

DISTINGUISHING GRACE

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A SERMON
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*“For who maketh thee to differ from another?”
1 Corinthians 4:7*

OR as it is in the Greek, “For who distinguisheth thee?” “Who giveth thee distinguishing and discriminating mercy?” “Who maketh thee to differ from another?” Pride is the inherent sin of man, and yet it is of all sins the most foolish. A thousand arguments might be used to show its absurdity, but none of these would be sufficient to quench its vitality. Alive it is in the heart, and there it will be, till we die to this world and rise again without spot or blemish.

Yet many are the arrows which may be shot at the heart of our boasting. Take for instance the argument of creation, how strongly that thrusts at our pride. There is a vessel upon the potter’s wheel, would it not be preposterous for that clay which the potter fashions to boast of itself and say, “How well am I fashioned! how beautifully am I proportioned, I deserve much praise!” Why, O lump of clay, whatever you are, the potter made you, however elegant your proportions, however matchless your symmetry, the glory is due to him that made you, not to yourself, you are but the work of his hands.

And so let us speak unto ourselves. We are the thing formed, shall we say of ourselves that we deserve honor because God has formed us excellently and wondrously? No, the fact of our creation should extinguish the sparks of our pride. What are we after all, but as grasshoppers in His sight, as drops of a bucket, as lumps of animated dust, we are but the infants of a day when we are most old, we are but the insects of an hour when we are most strong, we are but the wild ass’s colt when we are most wise, we are but as folly and vanity when we are most excellent—let that tend to humble us.

But surely if these prevail not to clip the pinions of our high soaring pride, the Christian may at least bind its wings with arguments derived from the distinguishing love and peculiar mercies of God. “*Who maketh thee to differ from another?*”—this question should be like a dagger put to the throat of our boasting—“*and what hast thou that thou did not receive?*”—it would be like a sword thrust through the heart of our self-exaltation and pride.

We shall now for a moment or two endeavor to put down our pride by observing wherein God has distinguished us and made us to differ, and then by noticing that all this comes of Him, and should be a reason for humiliation and not for boasting.

I. Many of us differ from others in God’s providential dealings towards us.

Let us think a moment how many there are of God’s precious and dearly beloved children, who at this moment are in the depths of poverty. They are not walking about in sheepskins and goatskins, persecuted, afflicted, and tormented, but still they are hungry, and no man gives them food to eat; they are thirsty, and no man furnishes them with drink, their lives are wasted in poverty and their years in distress.

Some there are of God’s children who were once in affluence but have been suddenly plunged into the lowest depths of penury, they knew what it was to be respected among the sons of men, but now they are among the dogs of the flock, and no man cares for them. There are some of us who are here present who have all that heart can wish, God has given us food and raiment, the lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places, and we have a goodly heritage.

Let us gratefully ask—“Who maketh us to differ?” Let us recollect that all we have is the gift of His providence. Not to you, O my hands, do I sacrifice because you have toiled for bread, not to you, O ye

brains, will I offer incense because you have thought for my daily livelihood, not to you, O my lips, will I offer my adulation because you have been the means of furnishing me with words. No, unto God, who gives power to get, and to have, and to enjoy, unto Him be all the praise for what He has done for us. Never let our songs cease, for His goodness is an ever flowing stream.

Perhaps none of us can ever know, until the great day shall reveal it, how much some of God's servants are tried. To this day they have "perils by land, and perils by sea, and perils by false brethren," to this hour they are pinched by want, they are deserted by friends, they know what despondency means, and all the ill which dejection and disappointment can bring to them, they have dived into the lowest depths of the sea of trouble, and have walked for many a league over the hot sand of the desert of affliction.

And if God has delivered us from these things, and has made our path more pleasant, and has led us beside the still waters, and into the green pastures—if He has distinguished us by the common gifts of His providence above many others of His children who are far better and far more holy than we, what shall we say?

It is owing only to His grace towards us, and we will not exalt ourselves above our fellows, we will not be high-minded, but condescend to men of low estate; we will not lift our necks with the proud, but we will bow down our brows with the humble; every man shall be called our brother, not merely those who are arrayed in goodly raiment, but those who are clothed in the habiliments of toil, they shall be confessed to be our kindred, sprung from the same stock, for what have we that we have not received, and what maketh us to differ from another?

I wish that some of the stiff-necked gentry of our churches would at times recollect this. Their condition is smooth as oil and as soft as young down, but their hearts are as high as poplars and their manners as stiff as hedge stakes. There have been many who would do well if they would learn that they have nothing beyond what God has given them. And the more God has given them, the more they are in debt.

