

The Way Which Wicked Men Have Trodden

by Edward Payson

The sermon 'The Way Which Wicked Men Have Trodden' by Edward Payson describes the old way of wicked men, which consists of selfishness, pride, sensuality, unbelief, and actual disobedience, and warns against the modification of this way, which involves rejecting the Mediator and the atonement provided by God.

Scripture: Genesis 3:6, Job 22:15, Matthew 7:13, John 14:6, Hebrews 11:4

Topics: "Sin And Deception", "Repentance And Faith"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of considering the old way that wicked men have trodden, leading to destruction, as highlighted in Job 22:15-17 and Matthew 7:13. He describes the sinful progression starting with selfishness, pride, sensuality, unbelief, and disobedience, ultimately leading to despair and self-justification. Payson warns about the deceptive nature of a false religion that rejects the atonement of Christ, as seen in Cain's rejection of a sacrificial lamb. He emphasizes the need to repent, have faith in Christ, and rely on His atonement for salvation, contrasting the narrow path of life with the broad road to destruction.

Transcript

Hast thou marked the old way, which wicked men have trodden? Which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overthrown with a flood: Which said unto God, depart from us; and what can the Almighty do for them ?--Job xxii. 15, 16, 17.

WIDE, says our Divine Teacher, is the gate, and broad is the way, which leadeth to destruction; and many there be who go in thereat. Of this broad way Eliphaz here speaks. Inferring from the unprecedented afflictions of Job, that he must be a wicked man, he asks him whether he had duly considered the old way which had been trodden by other wicked men of former ages, who were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overthrown with a flood.

My hearers, this is an important question, a question which may be very properly addressed to all, and from which the most salutary consequences may result. If any of you have not suitably considered the way which wicked men have trodden, you may even now be ignorantly pursuing it; nor can any be sure, that he has forsaken this way, unless he knows what it is. Permit me then to address this question to you,--Have you marked, have you duly considered the way of wicked men, and the end to which it leads? If you have not, let me request your attention while I endeavor, by the light of revelation, to trace this way, to show in what it consists, and what is its termination.

I. Let us consider the way itself. In tracing it, it will be proper to begin at its commencement. It was, you will observe, even in the time of Eliphaz, an old way, a way which had long been trodden. Indeed, it is almost as old as the human race, or as the world which they inhabit; for it was formed in the days of our first parents, at the time when they ate of the forbidden fruit. Then the wide gate, which leads into the broad way, was opened and alas, it has never since been closed. By carefully attending to the conduct of those, who first formed the way, and first walked in it, we may learn in what it consists. It is thus described by the inspired historian:

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food; and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise; she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat."

In this account of the conduct of the first sinner we see, in the first place, selfishness, or a preference of herself to God; for had she loved him supremely, she would have chosen to obey his commands, rather than to gratify herself. This must ever be the first sin; for so long as any creature prefers God to himself, he will choose to please God rather than to gratify himself; of course, he will avoid every sin, and no temptation will induce him to offend his Maker, while he loves him with all his heart. But so soon as any creature begins to prefer himself to God, he will choose to gratify himself; rather than please his Maker; and will of course commit any sin, which promises him self-gratification or self-aggrandizement.

The second thing to be noticed in the conduct of the first sinner, is pride. She saw that it was a tree to be desired to make one wise; that is, she fancied, as the tempter had asserted, that it would cause her to become as a god, knowing good and evil. Now this wish was the effect of pride; and it was accompanied by the inseparable attendant of pride, discontent; discontent with the situation in which God had placed her.-- This sin is the natural consequence of selfishness; for as soon as we begin to prefer ourselves to God, we shall wish to put ourselves in the place of God, and to rise above the sphere of action which he has assigned us, and to grasp at those things which he has not thought proper to bestow.

The third thing in her conduct, the third step in the way of sin, was sensuality, or a disposition to be governed and guided by her senses, and to seek their gratification in an unlawful manner. She saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eyes. Here was something to gratify two of the senses, those of tasting and seeing; and this gratification, though forbidden, she was determined to enjoy. The influence of sin, which had hitherto existed only in the passions of the mind, began to extend itself to the appetites of the body, and by this influence they were inflamed to such a degree, that they prompted her to disregard the dictates of reason and conscience, and the commands of God.

