

# Knowledge of One's Sins, a Difficult Acquisition.

by Edward Payson

---

*The sermon emphasizes the difficulty of recognizing one's own sins due to ignorance, self-love, and the deceitfulness of sin.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 19:12, Proverbs 16:2, Proverbs 21:2, Proverbs 28:13, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:20, 1 Corinthians 4:4, Hebrews 4:12, James 1:22, 1 John 1:8

**Topics:** "Sinfulness", "Repentance"

---

## Description

Edward Payson preaches on the difficulty of understanding our own errors and sins, emphasizing the importance of seeking God's cleansing from hidden faults. He explains that acquiring knowledge of our sinfulness is challenging due to human ignorance of the divine law, the nature of the human mind, the prevalence of self-love, the deceitfulness of sin, and the effects of sin on our understanding and conscience. Payson urges his listeners to examine their hearts honestly, considering the possibility of self-deception and the need for repentance and reliance on God's grace for true transformation.

---

## Transcript

"Who can understand his errors?"

Psalm 19:12

From the preceding part of this psalm it appears that, when David uttered this exclamation, he had been meditating on the purity and perfection of the divine law. From this subject he passed by a very natural transition, to his own transgressions of that law. The more he reflected upon them the more numerous and aggravated did they appear; and the more he felt convinced that he was still very far from discovering them all. Hence he was constrained to exclaim, Who can understand his errors?

Cleanse thou me from secret faults; that is, from those faults of which I am not sensible, which are hidden even from myself. To understand our errors, is to be acquainted with our faults, or in other words, with our sins; to know how often we transgress the divine law. By asking who can do this, the psalmist evidently intimates that it is exceedingly difficult, and that the knowledge of our sins is a very rare attainment. That it is so, every one, who knows any thing of the divine law, of himself and of mankind, will readily acknowledge.

Every such person is sensible that he is very far from knowing his own sinfulness, in its full extent, and feels the necessity of beseeching God to pardon his secret faults. And my friends, it is exceedingly important that we should all be sensible of this, that we should be duly aware how very difficult it is for any person to understand his errors. I propose, therefore, in discoursing on the passage, to show, I. That to acquire a knowledge of our sinfulness, is exceedingly difficult; and, II.

Why it is so. I. To acquire a knowledge of our sinfulness is exceedingly difficult. That it is so, may be inferred from the fact, that very few acquire this knowledge, and that none acquire it perfectly. It may reasonably be presumed that any thing, which all men are concerned to obtain, and which very few do obtain, must be of difficult acquisition. Now it is obvious that all men are concerned to obtain a knowledge of their errors, their sins. Scarcely a person can be found, who does not profess to wish for this knowledge.

But it is equally obvious, that very few obtain it in any considerable degree, and that none obtain it perfectly. So obvious is this, that the blindness of men to their own faults has been the constant theme of satirical and moral writers from the earliest ages, whose writings have come down to us. Indeed it is one of the first traits of the human character, of which young persons take notice when they begin to mix with the world; so that he must be very young, and very unobserving, who has not learned that his neighbors and acquaintances are ignorant of their own feelings.

Even children, at a very early age, will often discover faults in their parents or instructors, of which these parents or instructors are wholly unconscious. But without insisting on these things, let me appeal to your own observation. Do you not, every day, meet with persons who appear to be perfectly insensible of faults and imperfections, which every man of common sagacity would discover in them on a very slight acquaintance? Do you not know many individuals, whose failings are known from one end of the town to the other, but who know nothing of them themselves?

Did you ever know a covetous person, who thought himself covetous? or a vain man, who thought himself vain? or a proud man, who thought himself proud? Do you not often hear persons censure others for faults of which they are themselves guilty, and perhaps in a much greater degree? Do not persons often apply sermons to their neighbors, which all who know them, are sensible would apply much better to themselves? In a word, do you know any person who, you have reason to believe, is perfectly acquainted with his own failings? or even one who knows them as well as they are known to others?