Why should a man boast because he is deeper in debt than another? Do the debtors in the Queen's Bench say to one another, "You are only a hundred pounds in debt, and I a thousand, therefore I am a greater gentleman than you"? I think not. But nevertheless, if they did so, they would be as wise as men who boast beyond their fellow creatures because they happen to have more of rank, wealth, honor, and position, in this world. "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

But the best way for you to feel this part of the discourse is to go tomorrow into a hospital, and walk along the wards and see how poor men's bodies suffer, and then go into the operating room and see what flesh and blood may have to endure. Then when you have done, go round the neighborhood to see the sick who have lain for ten, or twelve, or fifteen years upon the same bed, and after that go and visit some of God's poverty stricken children who just exist in this world, and it is but a bare existence, maintained on bread and butter and a little tea, and but too little of even such things as those. Go and see their poor, miserable, unfurnished rooms, their cellars and their attics, and that will be a better sermon to you than anything I can utter.

You will come home and say, "Oh my God, I bless You for Your kindness towards me. These temporal mercies which I once thought so little of, I must heartily bless You for. I must thank You for what You have given to me, and I will ascribe it all to Your love, for You make me to differ. I have nothing that I have not received."

II. But this is not the most important point for us to observe. We are now going to look at, not matters of providence, but the things of God's grace.

Here it is that we who are now assembled as a church have most reason to bless God and to say, "Who maketh us to differ from others?" Take, my dear friends, in your mind's eye the cases of the careless, the hardened, and the thoughtless, of even this present congregation. Side-by-side with you, my

brother, there may sit a man, a woman, who is dead in trespasses and sins. To such the music of the Gospel is like singing to a dead ear, and the dropping of the Word is as dew upon a rock.

There are many in this congregation whose position in society, and whose moral character are extremely excellent, and yet before God their state is awful. They attend the house of God as regularly as we do. They sing as we sing, sit as we sit, and come and go as we do, and yet they are without God and without hope in the world—strangers from the commonwealth of Israel, and aliens from the covenant of promise!

Yet what maketh us to differ? Why is it that I this day am not sitting down a callous hearer, hardened under the Gospel? Why am I not at this very hour hearing the Word with my outward ear but rejecting it in my inward heart? Why is it that I have not been suffered to reject the invitation of Christ to despise His grace—to go on, Sunday after Sunday, hearing the Word and yet being like the deaf adder to it?

Oh, *have I made myself to differ?* God forbid that such a proud, blaspheming thought should defile our hearts. No, beloved—

*“Twas the same love which spread the feast,
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.”*

The only reason, my brother, why you are at this time an heir of God, a joint-heir with Christ, a partaker of sweet fellowship with Jesus, an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven, is because HE hath made thee to differ. You were an heir of wrath, even as others, born in sin and shaped in iniquity. Therefore must you give all the glory to His holy name and cry—“Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be all the praise.” Even this one thought when fully masticated and digested, might feed up our gratitude and make us humbly bow before the footstool of God’s throne with joyful thanksgiving.

III. Will you please however, think of other cases?

Who maketh thee to differ from others of this assembly who are more hardened than those to whom we have alluded? There are some men and women of whose salvation, if it were to be wrought by man, we must indeed utterly despair, for their hearts are harder than the most stubborn steel. The hammer of the Word makes no impression on such souls. The thunders of the law roll over their heads, but they can sleep in the midst of the tumult—the lightnings of Sinai flash against their hearts, but even those mighty flames seem as if they recoil from the attack.

Do you not know such? they are your own children, your husband, your wife, some of your own family, and as you look upon them, though you have longed, prayed, and wept, and sighed for their souls, you are compelled to say in your heart, “I half fear that I shall never see them converted.” You say with sorrow, “Oh, if they are saved it will be a wonder of divine grace indeed. Surely they will never yield their souls to God. They seem as callous as if their conscience were seared with a hot iron, they appear to have the stamp of condemnation upon their brow, as if they were marked and sealed, and had the earnest of the pit upon their hearts before they came there.”

Ay, but stop—“Who maketh thee to differ?” Why am I not at this day among the most hardened of men? How is it that my heart is melted so that I can weep at the recollection of the Redeemer’s suffering? Why is it that my conscience is tender, and that I am led to self-examination by a searching sermon? How is it that I know how to pray and to groan before God on account of sin? What has brought the water from these eyes, but the selfsame power which brought the water from the rock? And what has put life into my heart but the selfsame Omnipotence which scattered manna in the hungry desert? Our hearts had still been like the wild beasts of the forest if it had not been for divine grace.

