

SERMON XVI,

The grace of the gospel no encouragement to sin.

Romans 6:1, 2.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid: how shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?

THE great apostle of the Gentiles, having, in the foregoing chapter, asserted the free grace of God, in the justification of a sinner, by Jesus Christ, and by him alone; he comes in this to answer an objection that some had raised against this doctrine, as is it had a tendency to encourage sin. They were ready to say, If Christ, as our surety, is exalted, by bearing our iniquities, then let us go on in sin: and since, the apostle had said in the preceding chapter, where sin abounded grace did much more abound,¹ some might be ready to say, If such proportions as these are true, we have from hence encouragement to gratify our corruptions, and transgress without fear. To which the apostle answers, with detection, in the words of the text, Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. This objection to the doctrine of grace was not confined to the days of the apostles, but you know, nothing is more common in our own, than to hear it brought as a charge against those, who have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.² If a person speaks of the perfection of Christ's sacrifice, and of the free justification of sinners by his blood and righteousness alone, without their works having any share in the honor of it; I say, if he represents our acceptance thus alone, in the beloved, it is much if he is not branded with the name of an antinomian, and his doctrine rejected, as having a direct tendency to encourage sinners to continue in their sins. But how unjust a censure, and how unreasonable a reproach this is on the free grace of God, which hath abounded towards the elect, I shall endeavor to make appear.

In the words we have,

¹ Romans 5:20

² Acts 20:27.

First, the objection itself, and that is, that the abounding of sovereign grace, have a tendency to encourage sin. The apostle tacitly supposes some offering this, by way of objection. And,

Secondly, we have his answer to it, with, God forbid, and by shewing the unreasonableness of it; How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? I shall consider each of these, and then draw some inferences from the whole, by way of application.

1. I shall consider the objection itself and it may be reduced to two heads:

I. Some may say, "If this doctrine be true, that if rich grace has provided for the pardon of all our sins; and if, by the settlements of the covenant, and the satisfaction of Christ, we are certainly delivered from the righteous punishment they have deserved; then we may with safety indulge ourselves in the vilest of practices. This, you know is an inference, that corrupt reason draws from such glorious premises. If the debt is paid, some will be apt to say, as you assert it is, then where is the harm of increasing it? If Christ hath so secured us from wrath to come, that we shall never come into condemnation, and sin shall never be able to divest us of our interest in him, then, away with all duty, and every thing of a religious nature. We will go on in sin, since we may do it with safety. This is one part of the objection.

2. It will be also argued by way of objection, is, as the apostle says, where sin abounded, grace did much more abound, then, men may be naturally led to go on and increase their sins, that so the riches of grace may shine forth with greater luster. You allow with us, will such say, that it is good to labor that grace may abound, or that God may be exalted in pardoning our iniquities: and if he is so much the more exalted, by how much the more our offences have abounded; then we will indulge sin, and that even in flagrant instances, that so rich grace may appear the more glorious. This is putting the objection in its full strength, and let me tell you, it has constantly been so, from the apostles days even until now. As there have not been wanting some persons, who have been so far abandoned, as to turn the grace of God into such wantonness, as this, so others there always have been, who have dared to charge the doctrine of the grace of God, with having in itself a tendency to promote it, and have therefore rejected that doctrine. I persuade myself, there are very few of you but have met with this latter objection, especially when you have been engaged to plead for the

exaltation of Christ alone separate from our frames, or duties, in point of acceptance, and justification in the sight of God. And indeed, when the Lord calls you to this, you are to expect such sort of opposition and reproach. And what is the reason? Why, suffer me to say, with regard to some persons, it is not much to be wondered at, since we have cause to fear, that in destroying their own righteousness, or excluding it from a share in their justification, you even take away their gods: and what have they more? You destroy the foundation, perhaps, upon which they have been "building for many years. And to go about to convince them of its insufficiency and danger, you will too often find, it rather exposes you to their scorn and contempt, than produces the good effect you would hope for. We are all of us so naturally fond of endeavoring to establish a righteousness of our own, that, it is no wonder we cannot easily bear the discovery of its being a bed shorter, than that a man can stretch himself on it.³ And unless we are taught by the Spirit of the Lord, I am sure that the man who will venture to tell us that all our prayers, our tears, and the likes are even worse than nothing, when made the matter of our justification, and acceptance with God; I say, a man that tells us thus, will be deemed by many, a licentious preacher, who opens a door to the gratification of our sensual appetites. How far, in reality, this is from being the case, I shall endeavor to shew you under the next general head: which is,