Now if mankind are thus universally blind to their own faults, even to those faults which their fellow creatures can discover in them, much more must they be blind to those secret sins of the heart, which men cannot discover, but which are exceedingly sinful in the sight of a holy, heart-searching God; for it is evidently much more difficult to acquire a knowledge of the latter than of the former. Agreeably, we learn both from observation and from the scriptures, that of those sins of the heart, in which men's errors or sinfulness principally consist in the sight of God, they are all by nature entirely ignorant.

For instance, the scriptures inform us that the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, that it is full of evil, that in it there dwells no good thing, that all its thoughts and imaginations are sinful; that it is enmity against God, and not subject to his law, and that it is hard, a heart of stone. They tell us that all men have gone out of the way; that they are dead in trespasses and sins; that there is none righteous, none that doeth good, no not one; that all have broken the divine law, and are under its curse; in a word, that all deserve everlasting misery, from which it is impossible for any to escape, but through

the atonement and mediation of Christ.

Now it is too evident to require proof that men naturally know nothing of all this, that they are completely blind to the sinful state of their hearts; and so blind, that it is impossible for human means to convince them of it, or to make them sensible of the justice of their condemnation. Thus, my friends, it ever has been. Thus it was in the days of Solomon; for we read, There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet are not washed from their filthiness. Thus it was with the Jews in the days of the prophets.

When God charged them with despising his name, they impudently replied, Wherein have we despised thy name? When he threatened them with the punishment which their sins deserved, they cried, Wherefore hath the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? or, what is our iniquity? or, what is our sin that we have committed against the Lord? Thus it was with the same nation in our Savior's time. When they were crucifying the Lord of glory and persecuting his disciples, they fancied that they loved God, and flattered themselves that they were beloved by him; and at the very moment, when the measure of their iniquity was full, and they were ripe for ruin, they confided in their own supposed innocence and felt secure.

The same ignorance of their own characters, the same blindness to their own sinfulness, has been exhibited by mankind ever since. Hundreds of writers have asserted, in opposition to the scriptures, that the human heart is naturally good; that mankind are naturally virtuous, and thousands and tens of thousands have believed the assertion. This is the reason why so many reject the Savior. They will not come to him, because they do not feel that they need him; and they do not feel that they need him, because they are blind to their own sinfulness.

And this, my hearers, is the reason why so many of you neglect him. You do not understand your errors. There was a time, when none of you understood them; and though some of you have been convinced of your mistake, in this respect, the larger part are still insensible; and even those who are best acquainted with their own transgressions will readily acknowledge that they are very far from knowing them all. Since then all men are thus ignorant of their own failings and offences, it is evident that to acquire a knowledge of them must be exceedingly difficult.

That it is so, is farther evident from the fact, that the influences of the divine Spirit are represented as necessary to Communicate this knowledge. Speaking of this divine agent, our Savior says, When he is come, he shall convince the world of sin. Now it will, I presume, be allowed, that God would not send his Spirit to perform a needless work. But it would be needless to convince men of sin, if they were not ignorant of their sins. Did they possess knowledge of them, or could men communicate to them this knowledge, the convincing influences of the divine Spirit, would be entirely needless.

But they are not needless; they are indispensably necessary. It follows then that mankind are so blind to their own sinfulness, so ignorant of their true characters, that the Spirit of God alone can remove this blindness, and give them a knowledge of themselves, of their sins. Having thus shown that it is exceedingly difficult for men to understand their errors, or to know their sins, I proceed, II. To shew why it is so. 1. It is so, because men are ignorant of the divine law.

The apostle observes that, where there is no law, there is no transgression. Of course, while men are ignorant of the law, they must be ignorant of their transgressions. Again, the apostle observes that by the law is the knowledge of sin. Of course, those who know little or nothing of the divine law must know little or nothing of sin. Once more; St. John observes, that sin is a deviation from the law. Of course, unless men

are well acquainted with the law, they cannot discover their own deviations from its requirements.

