

My wife and I were taking ballroom dancing lessons. We drove once-a-week to a nearby city with a mixture of anticipation and nervousness. We were given instruction and introduced to new dance steps each of the evenings we attended. The couple who ran the school gracefully demonstrated the dances for us before we were paired with different students to practice the dances under their watchful eye. This was a new experience for all of us who were beginner students. We stiffly moved about the dance floor trying to concentrate on the pattern of the assigned dances and follow the music being played. It was challenging to me and my wife but it was also enjoyable to learn of a world we'd never experienced. Every evening we drove home from dance discussing our experience, amid much laughter, over the ineptness of ourselves and others as we progressed through the class.

One evening I was paired, for a short time, with an intermediate student for a particular dance. As we danced she suddenly stopped me and said, "You're doing it wrong." We began all over. Soon she stopped me again and sourly said, "You're doing it all wrong." We began for a third time. Exasperated with my leading again, she stopped me with an expressionless stare and said with more firmness, "You're still doing it wrong!"

I stood looking into her face with a mischievous grin. I lightheartedly ribbed her by saying, "You know, it really doesn't matter if I even dance. You look so good out here dancing around this floor. No one notices me anyway, because you look so good." Amazingly, my ridiculous compliment went to her head instantly. She brightened up and gave me a big smile. The woman tilted her head to one side and flicked her hair with her left hand while stating cheerily, "It's my hair. It's my long flowing hair when I turn." She touched her pleated dress with the same hand and gleefully explained further, "And it's this dress I wore. When I spin it billows out." The rest of the evening she pranced all over the room full of herself as she went from partner to partner. My words had transformed her into a dancing star, in her mind at least.

I laughed over the vanity of this woman and her amplified estimation of herself. I told others this story because I thought it was entertaining and funny. Now, I look at the role I played, the woman's unexpected response and dancing, from a much different perspective. My purpose in sharing the story at this time is for the instruction of my readers. It is surprising (at least to me) how easily people succumb to flattery (or what is taken as flattery). Flattery is pervasive. It also raises

problems which need to be addressed.

*Let me not, I pray, show partiality to anyone;  
nor let me flatter any man. For I do not know how  
to flatter, else my Maker would soon take me  
away.*

*Job 32:21-22*

### **WARNINGS AGAINST FLATTERY & FLATTERERS**

In the book of Job we have detailed for us a long debate between Job and his three visiting “friends”. The argument is about the cause of Job’s recent all-encompassing ruin. Job’s health, children, and possessions have been suddenly swept away and he is distraught over it all. His friends argue in turn that Job is being judged by God for sin and they probe into this matter to evaluate his sinfulness; Job counters that he is confident it is not because of his sinfulness, but he admits to his friends that he does not know the reason for his ruin. The debate takes many different approaches to answer the question as the men stubbornly and eloquently argue, with both sides refusing to yield.

Elihu, a fourth man, takes a different tack and contradicts Job’s friends (before arguing against

Job too). Elihu portrays himself as an honorable man of godly character by asserting to the others that he will not flatter them by agreeing with their arguments since he is honestly not of the same opinion. These are his words in the text cited above. Job had stated earlier in this long argument, “He who speaks flattery to his friends, even the eyes of his children will fail.” (17:5) Job refused to pretend agreement with his friends’ counsel, thus flattering the men, and, at the same time, warned against such behavior in general. This is an important aspect of the running argument recorded in the book of Job.

In Scripture we are wisely warned against keeping company with flatterers (“do not associate with one who flatters with his lips” Proverbs 20:19b), warned against the harm done by flattery (“a flattering mouth works ruin” Proverbs 26:28b), and warned against the peril before us because of flattery (“A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.” Proverbs 29:5). We are strongly warned not to succumb to flattery from the immoral (“With her flattering lips she seduced him” Proverbs 7:21) or of the devious aspiring ruler (“he shall come in peaceably and seize the kingdom by flatteries” Daniel 11:21b) or the flattering of an enemy (“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but

the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” Proverbs 27:6).

