

PRACTICAL

*Atheism*

STEPHEN CHARNOCK

(1628-1680)

# Practical Atheism

*Modernized and Abridged*

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# Practical Atheism

*The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.*—Psalm 14:1

## Introduction

**P**RACTICAL atheism is natural to man in his depraved state, and very common in the hearts and lives of men.

“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” He regards Him as little as if He had no being. He said it in his heart, not with his tongue, nor in his head. He never firmly thought it nor openly asserted it. Shame put a bar to the first, and natural reason to the second. Yet perhaps he sometimes had some doubts whether there was a God or not. He wished there was not any and sometimes hoped there was none at all. He could not erase the notion of a deity in his mind, but he neglected fixing the sense of God in his heart and made it too much his business to deface and blot out those characters of God in his soul which had been left under the ruins of original nature.

“There is no God.” Most understand this to refer to a denial of the providence of God. He who denies any essential attribute may be said to deny the being of God. No nature can subsist without the perfections essential to that nature, nor can God be conceived of without His. The apostle tells us that the Gentiles were “without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). So in some sense all unbelievers may be termed atheists; for, rejecting the Mediator appointed by God, they reject that God Who appointed Him.

The title of atheist belongs not only to those who deny the existence of God, or to those who despise all sense of a deity and would root out the conscience and reverence of God from their souls. It belongs also to those who do not give due worship to God; who worship many gods; or who worship one God in a false and superstitious manner; when they have not right conceptions of God, nor intend to worship Him according to the excellency of His nature. All those who are unconcerned for any particular religion are of this character. Though they acknowledge a God in general, they are yet willing to acknowledge any god that shall be coined by the authorities under whom they live. The Gentiles were without God in the world—without the true notion of God, though they had a god of their own framing.

This general or practical atheism is natural to men:

1. Not natural by created, but by corrupted, nature. It is against nature, as nature came out of the hand of God; but universally natural, as nature has been infected by the serpent's breath. Lack of due consideration of God or misrepresentations of His nature are as agreeable to corrupt nature as the disowning the being of a God is contrary to common reason.

2. It is universally natural: "The wicked are estranged from the womb" (Psa 58:3). "They go astray as soon as they be born...their poison is like the poison of a serpent" (vv. 3-4). "The wicked"—and who by his birth has a better title? They go astray from the dictates of God and the rule of their creation as soon as they are born. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent, which is radically the same in all of the same species.

It is *seminally*<sup>1</sup> and fundamentally in all men, though God may restrain it more in some men than in others. This principle runs through the whole stream of nature. The natural inclination of every man's heart is away from God. When we attempt anything pleasing to God, it is like climbing up a hill against nature. When anything is displeasing to Him, it is like a current running down the channel in its natural course. How softly do we naturally sink down into that which sets us at a greater distance from God! There is no active, potent, efficacious sense of a God by nature.

The great apostle cites the text to verify the charge he brought against all mankind (Rom 3:9-12). In his interpretation, the Jews, who owned<sup>2</sup> one God, and were dignified with special privileges, as well as the Gentiles, who maintained many gods, are included in this description. He charges all because all, every man of them, were under sin: "There is none that seeketh after God" (v. 11); and in verse 19 he adds, "What things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law" (Rom 3:19), that none should imagine he included only the Gentiles and exempted the Jews from this description. The leprosy of atheism had infected the whole mass of human nature. No man among Jews or Gentiles did naturally seek God, and therefore all were void of any spark of the practical sense of the deity. The effects of this atheism are not in all externally of an equal size; yet, in the foundation and root of it, there is not a hair's difference between the best and the worst men that ever walked the world.

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<sup>1</sup> **seminally** – originally.

<sup>2</sup> **owned** – acknowledged; confessed.

The distinction is laid either in common grace,<sup>3</sup> bounding and suppressing it; or in special grace, killing and crucifying it. It is in everyone either triumphant or militant, reigning or deposed. “None...seeketh after God.” None seeks God as his rule, as his end, as his happiness, which is a debt the creature naturally owes to God. He desires no communion with God; he places his happiness in anything inferior to God; he prefers everything before Him, glorifies everything above Him. He hath no delight to know Him; he regards not those paths which lead to Him; he loves his own filth better than God’s holiness.

The noblest faculty of man is his understanding, wherein the remaining traces of the image of God are visible. Wisdom is the highest operation of that faculty. But in the judgment of the Spirit of God, man’s wisdom is “devilish” while it is “earthly and sensual” (Jam 3:15). And the wisdom of the best man is no better by nature. A legion of impure spirits possess it. It is devilish as the devil, who though he believes there is a God, yet acts as if there were none, and wishes he had no superior to prescribe him a law and inflict that punishment upon him which his crimes have merited. Hence the poison of man by nature is said to be like “the poison of a serpent,” alluding to that serpentine temptation which first infected mankind and changed the nature of man into the likeness of the devil (Psa 58:4). The harmony of the world presents men not only with the notice of the being of a God, but darts into their minds some remarks of His power and eternity. But the thoughts and reasonings of man are so corrupt, as may well be called diabolical, and as contrary to the perfection of God and the original law of their nature as the actings of the devil are. Since every natural man is a child of the devil and is moved to action by the diabolical spirit, he must have that nature which his father has, though the full discovery of it may be restrained by various circumstances (Eph 2:2). To conclude: though no man, or at least very few, arrive at the positive conclusion in their hearts that there is no God, yet no man naturally has in his heart any reverence for God.

