

The Vain Self-Flatteries of the Sinner

by Jonathan Edwards

"For he flatters himself in his own eyes—until his iniquity is found to be hateful." Psalm 36:2

In the foregoing verse, David says, "An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no *fear of God* before his eyes." That is, when David saw that the wicked went on in sin, in an allowed way of wickedness, it convinced him, that they were not afraid of those terrible judgments, and of that wrath with which God has threatened sinners. If they were afraid of these things—they could never go on so securely in sin, as they did.

In our text David gives the reason why the wicked did not fear. It was a strange thing that men, who enjoyed such light as they did in the land of Israel, who read and heard those many dreadful threatenings which were written in the book of the law—should not be afraid to go on in sin. But says the Psalmist, "They flatter themselves in their own eyes!" That is—they have something or other which they make a foundation of encouragement, whereby they persuade themselves that they shall escape those judgments; and which makes them put that day of judgment far away from themselves.

In this manner he proceeds, until his iniquity is found to be hateful. That is—until he finds by experience that it is a more dreadful thing to sin against God, and break his holy commands, than he imagined. He thinks *sin* to be sweet—and hides it as a sweet morsel under his tongue! He loves it, and flatters himself in it, until at length he finds, by experience—that it is as bitter as gall and wormwood! Though he thinks the *commission* of sin to be lovely—yet he will find the *fruit* of it to be hateful, and what he cannot endure. "At last it will bite like a serpent—and sting like an adder!" Proverbs 23:32

Here observe three things:

1. The *subject* spoken of, is the WICKED MAN, of whom the Psalmist had been speaking in the foregoing verse.
2. His *action* in flattering himself in his own eyes. That is—he makes himself and his case to appear to himself, or in his own eyes, better than it is.

3. How *long* he continues so to do—until his iniquity is found to be hateful. Which may be taken for his sin itself—the wicked will see how odious sin is to God—when he shall feel the *effects* of God's hatred! He will find his iniquity to be hateful, as he will find the hatefulness and feel the terribleness of the FRUIT of his iniquity.

DOCTRINE:

Wicked men generally flatter themselves with hopes of escaping eternal punishment, until it actually comes upon them!

There are but few sinners who despair, who give up the cause and conclude with themselves, that they shall go to hell. Yet there are but few who do *not* go to hell. It is to be feared that men go to hell every day out of this country—yet very few of them allow themselves to believe, that they are in any great danger of that dreadful punishment. They go on sinning and traveling in the direct road to the bottomless pit—yet by one means or another, they persuade themselves that they shall never fall into it!

In my present discourse, I shall:

1. Mention some things in *confirmation* of the doctrine—that sinners flatter themselves with the hope of sinning with impunity.
2. Mention some of the various *ways* wherein sinners flatter themselves in that false hope.
3. Show that sinners generally go on flattering themselves, until eternal punishment actually overtakes them.

I. I am to mention some things in *confirmation* of the doctrine, that sinners flatter themselves with the hope of *sinning with impunity*.

1. We are so taught in the word of God. Beside our text, you may see, Deuteronomy 29:18, 19. "The LORD made this covenant with you so that no man, woman, family, or tribe among you would turn away from the LORD our God to worship these gods of other nations, and so that no root among you would bear bitter and poisonous fruit. Let none of those who hear the warnings of this curse consider themselves immune, thinking, '*I will be safe, even though I am walking in my own stubborn way.*' This would lead to utter ruin!" Where it is supposed that they whose hearts turn away from God, and are roots that bear

gall and wormwood, generally bless themselves in their hearts, saying, "*I will be safe!*"

See also Psalm 49:17,18. "He will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him. Though while he lived, he counted himself *blessed*." And Psalm 50:21. "These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face!"

