

Sinners Willful and Perverse

by Edward Payson

The sermon explores the willful obstinacy of sinners in rejecting the Gospel despite God's diverse efforts to persuade them.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Matthew 21:28, Luke 7:31, John 3:19, 1 Corinthians 1:18

Topics: "Human Depravity", "Gods Grace"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the unreasonableness and perverseness of sinners, likening them to children who refuse to participate in joyful or mournful activities. He emphasizes God's diverse efforts to persuade sinners to embrace the Gospel through various means and ministerial gifts. Despite God's abundant grace and the different approaches used by ministers, sinners often remain obstinate due to their own pride, selfishness, and opposition to God. Payson urges the congregation to examine their hearts and not deceive themselves with excuses for rejecting the Gospel, highlighting the importance of yielding to God's wisdom and grace.

Transcript

And the Lord said, whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the market place, and calling one to another, and saying, we have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, he hath a devil. The son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, behold a gluttonous man, and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But wisdom is justified of all her children. -- Luke vii. 31 --35.

IF we ever find infinite wisdom apparently at a loss, it is when she would describe the unreasonableness and perverseness of sinners, or devise proper means to reclaim them. Thus we find her saying to God's ancient people, O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for thy goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. In a similar manner Christ here represents himself as at a loss how to describe the perverseness and obstinacy of his hearers. Whereunto, says he, shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? As it is, however, impossible, that the infinitely wise Savior should ever be really at a loss, he immediately fixes upon a similitude, which strikingly illustrated their character and conduct. They are, says he, like children sitting in the market-place, and saying to their fellows, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not wept. To see the force and oppositeness of this comparison, it is

necessary to recollect the manner, in which weddings and funerals were solemnized among the Jews. At their weddings, a procession was formed, preceded by musicians, playing cheerful tunes, and dancers, who accompanied and kept time to their music. At their funerals also they had mourners, who performed solemn and mournful airs, or uttered cries, lamentations and other expressions of grief. These various ceremonies the Jewish children were accustomed to imitate in their amusements. Sometimes they played cheerful tunes, and rejoiced as at a marriage feast; at others, they tittered mournful sounds, and affected to weep, as at a funeral procession. Sometimes however, children who wished to amuse themselves in this manner, found their companions peevish and unwilling to join them. If they piped and rejoiced, as at a wedding, these ill humored companions would not dance; if to please them, they changed their strain, and mourned, as at a funeral, they would not weep and lament. hence they complained, as in our text, that it was impossible to please them, they would neither do one thing nor another. Similar to the temper and conduct of these perverse children was that of the Jews in the Savior's time, and similar has been the conduct of sinners ever since. To trace this similarity, is my present design.

I. The companions of these perverse children employed various means to conquer their obstinacy and persuade them to join in their amusements. So God has employed a great variety of means to persuade sinners to embrace the Gospel. He has sent judgments to subdue, and mercies to melt them; arguments to convince, and motives to persuade them; threatenings to terrify, and invitations to allure them. In different parts of his word he has exhibited divine truth in every possible variety of form. In one place it is presented plainly to the mind in the form of doctrines; in another, it is couched under the veil of some instructive and striking parable; in a third, it is presented to us in a garb of types and shadows; in a fourth, it is illustrated by the most beautiful figures; and, in a fifth, exemplified in some well drawn character, or interesting portion of history. In a word, he addresses us, by turns, in language the most plain and simple, the most grand and commanding, the most pointed and energetic, the most sublime and beautiful, the most impressive and affecting, the most pathetic and melting. God and men, this world and the next, time and eternity, death and judgment, heaven and hell, -- these rise successively to our view, portrayed in the most vivid colors, and exhibited in various forms, while the whole created universe is put in requisition to furnish images for the illustration of these awful realities; and the infinite wisdom of God himself is exerted, if I may so express it, to the utmost, in devising and employing the most suitable means to impress them upon our minds, and cause them to affect our hearts. Thus he has addressed himself, by turns, to our eyes and to our ears, to our understandings and consciences, to our imaginations and to our affections, to our hopes and to our fears; and caused divine truth to seek admission to our minds by every avenue, to try every possible way of access.

