

Character Affected by Intercourse.

by Edward Payson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of choosing to associate with religious men and the consequences of choosing irreligious companions.

Scripture: Psalm 1:1, Proverbs 13:20, Proverbs 22:24, 1 Corinthians 15:33, 2 Corinthians 6:14

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Fellowship"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of choosing wise companions over foolish ones, emphasizing that walking with religious individuals leads to a life of faith and salvation, while being a companion of sinners leads to destruction. He explains that walking with religious men involves more than occasional interactions but requires a continual course of conduct in agreement with their pursuit of heaven through Jesus Christ. Payson warns that associating with sinners not only hinders the development of serious religious impressions but also leads to the formation of habits and attitudes that oppose true faith, ultimately resulting in spiritual destruction.

Transcript

"He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; but a companion of fools shall be destroyed."

Proverbs 13:20

have often reminded you that the terms wisdom and folly, wise and foolish, have a very different signification in the writings of Solomon, from that which they bear in the works of uninspired men. By wisdom, he means something of which the fear of the Lord is the prime constituent; for he says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments. By wisdom, then, he means religion; for religion begins with the fear of God.

Of course, by the wise, he intends those who are religious; those who, to use the language of an apostle, are wise unto salvation. By folly, on the contrary, he means sin; and, by the foolish, those who love and practice it; or, in other words, impenitent sinners, who are destitute of the fear of God with which wisdom begins. The import of our text then is this, He that walks with religious men will become religious; but a companion of sinners shall be destroyed. These two assertions I now propose to consider separately, with a view to illustrate their meaning, and convince you of their truth.

I. He that walks with religious men will become religious. The term walk, as used, by the inspired writers, always signifies a continued course of conduct, or a manner of living, in which men persevere till it becomes habitual. Thus the phrase, Enoch walked with God, evidently signifies that he lived in a religious manner. He did not repair to God occasionally, when want or affliction or fear of death impelled; he did not merely take a few steps in that path in which God condescends to walk with men, and then forsake it; but he pursued that path habitually and perseveringly; he lived with God, in contradistinction from those who live without him in the world.

So the phrase, to walk in the way of God's commandments, evidently signifies, to pursue a course of holy obedience, without turning aside to the right hand or to the left. To walk with religious men, then, is not merely to mingle occasionally in their society, or to unite with them in performing some of the more public ditties of religion; but it is to make them habitually our chosen companions and friends, and, in subordination to God, our guides. It is not, for instance, walking with religious men to go with them to places of public worship; for David says of Ahithophel, who died as a fool dieth, We walked to the house of God in company.

Nor is it walking with religious men to converse with them occasionally on religious subjects; for David says of the same Ahithophel, We took sweet counsel together: that is, we had conversation pleasant to me, and, as I then thought, to him, respecting subjects of a religious nature. It is not walking with religious men to reside with them, to live in a pious family; and to attend with its members at the family altar; for a person may do this reluctantly, and his chosen associates, the companions of his pleasure, may be of a very different character.

Nor does uniting with religious men in promoting some of the great objects which the Christian world is now pursuing, necessarily prove that we walk with them; for we may be led to do this by wrong motives, as well as by those which are right. But to walk with religious men is to choose them for our associates, our fellow travelers in the journey of life; and this implies an agreement with them in our views and objects of pursuit. Can two walk together, says the prophet, except they be agreed?

A question which plainly implies that they cannot. In order that two persons may walk together, they must be agreed, first; respecting the place to which they will go; for if one wishes to go to one place, and the other to a different place, they cannot be companions. In the second place, they must agree in opinion respecting the way which leads to that place; for if they disagree in this they will soon separate. In these two particulars, then, all who would walk with religious characters must agree.

Now the place to which every religious person, is travelling is heaven. Every such person, the Scriptures inform us, is a pilgrim and stranger on earth, seeking another and better country, that is a heavenly. Of course, all who would walk with them must make heaven the object of their pursuit, the place which they aim to reach. Again; in the opinion of every truly religious person, the only way to heaven is Jesus Christ; for I, says he, am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father but by me.