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<sup>3</sup> **common grace** – effects of God’s providence and revelation common to both the elect and non-elect; **special grace** – Christ’s saving work, God’s revelation, and the effective work of the Holy Spirit in the elect.

# I. General Propositions

In general, before I come to a particular proof, take some propositions.

## **Proposition 1: Actions prove more than words.**

The testimony of works is louder and clearer than that of words, and the frame of men's hearts must be measured rather by what they do than by what they say. All outward impieties are the branches of atheism at the root of our nature, as all infectious sores are expressions of contagion in the blood. Men's practices are the best indexes of their principles. The current of a man's life is the counterpart of the frame of his heart. Who can deny atheism in the heart, when so much is visible in the life? A practical denial of God is worse than a verbal, because deeds usually have more deliberation than words. Words may be the fruit of a passion, but a set of evil actions are the fruit and evidence of a predominant evil principle in the heart. Those are more deservedly termed "atheists" who acknowledge a God and walk as if there were none, than those (if there can be any such) that deny a God and walk as if there were one.

A sense of God in the heart would burst out in the life. Where there is no reverence of God in the life, it is easily concluded there is less in the heart.

The flames breaking out of a house reveal the fire to be much stronger and fiercer within. The apostle judges those who gave heed to Jewish fables to be deniers of God, though he does not charge them with any notorious profaneness: "They profess that they know God, but in works they deny him" (Ti 1:16). They boasted themselves to be holy; the apostle calls them abominable. They bragged that they fulfilled the law; the apostle calls them disobedient. There was more of the denial of God in their works than there was acknowledgment of God in their words. Those that have neither God in their thoughts, nor in their tongues, nor in their works, cannot properly be said to acknowledge Him.

## **Proposition 2: All sin is based on secret atheism.**

Atheism is the spirit of every sin. Though several sins may disagree with one another, yet like Herod and Pilate against Christ, they join hand in hand against God. Though lusts and pleasures are diverse, yet they are united in disobedience to Him (Ti 3:3). All wicked inclinations in the heart, struggling motions, secret complaints, self-applauding confidences, envy, ambition, and revenge are sparks from this latent fire. The

language of every one of these is, "I would be a lord to myself, and would not have a God superior to me."

The variety of sins against the first and second table, neglect of God and violence against man, are derived from this in the text. First, "the fool hath said in his heart," and then follows a legion of devils. As all virtuous actions spring from an acknowledgment of God, so all corrupt actions rise from a lurking denial of Him. "By the fear of God men depart from evil" (Pro 16:6). By not regarding God, men rush into evil.

In sins of omission, we do not acknowledge God, in neglecting to perform what He commands. In sins of commission, we set up some lust in the place of God and pay to that the homage which is due to our Maker. We deny His sovereignty when we violate His laws. We disgrace His holiness when we cast our filth before His face. We disparage His wisdom when we set up another rule as the guide of our actions rather than that law He has fixed. We slight His sufficiency when we prefer satisfaction in sin before happiness in Him alone; and we slight His goodness when we judge it not strong enough to attract us to Him. Every sin invades the rights of God and strips Him of one or other of His perfections. It is such a vilifying of God as if He were not God; as if He were not the supreme creator and benefactor of the world; as if we did not have our being from Him; as if the air we breathed in, the food we lived by, were our own by right of supremacy, not of donation.

**Proposition 3: Sin implies that God is unworthy of existence.**

Every sin is a kind of cursing God in the heart (Job 1:5), an aim at the destruction of the being of God, not actually, but virtually; not in the intention of every sinner, but in the nature of every sin. The lust that excites a man to break His law would excite him to annihilate His being if it were in his power. In every sin, a man aims to set up his own will as his rule, and his own glory as the end of his actions, against the will and glory of God. And could a sinner attain his end, God would be destroyed. Sin is called "turning the back" upon God (Jer 32:33); "kicking against him" (Deu 32:15); as if He were less worthy than the lowest beggar. What greater contempt can be shown to the lowest, vilest person, than to turn the back, lift up the heel, and thrust him away with indignation? All these actions, though they signify that such a person exists, yet testify also that

he is unworthy of existing—that he is not useful in the world, and that it would be better if the world were rid of him.

All sin against knowledge is called a reproach of God (Num 15:10; Eze 20:27). Reproach says a man is unworthy to be admitted into company. By nature we judge God unfit to be conversed with. God is the term turned *from* by a sinner; sin is the term turned *to*. This implies a greater perceived excellency in the nature of sin than in the nature of God. Whoever thinks the notion of a deity unfit to be cherished in his mind by warm meditation implies that he does not care whether or not God has a being. They do “not like to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom 1:28).

The description of the nations of the world, lying in the ruins of Adam’s Fall, and the dregs of that revolt, is that they know not God. They forget God, as if there were no such being above them. Indeed, he who does the works of the devil avows the devil to be more worthy of observance, and consequently of a being, than God, Whose nature he forgets, and Whose presence he abhors.

#### Proposition 4: Every sin would render God a foolish and impure being.

Many transgressors esteem their acts, which are contrary to the law of God, both wise and good. If so, the law against which they are committed must be both foolish and impure. What a reflection that makes upon the Lawgiver!

