Syria was left to perish in idolatry? Was the one race purer in its origin and better in its character than the other? Did not the Israelites take unto themselves false gods a thousand times and provoke the true God to anger and loathing? Why then should they be favored above their fellows? Why did the sun of heaven shine upon them, while all around the nations were left in darkness and were sinking into hell by myriads? Why? The only answer that can be given is this, that God is a Sovereign and "will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy and whom he wills, he hardens."

So now also, why is it that God has *sent His Word to us while a multitude of people are still without His Word*? Why do we each come up to God's tabernacle, Sabbath after Sabbath, privileged to listen to the voice of the minister of Jesus, while other nations have not been visited thereby? Could not God have caused the light to shine in the darkness there as well as here? Could not He, if He had pleased, have sent forth messengers swift as the light to proclaim His Gospel over the whole earth? He could

have done it if He would. Since we know that He has not done it, we bow in meekness, confessing His right to do as He wills with His own.

But let me drive the doctrine home once more. Behold how God displays His sovereignty in this fact, that out of the same congregation, those who hear the same minister, and listen to the same truth, one is taken and the other left. Why is it that one of my hearers shall sit in yonder pew and her sister by her side, and yet the effect of the preaching shall be different upon each? They have been nursed on the same knee, rocked in the same cradle, educated under the same auspices. They hear the same minister, with the same attention, why is it that the one shall be saved and the other left? Far be it for us to weave any excuse for the man who is damned, we know of none, but also, far be it for us to take glory from God. We assert that GOD makes the difference, that the saved sister will not have to thank herself, but her God.

There shall even be two men given to drunkenness. Some word spoken shall pierce one of them through, but the other shall sit unmoved, although they shall, in all respects, be equally the same both in constitution and education. What is the reason? You will reply, perhaps, because the one accepts and the other rejects the message of the Gospel. But must you not come back to the question, who made the one accept it and who made the other reject it? I *dare* you to say that the man made himself to differ. You *must* admit in your conscience that it is God alone to whom this power belongs.

But those who dislike this doctrine are, nevertheless, up in arms against us and they say, "How can God justly make such a difference between the members of His family? Suppose a father should have a certain number of children and he should give to one all his favors and consign the others to misery, should we not say that he was a very unkind and cruel father?" I answer, yes, but the cases are not the same. You have *not a father* to deal with, but a *Judge*. You say all men are God's children. I demand of you to prove that. I never read it in my Bible. I dare not say, "Our Father which are in heaven," till I am regenerated. I cannot rejoice in the fatherhood of God towards me till I know that I am one with Him and a joint-heir with Christ. I dare not claim the fatherhood of God as an unregenerated man. It is not father and child, for the child has a claim upon its father, but it is King and subject, and not even so high a relation as that, for there is a claim between subject and King. A creature, a sinful creature, can have no claim upon God, for that would be to make salvation of works and not of grace.

If men can merit salvation, then to save them is only the payment of a debt, and God gives them nothing more than He ought to give them. But we assert that grace must be distinguishing if it be grace at all. O, but some say is it not written that, "*He gives to every man a measure of grace to profit withal?*" If you like to repeat that wonderful quotation so often hurled at my head, you are very welcome, for it is no quotation from Scripture, unless it is an Arminian edition. The only passage at all like it refers to the spiritual gifts of the saints and the saints only.

But I say, granted your supposition, that a measure of grace is given to every man to profit withal, yet He has given to some a measure of particular grace to make that profit. For what do you mean by grace, which I put out, to profit? I can understand a man's improvement in the use of grease, but grace improved and made use of by the power of man, I cannot comprehend. Grace is not a thing which I use, grace is something which uses me.

But people talk of divine grace sometimes as if it were something they could use and not as an influence having power over them. Grace is something not which I improve, but which improves me, employs me, works on me. And let people talk as they will about universal grace, it is all nonsense, there is no such thing, nor can there be. They may talk correctly of universal blessings, because we see that the natural gifts of God are scattered everywhere, more or less, and men may receive or reject them. It is not so, however, with grace. Men cannot take the grace of God and employ it in turning themselves from darkness to light. The light does not come to the darkness and say, use me. But the light comes and drives the darkness away. Life does not come to the dead man and say, use me and be restored to life, but it comes with a power of its own and restores to life. The spiritual influence does not come to the dry

bones and say, use this power and clothe yourselves with flesh. But it comes and clothes them with flesh and the work is done. Grace is a thing which comes and exercises an influence on us,

*“The sovereign will of God alone
Creates us heirs of grace.
Born in the image of His Son,
A new-created race.”*

And we say to all of you who gnash your teeth at this doctrine, whether you know it or not, you have a vast deal of enmity towards God in your hearts, for until you can be brought to know this doctrine, there is something which you have not yet discovered, which makes you opposed to the idea of God absolute, God unbounded, God unfettered, God unchanging and God having a free-will, which you are so fond of proving that the creature possesses. I am persuaded that the sovereignty of God must be held by us if we would be in a healthy state of mind. “Salvation is of the LORD alone.” Then give all the glory to His holy name, to whom all glory belongs.