All those who walk with religious persons must agree with them in assenting to this truth. I do not mean that they must immediately and cordially embrace it, for they would then themselves be religious; but they must have such a conviction that there is a heaven, and that an interest in Jesus Christ is necessary to obtain it, as will draw them away from sinful society and sinful pleasure, and induce them to associate with Christians, to unite with them in attending diligently all the means of grace, and to listen with interest to religious conversation; they must, in short, have such a conviction of the truth and reality and importance

of religion as to adopt the resolution and the language of Ruth: Entreat us not to leave you, nor to return from following after you, for where you go, we will go, where you dwell we will dwell; your people shall be our people, and your God our God, nor shall any thing part us.

Nor is it sufficient to adhere to this resolution for a short time only, for every Person, who becomes the subject of serious impressions, forms such a resolution, and adheres to it so long as these impressions remain. During this period he loses all relish for worldly pleasures, and for conversation of a worldly nature, and can enjoy no society but that of Christians. But in too many cases this state of mind is of short duration. Their serious impressions are effaced, their desire for earthly and sinful objects revives, they forsake religious pursuits, and religious society, and return snore eagerly perhaps than ever, to their former courses, their former associates.

Such persons cannot be said to walk with religious characters, in the sense of our text; they do at most but take a few steps with them, and, instead of adhering to the resolution of Ruth, imitate the conduct of Orpah, who after a short struggle between her convictions and her inclinations, went back to her country and to her idols. But those, who instead of thus drawing back to perdition persevere to the end of life in the course which has been described, really walk with religious persons, and will themselves become religious.

There are several circumstances and considerations which, taken collectively, prove the truth of this assertion, though no one of them taken separately would be sufficient to prove it. In the first place, the simple fact, that a person chooses to associate with religious characters, in religious pursuits, proves that he is already the subject of serious impressions; that his understanding is convinced of the reality and importance of religion: that his conscience is awakened, and that, to use the language of inspiration, the Spirit of God is striving with him; for it is most certain that, unless this is the case, no person will ever forsake his sinful pleasures and pursuits, and his sinful companions for the society of Christians.

All his natural feelings and inclinations render him averse to their society, and prevent his finding pleasure in religious pursuits: while, at the same time, they urge him to pursue worldly objects, and give him a relish for the company of worldly associates. He is also aware that, should he forsake his worldly companions for the society of Christians, he will expose himself to their contempt and become the subject of their ridicule. What then is to induce him to act contrary to his natural feelings and inclinations, and to exchange society which he loves, and in which he finds pleasure, for that which is disagreeable, and to expose himself to ridicule and contempt?

It is most evident that nothing can do this but the power of an awakened conscience, of strong conviction produced by the Spirit of God. He then, who begins to walk with religious persons, is already the subject of religious impressions, the Spirit of God is operating upon his mind, and this affords some reason to hope that he will become really religious. At least his situation is much more hopeful than that of a person who feels no religious concern. In the second place, he who walks with religious persons, will see and hear many things which powerfully tend to increase and perpetuate those serious impressions of which he is already the subject; while, at the same time, he will be withdrawn from the operation of many of those causes by which such impressions are effaced.

There is nothing which tends more powerfully to obliterate these impressions, than the society, the conversation, and example of the world. These causes have destroyed more, who once were not far from the kingdom of God, than perhaps all other causes united. Indeed it is, humanly speaking, impossible that

any serious impressions should remain long upon a mind, which is exposed to the full malignant influence of these causes. But he who walks with religious persons, is very much withdrawn from this fatal influence.

Not only so, but he is brought under a different and salutary influence. He moves in a circle where God and the Redeemer, and the soul, and salvation, and heaven, are regarded as objects of supreme importance; and where the world, with all which it contains, is considered as comparatively worthless. He moves in a circle where he sees religion exemplified, where it is presented to him not as a cold abstraction, or as a lifeless form, but living, breathing, and acting, in the person of its disciples.

He sees the salutary and happy effects which it produces; he sees that it does not, as he once thought, render its votaries gloomy or morose or misanthropic, but that its fruits are love and joy and peace. In addition, he hears much conversation on religious subjects, much that is calculated to instruct him, to warn him, and to increase his conviction of sin; and his desire to become truly religious. Besides he is almost daily brought under the operation of some of the means which God employs to produce and increase conviction, and to effect conversion.