2. It is very evident, that sinners flatter themselves that they shall escape punishment, by this—that otherwise they would be in dreadful and continual distress. Otherwise, as long as they are in sin—they could never live and go about so cheerfully as they now do! Their lives would be filled with sorrow and mourning, and they would be in continual *uneasiness* and *distress*; as much as those that are exercised with some violent pain of body. But it is evident that it is not in fact so; it is apparent that men are *careless* and *secure*; that they are not much concerned about future punishment, and that they cheerfully pursue their business and recreations. Therefore they undoubtedly flatter themselves—that *they* shall not be eternally miserable in hell, as they are threatened in the Word of God

3. It is evident that they flatter themselves with hopes that they shall escape punishment, as otherwise they would certainly be restrained at least from many of those sins in which they now live—and they would not proceed in wilful courses of sin. This *sinfulness of the wicked* convinced the Psalmist, and is enough to convince everyone—that there is no fear of God before his eyes, and that he flatters himself in his own eyes. It would be impossible for men allowedly from day to day to do those very things, which they know are threatened with everlasting destruction, if they did not some way encourage themselves, they would nevertheless escape that destruction.

II. I shall mention some of the various ways, wherein sinners flatter themselves in their own eyes.

1. Some flatter themselves with a *secret hope*—that there is no such thing as another world. They hear a great deal of preaching, and a great deal of talk about hell, and about the eternal judgment; but those things do not seem to them to be real. They never saw any of these things: they never saw *hell*, never saw the *devils* and *damned spirits*; and therefore are ready to say with themselves, "How do I know that there is any such thing as another world? When *animals*

die—that is an end of them—so perhaps it will be the same with me? Perhaps all these warnings of Scripture, are nothing but the inventions of men, nothing but cunningly devised fables.

Such thoughts are apt to rise in the minds of sinners, and the devil seeks to enforce them. Such thoughts are a great comfort to them; therefore they *wish* they were true, and this makes them the more ready to think that they are *indeed* true. So that they become hardened in the way of sin—by their infidelity and atheistic thoughts. Psalm 14:1, "The fool has said in his heart—There is no God." Psalm 94:6, 7, "They kill the widow and the foreigner and murder the fatherless. They say—*The Lord doesn't see it. The God of Jacob doesn't pay attention!*"

2. Some flatter themselves that *death is a great way off*—and that they shall *hereafter* have much opportunity to seek salvation; and they think if they earnestly seek it, though it be a great while hence, they shall obtain it. Although they see no reason to conclude that they shall live long, and perhaps they do not positively conclude that they shall live long—yet it does not come into their minds, that their lives are really *uncertain*, and that there is no certainty that they will live another year. Such a thought as this does not take any hold of them. And although they do not absolutely determine that they shall live to *old age* or to middle age—yet they secretly flatter themselves with such a vain imagination. They are disposed to believe so, and do so far believe it—that they act upon it and run the venture of it!

Men will believe that things will be—as *they choose to have them*, without reason, and sometimes without the appearance of reason, as is most apparent in this case in Psalm 49:11, "Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue forever, and their dwelling places to endless generations."

The *inclinations* and *desires* of men to *have* it so, is the principal thing which makes them *believe* so. However, there are several other things which they use as arguments to flatter themselves. Perhaps they think with themselves, that since they are at present in health, or in youth, or that since they are useful men, do a great deal of good, and both themselves and others pray for the continuance of their lives; they are not likely to be removed by death very soon.

If they shall live many years in the world—they think that it is very probable they shall be converted before they die. They expect

hereafter to have much more convenient opportunities to become converted, than they have now. And by some means or other, they think they shall somehow be converted before they die—perhaps in old age.

3. Some flatter themselves that they lead *moral* and decent lives—and therefore think that they shall not be damned. They think with themselves that they do not live in any open vice—that they are careful to wrong no man—that they are just and honest in their dealings—that they are not addicted to strong drinking, or to impurity, or to filthy language—that they are constant attendants on the public worship, and maintain the worship of God in their families. *Therefore* they hope that God will not cast them into hell. They do not see *why* God should be so angry with them—seeing they are so moral and upright in their walk. They do not see that they have done enough to anger him to *that* degree. And if they have *angered* him, they imagine they have also done a great deal to *pacify* him.