II, To consider the weakness and folly of this objection, both from the nature of things, and from the scriptures. And here let me in treat your most serious attention: and excuse me, if I am somewhat large, sense this matter is of no small importance, and the odium which is cast upon us, is such, that unless the word of God will help us in wiping it off, I am sure instead of being fit to preach the gospel, we should not be fit even for Christian society. The objection then is, that what we lay down is of the same nature, as if we should say, that we may sin that grace may abound. In answer to which,

1. We absolutely deny the thing to be fact. For there never was a true believer who maintained it, as his avowed principle, that because of the riches of the grace of God he might go on to throw the reins on the neck of his corruptions. Observe, I do not say, that there never was a Christian, who hath, when under strong temptation, been left of God, so far, as at sometimes to draw very bad conclusions, from the riches of divine grace; and how far

³ Isaiah 28:20.

such temptations, under a suspension of grace, have prevailed, I will not pretend to say. But, what I assert is, that it cannot be his avowed principle, which he adheres to, that he hath therefore reason or occasion given to indulge himself in sin, because it cannot do him any real damage. This is not the reasoning of God's children, or what they dare plead for. So that we absolutely deny the fact. Men may talk at this rate who have a name to live, and yet are dead; but it is not the language of renewed souls. The Holy Spirit, indeed teaches, from the Stability of the Covenant, that sin shall not ruin us; but then the argument is always so handled, as to lead us into a solicitude for grace to walk, as becomes the gospel: And indeed the strongest motives are drawn from it to induce us to an holy, humble, and constant obedience. But again,

2. We observe, that those who make this objection, look upon all imperfections of the Christian through a wrong glass. Is a man who pleads for the honor of Christ in our salvation? If suffered to fall into temptation, how ready are the enemies of free grace to say, *We see what is the consequence of these notions; we expected no better; the man has now plainly Shewn us, that his principles lead to licentiousness, since he indulges it in his own practice?* But how unjust is this conclusion? Alas! Where is the man, that doth good and sinneth not?⁴ Where is the opposer of these doctrines but what sometimes falls? And how hard is it that all the misconduct of those that defend them must be charged upon the grace of the gospel? No, God forbid. I am sure if a man falls, it is not the grace of God that teaches him to do so: though the grace of God tells him, if he is a believer, that he shall rise again. It is true, when he falls into sin, instead of depending on his repentance, and performances to expiate and atone for it, he desires to repair to the great sacrifice, whereby Christ has perfected them that are sanctified. And thus, because he cannot think of making a Saviour of his duties, must he, from thence, be charged with contempt of them? What, is there no difference between neglecting, and despising duties? Where persons conclude thus, they judge without knowledge, and censure without reason. For remember, though we look not to our duties to satisfy for our sins, yet we have, we humbly hope, a strict regard to them in their proper place, and it will be bad with us, if this regard is not really superior to that of those who make their all to depend upon them. But then, again,

⁴ Eccles. 7:20.