The Word of God has much to say about the topic of flattery and has many warnings to give on this matter. Several have already been cited, but what is flattery? The following is a good dictionary definition—flattery: *to compliment or praise, usually excessively, with insincerity to win favor or advancement*. I believe the key word in this definition of flattery is “insincerity”. Flattery is the giving of compliments or praise to others that are not sincere, i.e. not wholly truthful or honest. Also these endearing remarks are made to receive some sort of benefit to the one who speaks them; the flatterer is self-serving in his praise of others and is a hypocrite. Flattery is undoubtedly a type of hypocrisy.

The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek and refers to an actor in the theatre who is playing a part. He is pretending to be someone he is not and playing a role in the performance. The flatterer is one who pretends to be a person of sincere good will by recognizing others, with agreeable courtesies and kind words, in order to receive, in a roundabout way, some advantage or position or benefit to himself. This is the real, hidden motivation of the flatterer, and the pleasing words he uses

are a ploy to win the confidence and favor of others from whom he may exact some privilege. The man of real balance, who is truly pious, employs sincere praise and honest compliments on one hand, and wise stern exhortation and necessary rebuke on the other, as circumstances dictate. The consequences received (either good or bad) to one's self is of little importance compared to the benefit desired for another, when the truth is spoken in love. This is a virtuous motivation devoid of flattery.

I was deeply saddened by an extended conversation with a dear sister who had married a man who proved himself habitually unfaithful to marriage. This unfortunate situation arose out of loneliness and a longing, on the godly woman's part, to be married again. Her first husband had died suddenly in a fatal accident and she was left with property to maintain and a large house in which to live. Amid tears she expressed the hurt and betrayal she felt. This wronged lady had received a man who portrayed himself to be something he was not, as she sadly discovered later. Her words were full of meaning when she openly revealed how she'd been duped, "He told me what I wanted to hear."

### **EXTREME EXAMPLES OF FLATTERIES**

In Scripture, striking examples of flattery, used for extremely devious purposes, are given. Stern warnings are leveled against the use of flattery to express God's displeasure. We are given much to consider about this issue.

The story is told of how Absalom won the hearts of the people through intrigue (flattery) and was able to wrest the throne from his father David and become king over Israel. Here is the account: *Now Absalom would rise early and stand beside the way to the gate. So it was that whenever anyone who had a lawsuit came to the king for a decision, that Absalom would call to him and say, "Your servant is from such and such a tribe of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your case is good and right, but there is no deputy of the king to hear you." Moreover Absalom would say, "Oh, that I was made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me; then I would give him justice." And so it was, whenever anyone came near to bow down to him, that he would put out his hand and take him and kiss him. In this manner Absalom acted toward all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So*

*Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.*

*2 Samuel 15:2-6*

[It also did not hurt Absalom to be a strikingly handsome man. “Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.” (2 Samuel 14:25) It seems that men and women are too often captivated by appearances and flattering words. The combination of the two can prove to be an extremely strong magnet.]

The religious leaders came to Jesus on several occasions to ask Jesus hard questions. They were not seeking answers to legitimate questions but wanted to entrap and embarrass Him, and thus discredit the Man and His message. Once, the Pharisees (who were opposed to paying taxes to the occupying Roman government) and the Herodians (who supported the payment of such taxes by the Jews) conspired together to pose a question. They were confident that no matter how Jesus answered, He would offend one party or the other. Here is the account of the question and Jesus’ answer:

*They said, “Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God in truth, nor do You care about anyone, for you do not regard the person of*

*men. Tell us therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*

*But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money."*

*So they brought Him a denarius.*

*And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?"*

*They said to Him, "Caesar's."*

*And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

*When they heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way. Matthew 22:16-22*

[The Jewish leaders came to Jesus with cleverness but He answered them with wisdom. This was the clear difference – men are clever, but Jesus is wise! It is important to note the hypocrisy in this exchange. Before posing the tax question, the men copiously complimented Jesus to give themselves the appearance of sincerity and humility. The men came to Jesus with flattery to begin their discourse. Surely they thought this approach would help shield their true intent before posing their question and possibly disarm Jesus by their accommodation. Jesus made quick work of exposing

them as flattering hypocrites.]