Oh! I beseech you, my dear friends, every time you see a hardened sinner, just say within yourself, “There is the picture of what I should have been, what I must have been, if all-subduing, all-conquering

love had not melted and sanctified my heart.” Take these two cases then, and you have, heaven knows, reason enough to sing to the praise of sovereign grace.

IV. But now another, the lowest class of sinners do not mingle with our congregations, but are to be seen in our back streets and lanes, and sometimes in our highways.

How frightful is the sin of drunkenness, which degrades a man into a beast, which sinks him lower than the brutes themselves! How shameful is the iniquity of blasphemy, which without any object or any chance of profit, brings a curse upon its own head! How awful are the ways of the lascivious wretch who ruins both body and soul at once, and not content with his own destruction ruins others with him. Cases that come under our observation in the daily newspapers and that assail us in our daily observation and hearing are too vile to be told. How often is our blood chilled with the sound of an imprecation, and how frequently our heart is made to palpitate with the daring impieties of the blasphemous?

Now let us stop, “Who maketh thee to differ?” Let us recollect that if we live very near to Christ, we would have lived quite as near to hell if it had not been for saving grace. Some of you here present are special witnesses of this grace, for you have yourself experienced redemption from these iniquities.

Look back some four years with some of you and recollect how different were your surroundings then to what they are now. Mayhap four years ago you were in the taproom singing the song of the drunkard as readily as any, but just a little while ago you cursed that Savior whom now you love. Only a few months have flitted over your head since you ran with the multitude to do evil, but now, “Who maketh thee to differ?” Who has wrought this miracle of grace? Who has led you to the stool of the penitent and the table of communion, who has done it?”

Beloved, you are not slow to answer, for the verdict of your heart is undivided, you do not give the glory in part to man and in part to God. No, you cry loudly in your hearts, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, and ye have been washed in the Redeemer’s blood, and sanctified with the Spirit. You have been made to differ and you will confess it, you have been made to differ by distinguishing grace and distinguishing grace alone.

And what upholds the rest of us from being what these my reclaimed brethren once were, and what they will become again unless saving grace keeps them? What preserves the preacher this day from being a lecturer to Infidels, dishonoring the grace of God which now he glories to magnify? What prevents the deacon from being an assistant in the courts of Satan? What forbids those who open the doors at the house of our God, and who serve Him on the Sabbath day from being door-keepers in the tents of the sons of Belial? Why nothing, they had been there unless *grace* had prevented them. Grace has done it and nothing else.

When we pass a prostitute in the street, we say, “O poor creature! I can pity you. I have not a harsh word for you, for I had been as you are had not God preserved me.” And when you see the reeling drunkard, be not too hasty to condemn, recollect you had been as a beast before God unless the Lord had kept you, and when you hear the oath and shudder at it, imagine not that you are superior in yourself to the man who curses God, for perhaps you once cursed him too, and certainly you would have done had not the Holy Spirit sanctified you and implanted in you a hatred of that which the wicked so greedily follow.

Have you seen a man hanged for murder? Have you seen another transported for the most infamous of crimes? If you hear of one who sins against society so foully that mankind excommunicate him, pause and say, “Oh! but I should have gone as low as that, I should have been as black as he, unless restraining grace had kept me back in my unregeneracy, and unless constraining grace had pushed me forward in the heavenly race, ever since I have known the will of Jesus.”

V. And now we will pause again and think over another evil which stares us in the face in connection with every church.

There are most melancholy cases of backsliding in so large a church as this. We are compelled often to discover the character of men and women who once seemed fair for heaven, but who manifested that they never had the root of the matter in them. Oh! well did the poet say—

*“When any turn from Zion’s way,
Alas! what numbers do!”*

No trial is greater to the true minister than the apostasy of his flock. All the rage of men is quite unable to bring tears to our eyes, but this has done it. Alas! when those whom I have loved have turned aside from the way of God, when those who have sat with us at the same table, and have joined with us in church communion, have gone out from us and have brought dishonor upon the church, and upon the name of Christ, there has been woe in my inmost spirit.

Sometimes there are cases as glaring as they are painful, and as vile as they are grievous. Some of those, who were once in the midst of God’s sanctuary, have become drunkards and whoremongers—and God in heaven only knows what. They have sinned against everything that is seemly, as well as everything that is holy.

