

The Wicked Through Pride Refuse to Seek God.

by Edward Payson

The wicked will not seek after God because of their pride, which prevents them from acknowledging their ignorance and dependence on God.

Scripture: Psalm 10:4, Psalm 138:6, Proverbs 8:13, Proverbs 16:18, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 23:12, Philippians 2:3, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5, 1 John 2:16

Topics: "Pride And Sin", "Seeking God"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the wicked's unwillingness to seek after God due to the pride of their hearts, which hinders them from pursuing knowledge, favor, likeness, and communion with God. The sermon emphasizes that salvation is solely by God's grace, highlighting the wicked's self-destructive nature and the folly of pride that leads to ignorance and separation from God. Payson urges self-examination among the audience, challenging them to seek God diligently through studying scriptures, prayer, and pursuing communion with Him.

Transcript

"The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God"

Psalm 10:4

In this psalm we have a full length portrait of a careless, unawakened sinner, drawn by the unerring pencil of truth; and so perfect is the resemblance, that were it not for the blinding influence of sin, every such sinner would discover in it, as in a glass, his own image. Two of the features, which compose this portrait, are delineated in our text. The first is an unwillingness to seek after God. The second is pride, which causes that unwillingness. The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God.

In discoursing on this passage, we shall endeavor to show--that the wicked will not seek after God--and that it is the pride of their hearts, which prevents them from seeking him. It will be understood, that by the wicked, we here intend careless, unawakened sinners. I. The wicked will not seek after God. The expression implies, not only that they do not seek after him, but that they will not. It is the settled, determined purpose of their hearts, not to seek him; and to this purpose they will obstinately and unalterably adhere, unless their wills are subdued by divine grace.

With a view to illustrate and establish this truth, we observe 1. That the wicked will not seek after the knowledge of God. This the scriptures plainly assert. The wicked say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. It is also evident from the experience of all ages, that no careless, unawakened sinner, ever used any means, or made the smallest endeavors to acquire a knowledge of God. Our Savior explicitly declares, that all who seek, shall find.

But the wicked do not find the knowledge of God; therefore they never seek it. They will not study the scriptures with a view to become acquainted with God. It is true, they sometimes read the scriptures; but they read them either in a formal, careless manner, or to quiet the remonstrances of conscience, or to find arguments in favor of some false system of religion, which may encourage them in sinful pursuits, and enable them to indulge delusive hopes of future happiness. They never look into the Bible with a sincere desire to find God there; nor study it with that humble, docile, childlike temper, without which it will ever be studied in vain.

And while many thus read the scriptures with improper views, or wrong feelings, many also, there is reason to fear, scarcely read them at all. From week to week, and from year to year, their Bibles lie on the shelf unopened, while they know little more of their contents than of the Koran of Mahomet. The wicked will not pray for the knowledge of God. It can never be said with truth of a wicked man, behold he prayeth. On the contrary, he invariably casts off fear, and restrains prayer before God.

He may indeed, and, as we have already seen, often does, request God to depart from him, and like the evil spirits in our Savior's time, he may cry, I beseech thee, torment me not. But never does he sincerely ask for divine instruction. Never does he cry after knowledge, or lift up his voice for understanding. If he did, he would infallibly obtain it; for every one that asketh, receiveth. Ye have not, says the apostle, because ye ask not. The wicked will not improve those opportunities for acquiring the knowledge of God, which our public and private religious institutions afford.

It is true that many of them attend frequently, perhaps constantly, on the instructions of the sanctuary; but it is equally true, that custom, curiosity, a regard to reputation, or a wish to pass away the time, and not a desire for divine knowledge, induces their attendance. That this is not an uncharitable supposition is apparent from their conduct. Often, while the most solemn and important truths are proclaimed in their hearing, their thoughts, like the fool's eyes, are in the ends of the earth; and they literally hear as though they heard not.

If at any time they listen more attentively to the preached word, it is not with a wish to understand, believe and obey it. Their whole aim in listening often appears to be, to find some real, or apparent contradiction; some plausible excuse for disbelieving or neglecting what they hear. They watch, as the prophet observes of the Jews, to find some iniquity in the speaker. Their minds are full of cavils and objections against the truths delivered; and, no sooner do they leave the house of God, than they forget or banish all that has been said; or remember it only, that they may pervert, misrepresent, and deny it, and thus harden themselves and others in ignorance and sin.