III. We now come, in the third place, to notice the differences which God often makes in His church in HONORABLE GIFTS.

There is a difference made between God’s own children, when they are His children. Note what I mean, one has the honorable gift of *knowledge*, another knows but little. I meet, every now and then, with a dear Christian brother with whom I could talk for a month and learn something from him every day. He has had deep experience, he has seen into the deep things of God, his whole life has been a perpetual study wherever he has been. He seems to have gathered thoughts, not from books merely, but from men, from God, from his own heart. He knows all the intricacies and windings of Christian experience, he understands the height, the depths, the lengths, and the breadths of the love of Christ, which passes knowledge. He has gained a grand idea, an intimate knowledge of the system of grace and can vindicate the dealings of the Lord with His people.

Then you meet with another who has passed through many troubles, but he has no deep acquaintance with Christian experience. He never learned a single secret by all his troubles. He just floundered out of one trouble into another, but never stopped to pick up any of the jewels that lay in the mire—never tried to discover the precious jewels that lay in his afflictions. He knows very little more of the heights and depths of the Savior’s love than when he first came into the world. You may converse with such a man as long as you like, but you will get nothing from him. If you ask why is it, I answer, there is a sovereignty of God in giving knowledge to some and not to others.

I was walking, the other day, with an aged Christian, who told me how he had profited by my ministry. There is nothing that humbles me like that thought of yon old man deriving experience in the things of God, receiving instruction in the ways of the Lord from a mere babe in grace. But I expect that when I am an old man, if I should live to be such, that some babe in grace will instruct me. God sometimes shuts the mouth of the old man and opens the mouth of the child. Why should we be a teacher to hundreds who are, in some respects, far more able to teach us? The only answer we can find is in the divine sovereignty and we must bow before it, for has He not a right to do as He wills with His own? Instead of being envious of those who have the gift of knowledge, we should seek to gain the same, if possible. Instead of sitting down and murmuring that we have not more knowledge, we should remember that the foot cannot say to the head, nor the head to the foot, I have no need of you, for God has given us talents as it has pleased Him.

Note again when speaking of honorable gifts. Not only knowledge, but *office* is an honorable gift. There is nothing more honorable to a man than the office of a deacon or a minister. We magnify our office, though we would not magnify ourselves. We hold there is nothing can dignify a man more than being appointed to an office in a Christian church. I would rather be a deacon of a church than Lord Mayor of London. A minister of Christ is, in my estimation, an infinitely higher honor than the world

can bestow. My pulpit is to me more desirable than a throne and my congregation is an empire more than large enough. An empire before which the empires of the earth dwindle into nothing in everlasting importance. Why does God give to one man a special call by the Holy Ghost to be a minister and pass by another?

There is another man more gifted, perhaps, but we dare not put him in a pulpit, because he has not had a special call. So with the deaconship. The man whom some would, perhaps, think most suitable for the office is passed by and another chosen. There is a manifestation of God's sovereignty in the appointment to office in putting David on a throne, in making Moses the leader of the children of Israel through the wilderness, in choosing Daniel to stand among princes, in electing Paul to be the minister to the Gentiles, and Peter to be the apostle of the circumcision. And you who have not the gift of honorable office must learn the great truth contained in the question of the Master, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?"

There is another honorable gift, the gift of *utterance*. Eloquence has more power over men than all else besides. If a man would have power over the multitude, he must seek to touch their hearts and chain their ears. There are some men who are like vessels full of knowledge to the brim, but have no means of giving it forth to the world. They are rich in all gems of learning, but know not how to set them in the golden ring of eloquence. They can collect the choicest of flowers, but know not how to tie them up in a sweet garland to present them to the admirer's eyes. How is this? We say again, the sovereignty of God is here displayed in the distribution of honorable gifts. Learn here, O Christian man, if you have gifts to cast the honor of them at the Savior's feet and if you possess them not, learn not to murmur. Remember that God is equally as kind when He keeps back as when He distributes His favors. If any among you is exalted, let him not be puffed up. If any is lowly, let him not be despised. For God gives to every vessel his measure of grace. Serve Him after your measure and adore the King of heaven who does as He pleases.

IV. We notice in the fourth place, the gift of USEFULNESS.

I have often done wrong in finding fault with brother ministers for not being useful. I have said you might have been as useful as I have been had you been in earnest. But surely there are others even more earnest and more efficient, others laboring as constantly, but with far less effect. And therefore, let me retract my accusation and in lieu, thereof, assert that the gift of usefulness is the result of God's sovereignty. It is not in man to be useful, but in God to make him useful. We may labor ourselves with all our might, but God alone can make us useful. We can put every stitch of canvas on when the wind blows, but we cannot make the wind blow.