The moral law is not properly a mere act of God’s will considered in itself, or a tyrannical edict, but it commands those things which are good in their own nature, and prohibits those things which are in their own nature evil. Therefore, it is an act of His wisdom and righteousness, the result of His wise counsel, and an extract of His pure nature. All the laws of just lawgivers are not only the acts of their will, but of a will governed by reason and justice, and for the good of the public, whereof they are conservators.<sup>4</sup>

If the moral commands of God were only acts of His will, and did not have an intrinsic necessity, reason, and goodness, God might have commanded the complete contrary, and made a contrary law, whereby that which we now call vice might have been canonized for virtue. But if murder, adultery, and plunder had been commanded instead of the contrary,

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<sup>4</sup> **conservators** – officials entrusted with protecting the rights of others.

God would have destroyed His own creation. He would have acted against the rule of goodness and order, and He would have been an unjust, tyrannical governor of the world. Public society would have been cracked into pieces, and the world become a shambles and a brothel house.

Since all sin is against the law of God, every disobedience denies the wisdom and holy righteousness of God's nature. And what is the consequence of this, but that God is seen as both foolish and unrighteous?

As was said before, presumptuous sins are called reproaches of God. "The soul that doth aught presumptuously reproacheth the Lord" (Num 15:30). All reproaches of God must imply a charge either of unrighteousness or ignorance. If of unrighteousness, it is a denial of His holiness. If of ignorance, it is a blemishing His wisdom. If God's laws were not wise and holy, God would not command them; and if they are so, we deny infinite wisdom and holiness in God by not complying with them. When a man disbelieves God's promises, he "makes him a liar" (1Jo 5:10); so he who disobeys a wise and holy God makes Him guilty either of folly or unrighteousness.

Now, suppose you knew an absolute atheist, who denied the being of a God, yet had a life free from any notorious defilement, would you count him so bad as the other who acknowledges God's being yet, by his course of action, lays such a black imputation of folly and impurity on God?

**Proposition 5: Sin endeavors to render God the most miserable being.**

Sin is nothing but an opposition to the will of God. The will of no creature is so much contradicted as the will of God is by devils and men. There is nothing under the heavens that human affections stand more point-blank-against than against God. There is contempt for Him in all the faculties of man. Our souls are as unwilling to know Him as our wills are averse to follow Him: "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom 8:7). It is true God's will cannot be effectively hindered, for then God would not be supremely blessed, but unhappy and miserable. All misery arises from lacking what a particular nature wants and ought to have. Besides, if anything could frustrate God's will, it would be superior to Him. God would not be omnipotent, and would lose the perfection of the Deity, and consequently the Deity itself. But sin is a contradiction to the will of God's revelation, to the will of His precept. It naturally aims for superiority over God, and

would usurp His omnipotence, and deprive Him of His blessedness. If God did not have infinite power to turn sin's designs to His own glory, the will of sin would prevail and God would be totally deprived of His blessedness. Sin endeavors to subject God to the wills of men. "Thou hast made me to serve with thy sins" (Isa 43:24). Sin endeavors to subject the blessed God to the lust of every person in the world.

### Proposition 6: Men wish God did not exist.

Men sometimes in some circumstances wish God did not exist. Some think this is the meaning of the text: "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God." Many tamper with their own hearts to persuade themselves there is no God, and when they cannot do that, they wish there were none. Men naturally have some conscience of sin, and some notices of justice. "They know the judgment of God" (Rom 1:32), and they know the demerit of sin, "that they which do such things are worthy of death." What is the consequence of this but fear of punishment? And what is the result of that fear but the wish that the Judge were either unwilling or unable to vindicate the honor of His violated law? When God is the object of such a wish, it is a virtual undeifying of Him. Not to be able to punish is to be impotent. Not to be willing to punish is to be unjust. Both are imperfections inconsistent with God. Fear of God is natural to all men—not a fear of offending Him, but a fear of being punished by Him. Wishing for the extinction of God grows in men according to the degree of their fears of His just vengeance. Though such a wish is at its height only in the damned in hell, yet it has its starts and motions in frightened and awakened consciences on the earth.

Those who wish there were no God or that God were destroyed include the following:

1. Terrified consciences see nothing but cause for fear. As they have lived outside the bounds of the law, they are afraid to fall under the stroke of His justice. Fear wishes the destruction of what it believes to be harmful. And every wicked man in anguish of spirit would take away the life of God—were it within the reach of his power. He would rid himself of his fears by destroying his avenger.

2. Debauched<sup>5</sup> persons sometimes have such wishes. Since man is so deeply in love with sin as to count it the most estimable good, he cannot but wish the abolition of the law that restrains it, and the change of the

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<sup>5</sup> **debauched** – corrupted; destroyed by immoral or destructive behavior.

Lawgiver Who enacted it. They do as certainly wish that God had no holy will to command them, as despairing souls wish that God had no righteous will to punish them.

3. Some perform external duties only out of a principle of slavish fear. They perform the duties the law commands with the feelings of slaves performing their drudgery. They are constrained in their duties only by considerations of the whip and the cudgel. Since, therefore, they do it reluctantly and secretly murmur while they seem to obey, they wish that the commands were recalled and the Master Who commands them was in another world. The Spirit of adoption makes men act towards God as a father; a spirit of bondage only eyes Him as a judge.

Let us now appeal to ourselves and examine our own consciences. Did we ever please ourselves sometimes in thinking how happy we would be, how free in our vain pleasures, if there were no God? Have we not desired to be our own lords without control, subject to no law but our own, and guided by no will but that of the flesh? Did we ever rage against God under His afflicting hand? Did we ever wish God were stripped of His holy will to command, and His righteous will to punish?