3. Admit that among those who stile themselves advocates for free grace, there were some, who, should not only talk, but even act thus must the grace of God, from thence, be sullied, as is that grace led them to this sinful conduct? No, we may much safer judge concerning such persons, that they have only a name to live, and never tasted of the grace of God; than to charge this conduct on principles, which, is received in faith, will be necessarily productive of holiness. Might we not, with the same justice, charge a good, a wise, and gentle administration of civil government, with all the enormities that are committed by licentious men under it? You see how this would be looked upon, by men of the least sense in the world. It is, you know, always esteemed as an act of the highest injustice, to charge the irregularities of a few particular members of a community, as a brand of infamy on the constitution; and if it is so in civil societies, why not in religious ones, and where Christ and his interest are concerned? There have been from the first, and will continue to be, perhaps, as long as there is a church in the world, some who have crept in at unawares, who, under Specious pretences of exalting Christ, have, not only pleaded for great irregularities, but have been chargeable with them themselves. But from thence, are we to conclude that the grace of God instructed them into this, or that the doctrines of the gospel had this influence upon them? This is not only the most monstrous absurdity imaginable, but is an act of such injustice, that we Should be ashamed of in other cases. I most freely confess, there have been persons of the vilest characters, who have screened themselves under the notion of being warm pleaders for the great doctrines of the gospel: but, I am ready to persuade myself, that there are but very few, even of those that only bear the name of Christians, who will ever pretend to say, they committed this or the other sin, with that view, that grace might abound, and therein think they did well. However, I am thoroughly convinced that, upon the least examination, it will be found, that where there is one who is left of God to so great a wickedness as to plead for such unlawful liberty, there are multitudes who are building upon the sandy foundation of their own works, and strength to perform them, in the contempt of Christ's sacrifice and righteousness, and the aids of his Spirit, who have fallen an easy prey to the temptations of Satan, and the gratification of their own corruptions. But to proceed,

4. We observe, that, whatever may be the sentiments of carnal professors, a true Christian cannot possibly continue in sin, or avowedly do so, that grace may abound, because he is not in his own, but Christ's keeping; as the apostle tells the Corinthians; Ye are not your own, for ye are

bought with a price.⁵ And if we are Christ's, we have his spirit,⁶ and if we have his spirit, he will teach us otherwise. Were we indeed left to ourselves, we might join with the profane, in drawing such abominable inferences from the richest grace; and not only do so in argument, but in practice too; but, blessed be God, the case is quite otherwise. The believer is under the care of the great Shepherd, who will make him hear his voice, and instruct him, not only into the way of salvation, but so influence his heart and life, that instead of drawing such conclusions, as the world would fain persuade us he doth, that he will from the love of God manifested to him, be so much the more solicitous for grace to walk as becomes his relation to Christ, and his character as a Christian; and instead of thus vilely abusing the grace of God, it will be the business of his life and conversation to exalt and recommend it. He will, by the grace of Christ say, *What, did my Lord Shed his blood for my sins, and Shall I from thence fetch occasion to multiply my transgressions? By no means. Shall I continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.* I cannot so much as admit the thought: this would be so flagrant an instance of the basest and vilest ingratitude that I cannot but abhor it. And how comes he indeed to say so, but by the mighty grace of God that has made him to differ? Thus I have laid down some proportions, that may serve as an introduction, to assist us in our search into scripture concerning this matter; such as, that it is absolutely false, that a Christian as such, can or doth allow it as his avowed principle, to continue in sin, that grace may abound; that the imperfections of believers, in order to establish this charge are viewed in the most invidious light; and notwithstanding there may be, or really are some, that call themselves Christians, who have the daring impiety to adhere to such an abominable principle, and bring forth the scandalous fruits of it; yet this cannot in any justice be charged on the doctrines of grace, however such men boast of their regard to them. For the devils themselves believe there is a God, and yet their enmity against him must, in no sense, be charged upon their belief of his being. I have also observed the impossibility of this, from the union between Christ and the believer, and his care over, and concern for him; and that he, not being in his own keeping, but in that of the great shepherd of the church, cannot, therefore, avowedly continue in such an abuse of the grace of God.

Let us now look into the scriptures, and see what arguments the Spirit of God, makes use of there, in order to press us to holiness. And is he uses

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

⁶ Romans 8:9.

the very same arguments to this purpose, which these persons think have a tendency to destroy holiness, then, either they must be mistaken, or the Holy Spirit. The latter of which, God forbid that we should so much as admit the supposition of. See how the apostle argues in this same epistle where our text is; says he, God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have Mercy upon all.⁷ And accordingly he breaks out into holy admiration of the riches of divine grace. O the depths of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of Gods!⁸ Well, and what follows? Why, I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.⁹ Here is an exhortation, in forced with an argument, that the wise men of this world may treat with contempt. He does not say, I beseech you, if you mean to get to heaven, and escape eternal destruction, which are, no doubt, just arguments, and very properly and frequently used in the holy scriptures, but, I beseech you by the mercies of God, by those extraordinary instances of his favor, that he has manifested to you. The apostle knew well enough, that unless these would influence them, all other arguments would be to no purpose.