But mankind is naturally ignorant of the divine law. In the language of the apostle, they are alive without the law. They have no proper sense of the strictness and spirituality of its precepts. Hence they regard many things as innocent and even as laudable, which the law of God condemns as sinful. Agreeably, Christ informs us, that what is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. It is evident that he who would understand his errors, must understand the divine law, which alone can tell him what his errors are.

He must have this law in his mind, in his memory, in his conscience; and he must be familiarly acquainted with all the perceptive and practical parts of God's word, and have a disposition to measure his conduct daily by this rule. But men have naturally neither this acquaintance with the rule, nor this disposition to apply it. On the contrary, they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves among themselves. Of course, they must be very far indeed from understanding their errors.

But perhaps it will be asked, if men are thus ignorant of the law, how can they be justly condemned for transgressing it? I answer, because their ignorance is a voluntary ignorance. They have the law of God in their hands, and might become acquainted with it, if they would; and it is a maxim with the divine, as well as with human governments, that ignorance of the law excuses no one. 2. Another cause, which renders it difficult for us to acquire a knowledge of our sins, may be found in the nature of the human mind.

The mind has been justly compared to the eye, which, while it perceives other objects, cannot see itself, unless it be furnished with a mirror. Hence men usually find it difficult to examine themselves, to discover their own real motives, and the secret springs of action, and to become acquainted with the various exercises of their minds. It is true, they have, in the law and word of God, a faithful mirror, by looking into which they might see and know them; but into this mirror, unhappily, men do not love to look.

They dislike it, for the same reason that the Jews hated Christ, viz., because it testifies that their deeds are evil, and threatens them with the divine displeasure. Now while men indulge this dislike, and neglect the Bible, it is as certain that they will never become acquainted with their own hearts, as it is that they will never see their own countenances without a mirror; for Jehovah declares that he alone knows the heart, that none but himself can know it; and the knowledge of it which he possesses is communicated to men only through the medium of his word. 3.

Another cause, which renders it exceedingly difficult for men to discover their own faults, is the prevalence of self-love. I presume, my friends, you will not deny that every man naturally loves himself more than any other object in the universe. Of course, he will be extremely partial in judging himself and exceedingly unwilling to discover faults in one he loves so well. You are sensible that men are seldom, if ever, so keen-sighted in discovering the faults of their children, their friends, and partisans, as they are in discerning the faults of others.

You know that we can all see failings in an enemy much more easily, than in a friend. Of course, since men love themselves better than even their friends, or children, they must be still more blind to their own failings, still more slow to discern and acknowledge them. Should a man be counselor, witness, jury, and judge, in a case where his estate or his life was concerned, would you not expect him to determine it in his own favor? But when a man sets himself to examine his own character, and to try his title to the heavenly inheritance, he is counselor, witness, jury, and judge, all in one; and, of course, he will, if possible, pronounce a favorable sentence.

He will try himself by some easy rule; he will make the best excuse in his power for every thing that can be excused; he will keep some things entirely out of sight; he will call his faults by the softest name which they can be made to bear; and if there be any thing which he can neither deny, nor overlook, he will ascribe it to the force of temptation, or the frailty of human nature, and plead that it is nothing worse than thousands are guilty of, who pass for honest men. 4.

What the Scriptures call the deceitfulness of sin, is another cause which renders it extremely difficult for us to understand our errors. I need not tell you that vice can cloak itself with the garb of virtue, or that sin can assume the name and appearance of goodness. Nor need I inform you that actions derive their character from the motives which prompt us to perform them, so that the same action, which is good when prompted by a right motive, will become sinful when it proceeds from motives which are wrong.

Now it is by no means easy for men to ascertain in all cases the real motives by which they are actuated. In consequence of the false names and fair disguises which sin assumes, and in which its deceitfulness consists, we may easily fancy that we are governed by right motives, when in fact we are not so, and thus class our sins among our virtues. For instance, a man may fancy that he is actuated by true zeal for God, when in reality it is nothing but a selfish zeal for his own party, or sinful anger against those who oppose him.