This is enough for the general propositions.

For the proof of this, consider these two general evidences: Man wants to set himself up, first, as his own rule; secondly, as his own end and happiness.

## II. Man His Own Rule instead of God

Man wants to set himself up as his own rule instead of God. This will be proved by this method:

1. Man naturally disowns the rule God sets him.
2. He acknowledges any other rule rather than that of God's prescribing.
3. He does these to set himself up as his own rule.
4. He makes himself not only his own rule, but also the rule of God, and gives laws to his Creator.

### 1. Man naturally disowns the rule God sets him.

To deny His royalty is to deny His being. When we disown His authority, we disown His Godhead. It is the right of God to be the sovereign over His creatures.

Every man naturally is a son of Belial, wishes to be without a yoke, and leaps over God's enclosures. In breaking out against His sovereignty, we disown His being as God. To be God and sovereign are inseparable; He could not be God if He were not supreme. Nor could He be a creator without being a lawgiver. To be God and yet inferior to another is a contradiction. To make rational creatures without prescribing them a law is to make them without holiness, wisdom, and goodness.

*a. Reluctance to know God's rule*

There is in man a natural unwillingness to even be acquainted with the rule God sets him. There are none that "did understand, and seek God" (Psa 14:2). Refusing instruction and casting His word behind the back is a part of atheism (Psa 50:17). We are dull in hearing the instructions of either law or gospel (Heb 5:11-12), and slow in the apprehension of what we hear. There can be no friendly agreement between the holy will of God and the heart of a depraved creature. One is holy, the other unholy; one is universally good, the other only bad. The purity of the divine rule renders it nauseous to the impurity of a carnal heart.

Rejecting a holy rule with disgust is an evidence of atheism in the heart. The remainders of it are still found more or less in every Christian, though not in full sway. As there is a law in his mind by which he delights in the law of God, so there is a law in his members by which he wars against the law of God (Rom 7:22-23, 25). How predominant is this loathing of the law of God, when corrupt nature is in its full strength, without any principle to control it! Such a mind is so dark it is ignorant of God's law, and the will is so depraved it is resistant to it. If man were naturally willing and able to intimately know and delight in the law of God, it would not have been such a remarkable favor for God to promise to write the law in the heart. A man may sooner engrave the chronicle of a whole nation or all the records of God in the Scripture upon the hardest marble with his bare finger than write one syllable of the law of God in a spiritual manner upon his heart. For,

1. Men are negligent in using means to attain the knowledge of God's will. All natural men are fools, who do not know how to use the price God puts into their hands (Pro 17:16). They do not rightly esteem the opportunities and means of grace; they account the law to be folly when it is the product of infinite and holy wisdom.

2. When any part of the mind and will of God breaks in upon men, they endeavor to shake it off—as a man would shake off an officer who

comes to arrest him. “They did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom 1:28). “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1Co 2:14), that is, into his affection. He pushes them back as men do troublesome and importunate beggars.

3. When men cannot shake off the notices of the will and mind of God, they have no pleasure in the consideration of them. This could not possibly be if there was a genuine purpose to acknowledge the mind and law of God as our rule. Servants who love to obey their master will delight to read and carry out their orders. The devils understand the law of God in their minds, but they loathe the impressions of it upon their wills. A natural man is said not to know God or the things of God. He may know them in his mind, but he does not know them in his heart. A sensual soul can have no delight in a spiritual law. To be sensual and not to have the Spirit are inseparable (Jude 1:19).

Natural men may indeed meditate upon the law and truth of God, but without delight in it. If they take any pleasure in it, it is only as it is knowledge, not as it is a rule. Natural men desire to know God and some part of His will and law, not out of a sense of their practical excellency, but out of a natural thirst after knowledge. They purpose to furnish their understandings, not to quicken their affections. They are like idle boys who light a fire, not to warm themselves by the heat, but to entertain themselves with the sparks. But a gracious soul not only considers his meditation to be sweet, but he takes delight in the object of that meditation (Psa 104:34).

4. There is further a rising of the heart against the will of God:

*Internal.* God’s law cast against a hard heart is like a ball thrown against a stone wall—because of the resistance, it bounces further from it. We have a natural antipathy against the divine rule; and therefore when it comes close to our consciences, we tend to scorn it and reason against it; and corruption breaks out more strongly. “But sin taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence, for without the law sin was dead” (Rom 7:8). Sin was in a languishing posture, as if it were dead, like a lazy guard in a city, till when it hears an alarm from the enemy it takes arms and revives its courage. All the sin in the heart gathers together its force to stand.

*External.* It is a fruit of atheism in Psalm 14:4: “Who eat up my people as they eat bread.” How God revealing His mind meets with opposition! Men hate the light so much that they disdain the lanterns that bear it.

5. Men often seem desirous to know the will of God not out of any respect to His will and to make it their rule, but upon some other consideration. Truth is rarely received as truth. There is more hypocrisy than sincerity in the church. Judas was a follower of Christ for the bag. Men sometimes pretend to want to know the will of God to satisfy their own passions rather than to conform to God's will. Many entertain a doctrine for the person's sake rather than a person for the doctrine's sake. They believe a thing because it comes from a man they esteem, as if his lips were more canonical than Scripture.