Nor is this all. Private religious conversation, and meetings for this purpose, afford opportunities for acquiring the knowledge of God, as favorable, and in some respects, perhaps, more so, than the public instructions of the sanctuary. But these opportunities the wicked will by no means improve. Seldom, if ever, is the instance known of a careless, unawakened sinner visiting a minister of Christ for the purpose of religious conversation, or attending a private religious meeting, unless it were with some improper

motive.

They can readily and cheerfully attend meetings of a different kind, and engage in conversation on subjects of a different nature, but they avoid places and circles in which religion will probably be introduced, as they would shun a place infected by the plague. We have no fear that these assertions can, with truth, be contradicted. Scripture, observation, and experience unequivocally testify, that careless, unawakened sinners will not seek after the knowledge of God. 2. The wicked will not seek after the favor of God.

Indeed, it is perfectly natural, that those, who think the knowledge of God not worth pursuing, should scarcely consider his favor as worth seeking. Knowing nothing experimentally of his excellence and perfections, and ignorant of their entire dependence on him for happiness, they cannot, of course, realize, that the favor of God is life, and his loving kindness better than life. Hence they will not seek to obtain it, but prefer almost every thing else to the divine favor; and love the praise of men more than the praise of God.

The way to obtain and secure the favor of God is as plainly marked out, and, at least, as easy to be followed by those who are so disposed, as the way to acquire any temporal blessing whatever. God has stated in his word, with the greatest possible clearness, both what will secure and what will forfeit his favor; both what will incur and what will avert his displeasure. Yet all the wicked daily practice those things which are displeasing to God, and entirely incompatible with the enjoyment of his favor; while, on the contrary, they totally neglect to cultivate those dispositions and perform those actions, which will secure his approbation.

In fact, they think, they care nothing about it. How he shall avert God's displeasure, or obtain his favor, is no part of an unawakened sinner's inquiry or concern. He asks innumerable other questions, many of which are in the highest degree frivolous and useless; but never is he heard to ask, What must I do to be saved? He pursues other objects, the most trifling objects too; but never is he seen engaged in the ardent pursuit of this. He is exceedingly jealous of his own reputation and solicitous to acquire the good opinion of his fellow creatures, even of the meanest and most worthless among them, while he proportionally dreads their censures.

But the wrath of him, in whom he lives, and moves, and exists, who can in a moment cut short his life, and destroy both soul and body in hell, he does not fear; nor does he consider his highest approbation as a worthy object of desire or pursuit. In the language of inspiration, the wicked cry out by reason of the arm of the mighty; but none saith, where is God, my Maker, who giveth songs in the night? 3. The wicked will not seek after the likeness of God. That they do not at all resemble him, is certain, if the scriptures are true.

That they do not wish or endeavor to resemble him, is equally evident. There is, indeed, in their view, no reason, why they should. There are but two motives, which can induce any being to imitate another, or to wish to resemble him. The first is a wish to obtain the approbation of the person imitated. The second is admiration of something in his character, and a consequent desire to inscribe it into our own. But the wicked can be influenced by neither of these motives to seek after conformity to God.

They cannot be led to imitate him by a wish to obtain his favor; for this, as we have already seen, they have no desire to obtain. Nor do they discover any thing in his character, which they wish to transcribe into their own; for they have no knowledge of God, no desire to know him, no taste for the beauties of holiness. Christ, we are told, is the image of the invisible God, the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express

image of his person. Yet they evidently, as the prophet observes, discover in Christ no form or comeliness; and when they see him, he has in their eyes no beauty, that they should desire to resemble him.

And as it is with Christ, the image of God, so of course, it must be with respect to God himself. Since they have no wish to imitate the former they cannot, they will not seek after conformity with the latter. The truth of this conclusion is evident from their conduct. Though man is naturally an imitative being; and though the wicked imitate many things in the conduct of their fellow creatures; things too, which are, in many respects, foolish, ridiculous, and sinful, yet they never evince the least desire, or make the smallest exertion to imitate the inimitable perfections of God.

On the contrary, they refuse to be reconciled to him, follow a course directly opposite to his, and daily become, if possible, more and more unlike him. 4. The wicked will not seek after communion with God. That there is such a thing, as the enjoyment of fellowship or communion with God, the inspired writers most unequivocally assert; and one of them, St. John, informs us, that to bring those, whom he addressed, to the enjoyment of this privilege, was the principal design of his epistle.

