

## **A Discriminating Ministry**

(A posthumous sermon)

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Afternoon, July 11, 1869

"If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them." Jeremiah 15:19

None of the prophets of the Old Testament seem to have walked in so rough and thorny a path as the prophet Jeremiah. And there seems to be special reasons why it was so. First his lot was cast upon very evil days. It was just at the time when the Lord was wreaking his vengeance upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and of Judea, through the hand of the King of Babylon. There was famine in the city, war without, and a dark lowering cloud hung over Jerusalem, which Jeremiah knew from the word of the Lord would soon burst forth into a destruction of the city and of its inhabitants. But he was very jealous and zealous for the honour of the Lord who showed him what was coming to pass. He instructed him in his judgments, and he enabled him to lay before the people what would be the consequence of their transgressions if they repented not. But nobody listened to him. Nothing but persecution met him, and but for the special providence of God, he would have lost his life when he was cast into the pit, where he sunk up to the very armpits in the mud and filth. But again, he seems to have been by nature a man of a rebellious turn of mind. God's people, like other people, are differently constituted. Some are more weak, placid, mild, gentle, unruffled; others are naturally more inclined to rise up in anger and rebellion. It was so with Jeremiah. He was not one of those smooth, gentle, easy, placable natures that nothing can ruffle. But on

the contrary, the make of his natural mind was such that a mere trifle, so to speak, would stir up in the depths of his heart rebelliousness even against God. In fact, taking a view of all the prophets, we find none of them indulging in such—if I may use the expression—daring words against the Lord Almighty, as the prophet Jeremiah. Look, for instance, at the words preceding my text: "Why is my pain perpetual"—as though he would quarrel with God because he could not get it relieved—"why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? Why dost thou not speak the healing word? Why suffer my wounds to fret and rankle, when there is balm in Gilead and a physician there? Why suffer my wounds thus to fester?" Then comes that speech, which to my mind is one of the most—what shall I say?—unworthy, unbecoming speeches that man ever made to his Maker: "Wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar?" What if a man should call God a liar? It is an offence between man and man. Man cannot bear to be called a liar by his fellow; and many a knock-down blow has been the issue of one man calling his brother a liar. For man to be so daring as to speak to God what he would scarcely speak to his fellow man, seems almost atrocious. And yet there is a saving word. He says "Wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar?" The word "as" softens it down. He did not rise up in such daring as to call God altogether a liar. "Wilt thou be"—it assumes an interrogative form, which softens it still more—"wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar?" As though he should say to the Lord, "Thou hast promised to support me: where is now that support? Thou hast promised my enemies shall not prevail against me: see how they do prevail. Where is thy promise? Why, Lord, it is almost as though thou wert unfaithful to thy word; and as waters that promised to flow to relieve the city, and those waters dried up, wilt thou be thus to thy servant who loves thy honour, to whom thy word is the joy and rejoicing of his heart? Wilt thou be all this to

him, so that thou art, as it were, like waters that fail: when I want to drink, there is no drink to relieve my fainting thirst?" Now the Lord deals very tenderly with his servant. He is a long-suffering God. He does not, as he might justly do, launch forth the lightnings of his vengeance and say, "Call me a liar! Take thy deserts." No; he speaks very gently and yet very firmly and faithfully:—"If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me. If thou return from this rebellious mood, from this fretful disposition, from these murmuring accusations, and come back to that better mind which becomes thy position and me as thy Lord and Master, thou shalt stand before me and I will make it manifest thou hast a standing in me and before me that none of thy enemies can gainsay or resist." And then he adds the words of the text: "If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them."

In these words I think we may see,

I.—*First, a condition.* I use the word with some degree of reluctance; but still it conveys the idea best. First, then, a condition: "If thou take forth the precious from the vile."

II.—*Secondly, a promise:* "Thou shalt be as my mouth."

III.—*Thirdly, a command:* "Let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them."

I shall have to explain, before I enter into my text, what is precious and what is vile; and how these two things are mingled together, supposing it needs the hand of the servant of God to take forth the one from the other.

