

Discourse XI

"The Necessity of Divine Influence in Salvation" (Part 1)

by
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"No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."
John 6:44

Perhaps there is scarcely any doctrine of Scripture more repugnant to the feelings of sinful man than the necessity of a Divine influence in whatever relates to the salvation of the soul. And yet there is none which, when rightly understood and duly appreciated, is more full of encouragement and consolation. How it happens that we worms of the dust (ignorant, weak, and wicked) are unwilling to be enlightened by that Being whose understanding is infinite, to be "strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man," and to have him "work in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure"; how this happens is surely to be accounted for in no other way than that sin the most deep and dreadful has "darkened our foolish hearts," rendered us blind to our own true interest, and urged us to rush onward to perdition--refusing to be rescued by that arm which alone is mighty to save.

This opposition to the doctrine of Divine influence is as various as the different shapes of sin and diversities of human character. Indeed, it often changes its form in the same breast, and when driven from one "refuge of lies" finds a hold in some other.

1. *Unbelief doubts the possibility of Divine influence.*

"I can trace," says one, "within my own mind no symptoms of foreign guidance or aid. I discover there nothing but the regular and uninterrupted flow of my own thoughts, emotions, and purposes--no supernatural suggestions, nothing that is not connected with something preceding. I always act from motives and as reason dictates, without any sudden and unaccountable starts of aversion to vice or love of virtue. Indeed, were it not so, I should cease to be free. Place me under Divine influence with regard to moral objects of thought or action, and you make me a mere machine. You destroy my responsibility to God."

2. *Pride disdains this influence.*

"Am I not," is its language, "the absolute sovereign of my own thoughts, affections, and conduct, and capable as a free agent of controlling and directing them as I please? Must I be still influenced and guided by God in the exercise of that *very* power which he has given me of choosing the good and refusing the evil?"

3. *Self-righteousness does not want this influence.*

"All the commandments of God have I kept from my youth up," it exclaims. "What lack I yet?"

Why need I be drawn by God to a reliance upon the merits of his Son, I who am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing?"

4. *Slothfulness is waiting for this influence.*

Its language is: "I have nothing to do in the affair of my salvation. God alone can change the heart. He alone works in us both to will and to do. I will therefore live in hope that I shall be *compelled* to enter into the kingdom of heaven; and in the meanwhile, surely but little blame can attach itself to one who is thus absolutely dependent for all holiness upon the efficacy of Divine influence."

5. *Guilt, awakened by conscience, imagines that it truly longs for this influence, and murmurs because it has not received it.*

"How long," it says, "will God withhold from me the energy of his grace? My ardent wish is to be made holy and happy. I see the extreme wickedness of my own heart. I feel that I am unable to change its polluted affections. How often have I sought carefully the interposition of Divine assistance and yet have not found it. What else can I do that I have not done?"

Such, my hearers, are some of the repugnancies which the sinner feels against the doctrine of Divine influence, and some of the perversions which he makes of it. I propose to consider them in their order, and to show that although some of them may in a few instances originate from misapprehension and mistake, yet that most of them always, and all of them often, are to be traced to the depravity of the human heart.

I. In the first place, then, *Unbelief doubts the possibility of Divine influence.* And why? Because it can discover no traces of this influence in its own mind, and because it deems it to be inconsistent with the freedom of human agency. Let us attend to these two particulars.

Unbelief can discover no traces of a Divine influence in its own mind. But surely this is a very unsatisfactory argument to prove that it has not affected the minds of others. Shall the sickly invalid who has from his very birth labored under the constant pressure of lassitude [listlessness] and disease be justified in concluding that no one feels the benign influence of health because he [himself] has never been conscious of it? Strong and unequivocal is the testimony of thousands--whose clearness of apprehension, sobriety of judgment, and veracity of assertion in all other cases are never called in question--that they discover within themselves a wonderful transformation of temper and conduct which manifests itself to be the effect of a Divine influence by marks the most distinct and certain. Now surely it is neither the part of candor nor good sense to deny the reality of that which is attested by the most respectable witnesses.