The next step in the fatal way, was unbelief; a distrust of God's word, and a consequent belief of the tempter's suggestions. God had said, "In the day thou eatest, thou shalt surely die." This threatening she now disbelieved. The tempter said, "God doth know that ye shall not surely die; but in the day that ye eat of it, your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." This falsehood she did believe. This disbelief of God's word, and belief of Satan's suggestions, were the natural consequence of sins already mentioned; for when the passions and appetites are inflamed by the influence of sin, they immediately blind the understanding in such a manner, that it can no longer discover the evidence which attends divine truth, nor the force of those arguments and motives, which should induce us to obey it. Every thing which is urged against a compliance with our sinful inclinations then appears weak and groundless; while those sophistical reasonings, which favor their gratification, seem powerful and conclusive. In this state therefore, the mind is completely prepared to disbelieve the God of truth, whose

word opposes and forbids its sinful inclinations, and to believe the father of lies, who urges us to gratify them. And this in fact is the source of all the unbelief which prevails in the world; for the evidence attending God's word, is so convincing, that men never would, never could disbelieve, did they not first wish to disbelieve it.--But to proceed, God's threatenings being, thus disbelieved, and the lies of the tempter embraced as truth, every barrier, which opposed her progress, was removed; and the sinful propensities that have been mentioned, broke out in open, actual disobedience. She took of the fruit of the tree and did eat. Thus she made a full entrance into that way, which wicked men have ever since trodden. The first step, was selfishness; the second, pride; the third, sensuality; the fourth, unbelief; and the last, actual, open, willful disobedience. To the same result every one will come, who begins to tread in her steps. Selfishness, pride, and sensuality, will lead them in pursuit of forbidden objects up to the gate which opposes their progress in the broad way: a gate, which is secured by God's awful threatenings. Unbelief, by disregarding these threatenings, will draw back the bolts, and then actual disobedience will burst open the gate, and hurry them onward without restraint, in the broad way. And as the first sinner was unwilling to walk in this way alone, and became a tempter, by presenting the fatal fruit to her husband, and persuading him to eat; so all, who have since walked in it, have wished for companions, and enticed their relatives, friends, and acquaintances to follow them.

But without insisting on this, let us trace the farther progress of the first sinners in their fatal career. Though they had disbelieved God's threatenings, they soon found, as sooner or later all sinners will find, that their unbelief did not render them false, or prevent their fulfilment, Before the close of the day, which they had stained by their disobedience, their offended Maker came to call them to an account; and from their conduct on that occasion, we may obtain a further acquaintance with the way in which sinners walk.

They exhibited sullen hardness of heart, impenitence, and despair of forgiveness. They expressed no sorrow, or penitence, nothing like brokenness of heart. They made no confession of sin; they uttered no cries for mercy; they expressed no wish to be restored to the favor of their offended Judge.

They displayed a self-justifying temper. Adam attempted to throw the blame upon his wife; and she, in turn, endeavored to transfer it to the serpent.

They showed a disposition to reflect upon God, as the cause of their disobedience. "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree, and I did eat."

In a manner precisely similar have sinners ever since conducted. They will not confess their sins; they will not repent of them; they will not cry for mercy; they will not seek the favor of their offended God. On the contrary, they excuse and justify themselves, and indirectly cast the blame of their sinful conduct upon Jehovah, by saying, the passions, appetites, and inclinations, which thou gavest us, have led us to act as we have done. This hard, impenitent, self-justifying temper, taken in connection with those things which were previously mentioned, constitute the old way, which wicked men have trodden. Of this we shall be convinced by examining the temper and conduct of successive generations of sinners; and making proper allowance for the different circumstances in which they were placed. Such, for instance, was the way trodden by that generation of mankind, which was destroyed by the flood. I mention this generation, partly because there is an evident allusion to it in our text; partly because their situation resembled our own, more nearly than did the situation of our first parents; and partly, because we have in the writings of Moses, and in the discourses of our Savior, a more particular account of their temper and conduct, than is given of any other generation in those early ages of the world. Now from this account we find that they were guilty of the same sins, that they walked in the same path, which has already been described.