We may fancy that we love Christians, when in fact we feel nothing but selfish affection for those of our own denomination. We may flatter ourselves that we are truly charitable, when we give alms to the poor, and yet we may be really actuated by a desire of applause, or by a wish to do something which gratifies our pride, and makes us think more highly of ourselves. We may think that we feel a true filial fear of God, when we have nothing but that slavish fear of punishment, which makes the devils tremble before him.

We may fancy that we are serving God, and aiming to glorify him, when in fact we are only serving and aiming to honor ourselves. We may fancy that we read and attend public worship with right views and feelings, when in fact we perform these duties merely from custom, or formality, or with a design to quiet our consciences. We may fancy that we are only prudent, industrious, and economical, when we are really influenced by that love of money which is the root of all evil, or that love of the world which proves us to be the enemies of God.

Now in all these cases, that self-love which has been mentioned, and that partiality which results from it, will prompt us to decide in our own favor, and to conclude that our motives are good. Thus, as the Scriptures inform us, men are hardened through the deceitfulness of sin; and hence as sin communicates its own character to the sinful heart, the heart is said to be deceitful above all things. My friends, it is difficult to know thoroughly a deceitful man. How much more difficult must it be to know a heart which is deceitful above all things! 5.

Another cause, which renders it exceedingly difficult, for men to acquire knowledge of their sins, is, the effects which sin produces upon their understandings and consciences. I need not tell you these faculties are the eyes of the soul, without which she can discern nothing. Now it is a most certain truth, that, just so far as Sin prevails in the heart and life, so far it puts out or darkens these eyes of the mind, with respect to all spiritual objects: so that it is always the case, that the more sinful a man really is, so much the less sinful does he appear to himself to be.

The more faults he has, the fewer he can discover in himself. This may appear to some of you a paradoxical assertion, but however it may appear it is strictly true, as a moment's attention to the

Scriptures will convince you. If you read the accounts there given us of different characters, you will find that the worst men ever seem to be most ignorant of their own faults, and most unwilling to confess and repent of their sins; while, on the contrary, those who were most eminently good, seem to have the worst opinion of themselves, and to be most ready to confess that they were the chief of sinners.

And, my friends, is it not so still? Do not some of the worst characters, with whom you are acquainted, appear to think very highly of themselves? And are there not others whom you can justly accuse of no particular fault, who, so far as you can judge, regard themselves as exceedingly sinful? Now this apparently unaccountable difference is owing entirely to the effects of sin. When sin prevails in the heart, it sears the conscience, and darkens the understanding, so that sin is not perceived, and the unhappy, blinded wretch feels most innocent and secure, at the very moment, when he is most in danger.

To use our Savior's expression, the light that is in him becomes darkness, how great then he adds; is that darkness. When this is the case, men, as the prophet expresses it, call evil good and good evil, and put darkness for light, and light for darkness. They can no more discover their own sins, than a blind man can discern spots of blood on his garment, or than dust can be perceived in a dark room. We may add in connection with these remarks, that the effect of habit is exceedingly great in rendering men insensible to their sins.

Many things which shock us when first presented to our view, cease to affect us at all, after we become familiarized to them. Now men soon become familiarized to their own thoughts, feelings and conduct. They seem like a part of themselves, and, however wrong they may at first appear, they soon cease to shock or offend, and at length pass unnoticed and unperceived. The young soldier starts at the sight of bloodshed and carnage, but after a few battles he plunges his bayonet into the body of a fellow creature with as little emotion as an artificer hews a block of wood.

Or, to take another comparison: Enter the mud-walled habitation of a savage, blackened with smoke, covered with filth of every kind, and half filled with the putrefying remains of his loathsome repasts, and endeavor to make him sensible how disgusting these things are, and to inspire him with the love of neatness and order. Could you succeed? Not at all. He sees nothing filthy, nothing disgusting, no want of neatness in his miserable and disgusting abode. Why? Because he is accustomed to it; and his blunted senses are not offended.