Corresponding to these various means, and to the different modes of instruction adopted in his word, are the various gifts and qualifications, with which he furnishes those, who are sent as his ambassadors to men. As he knows the different tastes and dispositions of men, and the modes of address best adapted to convince and persuade them, he endues his messengers with a great diversity of gifts, so that by one or another of them, every class of hearers may be gratified. He sends some ministers, who are sons of thunder, well qualified to awaken, rouse, and convince the careless; while others, like Barnabas, are sons of consolation, and fitted to comfort the feeble minded and support the weak. Some he furnishes with clear, penetrating minds, and strong reasoning powers, that they may perspicuously state, and ably defend the doctrines of revelation, answer objections, and by sound arguments, convince the gainsayers. To others he gives warm feelings and lively imaginations, that they may urge divine truth upon the hearts and consciences of their hearers, in a more forcible, impassioned and impressive manner. On a third class he bestows the faculty of presenting truth to the mind in a mild, insinuating, persuasive way, by which it

steals into and melts the heart, descending upon it like the dews of heaven, or silent showers, which water the earth. Thus, how diversified soever are the tastes and dispositions of men, all may, in turn, be gratified, in consequence of the variety of ministerial gifts, which God employs for the conversion of sinners and the edification of his church. Thus the healing medicine of divine truth is presented to the vitiated palates of sinners in every possible variety of form; or to allude to the comparison of our text, thus do different ministers address their hearers in different strains, sometimes endeavoring to allure them to embrace the gospel, by comparing it to a marriage feast; and, at others, attempting to terrify them to fly to it, by bringing into view the solemnities of death, and the awful scenes which follow it.

II. Notwithstanding the different means employed with these perverse children, they would not be prevailed upon to comply with the wishes of their companions. We have piped unto you, say they, but ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, but ye have not lamented. Precisely similar is the conduct of impenitent sinners. Notwithstanding the great variety of means, which God employs to persuade them to embrace the Gospel; and though, as our Saviour teaches us, these means are no less adapted to produce the effect than a message from the dead, yet still they perversely refuse to comply. Reason with them-- they will not be convinced; set motives before them--they will not be persuaded; address their hearts--they will not be affected; appeal to their consciences--they will not feel guilty; attempt to excite their fears--they will not be alarmed; endeavor to allure them to Christ by promises and invitations--they will not come. Beseech them, weep over them, expostulate with them in the most affectionate and pathetic manner; set good and evil, life and death, hell and heaven, judgment and eternity before them in every form-- they make light of all, and go their ways, one to his farm, and another to his merchandize. In vain have prophets prophesied; in vain have apostles preached; in vain have angels descended from heaven; in vain has the Son of God appeared on earth, and spoken as never man spake; in vain has the Eternal Father proclaimed from heaven, This is my beloved Son, hear ye him :--still sinners will not hear, they will not come to Christ for life, they will neglect the great salvation of the Gospel. Thus it always has been, thus it still is, and thus it always will be, while the heart remains what it is, and almighty grace is not exerted to subdue it.

III. The reason why these perverse children could not be persuaded to comply with the wishes of their companion, was, that they were out of humor, or for some other reason, felt indisposed to gratify them. Similar is the reason, why sinners will not be persuaded to embrace the Gospel, by all the means which God employs for this purpose. They do not come to Christ for life, because they will not. Their proud, selfish hearts, are full of enmity and opposition to God, and therefore they will not be reconciled.

It is the gospel itself, which they dislike;- and, therefore, how various soever may be the forms, in which it is presented, how clear soever the light, in which it is displayed, they will still reject it. It is because I speak the truth, says our Savior, that ye believe me not. This, however, sinners are by no means willing to acknowledge. They are afraid to confess, even to themselves, that it is hatred of the truth alone, which prevents them from embracing it. They therefore attempt to excuse themselves by imputing their rejection of the gospel to some other cause; and to no cause do they impute it more frequently, than to the faults of its professors, or to something in the manner or conduct of those, who preach it.