If they are not as yet converted—they hope that their moral and strict lives will move God to give them converting grace. They hope that surely God will not send to hell—those who live as moral as they do. Thus they flatter themselves, as those we read of Luke 18:9, "That trusted in themselves—that they were righteous."

4. Some make the *advantages* under which they live—an occasion of self flattery. They flatter themselves, that they live in a place where the gospel is powerfully preached, and among a religious people, where many have been converted—and they think it will be much easier for them to be saved on that account. Thus they abuse the grace of God to their destruction; they do that which the scriptures call *despising the riches of God's kindness*. Romans 2:4. "Do you despise the riches of His kindness, restraint, and patience—not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

Some flatter themselves, because they are born of godly parents, who are dear to God, who have often and earnestly prayed for them. They hope that their prayers will be heard—and this encourages them to go on in the way of neglecting their souls. The Jews had great dependence upon this—that they were the *children of Abraham*: John 8:33. They made their boast, "We are Abraham's descendants!" And in verse 39, "Abraham is our father!"

5. Some flatter themselves with their own *intentions*. They presently neglect their souls, and allow themselves in sin for a while longer—yet *intend* to reform at some time in the future. Though now they neglect their souls, and are going on in sin; yet they *intend* before long to bestir themselves, to leave off their sins, and to set themselves to seek God. They hear that there is great encouragement for those who earnestly seek God, that they shall find him. So they *intend* to do; they propose to seek with a great deal of earnestness. They are told, that there are many who seek to enter the kingdom of heaven—who shall not be able; but they *intend*—not only to *seek*, but to *strive*. However, for the present—they allow themselves in their ease, sloth, and pleasure, minding only earthly things.

Or if they should be seized with some mortal disease, and should draw near to the grave, before the time which they lay out in their minds for reformation, they think how earnestly they would pray and cry to God for mercy. And as they hear God is a merciful God, who takes no delight in the death of sinners—they hence flatter themselves that they shall move God to have pity on them.

There are but few who are sinners, and know themselves to be such, who do not encourage themselves with *intentions of future repentance and reformation*. There are but few who do not flatter themselves, that they shall in good earnest set themselves to seek God some time or other. Hell is full of GOOD INTENDERS who never proved to be TRUE PERFORMERS! Acts 24:25, "Go your way for now; when I have a convenient season, I will call for you."

6. There are some who flatter themselves, that they *do* and *have done*—a great deal for their salvation, and therefore hope they shall obtain it—when indeed they neither do what they *ought to do*, nor what they *might do* in their present state of **unregeneracy;** nor are they in any likely way to be converted. They think they are striving—when they neglect many commanded Scriptural duties; nor do they exert themselves as if it were for their lives; they are not violent for the kingdom of heaven.

There are doubtless many such; many are concerned, and are seeking, and do many things, and think that they are in a very fair way to obtain the kingdom of God. Yet there is great danger that you will prove at last to be some of the foolish virgins, and be found without *oil* in their vessels.

7. Some hope by their *strivings*—to obtain salvation of themselves. They have a secret hope, that they shall, by degrees, work in themselves— true repentance of sin, and love towards God and Jesus Christ. They are striving to do *themselves*—that which is the work of God. Many who are now seeking, have this vain hope—and labor, pray, hear sermons and go to private meetings—with the view of *making themselves holy*.

Many, who only project and design to turn to God hereafter, are apt to think that it is an *easy thing* to be converted, that it is a thing which will be in their *own power* at any time, when they shall earnestly set themselves to it.

8. Some sinners flatter themselves that they are *already converted*. They sit down and rest in a false hope, persuading themselves that all their sins are pardoned; that God loves them; that they shall go to heaven when they die; and that they need trouble themselves no more. Revelation 3:17, "You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

III. Sinners very generally go on flattering themselves in some or other of these ways, until their punishment actually overtakes them. These are the *baits* by which Satan catches souls—and draws them into his snare! Such self flatteries as these—keep men from seeing what danger they are in, and that make them go securely on in their false hopes, "like a bird darting into a snare—little knowing it will cost him his life!"