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. That this fellowship with God and his Son is a blessed reality, and that it is productive of the purest and most exalted pleasures, all true Christians well know; for they often taste its sweetness, and rejoice with joy Unspeakable and full of glory. But for this joy in God, and the fellowship which produces it, the wicked will not seek; for they do not desire it; they have no conception of it, and while they Continue wicked, it is morally impossible that they should have.

Communion, or even a desire for communion with any being, always presupposes some degree of resemblance to that being, and a participation of the same nature, views and feelings. Irrational animals evidently cannot enjoy communion with men in rational pleasures, because they have no capacity for such pleasures; nor can they even desire to enjoy communion with us, because they have no conception of such a quality as reason, nor of the pleasures which it qualifies us to enjoy.

But cause them to resemble us, endue them with reason, and they will, at once, desire and enjoy communion with us in rational pleasures and pursuits. For similar reasons wicked men cannot enjoy, or even wish to enjoy, communion with a holy God; for they resemble him as little, as the irrational animals do us; and, we have already seen, they will not seek to resemble him. As they cannot know spiritual things, because they are spiritually discerned; so they cannot enjoy spiritual pleasures, because they are spiritually enjoyed.

Not only have they no relish or capacity for such pleasures; they do not even know that such pleasures exist, nor can they form a conception of them, any more than an irrational animal can conceive of intellectual enjoyments. Of course, they will not seek after communion with God; and while the Christian, who has been made partaker of a divine nature, enjoys the most exquisite felicity in communion with his Maker and Redeemer, praying, Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon me, they roam unsatisfied from creature to creature, still vainly crying, who will show us any good?

Thus have I endeavored to illustrate and establish the assertion of the Psalmist. I proceed now, as was proposed, II. To the reason why the wicked will not seek after God, viz., their pride. In illustration of this, I observe, 1. That the pride of the wicked is the principal reason, why they will not seek after the knowledge of God. This knowledge it prevents them from seeking in various ways. In the first place, it renders God a

disagreeable object of contemplation to the wicked, and a knowledge of him as undesirable.

Pride consists in an unduly exalted opinion of one's self. It is therefore impatient of a rival, hates a superior, and Cannot endure a master. In proportion as it prevails in the heart, it makes us wish to see nothing above us, to acknowledge no law but our own wills, to follow no rule but our own inclinations. Thus it led Satan to rebel against his Creator, and our first parents to desire to be as Gods. Since such are the effects of pride, it is evident that nothing can be more painful to a proud heart, than the thoughts of such a being as God; one, who is infinitely powerful, just, and holy; who can neither be resisted, deceived, nor deluded; who disposes, according to his own sovereign pleasure, of all creatures and events; and who, in an especial manner, hates pride, and is determined to abase and punish it.

Such a being pride can contemplate only with feelings of dread, aversion and abhorrence. It must look upon him as its natural enemy; the great enemy whom it has to fear. But the knowledge of God directly tends to bring this infinite, irresistible, irreconcilable enemy full to the view of the proud man. It teaches him, that he has a superior, a master, from whose authority he cannot escape, whose power he cannot resist, and whose will he must obey, or be crushed before him and rendered miserable forever.

It shows him what he hates to see, that in spite of his opposition, God's counsel shall stand, that he will do all his pleasure, and that in all things, wherein men deal proudly, God is above them. These truths torture the proud, unhumbled hearts of the wicked; and hence they hate that knowledge of God, which teaches these truths, and will not seek it. On the contrary, they wish to remain ignorant of such a being, and to banish all thoughts of him from their minds. With this view they neglect, pervert, or explain away those passages of revelation, which describe God's true character, and endeavor to believe, that he is altogether such an one as themselves.

In the second place, the pride of the wicked prevents them from seeking after the knowledge of God, by rendering them unwilling to be taught. Pride is almost as impatient of a teacher, as it is of a master. The proud man is ever vain of his knowledge, and is unwilling to confess, or even to think, that there is any thing of importance, of which he is ignorant, or that any person is capable of giving him instruction. But if he consents to seek after the knowledge of God, he must acknowledge his ignorance, he must submit to be taught, he must, as it Were, put himself to school and become as a little child.