But infidelity is not satisfied with this reply to its objection. It starts another difficulty more subtle and ingenious. "Everyone," it says, "even the advocate for a Divine influence, who is careful to turn his view inward and examine attentively what passes within his own mind will discover there nothing but his own thoughts, emotions, and purposes. He will soon find that these succeed each other in a certain order; that one, as it were, grows out of some other preceding it; that all are under the guidance of his will, though subject in a certain sense to that principle of association which is one of the fundamental laws of the human mind."

Now, admitting all this to be true, what does it prove? Why this precisely, and this only: that the human mind is subject to certain laws which so control it as to produce a regular and connected train of thought and action. And is this inconsistent with the possibility of a Divine influence? *Who* gave the human mind these laws? *Who* sustains their operation? The Father of spirits. And cannot he, through the instrumentality of these laws, have access to those very souls which he supports in being, so as to guide and direct them as he pleases?

But to press the unbeliever more closely, let him tell what these laws are, what *any* laws are, whether of Providence, of Nature, or of Grace, but [that they are] a certain *uniformity* of operation which the Divine Being has seen fit to adopt in the exhibition which he makes of himself to his intelligent creatures. It is this very *uniformity* which displays him in the greatness of his strength, moving onward in silent majesty to the completion of his vast and incomprehensible purposes. And yet it is this very uniformity which leads us blind and sinful mortals to overlook, to forget, and even to deny the interposition of his power and his grace. "In him we live, and move, and have our being," although many of the most important processes of our animal frame go on so silently and secretly that we are entirely unconscious of them. They go on in such exact conformity to the laws of the human body that we are unable to discover the mode. And yet we acknowledge the reality of the Divine Agency which sustains and manages our corporeal existence. What symmetry, order, and harmony pervade the world of nature that surrounds us, from the lily of the field which unfolds its beauties by a gradual and regular process, to those vast lights in the firmament of heaven which are there placed, and continue their accustomed rounds, "for signs, and for seasons, and for days and for years." Everything goes on under the direction of what we call the Laws of Nature. And yet it is the great Creator of all things who "clothes the grass of the field," "causes the day-spring to know his place," "binds the sweet influence of Pleiades," "looses the bands of Orion," "brings forth Mazaroth in his season," and "guides Arcturus with his sons."

Now we do not deny the influence of God upon our bodies or upon the material world because we see this influence only in its *effects*, or because it acts with constant and regular *uniformity*. How unwise, then, nay how wicked is the unbeliever who rejects and treats with contempt the doctrine of a Divine influence upon the mind simply because the mind is under the direction of regular and uniform laws of thought and action!

But another difficulty is raised. "Granting," it is said, "the possibility of a Divine influence, how is this to be reconciled with the freedom of human agency?" I answer, just as many other apparent difficulties are to be reconciled where one truth seems to clash with another--by establishing each on its own proper basis, by its own proper proofs, and then acknowledging with a candid and humble mind that we blind and erring mortals cannot fathom all the works and dispensations of the infinite and eternal Spirit.

Our Saviour has expressly declared in the words of our text, "No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." These are the words of Him who by way of eminence called himself "The Truth." His declaration is enough to satisfy us that God does exercise a Divine influence upon man, especially since it has been shown that there is nothing in this inconsistent with all that we can discover of the structure and laws of the human mind. That we are free agents we know by our own consciousness. Here, then, each of these truths has its own proper

proof--both satisfactory, both convincing. And if we reject both on account of apparent inconsistencies and difficulties, we may well turn skeptics at once on all moral and religious subjects, nay on many subjects connected with the daily concerns and conduct of our life. Let us tremble then, my brethren, at the thought of resisting and grieving that Spirit of grace which alone is able to draw us to Jesus Christ. Let us no longer do this by cherishing unwise and wicked doubts respecting the reality and efficacy of his influence.