By contrast, in Scripture, we find strong words written against the use of flattery. The biblical context involves the delivery of the most important message which can be voiced by men to other men. The message is the gospel and it is to be preached without the tainting of manipulating flattery. Paul takes an opportunity to boldly defend his preaching of the gospel. He argues that he does not preach for personal prestige or monetary gain or for any other personal benefit (and, conversely, depicts proper preaching of the gospel for us). He defends himself against any and all criticism of his motives by asserting:

*But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness- God is witness. Nor do we seek glory from men , either from you or others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. I Thessalonians 2:4-6*

[Sadly there are many who use smooth and flattering words, who call themselves preachers of the gospel, to convey “their message” to the masses. It is not hard to bring to mind a television evange-

list who tells people what they want to hear, or who makes outlandish promises of how God wants to shower His holy people with material blessings, or who offers you the ability to tap into the treasury of hidden and unused power found within yourself. Men should not believe a gospel built upon the foundation of how wonderful and good and deserving they are. This is not God's message, but a perversion and utter deception. The truth is that men are inherently wicked (sinful). The gospel calls men to see themselves as they truly are- filthy sinners, to be broken by their debased state, to cry out to God for mercy and help. Sincere repentance and receiving forgiveness for sin requires faith in the only Sinless One- Jesus Christ. The gospel is not about the goodness of men and their worthiness before a God who notices them; the gospel is about the "altogether worthiness" of Jesus Christ who offers forgiveness to unworthy men by His perfect love.]

#### **THE WRONG KIND OF SPEECH & FLATTERY**

James speaks against the wrong use of the tongue in speech. He gives a general, sober warning against the improper and hurtful use of words. Much destruction is attributed to the little tongue, as it is given attention for its role in speaking.

James is stern in his admonition to take care and be forewarned about the potential for damage among undisciplined and unwise men. He could not be any clearer when he says: “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!” and “But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3: 5,8)

Throughout Scripture we are given specifics of ways in which speech is not to be used. Searching the Word of God, it is detailed how the words of men are employed to means which are detrimental. There are so many ways in which words may wound and kill. The Bible speaks uncompromisingly against lying, slander, gossip, boasting, cursing, false teaching, clamor, disputing, arguing, whispering, backbiting, reviling, evil speaking, foolish talking, coarse jesting, empty words, scoffing, mocking, hard answers, idle talk, profane speech, etc. Is it any wonder that men leave in their wake a host of hurt feelings and strained relationships?

Jude adds to this list of speech which insults man and God. It is dishonoring to God; it is distressing to man. We are not to express blatant discontent and employ deception. Jude tells us of certain men- evil men, ungodly men, sensual men,

apostates. These men have even crept into the church, he reveals! He warns that such men have denied Jesus Christ and disrupted the church. Jude characterizes them by saying, “These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.” (Jude 1:16) It is shameful to mouth grumbling, complaining, and flattering words!

Flattery is always presented in a negative way. It has no place in the life of a Christian. It is a deception associated with the ungodly. Flattery is serious and it is a sin! It is used as a cover and a distraction of someone’s real intentions, or a means of accomplishing some hidden agenda.

Paul, in a similar warning to the church, tells us to notice those who cause discord and divisions and to avoid them. He adds his strong words, “For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” (Romans 16:18)

A final warning I lay before the reader. Flattery, as it is denoted by these, and other men of God, is to be avoided. It is wrong to think that flattery can be used as simply a harmless technique to endear people to one’s self. To view flattery as just

another form of kindness or as a way of being friendly, nice, or agreeable is dangerous. Insincere compliments, saying what people want to hear, stretching the truth, etc. is sinful! In truth, it is self-love; it is not a love for others.

This is portrayed as the character of the ungodly.

#### **THE RIGHT KIND OF SPEECH & SINCERITY**

We have spent much time explaining the types of speech that should not be used. Emphasis has been placed on the problem of flattery from the list of wrong speech. The Bible is clear on how we may misuse the ability to converse with one another. The Bible also has much to say about the proper use of speech. What does the right kind of speech sound like? What should we include in our speech which will cause it to heal and bring life?

Solomon reminds us not to use too many words. We read, “He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit.” and “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.” (Proverbs 17:27; 10:19) In other words, don’t talk too much! James echoes the same thinking when he says, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow

to wrath.” ( James 1:19)

Once this wise lesson of limiting speech has been learned, we may consider what the Bible outlines as good speech. The Word of God speaks favorably of talk which includes blessing, truth, godly edification, simplicity, wisdom, non-favoritism (without partiality), timeliness (in due season), teaching, admonition, encouragement; our words should be gracious, acceptable, upright, orderly, profitable, wholesome, comforting, etc. A standard is set for us which is worthy of close attention and application. Do we not fall far short in what we think is good conversation?