In the first place, they were guilty of selfishness and pride. Their sinful passions they displayed in their disregard of the rights of their neighbors, in their contests for superiority; in consequence of which the earth was filled with violence, as we have abundant reason to believe it would now be, did not human laws restrain, in some degree, the passions of men.

In the second place, the persons who composed this generation, were sensual and earthly minded, governed by appetites and passions, rather than by reason, conscience and the law of God. This appears from the account given us of their alliances and connections, in forming which they seem to have regarded nothing but external appearances, choosing for their partners in life the irreligious, immoral and profane. That this was a distinguishing trait in their character, as well as that of the Sodomites, who lived some ages after them, appears from the account given of them by our Savior.

As it was in the days of Noah, says he, so shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded, they married and were given in marriage, and knew, or considered not, till Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. This, my hearers, is a most accurate description of worldly minded, wicked men; of men completely under the control of their appetites and passions, and regardless of every thing but the present life, with its transitory objects and pursuits.

From this account it also appears, that they were guilty of unbelief, impenitence, hardness of heart, and a consequent neglect of the day and means of grace, and the offers of salvation. To this unbelief and hardness of heart alone can it be ascribed, that they did not know, or as the word signifies, did not consider, till the flood came and destroyed them; for they were most clearly, and for a long time, warned of its approach. God allowed them a reprieve of one hundred and twenty years, during which Noah, as a preacher of righteousness, reproved them for their sin, and warned them of the approaching deluge, and pointed out the only possible way of escape.

In addition to their neglect of his warnings, they resisted the strivings, the influences of the divine Spirit; for we are told that Christ, by his Spirit, went and preached to them, and that God said respecting them, My Spirit shall not always strive with man; nevertheless his days shall be a hundred and twenty years-- thus plainly intimating, that during that time, his Spirit should continue to strive with them. And to what cause is it to be ascribed, that though thus favored, thus warned, they did not consider, till it was too late.

To their unbelief and hardness of heart--the two great causes to which it is still owing, that notwithstanding the preaching of the gospel, the offers of salvation, and the strivings of God's Spirit, men will not consider their latter end, nor fly to the Savior for refuge from the wrath to come. This account of the way in which antediluvian sinners walked, is the more deserving our attention, because our Savior informs us, that in the same way sinners will be found walking, when he comes to judge the world.

Now if sinners trod this way four thousand years ago; and if they will be still found pursuing it at the end of time; we may fairly infer, that they have walked in it ever since the days of Noah, and that they are following it at the present day; an inference, which is abundantly verified by the history of the Jews and their heathen neighbors, by the writings of the prophets, and by the preaching of Christ and his apostles, and by the present character and conduct of sinners.

There is however a way, which many wicked men have trodden, that appears to differ very widely from this, though it is in reality the same--a modification of it produced by the influence of a religious education, or of an awakened conscience operating upon a selfish, sinful heart. This way it is necessary to describe

particularly, lest those who are following it should be deceived, and fancy that they are walking, not in the old way which wicked men have trodden, but in the narrow path of life.

To understand in what the way of which I am speaking consists, it should be recollected, that immediately after the fall of man, God was pleased to reveal a way, in which sinners might be reconciled, return to him, escape the punishment 'which they deserve, and regain his forfeited favor. This way consists in repentance towards God, and faith in a Mediator of God's providing, and reliance upon an atonement for sin made by that Mediator. This way of salvation was at first revealed to mankind in an imperfect manner, under a veil of types and shadows.