The apostle implies in the commendation he gives the Thessalonians (1Th 2:13), that some receive the word for human interest, not "as it is in truth, the word of God," to command and govern their consciences by its sovereign authority. Some have the truth of God (as St. James speaks of the faith of Christ) "with respect of persons" (Jam 2:1), and receive it not for the sake of the fountain, but of the channel. Many times the truth delivered by another preacher is disregarded, but when it comes from the imagination and mouth of an idolized preacher, he is revered as God's oracle. This is to make man, not God, the rule.

6. Many receive the notions of the will and mind of God with unsettled and wavering affections. Man's heart is very unstable. The Jews one day applaud our Savior with *Hosannahs* as their king, then vote for His crucifixion the next, and treat Him like a murderer. We begin in the Spirit and end in the flesh.

7. Many desire to know the law and truth of God in order to satisfy some lust by it. This is so far from making God's will our rule that we make our own vile affections the rule of His law. How many forced interpretations of Scripture have been coined to give consent to the lusts of men! It is a part of the instability or falseness of the heart to wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction (2Pe 3:16). In Paradise, the first interpretation made of the first law of God was point-blank against the mind of the Lawgiver, and venomous to the whole race of mankind.

Poisonous consequences are often drawn from the sweetest truths. For example, God's readiness to receive returning sinners is made an encouragement to delay repentance till a deathbed.

Now, it is evident that this unwillingness to be spiritually acquainted with divine truth is a disowning God as our rule, and sets up self in His place, because this unwillingness is opposed to truth in its various aspects.

*First*, truth is most spiritual and holy. A fleshly mind is contrary to a spiritual law, and particularly as it is a searching and revealing law that would dethrone all other rules in the soul. As the holiness of God, so the holiness of the law offends a carnal heart. “Cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us...Prophecy not unto us right things” (Isa 30:10-11).

*Secondly*, the truth relates to or leads to God. The devil directs his fiercest attacks against the doctrines in the Word and those graces in the heart that most exalt God, debase man, and bring men to the lowest subjection to their Creator. Such is the doctrine of justification by faith. The Holy Ghost declared long ago that men hate not knowledge as knowledge, but as it directs them to choose the fear of the Lord: “They hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord” (Pro 1:29). A man naturally runs from whatever relates to God, proves man’s guilt, witnesses man’s revolt to Him, awakens conscience, and moves him to return to God.

*Thirdly*, the truth is most contrary to self. Men are unwilling to acquaint themselves with any truth that leads to God, because it leads from self. The reason we have such hard thoughts of God’s will is because we have such high thoughts of ourselves. It is a hard matter to believe or will that which has no affinity with some principle in the understanding, and no interest in our will and passions. Our unwillingness to be acquainted with the will of God arises from the disproportion between that and our corrupt hearts. We are “alienated from the life of God in our minds” (Eph 4:18-19).

Many are fond of sciences that enrich their understanding and do not oppose their sensual delights. Many have an admirable ability to understand philosophical reasons and mathematical demonstrations, or make observations from history, and spend much time and serious thought in the study of them. These sciences do not have to do directly with God and do not impair their beloved pleasures. They satisfy self. But if they had been as opposed to self as the law and will of God is, they had been rooted out of the world long ago.

*b. Contempt of God’s rule*

As men show their rejection of the will of God as their rule by their unwillingness to be acquainted with it, so they show it by their contempt of it. God’s rule is burdensome to a sinner. He flees from it as from a frightful monster and unpleasant yoke. Sin against the knowledge of the law is therefore called going back from the commandment of God’s lips

(Job 23:12); casting God's Word behind them (Psa 50:17). This is to treat God's Word as a contemptible thing, more worthy to be trodden in the dirt than lodged in the heart. Worse, it is casting it off as an abominable thing—"Israel hath cast off the thing that is good" (Hos 8:3)—an utter refusal of God. In despising His precepts, His essential perfections are despised. In rejecting the rule of His will, we disown all the attributes of His will: goodness, righteousness, and truth. As an act of God's understanding precedes the act of His will, so we despise the infinite reason of God. Men naturally account God's laws too strict, His yoke too heavy, and His limits too narrow. He who lives in contempt of this law curses God in his life. To think we firmly believe in God while we do not conform our lives to His law is a vain imagination.

This contempt is seen,

1. In presumptuously breaking any part of His law. By willfully refusing His right in one part, we root up the foundation of His rule. And if it is disowned in one thing, it is virtually disowned in all: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (Jam 2:10-11).

2. In natural aversion to the declarations of God's will and mind. Man desires to be as God, boundless. He wants to have no fetters, though they be golden ones that are conducive to his happiness.

3. We most despise God's will when it aims most for His honor and pleasure. Such is the nature of man since Adam. God desired mercy, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of Himself more than burnt offering. But they, like men, as Adam, "have transgressed the covenant" (Hos 6:6-7). They invade God's right even to be Lord of one tree.

We more scrupulously observe the fringes of the law than the greater concerns of it. The Jews were diligent in sacrifices and offerings, which God did not urge upon them as principal things, but as types of other things. They were negligent of the faith He established and were strangers to holiness, mercy, and pity, which concerned God's honor.

Our hearts are most indisposed to keeping laws that are eternal and essential to righteousness. In the observation of these we come nearest to Him and express His image more clearly—as those laws regarding inward and spiritual worship, and supreme affection to Him. We are more willing to carefully obey in outward services and shows of devotion than to discard secret affections to evil and crucify inward lusts and delightful thoughts. "Hanging down the head like a bulrush" is not difficult, but breaking the

heart like a potter's vessel to shreds and dust goes against the grain. It is a sacrifice God delights in when we recognize the excellence of God and the vileness of the creature.