It is therefore, to say the least, highly probable that he will become truly religious. In the third place, as the term walk signifies a continued course of conduct, it is evident that one, who walks with religious men, must be the subject of serious impressions for many years Successively. We have already seen that no one will begin to walk with religious persons, till he becomes the subject of serious impressions. Equally evident is it, that no one will continue to walk with them after his serious impressions are effaced.

He then who does continue to walk with them through life, must be the subject of serious impressions through life. But no one, it is presumed, ever heard of an instance in which a person, who was the subject of serious impressions through life, did not become religious. It is true persons may be seriously affected, occasionally, and perhaps for years together, and at different seasons, may associate much with religious characters, without becoming religious; but such persons cannot be said to walk with good men in the sense of the text; for their religious impressions are often effaced for a considerable time, and long intervals of carelessness succeed, during which they forsake in a great measure religious pursuits, and religious society.

But it is believed that no instance can be found, of a person who continued through life to walk with religious characters, and yet never become religious. We readily allow, indeed, that such a thing is possible; there is nothing in the nature of things to prevent it. God could, if he pleased, produce convictions of sin, and apprehension of future punishment which should last through life, and yet never be followed by conversion. But this is not his method. His method is, to give up those who obstinately resist his grace, to hardness of heart and to blindness of mind, and thus leave them to walk in their own ways, and to be filled with the fruit of their own devices.

Hence the serious impressions of those who finally perish are usually of short continuance; or if they continue long, it is with many interruptions. Nothing but real grace, but genuine religion, will enable a man to endure to the end. He then who continues to walk with religious men to the end of his life will become religious. Indeed he must have become so before many years, perhaps before many months had been spent in such a course. II. Let us now consider the second assertion contained in our text, A companion of sinners shall be destroyed.

By a companion of sinners is evidently meant, one who chooses for his associates persons regardless of religion. It does not render us companions of sinners to reside with them, to transact business with them.,

or to visit and converse with them for the purpose of performing kind offices, or of promoting their eternal interests. But if we select them as our intimate associates; if we choose to spend our leisure hours in their company; if we find pleasure in their society, and prefer it to that of religious persons; then we are certainly their companions in the sense of the text, and shall perish with them.

The truth of this assertion will appear evident from the following considerations viewed collectively, In the first place, it is certain that he, who is in this sense a companion of sinners, is the subject of no religious impressions, that he has few if any serious thoughts. The very fact, that he chooses such persons for his associates and companions, proves that he resembles them; that his views and feelings respecting religion correspond with theirs, and that their conversation is agreeable to his taste.

Referring to such characters, our Saviour says, They are of the world, therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth or listeneth to them. Hence it appears that they whose conversation is of a worldly nature, and they, who listen with pleasure to such conversation, are alike of the world. Besides, we have already seen that as soon as any person becomes the subject of serious impressions, he wishes to associate with serious characters. Such persons only will converse with him on that subject which lies nearest his heart, and which therefore is most interesting; from such persons alone can he obtain that information which he desires; and they alone can understand and sympathize in his feelings.

To speak on worldly subjects to such a person, will be like singing songs to a heavy heart. How can he, who is burdened with a load of guilt, and feels that his soul is in danger; that his eternal interests are at stake--find pleasure in conversing on subjects comparatively worthless and trifling? It is impossible. Nothing then can be more certain than the fact, that he, who selects irreligious persons for his companions, and finds pleasure in their society, is not the subject of any serious impressions.

He exactly resembles those with whom he associates, and is like them pursuing the broad and crowded road which leads to destruction. In the second place, he who chooses for his companions, persons regardless of religion, takes the most effectual way to prevent any serious impressions from being ever made on his mind. Experience and observation unite to prove, that the human mind, as is said of the chameleon, takes the complexion of those with whom it associates, and that the force of example, especially of bad example, is almost irresistible.

There is in human nature a principle of association, in consequence of which we can scarcely avoid becoming, in some degree at least, conformed to those with whom we associate on intimate and friendly terms. The operation of this principle is powerfully assisted, and its effects increased, by that desire to please which is natural to man. Hence he, who selects persons regardless of religion as his companions, will become more and more like them; he will imitate their example; he will become thoroughly imbued with their spirit; and receive their principles and maxims as the perfection of wisdom.