This his proud heart cannot brook; and therefore he will not seek the knowledge of God. In the third place, pride renders the wicked unwilling to use the means, by which alone the knowledge of God can be acquired. For instance, it renders them unwilling to study the scriptures in a proper manner. Every thing, which the Bible reveals, is suited to mortify pride; for in dictating it God had purposed in his heart to stain the pride of all human glory. The description, which it gives, of the desperately sinful, guilty, and ruined condition of mankind; of our entire dependence on the sovereign grace of God; the mysterious, humbling doctrines and self-denying precepts, which it inculcates; the self-condemning spirit, which it requires, and the self-abasing way of salvation which it reveals, render it exceedingly disagreeable to the taste of the proud, wicked man.

In addition to this, it commands him to renounce his proud dependence on his own understanding, to sit with a teachable, childlike temper at the feet of Jesus, and learn of him, who was meek and lowly in heart; to believe truths which he cannot fully comprehend, and which, perhaps, appear unreasonable to his prejudiced, blinded, unhumbled mind. These things the proud man cannot endure, and therefore will not study the scriptures. Pride also renders the wicked man unwilling to pray.

Prayer is an expression of wants and dependence, and a direct acknowledgment of a superior; and in addition to this, prayer for the knowledge of God includes a confession of ignorance, and a request to be taught. But this the proud man abhors. No wonder then that he will not pray for divine knowledge. No wonder, that even when he attempts this duty, he forgets its design, and, like the self-righteous Pharisee, instead of soliciting pardon, grace and instruction, proudly thanks God, that he is better than others.

In an equally powerful manner does the pride of the wicked operate in preventing them from improving public and private opportunities for acquiring religious instruction. If the public instructions of the sanctuary coincide, as they ever ought to do, with the contents of God's word, the same pride, which leads the wicked to dislike and neglect the one, will prevent them from believing and obeying the other. And with respect to more private meetings for religious conversation and instruction, an attendance on them is still more offensive to the pride of their hearts.

Indeed, since they are too proud to request divine illumination from God, it could scarcely be expected, that they will stoop to receive instruction from man. Even after the wicked man begins to be convinced of his ignorance of God, and of the importance of divine knowledge, he is unwilling to have it known, and is ashamed to confess to his Christian friends, or to the minister of Christ, that he is ignorant of religious truth. Such are the principal ways, in which the pride of the wicked operates to prevent them from seeking the knowledge of God. 2.

The pride of the wicked will not allow them to seek after the favor of God. The proud always aim at independence. They wish to believe themselves, and to persuade others, that they are able to render themselves happy, without the assistance of any one. But to seek the favor of God, implies dependence on him for happiness; it implies imperfection, inferiority. Hence it is easy to see how the pride of the wicked prevents them from seeking the divine favor. The way in which alone God's favor can be obtained, is, if possible, still more offensive to pride.

The very entrance upon the way, is a death-blow to it; for the Gospel casts down imaginations and every high thing, that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and requires us, if we would enjoy his favor, to bow our stubborn wills to his authority, to mortify our pride, and renounce our vainglorious, self-righteous thoughts and feelings. It tells us, that God resisteth the proud; that every one, who exalteth himself, shall be abased; and that the proud in heart are an abomination to the Lord, while he gives his grace to the lowly, and will dwell in none but the humble and contrite heart.

We can, therefore, be at no loss to know why the pride of the wicked will not suffer them to seek the favor of God. 3. Pride renders the wicked unwilling to seek after the likeness of God. Those, who have an exalted opinion of themselves, will not easily be persuaded to imitate others. They will rather expect others to imitate them. Besides, an attempt to imitate others, involves a confession, that they are our superiors; at least, that they excel us in those respects, in which we endeavor to imitate them.

But pride hates a superior, and is unwilling to allow that it is excelled by any one. 4. The pride of the wicked renders them unwilling to seek after communion with God. The proud man never wishes to associate with those, who are above him. If he must have superiors, he wishes to be as far from them as possible, that the sight of their superiority may not mortify his pride. Hence the remark of proud Caesar, when passing through an insignificant village--"I would rather be the first man in this village, than the second in Rome;" a speech, which, though admired by the proud and ambitious, nearly resembles that, which Milton has put into the mouth of Satan, after his fall: Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

This is the genuine language of pride; and therefore the proud man shuns the society of his superiors, and prefers that of his inferiors. He chooses to look down, rather than to look up, because, when he looks down, his pride is flattered by seeing others below him; but when he looks up, it is mortified. Hence he will not look up to God. He chooses rather to hold communion with irrational animals in the gratifications of sense, than to seek for fellowship with the greatest and best of beings, in the pure, exalted, and exquisite pleasures of religion. Thus clearly does it appear, that it is the pride of the wicked, which renders them unwilling to seek after God.