The atonement, which Christ, the Lamb of God, intended to make in the fullness of time, was typically represented by the sacrifice of a lamb without spot or blemish. His human nature, in which, as in a temple, dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was represented by a tabernacle, and afterwards by a temple, in which God manifested his presence in a sensible manner, and in which his worshippers might approach, while the mediatorial or priestly office of Christ was shadowed forth in the appointment of an order of men, who acted as mediators between God and man, presenting the sacrifices of men to God, and pronouncing the blessing of God upon men.

Now that modification of the way trodden by wicked men, which we are at present considering, consists in rejecting the Mediator, and the atonement which God has provided, and substituting something else in their place. In other words, it consists in presumptuously attempting to approach God in a way of our own devising, instead of that way which he has provided. The first wicked man who walked in this way, was Cain. While his righteous brother Abel, agreeably to God's appointment, offered a lamb in sacrifice as an atonement for his sin, Cain presented nothing but a gift of the fruits of the earth, disbelieving the great truth, that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin; and showing, that he did not regard himself as a sinner, who needed an atonement.

The consequence was such as might have been expected. The sacrifice of Abel, offered in faith and in obedience to the requisitions of God, was accepted; while the offering of the self-righteous Cain was rejected--a circumstance, which led him to murmur against God, to envy, hate, and at length murder his brother. In the way thus marked out and trodden by Cain, we find the wicked Jews in all ages of their history exceedingly prone to walk. Neglecting the temple where God dwelt, and the priests or mediators whom he had appointed, they erected high places and planted groves, in which they pretended to worship Jehovah, though in a way directly contrary to his commands; and like Cain, they hated and persecuted those who approached God in his own appointed way, and endeavored to convince them of the folly and sinfulness of their conduct.

In the same way their descendants were found walking in our Savior's time. Instead of embracing him as the only Savior, approaching God through him as the Mediator, and relying on his atonement and intercession for acceptance, they depended on their own works, their religious ceremonies, their alms, fastings, prayers and moral duties. Being ignorant of God's righteousness, they went about to establish their own, and refused to submit to the righteousness of God. And because our Savior and his apostles assured them, that in this way they could never be justified or saved, they hated, persecuted, and put them to death.

Soon after the death of the apostles, the Christian church began to apostatize from the faith, to forsake the way of life, and to walk in the way we are describing. They lost the power of Godliness, but multiplied its

forms, and substituted ceremonies, as a ground of dependence for salvation. Hence the Christian church gradually degenerated into the Church of Rome. Neglecting Jesus Christ, the one Mediator between God and man, they prayed to angels, to the virgin Mary, and to departed saints, as mediators; and instead of relying on his merits and atonement, they substituted in their room penances, bodily austerities, superstitious observances, and the endowment of churches and monasteries, by which they vainly hoped to atone for their sin, and obtain the favor of God.

In a way which is essentially the same, many walk at the present day. They depend for salvation on their religious services, their moral duties, their liberality to the poor, their orthodox sentiments, or on a profession of religion; while they neglect the atonement and intercession of Christ, the only sure foundation, the only way of access to the Father, and like their predecessors, hate, though they cannot persecute, those who warn them that their way is false, and their confidence vain.

From what has been said, it appears that this way, though apparently different from that in which openly wicked men walk, is essentially the same; and that it conducts of course to the same end. Its principal characteristics are self-righteousness and pride, flowing from ignorance of God and of ourselves, attended by a disbelief of the gospel, impenitence, and a substitution of something else in the place of Christ, as a ground of dependence. Wicked men then, may be ranked in two classes; the one having no religion, the other a false religion. The first follow the tempter in his own proper shape, as an angel of darkness; the second are deceived, and led to him in the garb of an angel of light. The first walk openly in the broad road to destruction, without fear or remorse; the second follow the same road, but are so blinded by ignorance and unbelief, that they mistake it for the path of life.