Remember, we are speaking of words only. We are not even considering things like tone-of-voice or body language and facial expressions. [“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1) “For You will save the humble people, but will bring down haughty looks.” (Psalm 18:27 )] The Bible indicates a good speaker will not be dull, unpleasant, or devoid of laughter and wit either. [“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” (Proverbs 16:24) “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each other.” (Colossians 4:6) ] Let your speech be

seasoned with salt!

We have established that hypocrisy is pretending and flattery is one form of this deception. The opposite of hypocrisy, and thus flattery, is sincerity. The Bible places a high premium on honesty and sincerity. To the list of words describing godly speech we must give “sincerity” a high place.

What does it mean to be sincere? Sincere means not hypocritical or pretended. In Scripture the word is sometimes translated “pure, unadulterated (unmixed), or genuine”. What is sincere is real; it is not said or done for appearance. Paul affirms his sincerity of conduct: “For our boasting is this; the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity...” (2 Corinthians 1:12) Timothy is reminded to be sincere in his faith: “Now the purpose of this commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.” (I Timothy 1:5) Peter is plain in contrasting words of hypocrisy with words of sincerity: “Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure [sincere] milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...” (I Peter 2: 1,2)

This characterizes the words of the godly.

### **THE GREAT LESSONS OF FLATTERY**

Much instruction comes from a study of the fall of Ephraim. Who was Ephraim? The northern kingdom of Israel consisted of ten tribes, and because of the prominence of the tribe of Ephraim, often the nation known as “Israel” was referred to as “Ephraim”. The ten tribes which made up the nation were defeated and taken into captivity by the Assyrians. We are told in Scripture this was God’s judgment upon the people for their wickedness. It would surprise many to read of the kinds of wickedness attributed to them. One of their grave sins might easily go unnoticed, or casually dismissed, if it were not so prominently mentioned.

Asaph minces no words against them:

*The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them.*

*Nevertheless they flattered Him with their mouth, and they lied to Him with their tongue; for their heart was not steadfast with Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant. Psalm 78: 9-11, 36-37*

[Here we are told of the people’s hypocrisy. They flattered God! What they said to God or about

Him did not match what was in their hearts and what was exhibited in their lives.]

Ezekiel was a prophet of God who was a contemporary of Hosea. He and Hosea spoke concerning the northern kingdom and its destruction. From God, Ezekiel learns of the people's wicked behavior.

*As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, "Please come and hear what the word is from the Lord ." "So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain." "Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them." Ezekiel 33: 30-32*

[Ezekiel is told by God of His displeasure with the people. He has sent His prophet, Ezekiel, to speak to the people. They listen to the prophet's words and discuss what is spoken, but they do not heed the teaching. The people do not reform their lives; they only flatter Ezekiel by their words.]

Hosea further describes the character of the people of Ephraim. Their situation is dire as they have easily taken up many practices of the ungodly nations around them.

*Ephraim has mixed himself among the peoples; Ephraim is a cake unturned. Aliens have devoured his strength, but he does not know it; yes, gray hairs are here and there on him, yet he does not know it. Hosea 7: 8-9*

[The imagery is strong. Ephraim is compared to the flat cakes that the women cook. It is as if a woman got distracted and her cake was not turned. One side is still soggy while the other side has charred. It is useless and unfit to be eaten. Ephraim has compromised and does not even recognize their serious departure from God. Also, they are in great danger of destruction, as an old man with gray hairs will soon die. They do not recognize the danger they face. They have fooled themselves; they have flattered themselves.]

Applications: (1) There are those who are Christian in name only who are not “practicing” believers. They know the right God-words to use and are comfortable with the culture of “professing” Christians. They are only able to flatter God. (2) There are those who think their cordial, respectful acknowledgement of, or pleasant interaction with,

priest or pastor or perceived holy one, places them in good standing with God. They are simply flattering men. (3) Maybe the saddest of all are those who think too highly of themselves. They overlook their own wrongdoing and sinfulness. They habitually flatter themselves. They flatter themselves!