II. In the second place, *Pride disdains this influence*. A feeling of dependence on God, whether for temporal or spiritual good, is of all other emotions the most repugnant to the sinful heart. Yet why should it be so? God is our Creator, our Preserver, our constant Benefactor. To him we are indebted for life, and breath, and all things. His visitation preserves our spirits. He feeds and clothes us. His bounty fills our cup and causes it to overflow with blessings. Should he at this moment withdraw his supporting hand, we should be blotted out from existence. Should he withhold his kindness and long-suffering and deal with us according to our just deserts, we should cease to be prisoners of hope. We should open our eyes upon that world where all is horror and anguish and despair.

And yet this Being--so good, so gracious, and so merciful--receives not the homage of our dependence. Especially is the sinner prone to reject the influence and assistance of God in what relates to the salvation of his soul. "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts" [Ps. 10:4, NKJV]. Alas, how does such conduct prove his extreme folly and guilt! How little has he yet detected of that ignorance of religious truth under which his dark and benighted understanding labors; of that weakness and insufficiency of human resolution which is so unable to cope with temptation, which yields to the first assaults of the adversary and is taken captive by him at his will; of that dominion of sin within his breast which binds and enslaves him in the miserable thralldom [servitude] of "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life." Could he once be brought to feel this his ignorance and weakness and guilt, and to exclaim with the humble Apostle, "We are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God," how earnestly would he ask for and how gratefully and devoutly would he cherish that spirit which alone can draw the proud and rebellious to Jesus Christ! And having felt the sweet attractions of his grace, how ready would he be to say with the same Apostle, "By the grace of God I am what I am!"

III. In the third place, *Self-righteousness does not want this influence*. For others it may indeed be necessary (for extortioners, for the unjust, for adulterers, for the poor publican) but for him who fasts and prays, who pays tithes of all that he possesses for the support of the civil and religious institutions of his country, who goes with "the multitude" to the house of God "with the voice of joy and praise [and] with the multitude that keep holy-day, who practices all the kind and endearing charities of life, who "lays judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet" in all his conduct and concerns with his fellowmen--that *he* must be "created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works" is what he cannot feel and will not believe.

Behold here, my brethren, another striking proof of the depravity of the human heart in thus opposing the necessity of a Divine influence. For what says our text? "No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." *No man*. No, not even the amiable and interesting young man of the Gospel, who fancied that he had kept all the commandments of God from his youth up, and whom Jesus, in the exercise of that social sympathy and benevolence which he had

as partaking of our human nature, regarded with a look of tenderness and love. All, all have sinned and must be drawn by the influence of the Holy Spirit before they will resort to Jesus Christ.

Ye, then, my brethren, who "think that ye stand, take heed lest ye fall." No longer, through ignorance of God's righteousness, "go about to establish your own." Acknowledge the necessity and humbly invoke the aid of that Divine grace which is alone efficacious to remove the film which now blinds your moral vision; to enable you to see that although fancying yourselves "rich and increased with goods and in need of nothing, you are indeed wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked"; and to lead you to that Saviour who came not "to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

IV. In the fourth place, *Slothfulness is waiting for this influence.* Forgetting that we are commanded to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, [and] unmindful of the precepts "Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you," "Cleanse your hands ye sinners and purify your hearts ye double-minded," the slothful sinner excuses his delay and palliates [excuses] his guilt by pleading in his defense the very doctrine which it is the object of this discourse to establish. "God alone," he says, "can change the heart, and therefore I will wait for his influence." But "the desire of the slothful kills him, for his hands refuse to labor." He sits down satisfied in his guilt--no alarms of conscience, no contrition for sin, no dread of futurity can arouse him from this slumber of death. Not even the cry of "Lord, save me" escapes his lips.