4. It is also seen in running greater risks and exposing ourselves to more trouble to oppose the will of God than is necessary to keep it. Men falsely charge God's precepts with being difficult when they contradict both our Savior, Who tells us His yoke is easy and His burden light, and their own calm reason and judgment. Is it not more difficult to be wicked, covetous, violent, and cruel, than to be virtuous, charitable, and kind? Does God command anything against right reason? Does He command anything that is not secretly delightful to do and delightful in its results? On the contrary, what do Satan and the world engage us in? Only what is injurious and dangerous. Is it sweet and beautiful to constantly wrestle against our own consciences, and resist the light we have, and continually quarrel against ourselves, as we always do when we sin?

5. In our hearts' unwillingness and awkwardness when we are supposed to render God service. Men "do evil with both hands earnestly" (Mic 7:3), but do good with one hand faintly. This is a wrong against His providence, as though we were not under His government, and had no need of His assistance. It is a wrong against His excellency, as though there were no amiableness in Him to make His service desirable. It is an injury against His goodness and power, as if He were not able or willing to reward the creature's obedience—or careless, not to take notice of it. It is a sign we take little satisfaction in Him, and that there is a great unsuitableness between Him and us.

*First*, there is a kind of constraint when we first begin to serve Him. We are rather pressed to it than enter voluntarily. By nature, service to God is done much against our wills. It is not a delightful food, but a bitter potion. Let us appeal to ourselves whether we are more reluctant to secret duties to God, than to join with others in public acts of service.

If we do perform any part of His will, is it not for our own ends, to have some deliverance from trouble? "In trouble have they visited thee, they poured out a prayer, when thy chastening was upon them" (Isa 26:16). In affliction, He finds them kneeling in devotion; but in prosperity, He feels them kicking with contempt. They pour out prayer in distress, but scarce drop one when they are delivered.

*Secondly*, there is reluctance in our service of God. We are reluctant to come into His presence, and when we do come, we are reluctant to

continue with Him. We do not heartily pay homage to Him as to our lord and governor. We regard Him not as our master, Whose work we ought to do, and at Whose honor we ought to aim.

First, in regard of the *matter* of service, when the torn, the lame, and the sick is offered to God. We think our dullest and deadest times are most fit to render God service. When sleep is ready to close our eyes, and we are unfit to serve ourselves, we think it appropriate to open our hearts to God. How few *morning sacrifices* does God have from many individuals and families! Men leap out of their beds to pursue carnal pleasures or worldly employments, without any thought of their Creator and Preserver, or any reflection upon His will as the rule of our daily obedience. How many grudge to spend their best time for God and reserve for Him the sickly and rheumatic part of their lives—the leftovers from what the devil and their own lusts have feasted on! God calls for our best, and we give Him the worst.

Secondly, in respect of *state of mind*. We think any state of mind will serve God's turn, which shows our disregard of God as a ruler. Man naturally performs duty with an unholy heart, whereby it becomes an abomination to God. "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination" (Pro 28:9). The services which He commands He hates when performed with a wicked mind or corrupt end: "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies" (Amo 5:21). God requires gracious services, and we give Him corrupt ones. We do not rouse up our hearts. There is not that natural vigor in the observance of God which we have in worldly business.

It is evident also in the distractions we have in His service. How reluctant we are to serve God with focus for one hour, nay, a part of an hour, notwithstanding all the thoughts of His majesty, and the eternity of glory set before our eye!

Weariness in serving God is another evidence of our reluctance. To be weary of our dullness signifies a desire; to be weary of service signifies a discontent to be ruled by God. How tired are we in the performance of spiritual duties, when in the temporal vanities we have a perpetual motion. How many willingly party all night long whose hearts sink at the very threshold of a religious service. Amos mentions some who wished the new moon and the Sabbath over that they might be busied again in their worldly affairs (Amo 8:5). Disregard for the Sabbath was disregard for the

Lord of the Sabbath, and for that freedom from the yoke and rule of sin which the Sabbath signified.

6. This contempt is seen in deserting the rule of God, when our expectations are not answered when we serve Him. When services are performed from carnal principles, they are soon cast off when carnal ends are not satisfied. But when we own the fact that we are God's servants, and God our master, our eyes will wait upon him till "he have mercy upon us" (Psa 123:2). Part of our duty to God is to "continue in prayer" (Col 4:1-2), and in all other service. "Watch in the same with thanksgiving." Watch for occasions of praise. Watch with cheerfulness for further manifestations of His will, strength to perform it, success in the performance, that we may draw matter of praise from all of it.

But naturally we cast off our duty to God if He does not speedily give us the blessing we expect. How many secretly mutter, "What is the Almighty that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" (Job 21:15). They do not serve God out of conscience to His commands, but for some carnal profit; and if God makes them wait for it, they will not continue, but stop seeking Him any longer. Like some beggars, if you do not respond to their asking and calling you, "good master," they will turn from blessing to cursing.

Corrupt nature would have God at its beck and steers a course of duty by hope of some carnal profits, not by a sense of the sovereignty of God.

7. This contempt is seen in breaking promises to God. A man makes vows of new obedience and perhaps binds himself with oaths, but they prove like Jonah's gourd, withering the next day. Fear of God's wrath makes many a sinner turn his back upon his sin, but the love of his ruling lust makes him turn his back upon his true Lord. This is from the prevalence of sin, that disputes with God for sovereignty.