My friends, it is the same with the sinner. Sin is the defilement, the pollution of the soul. In the sight of God and all holy beings, it is a thousand times more loathsome and disgusting, than any material filthiness can possibly be in ours. But the sinner has always lived in the midst of this moral pollution. He is therefore familiarized and accustomed to it. His spiritual senses, blunted and deadened, are not offended, and of course, he does not perceive his deformity. He sees nothing loathsome, nothing wrong in his heart, when in the sight of God, it is like an open sepulchre, full of putridity and rottenness.

Hence he hears of that fountain which is set open for uncleanness, of that blood which cleanses from all sin, with the same indifference that the savage would listen to a harangue on the benefits of personal and domestic neatness. This being the case, we need not be at a loss to know why it is so difficult to convince men of their sinfulness, to make them understand their errors. My impenitent hearers, this subject is, or ought to be, exceedingly interesting to you. It touches upon the very point, respecting which you are at issue with the Bible, upon the greatest difficulty which opposes your salvation.

The point of dispute, the great question is, whether your sins are so numerous and aggravated, and whether your hearts are so entirely depraved, as the Scriptures represent them to be. I presume, if you were convinced that this representation is strictly true; if you were fully convinced that your hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; that they are opposed to God and all goodness, and unwilling to be reconciled to him, there would be no difficulty in the way of your assenting to all the doctrines of the gospel.

You would then feel that it is perfectly just for God to condemn you; you would feel that your situation is dangerous and critical; you would feel your need of a Savior and the necessity of regeneration; and you would feel the need of spiritual and divine influences to effect this change. The great, the only question then is, are you entirely sinful, or are you not? The Scriptures, you must be sensible, seem at least to assert that you are. You, on the contrary, contend that you are not.

But, my friends, methinks the remarks which have been made ought to excite at least a suspicion in your minds that you may be deceived in this respect. You have heard that it is exceedingly difficult for a man to understand his own errors; that we are extremely prone to be partial to ourselves, to judge too favorably of our own characters. You have heard, and you see that other men do this; you see many around you entirely blind to their own faults; you see that none appear to be sufficiently sensible of all their faults; you have heard how many causes combine to hide our sins from us; and you must be sensible that you are exposed to the influence of all these causes.

Is it not then possible, that you may be deceived; that you may have formed too favorable an opinion of your own characters? Will any one of you undertake to say, that he is wiser than all other men; that though they are blind to their faults, he can discover and has discovered all his own? My friends, if you dare not say this, you must allow it to be, at least possible, that after all your hearts may be as sinful, as much depraved, as the Scriptures represent them to be. You must allow that, perhaps, you are hateful and abominable in the sight of the holy, heart-searching God, and exposed to his everlasting displeasure.

All your good opinions of yourselves may be nothing but the effects of secret pride and self delusion; and at the last day, when the discovery will come too late, you may find that you have deceived and destroyed yourselves. My friends, I entreat you to lay these things seriously to heart; for a mistake here will be, must be, fatal. Describing the feelings of penitent sinners, God says, Then shall ye loathe yourselves in your own sight, on account of your iniquities and abominations.

But no man can loathe himself, or repent of his sins, in this manner, until he sees that his character and conduct are loathsome; and he who cannot repent, cannot be pardoned; for Christ has said, Except ye repent, ye shall perish. Let me then prevail upon you to bring your characters to a strict, impartial scrutiny, to try them by the law of God and to remember, during the trial, that there is no danger of forming too low an opinion of yourselves; that all the danger lies on the other side; that you will be exposed to the blinding influence of self-love, and many other causes, which will combine to draw from you too favorable a sentence. And when you have done all, remember that, if your heart condemn you, God is greater than your heart, and knoweth all things.

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**