So, to the same purpose, is what you have in the first epistle to the Corinthians. The apostle had been exhorting them to flee fornication.¹⁰ Well, he adds this as a reason, for ye are bought with a price: or which is the same thing, your sins are pardoned, therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are Gods.¹¹ What a sad sort of a person would the apostle have been thought, and how preposterous his reasoning, had he lived in our days! You see, in this passage, the argument is not taken from the terrors of hell and destruction, but the very choice blessing that we are favored with, and that which effectually secures the soul from destruction: Ye are bought with a price. You are redeemed from wrath to come, therefore glorify God, or be solicitous for his grace, being thus purchased, as a testimony of the great sense you have of your privilege: look to the Lord for grace that you may be enabled to glorify him. Had the apostle thought of the consequences, that some men draw from such a doctrine, he would certainly have concealed it, or however, have been very far from mentioning it as a motive or argument to the practice of holiness; when he must be sensible, that it

⁷ Romans 11:32.

⁸ Ver. 33

⁹ Romans 12:1.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:18.

¹¹ Ver. 30.

would father encourage to the contrary disposition and practice. However he thus manifests how different his sentiments were, from those of the objectors with whom we have to do.

See also what the same apostle says to Titus, for the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us, what? Not to live as we list, but, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.¹² Observe, it brings us salvation, and then teaches us, as the consequence of our having this great blessing, to walk as becomes those that enjoy it. And again, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity. And what is the result of this? Why, it follows,—and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.¹³

Unto the same purpose, we have a remarkable passage in one of John's epistles? My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.¹⁴ These things, what things? Why, look into the preceding chapter, there he tells those to whom he writes, that, the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.¹⁵ This is you know the very doctrine, that these persons think would abound with such ill consequences. Well, these things write I unto you, says the apostle, that ye sin not. Some would say, were we thus to argue, that we aim rather to establish sin, than to dethrone it in the soul. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.¹⁶ Observe, his design in writing to them, is, that they should not sin, his argument is, Christ is their propitiation,¹⁷ and is entered into glory for them, as their advocate. So, that you see very plainly, for any to say, that the preaching of free grace, as the great argument that is to influence us in our new obedience, is so far from being a licentious doctrine, that it is the very same, that the Spirit of the Lord himself makes use of.

The last instance I shall give you, shall be that made use of in our text, and context. The apostle had told us, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us:¹⁸ and that where sin abounded, grace did much mere abound;¹⁹

¹² Titus 2:11, 12.

¹³ Titus 2:14.

¹⁴ 1 John 2:1.

¹⁵ 1 John 1:7.

¹⁶ 1 John 2:1.

¹⁷ Ver. 2.

¹⁸ Romans 5:8.

¹⁹ Ver. 20.

or, by how much the more our sins have abounded, by so much the more glory will be brought to Christ our great propitiation. He comes then in our text, and brings in an objection, that might be made, What shall we say then? Or is this the conclusion we shall draw from it, shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid, Says the apostle, let it not be, or, far be it from us; how shall we who are dead to sin, live any longer therein? That is, as I humbly apprehend, How shall we who are dead to it, as being delivered from its ruining power by the satisfaction of our blessed Lord; how shall we, who have received a principle of grace, and so, our renewed part is dead unto sin, how shall we now live any longer, or continue with delight, and pleasure therein? How can we, who are thus freed from condemnation and from the dominion of sin, live any longer therein? And thus he argues, neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead; and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law but under grace.²⁰ Ye are, as if the apostle had said, freed from the law as a covenant of works, or from its curse as broken, and instead of being in bondage to it, ye are now under grace. And what is the consequence of this? Why, sin shall not have dominion over you. Thus you see how the holy Ghost: argues for holiness constantly, from the rich abounding sovereign grace, and from hence we have sufficient ground to conclude, that the wisest way to engage Christians to an holy obedience unto God, is to convince them of what he has graciously done for them.