At the remembrance of these our eyes are filled with tears. “Oh that our head were waters, and our eyes fountains of tears, that we might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of our people.” No mischief makers are so powerful as deserters. None cause so much agony as those who have nestled beneath our wings, and then have flown away to feed with carrion vultures on the putrid carcasses of lust and sin.

But now let us pause. How is it that the minister has not forsaken his profession, and gone back like a dog to his vomit, and like the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire? How is it that the deacons of this church have not turned aside unto crooked ways, and denied the faith, and become worse than infidels? How is it that so many members of this church have been kept so that the wicked one touches them not?

O beloved! I can say for myself, I am a continual miracle of divine grace. If you leave me, Lord, for a moment, I am utterly undone.

*“Leave, O leave me not alone!
Still support and comfort me.”*

Let Abraham be deserted by his God, he equivocates and denies his wife. Let Noah be deserted, he becomes a drunkard, and is naked to his shame. Let Lot be left a while, and filled with wine, he revels in incestuous embraces, and the fruit of his body becomes a testimony to his disgrace. Nay, let David, the man after God’s own heart, be left, and Uriah’s wife shall soon show the world that the man after God’s own heart has still an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. Oh! well does the poet put it—

*“Methinks I hear the Savior say,
Wilt Thou forsake Me too?”*

And now let our conscience answer—

*“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.”*

Oh be not rashly self-confident, Christian man. Be as confident as you can in your God, but be distrustful of yourself. You may yet become all that is vile and vicious, unless sovereign grace prevent

and keep you to the end. But remember if you have been preserved, the crown of your keeping belongs to the Shepherd of Israel, and you know who that is. For He has said, "I the LORD do keep it. I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day." "Ye know who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before His presence with exceedingly great joy." Then give all glory to the King immortal, invisible, the only wise God your Savior, who has kept you thus.

VI. Allow me one more contrast, once again let your gratitude go with me.

Since you and I have joined the church how many who were once our companions have been damned whilst we have been saved, how many who were no worse than we were by nature have sunk into the lowest pit of hell. Conceive their unutterable torments, imagine their inconceivable woes, depict before the eye of your fancy their indescribable agonies.

Descend in spirit for a moment to the gates of fire, enter into the abode of despair where justice reigns supreme on her iron throne, pass by the dreary cell of those who are everlastingly damned. Behold the twisting of that worm that never dies, and the bleeding hearts that are crushed within its coils. Look you at that flame unquenchable and behold the souls that are sweltering there in torments to us unknown, and look if you can look, but you cannot look, for your eyes would be stricken with blindness if you could see their torments. Your hair should be blanched with but a moment of that horrible exhibition.

Ah! while you stand then and think on that region of death, despair, and damnation, recollect that you would have been there if it had not been for sovereign grace. You have a harp prepared for you in heaven, a crown laid up for you when you have finished your course. You have a mansion, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Oh, why is it you are not already a fiend, who is it that has given you a good hope through grace that you shall never come into that place of torment. Oh! tell it the wide world over. Tell it in time and in eternity, *free grace* hath done it. Free grace has done it from the first to the last.

I was a brand in the fire, but He plucked me from the burning, quenched me in His blood, and now He declares I shall be with Him forever in heaven. But oh! pause brethren and think that some of your former pot-companions, some of the companions of your revels and debaucheries are now in hell, and you are not there, and by the grace of God never will be there. Oh! why is this, why is this? Blessed be the Lord my God from this time forth and forever. Praise ye His name. Grace has done it. Grace has done it all.

No, I ne'er shall wear the chain, I ne'er shall be stretched upon that rack, nor feel that fire—

*"But I shall see His face,
And never, never sin,
But from the rivers of His grace
Drink endless pleasures in."*

But I most confidently proclaim that the reason why I shall escape and shall be glorified, is not to be found in me, but in Him. He hath made me to differ. I have nothing but what I have received.

Now what shall we say to these things. If God has made you to differ, the first prayer we should now utter should be, "Lord, humble us. Take away pride out of us. O God forgive us, that such beasts as we are should ever be proud." We might have been with our father the devil at this very hour, if it had not been for divine love. And if we are now in the house of our Father which is in heaven shall we be proud? Avaunt thou monster! Go and dwell with the Pharisee. Pride agrees well enough with the man who has in his own esteem been always virtuous. Go away and live with him who has had good works from the first day until now, but away from *me*.