It is not uncommon for people to delude themselves into thinking they are gifted artists, talented musicians, or exceptional singers. Just tune in to the television talent shows when contestants take the stage to sing or dance or perform in some way. Over and over again, when judges and audiences try to make it obvious to a performer he/she has little or no talent, the contestant responds with real anger, stunned surprise, or sad weeping. This is a perfect example of fooling [flattering] one's self. They had told themselves how talented they are until they have completed the deception. When the truth is told, they react with shock.

People may tell themselves how handsome or beautiful they are in front of the mirror, but others can see them much more clearly. Men practice flattery by comparing themselves to others who seem less successful than they are. Many make themselves feel better about their miserable, weak lives by telling themselves, "I'm not as bad as so-

and-so.” The flattery soothes, at least for a little while.

The Bible confirms the truth: “An oracle within my heart concerning the transgression of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes, when he finds out his iniquity and when he hates.” (Psalm 36:2)

Flattery. Flattery. Flattery. Politicians flatter to attract more voters. Preachers flatter to build a bigger following. Salespeople flatter to make more sales. Employees flatter the boss for a raise. Promiscuous persons flatter to gain lovers. Wicked men flatter for others’ ruin. We flatter God with words we call prayer. We flatter men for a variety of reasons. We flatter ourselves to feel important or good about ourselves.

### **CONSIDER CHRIST**

Jesus spoke and His words were the height of wisdom and understanding. We read verses like: “And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching.” and “When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were

astonished and said, ‘Where did this Man get this wisdom and mighty works?’ (Matthew 7:28, 13:54)

Not only was His teaching supreme, but He always used the right words in the right way; His speech was flawless. Of Jesus we are told, “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who does righteously.” (I Peter 2:21-23) So, Jesus committed no sin, there was no deceit in His words, and He did not revile or threaten, even when facing the greatest trial of His life. We are challenged to thus follow His example in our conduct and speech.

In summary, followers of Christ, Christians, are not to practice flattery. Christians are to be wise and not succumb to flattery. The habitual use of flattery is a mark of unbelief and apostasy. Flattery, as with all sin of word, deed or thought, must be repented and brought to Christ, who forgives and changes the sinner’s will.

## EXPLANATION

The purpose of this booklet is two-fold. The first is to deal with a topic, which the Bible addresses candidly, that is being neglected. When is the last time you heard teaching on flattery? Those of us who have given ourselves to living the Christian life are called to a higher standard of conduct than the world. Discussing and studying the ramifications of flattery will seem trivial, or even foolish, to many. For those who wish to please God and live for Christ, the kind of words that come out of our mouths must be considered and guarded. We are in need of reform.

The second purpose is to show decisively that men are sinners. Flattery is included as part of a whole list of ways in which words may be used for evil. Hopefully, this helps expose the fact that we are sinful and need not think too highly of ourselves. It is important that we see ourselves as we truly are and repent. The truth cannot be avoided no matter how much we pretend. Our guilt cries out for God's forgiveness.

## **A TESTIMONY**

While studying the topic of hypocrisy, for a series of messages I delivered at a church, I came across the issue of flattery unexpectedly. The biblical teaching on flattery captured my attention (and imagination) more than a general understanding of hypocrisy. What I came across in Scripture was like finding buried spiritual treasure. As I turned this matter of flattery over and over in my mind, as I listened carefully to what others said, as I evaluated my own conversations, I learned a lot.

We all know that words may be spoken in dishonesty; at times we are suspicious of things we are told. What this study did for me was help clarify how words are used to manipulate people. Bible verses guided me in seeing how widespread is the use of enticing words meant for deceit. It became obvious that our human nature is easily given to accept words which caress our high estimation of ourselves. Finally, the prevalent misuse and abuse of words for selfish or destructive motives displays man's inherent sinfulness. We are indeed a guilty, sinful people in need of a Sinless Savior!

The longer I live and the more I study God's Word, I become more and more aware of the depth of my sin, and the many, many ways in which we can and do sin. I am humbled even more by the forgiveness received through Jesus Christ!

Our words give us away.

NOTES