He will see them treat religion with indifference and neglect; he will hear them speak of it, if they speak of it at all, with levity, if not with contempt; he will find that they consider attention to it as quite unnecessary, and regard those who are the subjects of serious impressions as weak and deluded. Now it is evident that nothing can tend more powerfully than this to prevent him from ever becoming the subject of such impressions. It is evident that, by mingling in such society, he will become hardened against the truth, and fortified against every argument, motive, and consideration of a religious nature which can be presented to his mind.

He will come to the house of God, not with any desire to receive instruction, but merely to spend an idle hour in vain thoughts, or in unprofitable gazing, or in listening for something to which he may plausibly object, or turn into ridicule; and while divine truth drops around him like the rain, and distils as the dew, there will be, if I may so express it, an umbrella spread over his head which will suffer no salutary drop to fall upon him; or in the language of Scripture, there will be a veil upon his heart, through which the light of divine truth cannot penetrate.

It is therefore evident, not only that such a person has no serious impressions, but that there is very little reason to hope he will ever be the subject of them. In the third place, he who selects persons regardless of religion for his associates, takes the most effectual way to banish those serious thoughts which will occasionally rise in the minds even of the most careless. God employs various means to excite such thoughts. An attack of disease, the death of a companion, or an awakening sermon, often occasions them.

Now if a person in whose mind such thoughts arise, would entertain them willingly, cherish them, commune with his own heart and seek the society of religious persons, the consequences might be most happy and lasting. But if he associates with persons regardless of religion, his serious thoughts will almost infallibly be banished. Suppose, for instance, that a person, who comes careless and thoughtless to the house of God, finds his attention arrested, his understanding convinced, his conscience awakened by the truths which he hears.

While listening to these truths, he probably forms a kind of vague, undefined resolution, that he will pay more attention to religious subjects than he has done. But he leaves the house of God, and almost unavoidably falls in with some of his irreligious companions, He soon finds that the truths, to which he has been listening with interest, have not affected them in the same manner. If he ventures to hint, that the sermon was convincing, or the subject of it important, his remarks are received with the most frigid indifference, or with a look of surprise mingled with contempt.

He is therefore obliged to repress his serious thoughts, and such thoughts when repressed soon leave us. Besides, he must make an effort to enter into conversation, or his companions will suspect him of being serious, --a suspicion which he cannot bear to have them entertain. The subject of conversation will, of course, be of a worldly nature; it will excite worldly thoughts, and thus his serious thoughts will be banished, so that, before he quits his companions and returns home, the effect of the truth which he has heard is entirely obliterated.

I dare appeal to many of you, my hearers, for the truth of these remarks. Many of you cannot deny that you have been religiously affected by the truth which you have heard in this house; nor can you deny that, when you were thus affected, the society, conversation and example of your irreligious companions, banished your serious thoughts and lulled you to sleep again in the lap of sinful security. Thus it will always be, while you choose such companions. You may be a thousand times roused, and a thousand times may resolve that you will be more attentive to religion; but so long as you are a companion of sinners, your serious thoughts will be banished and all your resolutions broken.

Finally, he, who associates with persons regardless of religion, will inevitably form confirmed habits of feeling, thinking and acting, which will operate most powerfully to prevent him from ever becoming religious, and thus effect his destruction. The language of inspiration is, Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? then may those, who are accustomed to do evil, learn to do well. But by associating with irreligious companions, men soon become accustomed to do evil.

They acquire confirmed habits of neglecting religion, of delaying preparation for death, and of banishing serious thoughts. They also become more blindly devoted to the world, more fond of the society, conversation, and pursuits of those with whom they associate, and of course more enslaved by their influence and example. Thus, to use the language of Scripture, their bands are made strong, so strong that they will probably never break them. Nor is this all, there are among us few men, at least few young men, totally regardless of religion, whose morals are perfectly pure; few, who are not addicted to some species of vice.