Thus, we learn from our text, did the Jews. John Baptist came neither eating nor drinking; that is, he lived in the most frugal, abstemious manner, and, as a preacher of repentance, was reserved in his deportment, and severe in his rebukes. Hence they said, he hath a devil; that is, he is a morose, visionary, melancholy man, little better than one distracted, who knows not what he says. Our Savior, on the contrary, came eating and drinking; he associated with men in an affable, familiar manner, with a view to instruct them,

and for the same benevolent purpose visited and conversed with the most abandoned characters.

His perverse hearers then changed their tone, and cried, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. In a similar manner do sinners at the present day, attempt to conceal and excuse their opposition to the gospel. If professors of religion and its ministers live as they ought, soberly, righteously, and godly, they are said to be too rigid, superstitious, righteous overmuch. If, on the contrary, they are of a more cheerful, social turn, the world immediately exclaims, These are your professors, your saints; but in what respect do they differ from others?

If they are punctual in attending public and private meetings for religious worship, spend much time in prayer, and devote a considerable portion of their property to charitable and religious purposes, it is immediately said, that religion makes men idle and negligent of their families. If, on the other hand, they are industrious, frugal, and attentive to business, they are no less quickly accused of loving the world, as well as their neighbors, who make no pretensions to religion.

If a minister reasons with his hearers in a cool, dispassionate manner, and labors to convince their understandings, he is accused of being dry and formal in his preaching, or of not believing what he says. If another preaches in a more lively, animated strain, clearly proclaims the terrors of the Lord, and warns his hearers to fly from the wrath to come, he is charged with endeavoring to work on men's passions, and to frighten them into religion. If he insists much on the doctrines of Christianity, the necessity of faith, and the impossibility of being justified by our own works, he is accused of undervaluing morality, and representing the practice of good works as needless.

If, on the other hand, he clearly exhibits the pure morality of the gospel, inculcates holiness of heart and life, and states the dreadful consequences of neglecting it, he is charged with driving men to despair by unreasonable strictness and severity. Thus in almost innumerable ways men ascribe their neglect of the gospel to the faults of its professors, or to something in the manner in which it is preached, and thus harden themselves and others in unbelief.

But though they may thus deceive themselves, they cannot deceive God. He knows and has said, that the true reason of their rejecting it is, that they love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. For every one, that doeth evil, hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. That this is the case, is evident from men's conduct in other respects. Think not, however, my friends, that in mentioning these things, we are indulging in a spirit of recrimination or complaint. It is not for our own sakes, that we make these remarks -- for it is of very little consequence what men may say of us--but for your sakes. It is necessary to your conversion, that you should know what are the true causes of your rejecting the gospel; for until you know these, you will never embrace it. It is also necessary for God's glory, that the cause should evidently appear to be the obstinacy of sinners, and not any deficiency in the means employed by him for their conversion. Whether you will believe this or not, it is most certainly the truth, and you will one day be convinced that it is. Meanwhile, God has not left himself without witnesses to clear his character, and the honor of his gospel, from the groundless aspersions of sinners, --witnesses, which justify him before an ungodly world; for our Savior assures us in the conclusion of this parable, that, however sinners may reject the gospel, and condemn the manner, in which it is preached, still, wisdom is justified of all her children. By wisdom, is here meant, either God himself or the gospel, with the means which he employs for its promulgation. He is the only wise God, and the gospel is styled his hidden wisdom or the wisdom of God in a mystery; while by the means, which he employs to render it successful in building up his church, his manifold wisdom, we are told, is displayed. By the children of

wisdom, are intended the children of God, or in other words, those who yield to the force of his appointed means and cordially embrace the gospel. By all such, God, and his ways are justified, and the wisdom of all his proceedings is readily acknowledged. They admire, love, and adore him, for the infinite wisdom, as well as goodness, which appears in the gospel plan of salvation; and, while they contemplate it, exclaim with the apostle, O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

Little less do they admire the wisdom and goodness of God, as displayed in the means, which he employs to promote the success of the gospel; and in the fullness, richness, and variety of the scriptures, and in the diversity of gifts bestowed on his ministering servants. And while they acknowledge, that nothing but his all-conquering grace could have rendered these means efficacious to conquer their own stubborn hearts, and humbly cry, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to thy name be the glory,--they clearly see and unanimously testify, that the only reason, why sinners do not embrace the gospel, is their hatred of the truth, and their opposition to God.