Those that flatter themselves with hopes of *living a great while longer* in the world, and very commonly continue to do so—until death comes! Death comes upon them when they expect it not; they look upon it as a *great way off*, when there is but a *step* between them and death! They did not think of dying at that time, nor at anytime near it. When they were young—they proposed to live a good while longer. And if they happen to live until middle age—they still maintain the same thought—that they are not yet near death. And so that thought goes along with them as long as they live, or until they are just about to die.

Men often have a *dependence on their own righteousness*, and as long as they live, are never brought off from it. Multitudes uphold themselves with their own *intentions*, until all their prospects are dashed in pieces by death. They put off the work which they have to

do until such a time; and when that comes, they put it off to another time—until death, which cannot be put off, overtakes them! There are many also that hold a false hope, a persuasion that they belong to God; and they never will be persuaded to let go their vain hope—until it is torn from them by death.

Thus men commonly uphold themselves, and make themselves easy—until hell fire makes them uneasy! Everlasting ruin comes upon them as a snare, and all their hopes are at once cut off, and turned into everlasting despair! 1 Thessalonians 5:3. "When they shall say, 'Peace and safety,' then destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."

APPLICATION

1. Hence we learn one reason why there are but few saved, and why so many perish from under the gospel. All men know that they must die, and all who sit under the light of the gospel have been told many a time, that after this life—there is another world; that there are but two states in that other world, a state of eternal *happiness*, and a state of eternal *misery*; that there is but *one way of escaping* the misery, and obtaining the blessedness of eternity—which is by obtaining a saving interest in Christ, through faith in him; and that this life is the only opportunity of obtaining a saving interest in Christ. Yet men are so much given to *flatter themselves* in those ways which we have mentioned, that there are but few who seasonably take care of their salvation. Indeed they cannot but be in some measure concerned about their souls; yet they flatter themselves with one thing or another, so that they are kept steadily and uninterruptedly going on in the *broad way to destruction*.

2. Hence we learn the reason why the awakening truths of scripture, and awakening sermons, make no more impression upon men. It is in itself an astonishing and surprising thing, that God's denunciations of eternal misery, and threatenings of casting sinners into the lake which burns with fire and brimstone forever and ever—does not affect them, does not startle them. But the truth is, they flatter themselves, by such means as we have mentioned, that this dreadful misery is not for *them*; that *they* shall escape it, though multitudes of others are involved in it. They do not take these threatenings to *themselves*; they seem to think that they do not belong to *them*.

How many are there in this congregation, who, for all the awakening sermons they have heard—are yet secure in sin! And who, although they are sensible that they are in a Christless condition, and are still going on in sin—yet *intend* to go to heaven, and expect that by some means or another, that they shall arrive there. They are often told, that God is very angry with them; yet they think God is a very merciful God, and they shall be able to pacify him. If they be told how uncertain life is, that does not awaken them, because they flatter themselves with long life. If they be told how dangerous it is to delay the business of religion, they promise themselves, that they will hereafter engage in it with more earnestness than others—and so obtain the end, the salvation of their souls. Others, when they are told that many shall *seek*—who shall not be able to *obtain*; think surely, that *they*, having done so much for salvation, shall not be denied.

3. Let every sinner examine himself, whether he does not flatter himself in some of those ways which have been mentioned. What is it in your own minds, which makes you think it is safe for you to delay turning to God? What is it that encourages you to run such a venture as you do—by delaying this necessary work? Is it that you hope there is no such a state as heaven or hell—and a suspicion that there is no God? Is it this which makes you secure? Or is it that you are not much afraid, because you imagine that you shall have opportunity enough in the future, to mind such things? Is it an intention of a future seeking a more convenient season? And are you persuaded that God will hearken to you then, after you shall have so long turned a deaf ear to his gracious commands and invitations? Are you encouraged to commit sin, because you *hope* to repent of it? Are you encouraged by the mercy of God—to be his enemies? And do you resolve still to provoke him to anger, because you think he is easily pacified?