Having thus marked the old way which wicked men have trodden, let us consider,

II Its termination. Our Savior informs us, that it leads to destruction. That it does so, we might infer from what has taken place in this world. It led our first parents out of paradise, out of a state of holiness and happiness into a state of sin and misery; out of the clear light of the knowledge and favor of God into a land of darkness and the shadow of death. It led Cain into the guilt of murder, the murder of a brother, and banished him from the presence of God, and constrained him to cry, My punishment is greater than I can bear! For walking in this way the antediluvian sinners were cut down out of time, prematurely, being overwhelmed by a flood; the men of Sodom were destroyed by a fiery storm from heaven; Jews were scourged by a long series of calamities, terminating with their complete destruction by the Romans. What calamities have since befallen the Romish church, and successive generations of sinners, I need not inform you. But if we would see the final termination of this old way, we must go into the sanctuary of God, and look through the glass of revelation into eternity. There we shall see that this way leads directly down to the gates of hell. We are there taught, that the souls of those who were destroyed by the flood, are now spirits in prison, the prison of God's wrath; and may therefore fairly infer, that the souls of other wicked men, who have since been cut down out of time, are in the same situation. We are there told, that there is no peace to the wicked; that destruction and misery are in their paths; that they are driven away in their wickedness; that they shall go away into everlasting punishment. In a word, all the inspired writers cry with one voice, Wo unto the wicked! it shall be ill with them; for the reward of his hands shall be given him. Indeed, it is evident from the very nature of things, that these declarations must be true; that such a way as we have described can lead to nothing but endless misery.

APPLICATION. -- Having endeavored to trace the old way in which wicked men have trodden, to show in what it consists, and what is its termination; permit me, in applying the subject, to inquire,

1. Whether some of you are not walking in this way? Are none of you guilty of selfishness in preferring your own gratification to the glory of God and the happiness of your fellow creatures? Are none of you influenced by pride and discontent to murmur at the situation in which God has placed you, and to attempt to rise above it, by recurring to means which he has forbidden? Are none of you controlled by your sinful appetites, and passions, and inclinations, rather than by reason, conscience, and the fear of God? Have these evil counselors led none of you to desire, and to eat forbidden fruit; to gratify them in a way, or to a degree, which the law of God forbids? Do none of you disbelieve God's solemn declarations, that the soul who sinneth shall die; that the wicked shall be turned into hell, with all who forget him? Are none of you worldly minded, living a careless, irreligious life; acting as if your sole business was to obtain and enjoy what it affords? Are none of you excusing and justifying your conduct at your Creator's expense, saying in your hearts, the appetites, passions, and inclinations, which thou gayest me, cause me to conduct as I do? If you avoid open sins, are none of you neglecting repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; substituting your own works or merits in the place of his atonement; trusting to your own prayers rather than to his intercession, and thus, like the Jews, going about to establish your own righteousness? These things, you will recollect, constitute the old way, which wicked men in all ages have trodden; and if they are found in your temper and conduct, then you are walking in that way.

If you feel unable to determine with certainty what path you are pursuing, permit me to mention three things, which may assist you in determining where you are. In the first place, remember there are but two ways mentioned in scripture, in one or the other of which every man is walking. One is that which has now been described, the old and broad way which wicked men have trodden, and which leads to destruction; the other is the narrow, good old way, marked out by the Son of God, in which patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs have walked, which leads to life. Now since there are only these two ways, it is evident that all who are not walking in the latter are pursuing the former. Inquire then whether you are in the latter, the narrow path. It is totally, and in every respect, unlike the former. Those who walk in it are supremely influenced, not by selfishness, but by that love which seeketh not her own; not by pride, but by humility; not by discontent, but by constant acquiescence in the will of God. Instead of indulging and seeking to gratify their appetites and passions, they deny, mortify, crucify them; instead of disbelieving God's threatenings, they believe them, as well as his promises; they are heavenly and not earthly minded; they condemn, instead of justifying themselves; they rely for acceptance and salvation, not on any work or merits of their own, but on the atonement and intercession of Christ alone; and in dependence on his grace live a life of self-denial, watchfulness and prayer, endeavoring to walk even as he walked. If this, my hearers, is not your character; if you are not walking in this path; then you are most certainly in the old way which wicked men have trodden; for there is no middle path. He that is not with Christ is against him.