The sovereignty of God is also seen in the diversity of ministerial gifts. You go to one minister and are fed with plenty of good food, another has not enough to feed a mouse. He has plenty of reproof, but no food for the child of God. Another can comfort the child of God, but he cannot reprove a backslider. He has not strength of mind enough to give those earnest home strokes which are sometimes needed. And what is the reason! God's sovereignty. One can wield the sledge hammer, but could not heal a broken heart. If he were to attempt it, you would be reminded of an elephant trying to thread a needle. Such a man can reprove, but he cannot apply oil and wine to a bruised conscience. Why? Because God has not given to him the gift.

There is another one who always preaches experiential divinity, and very rarely touches upon doctrine. Another is all doctrine and cannot preach much about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Why? God has not given him the gift of doctrine. Another always preaches Jesus, blessed Jesus, men of the Hawker school, and many say, "Oh! they do not give us experience enough. They do not go into the deep experience of the corruption which vexes the children of God." But we do not blame them for this. You will notice that out of the same man will at one time flow streams of living water, while at another time he will be as dry as possible. On one Sabbath you go away refreshed by the preaching and the next you get no good. There is divine sovereignty in all this and we must learn to recognize and admire it.

I was preaching on one occasion last week to a large crowd of people and in one part of the sermon the people were very much affected. I felt that the power of God was there, one poor creature absolutely shrieked out because of the wrath of God against sin. But at another time, the same words might have been uttered and there might have been the same desire in the minister's heart, and yet no effect produced. We must trace, I say, divine sovereignty in all such cases. We ought to recognize God's hand in everything.

But the present is the most godless generation that ever trod this earth, I verily believe. In our fathers' days, there was hardly a shower, but they declared that God caused it to fall. And they had prayers for rain, prayers for sunshine, and prayers for harvest. As well when a haystack was on fire, as when a famine desolated the land, our forefathers said the Lord has done it. But now our philosophers try to explain everything and trace all phenomena to second causes. But brethren, let it be ours to ascribe the origin and direction of all things to the Lord and the Lord alone.

V. Lastly, GIFTS COMFORTABLE are of God.

O, what comfortable gifts do some of us enjoy in the ordinances of God's house and in a ministry that is profitable. But how many churches have not a ministry of that kind? And why then have we? Because God has made a difference. Some here have strong faith and can laugh at impossibilities. We can sing a song in all ill weathers, in the tempest as well as in the calm. But there is another with little faith who is in danger of tumbling down over every straw. We trace eminent faith entirely to God.

One is born with a melancholy temperament and he sees a tempest brewing even in the calm. While another is cheerful and sees a silver lining to every cloud, however black, and he is a happy man. But why is that? Comfortable gifts come of God. And then observe that we ourselves differ at times. For a season we may have blessed communion with heaven and are permitted to look within the veil. But perhaps those delightful enjoyments are gone. But do we murmur on that account? May He not do as He wills with His own? May He not take back what He has given? The comforts we possess were His before they were ours

*“And should You take them all away,
Yet would I not repine,
Before they were possessed by me
They were entirely Thine.”*

There is no joy of the Spirit, there is no exceeding blessed hope, no strong faith, no burning desire, no close fellowship with Christ, which is not the gift of God, and which we must not trace to Him. When I am in darkness and suffer disappointment, I will look up and say He gives songs in the night. And when I am made to rejoice, I will say, my mountain shall stand fast forever. The Lord is a sovereign JEHOVAH, and therefore, prostrate at His feet I lie, and if I perish, I will perish there.

But let me say, brethren, that so far from this doctrine of divine sovereignty making you to sit down in sloth, I hope in God it will have a tendency to humble you and so to lead you to say, “I am unworthy of the least of all Your mercies. I feel that You have a right to do with me as You will. If You crush me, a helpless worm, You will not be dishonored. And I have no right to ask You to have compassion upon me, save this, that I need Your mercy. Lord, if You will, You are able to pardon and You never gave grace to one that wanted it more. Because I am empty, fill me with the bread of heaven. Because I am naked, clothe me with Your robe. Because I am dead, give me life.”

If you press that plea with all your soul and all your mind, though JEHOVAH is a Sovereign, He will stretch out His scepter and save, and you shall live to worship Him in the beauty of holiness, loving and adoring His gracious sovereignty. “He that believes,” is the declaration of Scripture, “and is baptized, shall be saved. But he that believes not shall be damned.” He that believes in Christ alone and is baptized with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, shall be saved, but he who rejects Christ and believes not in Him, shall be damned. That is the sovereign decree and proclamation of heaven, bow to it, acknowledge it, obey it, and God bless you.

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