And are you sure, my fellow-sinner, that you have always been thus *waiting* for the Spirit of God to touch your heart? Have you never felt his monitory suggestions and influences? Has no religious truth of deep and interesting import been dropped within your hearing by a friend or pressed upon your attention from the sacred desk by the ministers of God's word? Has no salutary counsel of a watchful and tender parent been given with all the earnest solicitude of one whose life was bound up in your spiritual life? Has no remarkable dispensation of Providence removed from you someone who was dear to you as the apple of your eye, or some other of your own age and in your own circumstances who you little thought would thus become the victim of the king of terrors? Or has it never brought yourself to the borders of the grave? Have you never felt yourself to be guilty in the sight of God and trembled at the prospect of being summoned to appear at his bar, there to render an account for all the deeds which you have done in the body? Has no retired walk, no midnight musing led your thoughts heavenward and inclined you at least to hope that you might be interested in Him who is the Friend of sinners?

If all, if any, if even *one* of these causes have ever aroused you to sober and serious reflection with regard to the eternal destiny of your soul, then you have not been always waiting for the influence of the Spirit of God. Then it has striven with your spirit. And it is because you have resisted and grieved its sacred influence that you are now sunk in the arms of spiritual death. What do I say? Perhaps even now this Spirit of grace once more deigns to descend and touch your heart. Oh, yield yourself to its control! Pray constantly and earnestly that it may never again leave your breast, that it may enlighten your understanding, that it may purify your heart, that it may draw you from every other object to Jesus Christ.

V. In the last place, *Guilt, awakened by conscience to a sense of its danger, imagines that it truly longs for this influence, and murmurs because it has not received it.* And is it indeed so? Does

the sinner truly estimate the enormity of his wickedness and the extent of his danger? Is he sensible of his entire dependence upon the grace of God to subdue the dominion of sin within his breast? Does he honestly and sincerely wish that he may be made happy by being made holy, by being withdrawn in all his affections and desires from those forbidden objects which now occupy his mind and engross his heart?

He complains that he has done all he can do and yet the grace of God is denied him. Alas, how will this plea fail him at the bar of God! Will he then be prepared to say that day after day has witnessed his faithful and earnest perusal of those sacred Oracles "which are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ? [or] his retirement from the world that he might meditate on the things which belong to his everlasting peace? [or] his frequent prostration of spirit before the throne of God, praying with strong cries and many tears "God be merciful to me, a sinner?"

If he dare not make this plea at the judgment bar, let him not now impeach the justice or the goodness of God. Let him more carefully examine his own heart. Let him see whether he has indeed felt the pressure of his guilt, and whether he has not been striving and hoping all the while to do something which will entitle him to receive the grace of God not as a free gift but as a merited reward. Let him, in short, cast himself without reserve upon the mercy of that Saviour who is able and willing to save all who come unto him. Then will he no longer oppose the doctrine contained in our text, but from experience realize the truth and delight in the import of these words, "No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

Thus, my brethren, have I attempted to present to your consideration some of the repugnancies which the sinner feels against the doctrine of Divine influence and some of the perversions which he makes of it. You have seen how they all spring from the depravity of the human heart, that none furnish any extenuation of our guilt or ground of murmur against the justice or the goodness of God, and that if still embraced and cherished they will render us more and more worthy of that dreadful doom which awaits the finally impenitent.

Let us, then, learn and imbibe this salutary though humbling truth--that whatever evil we are chargeable with is the result of our own perverse and sinful inclination, and that all that is good within us comes down from the Source of all good--the Spirit of holiness and truth. No longer, with that Unbelief which doubts the possibility of a Divine influence, that Pride which disdains it, that Self-righteousness which does not want it, that Slothfulness which is waiting for it, or that terrified Guilt which imagines it longs for it and murmurs that it has not been procured by what it deems so great and unwearied efforts--no longer let any of us strive with these weapons of sin against the Holy Comforter. Let us cease this unhallowed warfare. Let us prostrate ourselves at the foot of the Cross and there look unto Him and be saved, who was "lifted up that he might draw all men unto him."

Discourse XI from *Discourses on Various Points of Christian Faith and Practice* by Thomas H. Gallaudet (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1818). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.