And thus, having given you so many instances out of the scripture, of arguments taken from the free unmerited grace of God, manifested to us in the Son of his love, in whom we are all accepted, to engage us to holiness in life and conversation, you see when we take this method, we tread in the very Steps of those persons, who are allowed to be inspired. And you must forgive me, if upon this occasion, I cannot forbear expressing my wonder, that any of those, who I dare not but believe have a regard for the scripture, should raise such clamors at dispensing the mysteries of the kingdom in their own light and beauty, as is they had a tendency to encourage immorality: when unless these are the proper motives of our obedience, and they operate on our minds by the grace of God given to us, whatever our pretences may be to strictness of life, there will be no more of it, than will just suit with our carnal interests. It is true indeed, that knowing the terrors of the Lord we

²⁰ Romans 6:13, 14.

persuade men; but surely no arguments seem so likely to influence ingenuous minds, which we suppose those of believers to become by the work of God's Spirit, as those which are drawn from the love and grace of God, and the security of their eternal state as in Christ Jesus. But, whatever be the effect of this reasoning, I think, I have sufficiently shewn that these, and such like motives, were those used by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, or rather the Spirit of God by them. And thus I have endeavored to shew you the weakness of this objection, both from reason and from scripture. What I shall further add shall be by way of application. And,

1. How abundantly doth it appear that the carnal mind is enmity against God?²¹ The scripture abounds in nothing more than the declarations of the free grace of God; and the men of this world level all their wisdom against it. There is no doctrine that is charged with such abominable consequences, as the clear declarations of the sovereign grace of our heavenly Father, in taking us into so near a relation with himself, and laying our sins on his Son: nor need we wonder at it, that, with regard to most men, this doctrine is esteemed but foolishness; but it is very sad indeed, that, of those who have tasted of the truth of grace, any should have a share in such ungrateful treatment of it. To me it appears very plainly, that they are so far left of God. Were the matter represented in scripture under any obscurity, or would it admit of the least dispute, we might be esteemed rash for saying so: but being wrote as with a sunbeam, and being allowed in a degree, by almost all that own the authority of scriptures, that it should be disputed as it has been, plainly proves that the carnal mind is enmity against God: other wise it could not but receive what is so plainly revealed.

2. How cautious should we be of admitting prejudices, against any particular truth, because of the slander that is cast upon it by the world. If the sentiments of carnal men, or of the generality of the professors of Christianity, were to be the standard of truth, what the apostle says, that when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son,²² had long ere this been banished, not only out of the world, but also out of the word of God. Instead then of entertaining an ill opinion of any sentiment because it is not received by the world, let us look very carefully, and see whether there is sufficient foundation for it in scripture. Because, for

²¹ Romans 8:7.

²² Romans 5:10.

the most part, it will be found, that those truths which are the least esteemed in the world, are the most agreeable to the mind of God. And then,

3. And lastly, let me entreat you, who make a profession of these truths, by the mercies of God, to be so much the more cautious, that there may not be so much as an appearance of reason for this objection. Be not only distinguished for your sentiments, but let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.²³ The enemy will indeed be apt to reproach you, let your conduct be what it will: but O that I could say, concerning all Christians, if it were the pleasure of the Lord, that their conversation bore a sufficient testimony to the reality of those truths they profess! Remember, believer, the eyes of the world are upon you, and especially if you plead for Christ and his salvation, and bring your testimony against any thing else being set up in his room. I say, remember the least failure in your conduct, will have the worst confirmation put upon it. Look to the Lord Jesus then, as to a Saviour who has a fullness of grace lodged in his hands, that you may be enabled to make it appear that you are bought with a price, even the precious blood of Christ, this great sacrifice, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, you live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.²⁴ And when this is the case, let the world go on to reproach, or say what it pleaseth. Yet, since, through grace, you abhor the thought of sinning that grace may abound, walk on in the light of God's countenance, and let Christ, as your righteousness, be exalted in your souls; till you come to that world, where every sin, every sorrow, and all contradiction and calumny, shall eternally be done away, and you will join the spirits of just men, in that song of grateful praise, Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priest unto God and his Father; to him be glory, and dominion for ever and ever Amen.²⁵

²³ Phi. 1:27.

²⁴ Titus 2:12.

²⁵ Rev. 1:5, 6.