What, then, may we understand by "precious?" We may

understand two things by it: something exceedingly scarce and something exceedingly valuable. Now there are many things which are very valuable which are not scarce: as, for instance, the air we breathe. How it fills every place, and how we could not exist even a minute without inhaling the breath of heaven. And yet it is not rare or scarce, for it fills every nook and crevice. Again, look at the rain: how precious is the rain; how it falls from heaven and fertilises the earth and causes the crops to spring forth clothing the fields with grass and making the very valleys to sing. How precious the rain is in a season of drought. And yet only in exceedingly dry seasons like last year can it be said to be rare. Look, again, at water: how it flows in our rivers; how it gushes out of the hills and vales; how we have only to dig a few feet into the earth, and there we find this valuable substance, water. How precious; our bodies could not subsist without it. Yet except in certain climates, it cannot be said to be scarce. But, on the other hand, a thing may be scarce and yet not valuable. There are certain minerals or metals, known only to chemists—if I were to tell you their names you could not take them home—but so scarce and so rare as to be only known by means of chemical analysis, and yet they are of no value. There are certain flowers that grow only in one or two spots in England, but only botanists value them. If you were wandering upon a mountain in Wales, and saw a flower which only grows there, you would put no value upon it, nor is it valuable except in the eyes of a botanist. Therefore, a thing may be rare and yet not valuable. But when it is not only scarce in quantity, but valuable in quality, then we stamp upon it the word "precious" in its true sense. Gold, for instance; silver, diamonds, pearls, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and precious stones generally,—these represent a value in themselves, not merely because they are very rarely to be found, but because they are useful in the way of commerce, as a medium of exchange, applied to various

purposes in the arts, or sought after by kings and princes and nobility to decorate their persons. These are instances where a thing is precious, not only for its scarcity, but also for its intrinsic value.

Having thus explained the word "precious," I will do the same for the word "vile," because I wish you to see distinctly the meaning between the two, so as to carry the idea into spiritual things. "Vile" is something common, cheap, that nobody sets any value upon. That is one sense of the word "vile;" and another is, filthy, polluted, unclean, nasty, abandoned in every way, like the dirt or dung in the streets, which is only a stench and a nuisance. We have the words "precious" and "vile" in Scripture used with respect to men and women, as well as things. We read of the "precious sons and daughters of Zion;" and we read of Eli's sons "who made themselves vile, and their father forbade it not." We read that "the vile person will work villainy and the churl will speak hypocrisy." And Job speaks of himself that he was in their eyes as one that was vile; nay, he said, as he felt in his own eyes, "I am vile." (Job 40:4.) And David could say, when taunted with dancing before the ark, "I will yet be more vile than thus, I will be base in mine own sight." (2 Sam. 6:22.) Now do you think you have caught the idea of what is precious and what is vile?

Now I shall go on to show how these are apparently mixed with one another, and how the servant of the Lord, as God's mouth, is to take forth the precious from the vile. And you will observe that the vile is more abundant than the precious, for he is not bidden to take forth the vile from the precious; that would pollute his hands with wickedness; but he is bidden to take the precious from the vile, that he may separate that which is precious to the honour and glory of God, and leave the vile to its own vileness and villainy.

Having thus led you to the words of the text, I shall show you that there are precious characters and vile characters, precious doctrines and vile doctrines, precious experience and vile experience, precious practice and vile practice; and that the servant of the Lord, who is to be mouth for God, is to take forth the precious from the vile that he may be as God's mouth.

I.—First, then, who are precious characters? They are the sons and daughters of Zion; they are those without God the Father loved with an everlasting love; they are those whom God the Son redeemed by his precious blood; they are those whom God the Holy Ghost makes his temple, in whose heart he plants the fear of God, and whom he is making meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. These are precious characters. In themselves, they are no better than others; nay, in some respects even worse, for it seems as if God had selected some of the most crooked materials, some of the vilest and worst in themselves, to make them vessels of honour meet for the master's use. (2 Tim. 2:21.) There is, therefore, no difference in themselves. The difference is wholly of God. It is his sovereign grace, and sovereign grace alone, that makes the distinction between the precious character and the vile character. Now this precious character, being precious in the sight of God, is loved with an everlasting love: precious, as bought by the love of his dear Son, and precious, as taken possession of by the Holy Ghost, he is in the sight of God of inestimable value. It is not because there is anything in him. God looks to his dear Son: it is what he is in Christ by virtue of eternal union with the Son of God; it is because he is a member of the mystical body of the Lord Jesus Christ that in the sight of God he is precious.

And who are the vile? The vile are those whom God looks

upon as refuse. The vile are those whom he leaves to fill up the measure of their iniquities. The vile are those who practice villainy, who manifest their hypocrisies, and live and die under vile influences that draw down upon them the awful displeasure of the Almighty.