One is profane, another is intemperate, a third is debauched, and a fourth is not strictly honest. These sins may, at first, disgust a young man, whose morals are as yet uncontaminated; but if he continues to associate with those who are guilty of them, his disgust will infallibly, though gradually, subside. He will first tolerate these vices, for the sake of those who practice them; then he will learn to give them soft, extenuating names; next he will be taught that it is a proof of spirit and genius in a young man, to plunge into some excesses; finally he will take the plunge, and be entangled in a whirlpool, from which there is little reason to hope he will ever escape.

What thousands and what millions of once promising youth have been ruined in this manner! Multitudes of our race have died in consequence of taking the plague, the yellow fever, the small pox, from the diseased: but far greater multitudes have been ruined, both for this world and for the next, by taking the infection of vice from vicious companions. From the preceding remarks, it appears that he, who associates with persons regardless of religion, has no present religious impressions; that he takes the most effectual way to prevent such impressions from being made on his mind, and to efface them when they are made; and that he is continually forming habits most unfavorable to religion, and thus bringing himself into a state in which he can no more learn to do well, than an Ethiopian can change his skin, or a leopard his spots; of course, he will die without religion, and the doom of all who die without religion, is destruction.

The companion of sinners then will be destroyed. It remains to make some improvement of the subject. 1. From this subject we may learn what course we are pursuing, and what will be our fate if we continue in our present course till the end of life. We cannot but know who are our chosen companions and associates; with whom we love to converse, and in whose society we find most pleasure. We cannot but know whether they consist of persons apparently religious, or of those who pay no regard to religion.

Say then, my hearers, who are your associates? Are you walking with religious characters, or are you companions of sinners? I ask this question, not only of those out of the church, but of those who are in it; for, strange as it may appear, there are many in the church of Christ, who are companions of sinners. They are united to the church only by the external tie of a profession; they do not walk with it; their hearts are not with it, but with the world. They feel most at home in worldly society; in such society they find most pleasure.

In worldly conversation they engage with most interest; worldly objects they pursue with most ardor. Now such persons, notwithstanding their profession, are companions of sinners in the sense of our text. Say then, my hearers, what are you? Are you with Christ or against him? Can you truly say to God, in the language of the psalmist, I am a companion of them that fear thee, and that keep thy precepts? Are such characters your chosen associates, in whose company you find most pleasure, with whom you love to spend your leisure hour?

Then you either are religious, or if you continue to pursue this course through life, will become so. But if you are a companion of those who pay no regard to religion, you are certainly irreligious, and if you pursue this course, destruction, everlasting destruction, will be your portion. 2. Let me beseech all present, and especially the young, to be guided by this subject in making choice of their associates. Remember that you are immortal beings, choosing companions for eternity.

Remember, that if you choose to associate with persons regardless of religion now, you must associate with them forever. You must be partners with them in their destruction. Remember too, that when you meet them in the other world, you will find them stripped of every quality which now renders their society pleasing. For from him which hath not, shall betaken away even that which he seemeth to have. Theta those who are now your tempters shall be your tormentors, and feel a diabolical gratification in adding to your wretchedness.

On the other hand, if you walk with good men, you shall have them for your companions through eternity; and not as they are now, stained by many imperfections, but perfect in every intellectual and moral excellence. Nor is this all. You shall also enjoy the society of angels, of your Redeemer, of your God. O then, be companions of them that fear God. Shun the society of every one who is addicted to any vice, as you would shun a man infected with the plague; for if you associate with such a person, there is almost a moral certainty that his vices will become yours.

Still more earnestly would I press an attention to this subject on those who are the subjects of serious impressions, or who have any serious thoughts. Do you wish to have such thoughts forever banished, such impressions effaced from your mind? do you wish to live without religion, to die without hope; and to perish forever? Then choose for your companions persons who are regardless of religion. On the other hand, do you wish that your serious thoughts should continue, that your serious impressions should become deep and lasting, and that they should end in conversion? do you wish to live religiously, to die triumphantly, to be happy eternally?

Then shun irreligious society and walk with good men. Choose them for your companions, listen to their instructions, request their prayers, imitate their example, attend with them on all the means of grace, converse with them freely respecting your religious concerns. Pursue this course without interruption, and the issue will be happy. Finally; permit me, in the name of all God's people, to address to each of you the invitation which Moses gave to Hobab; We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you; come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.

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