Again. Remember that in the way of the wicked, all men naturally walk. This the scriptures abundantly assert. Says the prophet, All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way. And again, The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, and behold they are all gone out of the Way. Since then all are naturally out of the way of life, and in the broad road to death, it is evident that if you have never forsaken this road, if a great change has not taken place in your feelings, views, character and conduct, you are in the broad road still. I do not say that it is necessary to know precisely the time and the manner, in which this change, this passing from one road to the other, took place. But I say that it is absolutely necessary that it should take place. And if you have never been convinced that you are in the broad road, convinced that it is a sinful and dangerous road, then you have not forsaken it. Says our Savior, Strive to enter in at the straight gate; for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able. Now is it possible that a man should strive to enter in at the straight gate and still know

nothing of it? Yet if you have not striven to enter it, you are yet in your sins.

Once more. We are taught, that the old way trodden by wicked men, is the way of the world, and a crowded way. Many there be, says Christ, who go in thereat. Says the apostle to the Ephesians, In time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience; among whom we all had our conversation, and were by nature the children of wrath even as others. The narrow path, on the contrary, is trodden by a comparatively small number; "few there be," says our Savior, "that find it." If then you would know in which path you are walking, inquire whether you have many or few companions; whether you are walking with the world or contrary to it. If you find yourselves in a crowded road, then you are in the broad road. If you are walking with the majority of mankind, then you are most certainly walking in the old way, which wicked men have trodden.

2. Should any of you be convinced by these remarks that you are in this dangerous way, permit me to apply the subject further, by urging you to forsake it without delay. Consider, O consider, whither it leads, and whither it has led those who followed it in former ages. Consider too, what God has done to turn you from it. He has clearly described it in his word. He has there traced it, as on a map, from its commencement to its fatal termination. All along the path he has set up way-marks with the inscription, This road conducts to hell; while a hand, pointing to a narrow path, which opens to the right, has written over it, This path leads to heaven.

Lest you should be so occupied by the cares and business of the world, as to pass these way-marks without noticing them, he has placed at each of them a watchman to warn thoughtless travellers, and to call their attention to these inscriptions; and lest any should rush on without stopping to hear their warnings, he has placed the Sabbath, like a gate, across their path to compel them to stop till it be opened, and to hear the warning voice. To one of these gates, my impenitent hearers, you have now come.

It has compelled you to pause a few moments, in your sinful career; and to pass away the time till the Sabbath is gone, you have come to the house of prayer. Here is a watchman appointed by your Creator. I stand to call your attention to the inscriptions which he has recorded; to the marks which he has drawn of the various paths in which men walk. Sinner, stop! I have a message to thee from God. See it written with his own finger, This broad road leads to destruction! Look at the map which he has drawn.

See here a way Opening out of the gates of paradise, leading on, broad and crooked, through the mazes of the world, and terminating at the iron gate of the bottomless abyss. See written on its margin, Destruction and misery are in this path; it leads down to the chambers of eternal death. This is the path of the openly irreligious. See close by its side another path, opened by the first murderer. See written on it, There is a way which seemeth right 'unto a man, but the end thereof is death.

This is the path of the self-righteous, the formalist, the hypocrite, and like the other, leads to death. Sinners, you have seen this path; it is yours ; it is the path in which you are now walking. You have also seen its end. Let it be yours then no longer. This day, this hour, forsake it, and enter that path which opens to the right hand. Here you may see it; and the straight gate, which leads into it, opens to every one who knocks. Close by its side stands a cross; rays of light darting from it, illuminate and mark out the path.

Just within the gate stands an invisible guide, with extended hand offering to lead, to assist, to support you; while at the termination are the wide open gates of heaven, from which issue a flood of glory, which

you will discover more and more clearly, as you approach them.. O then, enter this path. Strive, strive to enter in at the straight gate. Will you reply, I know not what to do. I am in utter darkness. I see not the gate, nor the way, nor the cross. Then cry earnestly for light.

Let your heart be toward the king's highway, and light will soon shine upon your steps. Above all, take not another step in the fatal road, which you have hitherto pursued. Pass not this Sabbath, this warning way-mark, lest you never see another.

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