Or do you think that your conversion is in your own power, and that you can turn to God when you please? Is it because you have been born of godly parents—that you are so secure? Or do you imagine that you are in a fair way to be converted? Do you think that what you have done in religion, will engage God to pity you, and that he never can have the heart to condemn one who has lived such a moral life? Or do you think that you are indeed converted already? And does that encourage you to take a liberty in sinning? Or are you secure, because you are so stupid as to think nothing about these things? Do you let these concerns wholly alone, and scarcely ever think at all how it will be with you after you are dead?

Certainly it must be one or more of these things which keeps you in your vain security, and encourages you to go on in sin. Examine, therefore, and see which of them it is!

4. By the text and doctrine—be persuaded to cease flattering yourselves thus, in your own eyes. You are herein informed, that those who do as you do, commonly continue so doing—until their punishment actually comes upon them! Thereby you may be convinced of the vanity of all such flatteries. Be afraid of that which you are sure is the devil's bait: "Surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird," Proverbs 1:17.

You are not only told in the *Scriptures*, that sinners are generally thus allured to hell, but your own *reason* may convince you that it is so. For doubtless other sinners have as much ground to hope to escape punishment as you; and it is evident, that they generally do hope to escape. Men almost universally think *they* shall not go to hell. If it were otherwise, they could have no peace or comfort in the world. Yet what *multitudes* go down from under the preaching of the gospel—to the pit of destruction! Now, this is surely enough to convince any sober, prudent person of the *folly of such flattery*, and of the folly of every one who does not immediately set about his great work with all his might. If you could have access to the damned, you would hear many of them curse themselves, for thus flattering themselves while they lived in this world; and you would have the same doctrine preached to you by their wailings and yellings—which is now preached to you from the pulpit.

If your temptation to vain security, is unbelief of the fundamental doctrines of religion, such as the being of God, of the eternal world, and an eternal judgment—you may consider, that though that makes you secure at *present*—yet it will not do always, it will not hold up when you come to die. The fool often in *health* says, "There is no God!" but when he comes to *die*, he cannot rest in any such supposition. Then he is generally so much convinced in his own conscience, that there is a God, that he is in dreadful amazement for fear of his eternal wrath. It is folly, therefore, to flatter yourselves with any supposition *now*, which you will not *then* be able to hold.

If you depend on *long life*, consider how many who have depended on the same thing, and had as much reason to depend on it as you—have died suddenly.

Is it because you are outwardly decent and moral—that you think you shall be saved? How unreasonable is it to suppose, that God should be so obliged by those actions, which he knows are not done from the least respect or regard to him, but wholly with a private view! Is it because you are under great advantages, that you are not much afraid but that you shall some time or other be converted, and therefore neglect yourselves and your eternal interests? And were not the people of Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum, under as great advantages as you, when Christ himself preached the gospel to them, almost continually, and wrought such a multitude of miracles among them? Yet He says, that it shall be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah, than for those cities.

Do you expect you shall be saved, however you neglect yourselves, because you were born of godly parents? Hear what Christ says in Matthew 3:9, "Do not say within yourselves—we have Abraham as our father." Do you flatter yourselves that you shall obtain mercy, though others do not, because you intend hereafter to seek it more earnestly than others? Yet you deceive yourselves, if you think that you intend better than many of those others, or better than many who are now in hell, once intended.

If you think that you are in a way of earnest seeking salvation, consider, whether or not you mind earthly things yet more? If you imagine that you have it in your own power to work yourselves up to repentance, consider, that you must assuredly give up that vain imagination before you can have repentance wrought in you. If you think yourselves already converted, and that encourages you to give yourselves the greater liberty in sinning—this is a certain sign that you are not converted.

Therefore abandon all these ways of flattering yourselves! No longer follow the devil's bait; and let nothing encourage you to go on in sin—but immediately and henceforth seek God with all your heart, and soul, and strength!