Now these precious characters and these vile characters are apparently mingled together. There may be sitting in the same seat side by side one who is precious and one who is vile. In the same family there may be a precious one and others who are vile ones. In a church, in a congregation, there may be those who are unspeakable precious, and those who are infamously vile. Now the servant of God must take forth the precious from the vile by describing, as the Lord gives him power, what are the marks that manifest him that is precious, and what are the marks that manifest him that is vile. He must show how it is the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the heart which makes one fear God's name, believe in his dear Son, hope in his mercy, love him and cleave to him with purpose of heart, and that by those things he is manifested as precious. On the other hand, the man who is vile is secretly working iniquity against God and his people. Therefore in that sense he is vile. Now when the servant of God begins to open up these mysteries, and traces out who are precious in the sight of God and who are vile, then he is as God's mouth.

But again, there are precious doctrines and there are vile doctrines; and these precious doctrines and these vile doctrines are apparently intermixed, so that it needs the servant of God to take forth the one from the other. The doctrine of the blessed Trinity is a precious doctrine. A Trinity of Persons in the unity of Godhead, an eternal Father, an eternal Son, an eternal Spirit, and yet these three Persons all one glorious God in the indivisible unity of the eternal

essence,—this is a precious doctrine, for it spreads its grace and its glory on every branch of divine truth. It sheds its beauty and glory on the electing love of God, on the redeeming blood of Jesus, on the sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost. The doctrine of three Persons in one God, and each co-equal in Deity, casts a bright and beautiful lustre on every sacred truth of the Bible, so that without it there is no order, but all is confusion. If the blood that cleanseth from all sin is not the blood of the Son of God, of him who is God, what value or validity is there in it to cleanse a guilty conscience? If his obedience is not the obedience of God's equal, how can that obedience be imputed to the saints of God, to be their shield and shelter, to justify them from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses? If his love is not the love of the Son of God, how can that love be from everlasting to everlasting? How can it diffuse itself amongst the members of his mystical body? And again, how can he hear prayer and answer prayer and be an intercessor able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him, unless deity gave validity to every act of his humanity? And so with the Holy Ghost, his divine Person in the glorious God-head, it casts a beautiful lustre on every branch of revealed truth. The Sonship of Christ,—that he is the revealed Son of the Father, to ever lie in his bosom as his own proper and real Son—is a precious doctrine; and every notion, fancy, or doctrine which opposes that is to be stamped as unutterable vile. The sovereignty of God, in choosing whom he will, in giving no account to man of these matters, but as a sovereign disposing of all men, and all events, and all circumstances, is a precious doctrine. And though there are times and seasons when that doctrine seems to militate against our thoughts and wishes, when it seems to cross our path both in providence and in grace; yet it will ever be embraced by the saints of God as a God glorifying truth, that He, as a sovereign, has a right to do what he will with body



and soul, and that all his purposes are the purposes of a sovereign who can execute what he may determine to bring to pass.

What, then, are vile doctrines? Every doctrine which denies the Trinity, whatever name it be called by, is a vile doctrine. Every doctrine which denies the eternal Sonship of our blessed Lord is a vile doctrine. Every doctrine which derogates from the honour of God, the glory of God, the majesty of God, is a vile doctrine; spring from what source it may, called by whatever name, it is a vile doctrine because opposed to the grand fundamental principles of our most holy faith. That God never chastises people for sin is a vile doctrine, because it leads men to licentiousness; it hardens men's hearts in the practice of sin if God does not chastise them for their iniquities and purge them by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning. Self-righteousness, Pharisaic love, legal duties carried on in a legal spirit, is a vile doctrine, because derogatory to the doctrines of sovereign grace, and opposed to the teaching of the Holy Ghost and the whole word of God from Genesis to Revelation. That men may live as they list; walk in the ways of the ungodly and have peace of conscience; do that which is evil and live in it and love it, and yet be saved without repentance, or godly sorrow, or confession, or leaving their sins, is a vile doctrine, base Antinomianism, and has caused the way of truth to be spoken evil of, for many are Antinomians in spirit and in conduct who dare not broach it in so many words. Take it, then, as shortly as I can lay it down, that every doctrine opposed to God and godliness, be it called by what name it may, is a vile doctrine, and the servant of the Lord has to take one forth from the other, has to prove every word, and give the precious doctrines of the everlasting Gospel, and set upon them God's attesting seal. And he is to denounce and testify, and warn his hearers against those vile doctrines

which harden the heart, sear the conscience, and land men in destruction and perdition.