REFLECTIONS.

1. How evident it is from what has been said, that salvation is wholly of grace; and that all the wicked, if left to themselves, will certainly perish! They do not seek after God; they will not seek after him; they are fully determined not to do it; the pride of their hearts supports the resolution, and they will infallibly adhere to it unless divine grace prevents. But if they do not seek God, they will not find him; and if they do not find him, they are undone forever. Their eternal destruction is therefore inevitable, unless God, of his mere sovereign, self-moved grace, seeks those, who will not seek him, subdues the pride of their hearts, and makes them willing.

This he has done for all, who are saved. This he must do for all, who ever will be saved. Need any thing more be said to prove, that salvation is wholly of grace? 2. How depraved, how infatuated, how unreasonable do the wicked appear! and how evident it is, that if they perish, they will be the sole authors of their own destruction! God has given them all the powers and faculties necessary to enable them to seek and pursue any object. This is evident, because they do, in fact, seek and obtain many objects.

God also commands them to seek his face; assures them, that none shall seek in vain; and at the same time warns them, that all, who seek him not, will be miserable forever. But the wicked neglect his warnings, disbelieve his promises, and pay no attention to his commands. When they hear him saying, Seek ye my face; instead of replying with the Psalmist, Thy face, Lord, will we seek--their proud hearts obstinately refuse to obey. They pursue the perishing vanities of time and sense through labors, dangers, and death itself; and wandering far from the way of peace, and neglecting the infinite beauty, the supreme good, the fountain of life and happiness, they madly rush on, with blind impetuosity, into the yawning gulf of destruction.

They are therefore, evidently and incontestably, their own destroyers, and when they shall hereafter be sentenced to depart accursed from him whom they now refuse to seek, should the whole intelligent universe be summoned to inquire what occasioned their fate, they would unite in a verdict of self-murder.

3. How foolish, how absurd, how ruinous, how blindly destructive of its own object, does pride appear! By attempting to soar, it only plunges itself in the mire; and, while endeavoring to erect for itself a throne, it undermines the ground on which it stands, and digs its own grave.

It plunged Satan from heaven into hell; it banished our first parents from paradise, and it will, in a similar manner, ruin all, who indulge it. It keeps us in ignorance of God, shuts us out from his favor, prevents us from resembling him, deprives us, in this world, of all the honor and happiness, which communion with him would confer; and in the next, unless previously hated, repented of, and renounced, will bar forever against us the door of heaven, and close upon us the gates of hell. O, then, my friends, beware, above all things, beware of pride.

Beware, lest you indulge it imperceptibly; for it is, perhaps, of all sins, the most secret, subtle, and insinuating. That you may detect it, remember, that he only, who seeks after God in his appointed way, is humble; and that all who neglect thus to seek him, are most certainly proud in heart, and, consequently, an abomination unto the Lord. Lastly--This subject may be applied for the purpose of self-examination. Say, then, my friends, are there none present, who do not seek after God?

Are you all seeking after the knowledge of God, by diligently and humbly studying the scriptures, by fervent prayer, and by a conscientious improvement of the public and private opportunities, with which God has favored you? Are you all seeking the favor of God as the one thing needful, avoiding every thing which will tend to displease him, and practicing every thing that tends to secure his approbation? Are you seeking conformity with God, aiming to be followers of him as dear children, and desiring to be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect?

Is communion with God the grand object of your desires, the principal source of your pleasures, the reward at which you aim, in the performance of religious duties? If this be the case with all present, you are indeed happy, and the preceding observations have no application to you. But if there be one person present, who is not thus seeking God, that person is a wicked person, one who is entirely under the influence of pride, and against whom all the dreadful curses, denounced by inspired writers upon the wicked are leveled.

If there be one such person in this assembly, may God, by his Spirit, single him out, convince him of his wickedness, his pride, his guilt and danger, and bring him as a trembling inquirer after God, to the feet of Jesus, and as a humble suppliant for mercy, to the foot of the cross.

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