Consider, then,

Are we not naturally inclined to disobey the known will of God? Can we say, "Lord, for Thy sake we refrain the thing to which our hearts incline?" Do we not allow ourselves to be lax, earthly, vain, proud, revengeful, though we know it will offend Him? Have we not opposed His declared will? Have we not run counter to Him and the laws that express most of the glory of His holiness? Is not this to disown Him as our rule? Do we never wish there were no law to bind us, no precept to restrain our idols? What is this, but to wish that God would depose Himself from being our governor, and leave us to our own conduct? It is to wish that He were as

unholy as ourselves, as careless of His own laws as we are. That is, that He were no more a God than we, a God as sinful and unrighteous as ourselves. He whose heart rises against the law of God to unlay it, rises against the author of that law to undeify Him. This is the origin of all sin and the fountain of all our misery. This is the first thing man disowns, the rule which God sets him.

## 2. Man naturally owns any rule besides what God prescribes.

The law of God orders one thing, the heart of man desires another. There is not the basest thing in the world, but man would sooner submit to be guided by it than by the holiness of God. When anything God commands crosses our own wills, we value it no more than we would the advice of a poor beggar.

### a. *The rule of Satan*

The rule of Satan is owned before the rule of God. The natural man would rather be under the guidance of Satan than the yoke of his Creator. Adam chose him to be his governor in Paradise. No sooner had Satan spoke of God in a way of derision—"Yea, hath God said?" (Gen 3:1, 5)—but man follows his counsel and approves of the scoff. The greatest part of his posterity have not been wiser by his fall, but would rather ramble in the devil's wilderness than stay in God's fold. It is by the sin of man that the devil is become the god of the world, as if men elected him to the government. Sin is an election of him for a lord, and puts the soul under his government. Those who live according to the course of the world, and are unwilling to displease it, are under the government of the prince of it. Since most of the worship of the world, which men's corrupt natures incline them to, is false and different from the revealed will of God, it is a practical acknowledgment of the devil as the governor. Men must then take good heed that they follow God's rule for their acts of worship, otherwise their worship is an owning the devil as the rule. Whatsoever is not from God is from Satan.

But to bring this closer to us and consider what is more common among us: Men that are in a natural condition, and wedded to their lusts, are under the paternal government of Satan. "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do" (Joh 8:44). If we divide sin into spiritual and carnal, the devil's authority is owned in both. In spiritual sin, we conform to his *example*, because he commits the same. In

carnal sin, we obey his *will*, because he directs such. He acts the one and sets us a *copy*. He tempts to the other and gives us a kind of *precept*. Man by nature would rather be bound in the devil's iron chains than in God's silken cords. What greater atheism can there be than to treat God as if He were inferior to the devil!

*b. The rule of men*

The more visible rule preferred before God in the world is man. The opinion of the world is more our rule than the precept of God. Many men's abstinence from sin is not from a sense of the divine will, no, nor from a principle of reason, but from affection toward someone they depend on, or fear of punishment from someone over them. This is the same principle in a wild beast that abstains from what it desires only from fear of a stick or club. Men will walk with the herd, go in fashion with the most, speak and act as the most do. While we conform to the world, we cannot perform a "reasonable service" to God, nor prove, nor approve practically "what the good, and acceptable...will of God" is. The apostle puts them in opposition to one another in Romans 12:1-2.

This appears,

1. In complying more with the dictates of men than the will of God. The fear of man more powerfully restrains men in their duty than the fear of God.

2. In observing God's will not simply because it is His will, but because men commanded it. If we do the will of God because those over us say so, we are obeying man, not God. This is to make God inferior to man in our esteem. Whatever men do that looks like moral virtue, not out of obedience to the rule of God, but because of custom, necessity, example, or imitation, they may in the doing of it rather be said to be apes than Christians.

3. In obeying the will of man when it is contrary to the will of God. Men are said to deny God when they attend to Jewish fables and the precepts of men rather than the Word of God (Ti 1:16), as when the decrees of fallible men are valued more than the writings of the Holy Ghost by His apostles.

As man naturally disowns the rule God sets him, and owns any other rule than that of God's prescribing, so

### 3. He does this in order to set himself up as his own rule.

He does this in order to set himself up as his own rule, as though our own wills, and not God's, were the true square and measure of goodness. We make an idol of our own wills. As much as self is exalted, God is deposed. True piety is to hate ourselves, deny ourselves, and cleave solely to the service of God. To make ourselves our own rule and object of our chief love, is atheism. If self-denial is the greatest part of godliness, the great letter in the alphabet of religion, self-love is the great letter in the alphabet of practical atheism. Self is the great antichrist and antigod in the world, that sets up itself "above all that is called God" (2Th 2:4). Self-love is the captain of that black band (2Ti 3:2). It sits in the temple of God and would be adored as God. This is the reason for the contention between the flesh and the Spirit in the heart of a renewed man. Flesh wars for the godhead of self, and spirit fights for the Godhead of God. The one would settle the throne of the Creator, and the other maintain a law of covetousness, ambition, envy, and lust instead of God.