Thus wisdom is justified of all her children; and this is the only encouragement, which ministers have to preach the gospel. They know, that it always has been, and that it always will be, foolishness to them that perish; and that by all such they shall themselves be considered as little better than fools and babblers, for if men have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they thus call those of his household. But they also know, that there are some, though, alas, too few, who are the children of wisdom; and that to them the preaching of the cross will always be the wisdom of God, and the power of God unto salvation.

Some such, I desire to bless God, there are in this assembly; some, who receive the truth in the love of it; some, who have felt its transforming, life-giving power; some, who, like all the children of wisdom, justify their heavenly Father and condemn themselves. It is, my Christian friends, indeed a delightful employment to preach to you the unsearchable riches of Christ; for you can, in some measure, feel their worth. It is pleasant to expatiate to you on his glories and beauties; for you have eyes to discern, and hearts to feel them.

It is pleasant to invite you to the gospel feast; for you have a disposition to comply. When we display the sufferings of your crucified Lord, and the sins which occasioned them, you are ready to mourn with us in godly sorrow and contrition of heart. And when in more cheerful strains we proclaim the happy consequences of his sufferings, and blow the trumpet, whose silver sounds are pardon, peace, and salvation, for dying men, you are equally ready to rejoice. In a word, your hearts are in unison with the gospel harp; when we strike its golden strings, your feelings vibrate to every touch; and you can accompany us, through its whole compass of sound, from the low notes of pious grief and penitential sorrow, up to the high thrilling tones of enraptured gratitude, love and praise, which almost accord with the harps of the redeemed before the throne.

Yes, you have learned that new song, which none can learn, but those who are redeemed from the earth; that song, which is sung in heaven, which will be new to all eternity; and most happy and highly honored do I think myself in being permitted to lead your choir on earth, and to hope that we shall sing it together in the full choir of the redeemed above. It is the greatest of my present supports and consolations, to see in you a proof that my labors are not altogether in vain. O, then, my brethren, my fellow travelers to heaven, my fellow heirs of its glories!

Strive to obtain hearts more and more perfectly attuned to the gospel harp; more habitually disposed to vibrate to its celestial sounds. Daily practice the song of the redeemed, and cause the notes of heaven to be heard on earth. Strive, by adorning the doctrine of God, your Savior, to justify the wisdom, which reveals it, and to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. And if any word I have ever spoken has been blessed to excite godly sorrow or religious feelings in your breasts, let me beseech you, in return, to pray for me, that I may be better furnished with the necessary qualifications for the ministry; that I may never utter an uncertain sound, and that, when I call sinners to mourn for their sins, or to rejoice in a Savior, God's grace may render the call effectual.

Would to God, my friends, we could believe that the class now addressed included all this assembly. But melancholy experience constrains us to believe, that the comparison in our text applies to many present, no less exactly than it did to the Jews. As promising means, as God employed to effect their conversion, have been employed with you. Indeed you enjoy far greater advantages than they did. They had only the Old Testament. You, in addition to that, enjoy the New. They were stumbled and perplexed by the mean circumstances, in which Christ appeared, so different from what they expected.

To you the reasons of his appearing in this manner, are fully explained. They rejected the Sun of Righteousness, when he first rose, and when his beams were comparatively feeble; you reject him, while shining in meridian splendor, and after his beams have blessed the nations for more than eighteen hundred years, diffusing light and happiness, wherever they come. They only heard the predictions of Christ; you have witnessed their exact fulfillment. They refused to hear Christ, while he spake on earth; you turn away your ears now he speaks from heaven.