"I the chief of sinners am,"

and saved by sovereign grace shall I be proud. It is not fit that you shouldest live in my heart, you monster! Begone! Begone! Find a fitter habitation than my soul. Should I be proud after such mercy, after such ill-deserving, but such God-receiving. Begone, pride! Begone!

Another lesson, if God alone hath made us to differ, why may He not make others to differ too? "After the Lord saved me," said one, "I never despaired of anybody," and let us each say so too. If you were brought in why not another? Will you ever give up praying for anybody now that you are saved?

I once heard one say concerning his child, "I think I must give her up, I can scarcely think she ever will be converted." Why you have been pardoned yourself, and if the Lord can do that, He can do anything. I am sure if the Lord has brought me to His feet there does not remain in the world a case that can ever equal mine, if He has brought me to receive His free grace, His sovereign love, His precious blood, and has made me to love Him, then there can be nothing too hard for Him. O Lord, if You have melted this metal heart, and dissolved this stony soul, You can break anything. If You have broken the northern iron and the steel, then what remains beyond Your power?

Go back then, Christian, armed with this fact, that God who hath made thee to differ can make anybody to differ. There can be no case beyond His strength, if He brought you in He can bring all in. If He does but stretch out His hand, no man need despair. Therefore, "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whither shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

Again, who has made me to differ? Has my Lord done it?—then let me serve Him more than others. There was a question asked once by our Savior, "What do ye more than others?" That question might well be put to each child of God here present. My dear friends, we must not be content with doing as much as other people do, in fact, we must never be contented with our doings at all, but always be trying to do more for Him who has done so much for us. Should I give my body to be burned, my flesh piecemeal to the knife, my nerves to the rack, and my heart to the spear, yet would I not give Him all that He deserves. No, if I should pass through the horrors of martyrdom, it were but a poor tribute to love so amazing, so divine.

What are you doing my friends, what are you doing my brothers and sisters for Christ? But I will not blame you, I censure myself if I censure you, but I will confess my own iniquities and leave you to confess yours. I do try to serve my Master, but I do not serve Him as I would. Each act that I perform is marred, either by want of prayer for a blessing upon it, by want of faith in my Lord, or by pride in looking back upon it.

I find too continually a tendency to serve myself instead of serving Christ, a constant longing rather to get through the work than to do it acceptably. And oh! when I think upon all, I must say I am an unprofitable servant. Have mercy O gracious Lord on my good works as well as on my bad ones, for my good works are but bad in the best and cannot be acceptable in themselves.

I am certain some of you have a little more need to say that than I have. Let us cease boasting any more. I know there are some here who are not serving Christ, some members in this church are doing nothing. You have not thought of doing anything for Christ, have you? You pay your regular subscriptions, you do what you are told to do, but do you give to Christ secretly? do you devote your substance unto Him when no one knows it? do you spend your time for Him? have you chosen a sphere, and have you said, "This is my work, and by the grace of God I will do it"?

Oh! you cannot tell how much there is to do, and how few there are to do it. I would I could have a church all alive, all active, so that there never could be a want but those who have would be ready to supply, and never a work but those who are qualified would be ready to fulfill. Never fear but we should find too many rather than too few to aid its accomplishment.

Oh that we had the good spirit of the ancient church, the spirit to propagate our Christianity everywhere. There needs to be in many of the suburbs of London fresh Gospel churches springing up. I can point to many places in my own vicinity, seven or eight, nine or ten in a row, where there is a chapel needed. In each place there are believers living, who do not think about uniting to establish a fresh

cause, but as long as their peculiar wants are satisfied, by journeying a long way off perhaps, they forget the hundreds and thousands who are pressing around them. Oh! there is much to be done, and very little time to do it in.

A very few weeks, and those of us who have been loved more than others, those of us who have thought we could wash Christ's feet with our tears, and wipe them with the hair of our heads, will have no more opportunities for spreading the name and fame of our glorious Redeemer. Let us give of our substance to His cause, give of our time to His service and have our hearts in His love, and so shall we be blessed, for in returning Christ's love we shall feel that His love is shed abroad more fully in our hearts and more fully in our understandings.

May the Holy Spirit add His blessing upon these broken words—they have been broken because they have broken my heart, and therefore I could not help their coming out in a broken way. God accept them, and dear brothers and sisters, may He bless them to you by helping you to love Him more, who is my hope, my joy, my consolation, and my all.

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