There is precious experience and there is vile experience. A precious experience springs out of the teaching of God in the soul and the work of the holy Ghost upon the heart. Every conviction of sin that springs from the Spirit's inward convincing operations is precious as being the handiwork of God. Every sigh, every cry, every groan, every tear, every honest, humble confession before God of what we have been and are is precious, because it is wrought by a divine power in the soul and the issue of it is salvation. Every sweet manifestation of the Son of God to the soul; every glimpse, glance, gleam, or view of his glorious Person by faith; every shining in of the light of his countenance, application of his word with power, whisper of his heavenly love, drawing of his divine grace, application of his precious truth to the heart is precious; it comes from God, it leads to God, it is the work of the Holy Ghost, it prepares the soul for eternity, it is a jewel of God's own gift. Even the humblings that we experience under the hand of God, the breaking down of a hard heart, the softening of an obdurate spirit, the melting of soul under the breath of the Lord, with the going forth of supplication, confession, and desire unto the God of all our mercies to look upon us and bless us, is precious, because it is his gift and work. Every thing which brings out of self, draws to the Lord, makes sin hateful, Jesus precious, puts the world under our feet, gives us the victory over sin, weans us from the love of self, and makes the Lord Jesus precious, should be called a precious experience.

And then there is a vile experience, which is a knowledge of sin without a knowledge of salvation. Many men can speak of their evil heart and take a glory in it. There are few, speaking comparatively, and perhaps none who sit under a gospel

ministry, who cannot speak something of the evil of their hearts. "O, they are so filthy, and so base, and so vile, and so black." Well, they are all that; but after all, it may be a vile experience: nothing but a burning up of nature, nothing but the shining of light upon a dark and wicked heart, without any holy mourning under it, no godly sorrow, no real contrition, no repentance, no confession, no forsaking it. Men will glory in their sins, speak of their bad tempers, how they quarrel with their wives, how cross they are with their children, how they can speak to their servants, and throw these things about as though this vile experience was the effect of grace, the fruit of the teaching of the Spirit. They can even boast of the sins they have committed, talk of the way they have been entangled, the lusts they have fallen a prey to, and throw all this about as though it was grace that had wrought a knowledge of these things in them. It is nothing but a vile experience, just so much dung and dirt of their corrupt nature, without anything of the grace of God in it. It is not knowing yourselves sinners that will save your souls; it is not seeing what you are, black as the tents of Kedar, that will take you to heaven. You may like to hear ministers describe the depths of the fall, the sins we are prone to, the temptations we are subject to, and the evils we feel. You can sit very eagerly to listen to a minister describing his evil heart, and evil temper, and what he feels in the absence of God, what a fretful, murmuring nature he has. You can suck all that down like sweet honey and feed upon it as the honeycomb. But when the servant of God begins to describe his sighs, cries, mourning, and tears, his restless nights, gloomy days, and how he has been exercised on account of the sins he feels, you turn your ear away; you leave all that. You take all the dark, all the black, all the foul, all the filthy, all the vile, and you gather up all this filth and rubbish, and seek to make an experience of it. You say, "Ah, our good minister tells us how bad he is, and what a vile

heart he has: why, I feel just as our good minister does, and if he is right I am right." You take all the filth and vileness, but leave out all the good. And he will tell you perhaps he is tempted; and you say "Yes, I am tempted." But he does not tell you he gives way to temptation if you do. He tells you Satan spreads snares for his feet, but he does not tell you he falls into them as you do. He tells you how wicked his heart is, and how easily he might be drawn aside if God permitted; and you believe all that. But you won't listen to him when he tells you how God keeps him as the apple of his eye, plants his fear deep in his heart, and turns him away from sin. You pull back your ear from all that and thus harden your hearts under a sound Gospel ministry. You feed upon ashes; a deceived heart turns you aside; you bring a lie in your right hand. Here is the vile experience.

Now the servant of God is to take forth the one from the other. He is not to keep back the evils of men's hearts, not to shun declaring the snares laid for their feet, nor the temptations into which they may fall but for God's help. He will tell you what he is and how sin works, because his heart is exercised by it. But he will not leave these things at an uncertainty, but will so take forth the precious experience and hold it up to view that it will be seen it is precious; and then your vile experience, he will take and cast it out like filth, and set upon it his condemning seal, backed by the authority of God. And so he will take forth the precious from the vile.