They refused to believe the testimony of prophets and apostles; you reject, not only their testimony, but that of all the multitudes of Christ's ministers, who have preached ever since. It is not surprising therefore, that you should refuse to believe my testimony. I have exerted, to the utmost, the abilities God has given me; in his name, I have, by turns, reasoned and persuaded, exhorted and entreated, invited and threatened, warned and promised, prayed and wept,--but to no purpose.

I have set before you, all that is awful and all that is amiable, all that is alarming and all that is alluring, but without effect. I have sounded the brazen trumpet of the law, but you have not mourned. I have blown the silver trumpet of the gospel, but you have not rejoiced. Other and more able ministers have also addressed you. You have, from this pulpit, heard, at different times, cogent reasoners, eloquent speakers, and impressive, persuasive preachers, endeavoring to prevail with you to embrace the gospel.

But all has been vain, and with respect to many of you, I fear, worse than in vain. My labors have now apparently less effect upon many of you than ever. Where they once made some impression, they now pass like water over a rock; where they once convinced, they now only irritate; where I was once received with affection, I am now considered as an enemy, because I tell you the truth. My friends--if, to labor, and watch, and pray for your salvation, with a heart broken with apprehension and tortured with anxiety, lest you should fail of it; if, to goad on a worn out body and jaded mind to exertions in your behalf, under which nature sinks, and life becomes a burden; if, to desire your conversion more than riches, more than reputation, more than health, more than life,--if these things are marks of an enemy, then I am your enemy, and such an enemy, I trust, I shall continue to be to my last breath.

In fact, if I except the tempter and the world, you have no enemies but yourselves. God, and Christ, and his servants, are your friends, or would be, if you would permit them; but, alas, you will not. Often would

they have gathered you, but ye would not. A deep-rooted, unconquerable aversion to what you think the strictness of Christ's regulations, frustrates all the endeavors of your friends to save you. You know that religion is important, you are convinced that it should be attended to; but you have no heart to it, you have no love for it, and therefore, as you sometimes confess, you cannot give your minds to it.

My friends, what will be the end of this? You have seen its end in the Jews. You know how terribly they were destroyed for neglecting Christ; and if they escaped not, who refused him, when he spake on earth, much more shall not ye escape, if ye turn from him who addresses you from heaven. Once more, then, we conjure you by every thing sacred and every thing dear, by every thing dreadful and every thing desirable, to renounce your unreasonable opposition, and yield yourselves the willing servants of Christ.

But there is also a third class of persons in this assembly, who must be addressed, though we hardly know in what manner to address them. It is composed of such as resemble the son in the parable, who, when his father said, Son, go work today in my vineyard, immediately replied, I go sir, but went not. When we speak to these persons in an affecting, mournful manner, and bring to their view the solemnities of death, judgment, and eternity, they seem ready to weep. And when we tell them of the goodness of God, the love of Christ, and the happiness of those, who come to his marriage feast, they are equally ready to rejoice, and seem to desire nothing so much as religion. But in a week, or perhaps in a day, they are the same as before. That there are many such among us, is evident from recent circumstances. We, a short time since, as you probably recollect, invited all, who considered religion as the one thing needful, and who meant to pursue it as such, to meet us at a certain place. We particularly requested, that none would attend, who had not made up their minds on the subject, who were not fully determined to persevere. In consequence of this invitation nearly one hundred persons assembled. I rejoiced at the sight, and immediately wrote to a society, that wished me to make a missionary tour, that in consequence of the serious attention, that existed among my people, I could not leave them. But where now are those, who thus pledged themselves to God, and to each other, and to me, that they would pursue religion? Alas! I fear that their goodness has been as the morning cloud and early dew, that soon pass away. That I should not know what to say to such persons, is not surprising, since, as I observed at the commencement of this discourse, God himself seems as if at a loss what to do with them. As an ancient writer observes, they are, by turns, a minister's comforters and tormentors. They excite his expectations today, but they disappoint him most painfully to-morrow. Let them not think however, that their temporary convictions will prevent them from being numbered among the characters described in our text. Let them not flatter themselves, that their conversion is rendered more probable by these transitory impressions. Every resistance of conviction renders such an event more hopeless.

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