And so with practice. There is precious practice and there is vile practice; and the servant of God will show you the difference. Precious practice is that which flows from the love of God, influencing the heart to every good word and work, which springs out of union with the living vine, and is produced by the sap and nutriment of grace flowing into the

branches; the practice that springs out of love, not fear; grace, not the law; and the work of the Holy Ghost, and not the spawn of free-will. He will show you that precious practice is to live a consistent life, to walk in godly fear, to adorn the doctrine by the fruits of righteousness; and then he will denounce vile practice. He will thunder forth God's denunciations against all vile practice masked and robed under cover of religion. He will take one from the other and show what is precious practice wrought in the heart by the power of God, and what is vile practice as carried on in secret under the cloak of religion, and carried on in the dark chambers of imagery. And he will show, also, that all practice that does not spring out of the power of God upon the soul, that may be born of human approbation, and arise from a Pharisaic spirit, is in the sight of God vile, because not wrought in the heart by his own Almighty power.

II.—Now you see what a work the servant of God has to do, and how he ought to be instructed in his own mind to see who are precious characters and who are vile characters, what are precious doctrines and what are vile doctrines, what is precious experience and what is vile experience, what is precious practice and what is vile practice; and not only have wisdom and discernment to see the difference, but boldness to declare it; not to fear man; to stand in no dread of his congregation, but to stand before them in faithfulness and honesty, as being a steward of the mysteries of God and being responsible to God for the due execution of his office. Now this man will be as God's mouth. God will speak with authority by him to your souls. You will receive many a sweet testimony into your conscience from him, because he will not mask over matters nor cloke over doctrines, and experience, and practice, and hide them all up in confusion. But he will speak with that authority, and that power, and that unction, and that savour, that it will be at times as God's very mouth

to your soul. You will see your character described, and it will come home to your bosom, and drop as a word from God into your heart. He shall trace out your experience; he shall bring to light your profession; and the word of God will so back up what he says, that it shall come home with God's authority, power, and unction into your soul. But if a man do not take forth the precious from the vile, he never can be as God's mouth. He never can speak with authority and power; nor would his word find a place in the consciences of those who fear God's name.

III.—Now comes our last point—the precept or exhortation: "Let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them." Now a faithful ministry will drive out and purge those who cannot bear to sit under it. There are very few that can bear a faithful ministry. So when a man begins to take forth the precious from the vile, and be as God's mouth, he must expect to drive from the sound of his voice those who cannot receive the testimony; because they are convinced in their own conscience, and they fly away because their conscience testifies against them. Now what is he to do to them? Is he to go after them and bring them back? "No," God says, "let them return unto thee. Maintain thou thy post." "Well, Lord, but perhaps they are rich; we shall lose their support; they will withdraw their subscriptions; the cause will suffer; we shan't get on so well. Might not he soften it a little, not be quite so harsh, give it out in a more mild and gentle form, not speak about vile characters, and vile doctrines, and vile experience, and vile practice? Why can't he smooth matters over a little, and these people won't leave." God says, "Let them return unto thee." And if they be saints of God, and the Lord has begun his work of grace upon their souls, and touched their heart with a coal from off the altar, and made their souls to burn within them, then they will gladly come back. They may go on in error and find their hearts

hardened; go amongst Arminians and free-willers, and find nothing but bondage and death. Now the man of God is not to go after them, nor to smooth matters over, but still to maintain his ground in all faithfulness. "Let them return unto thee." And those in whose hearts God has planted his fear, in whose souls he has begun to work with his heavenly grace, will always come sooner or later, under the sound of a faithful ministry. But others take offence, go away, leave, turn their back upon the truth and the people of God; and those often perish in their own deceiving.

Do you, dear friends, stand by the cause of God and truth? Is there anything can save your souls but truth? Can error save you, bless you, comfort you, support you, be with you on a bed of sickness, pain, languishing, and death? Is there anything but the blood of Christ that can wash your guilty conscience—anything but his righteousness that can justify your needy, naked soul—anything but his love that can be a sweet balm and cordial to your bleeding spirit? Can you abide by error? abide by evil? abide by sin? abide by the world? abide by carnality and death? You can abide by truth in its power, abide by the blood of Christ revealed to your conscience, abide by the love of God shed abroad in your soul, abide by the support of his upholding hand, abide by the sweet views of his Spirit to your soul. You can die by truth as well as live by truth. Therefore, never think for a single moment of turning your back on the ways of God, for if you do, you will only walk in the ways that lead to perdition; and if you go on in them, the further you go the more you will be entangled in the maze of sin and error, and it will be a mercy if you are ever brought back. Never mind your discouragements. Keep on in the footsteps of the prophet: they will guide you right at last. Abide by the truth of God: it has saved thousands; it will save you. Therefore, whatever be the consequence, hang by the truth of God;

keep close to what he has revealed by his Spirit and grace,  
and then you will receive the end of your faith in the  
salvation of your soul.