#### *a. Evidence of man being his own rule*

Evidence for this appears in these propositions:

*Proposition 1.* This is natural to corrupt man. The venom of the sin of Adam is naturally passed with his nature to all posterity. Adam did not aim at eating a forbidden apple or pleasing his palate. The chief object of his desire was to live independently from his Creator and be a god to himself. "You shall be as gods" (Gen 3:5). He aspired to be like God: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen 3:22), in self-sufficiency and self-rule. This treason is the old Adam in every man. The first Adam contradicted the will of God to set up himself; the second Adam humbled Himself and did nothing apart from the command and will of His Father. The principle where the venom of the old Adam lies must be crucified to make way for the throne of the humble and obedient principle of the new Adam, or quickening Spirit. Indeed, sin in its own nature is nothing else but self-will, and contrary to God's will. Lusts are therefore called the will of the flesh and of the mind (Eph 2:3).

*Proposition 2.* This is evident in men's dissatisfaction with their consciences when they contradict the desires of self. Conscience is knowledge actuated by and reflecting a superior power and righteous law. It is the impression of the law and a power above it impressing it. Conscience is not the lawgiver, but the reminder of the law of nature imprinted on our

souls. It causes us to consider the duty and penalty, applies the rule to our acts, and passes judgment upon matter of fact.

But man is much displeased with the directions of conscience, as he is out of love with the accusations and condemning sentence of this officer of God. They therefore “like not to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom 1:28)—that is, God in their own consciences.

If we are like God in anything by nature, it is in the more spiritual part of our souls. Our resisting that which is most like God and stands in God’s stead in us is a disowning of the Sovereign represented by the officer. Our bad treatment of God’s deputy in us reflects upon the God Whose cause it pleads. Men hate the righteous language of their own reasons and wish the eternal silence of their consciences because conscience maintains God’s rights and hinders the idol of self from usurping His godhead and prerogative.

*Proposition 3.* Many, if not most, materially good actions are done more because they are agreeable to self than because they are honorable to God. The Word of God may be heard not *as* His Word (1Th 2:13) but as there may be pleasing notions in it or discourses against an opinion or party we dislike. In the same way, the will of God may be performed, not *as* His will, but as it may gratify some selfish consideration. We will please God so far as it may not displease ourselves and serve Him as our master so far as His command may serve our pleasure. We consider not Who commands, but whether it displeases the sin that rules in our heart, and we pick and choose what is least burdensome to the flesh and distasteful to our lusts.

He who does the will of God not out of conscience of God’s will, but because it is agreeable to himself, casts down God’s will and sets his own in its place. He takes the crown from God and places it upon self.

*b. How man is his own rule*

1. As things are agreeable to natural or moral self. When men practice religion and walk in divine precepts not because they are divine, but because they are agreeable to their liking or constitution of nature, this is not observance of God’s command, but obedience to themselves. It is not from a sincere sense of God’s authority and voluntary submission to His will. A man will avoid excess in drinking, not because it is dishonorable to God, but because it blemishes his reputation or impairs his health. A man will be liberal in charity, not with an eye to God’s precept, but from his own natural compassion or generosity. We maintain the rights of God only

when we observe His rule without examining its agreeableness to our earthly interest or consulting with the whims of flesh and blood. We will not decline His service, even though we find it opposes our natural pleasure.

A man may commit wickedness privately when his reputation prevents him from committing it openly. When, against his Creator's known command, a man had set his mind to enter a brothel, the consideration of his own honor may prevent his entering. Our security and reputation, then, are set up in the place of God.

This also is in renewed men, who have the law written in their hearts. They have a habitual disposition to agree with the law of God. But when they act with respect to this habitual inclination, without eyeing the divine precept, which is appointed to be their rule, they set up a creature (as renewed self is) instead of the Creator. They supplant that law of His in His Word that ought to be the rule of our actions. This is so when men choose a moral life not so much out of respect to the law of nature as it is the law of God, but as it is a law in harmony with their souls and constitutions. There is more of self in this than consideration of God. If it were consideration of God, the revealed law of God would upon the same reason be received as well as His natural law. From this principle of self, some advance morality above evangelical dictates.

2. As they are agreeable to sinful self. The commands of God are not suited to bolster the corruptions of men; neither does the law itself excite or revive sin (Rom 7:8-9). But it is like a scandal taken, not given—an occasion taken by the tumultuousness of our depraved nature. The Pharisees were devout in long prayers to satisfy their ambition, to rake together fuel for their covetousness. "You devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers" (Mat 23:14). This kind of service is not paid to God for His own sake; it is paid to ourselves for our lust's sake.

3. As we neglect God's direction in times of need. This follows the text, "There is none that seeketh after God" (Rom 3:11). When we consult not with Him, but trust more to our own will and counsel, we make ourselves our own governors and lords, independent of Him. We are our own counsellors and manage our concerns without His permission and help. We act as though our works were in our own hands, and not in the hands of God (Ecc 9:1). If we must acquaint ourselves with God before we decree a thing (Job 22:21), then to decree a thing without acquainting God with it is to prefer our blind wisdom to God's infinite wisdom.

4. As we account the actions of others to be good or evil as they fit with or oppose our whims and wishes. Virtue is a crime, and vice a virtue, as it is contrary or concurrent with our desires. Many have little reason to blame the actions of others except that they are not agreeable with what they desire. We want all men to take directions from us. We make self the measure and square of good and evil, and not the will of God, which is the proper rule of judgment.

Well, then, let us consider: Is not this very common? Are we not naturally more willing to displease God than displease ourselves, when it comes to a point where we must do one or the other? Do not our judgments often contradict the judgment of God? Do we give His laws more respect than our own feelings? Do we carefully avoid staining His honor when it comes in competition with our own? Most men's lives are a pleasing of themselves, without repentance that they ever displeased God. Is not this to undeify God, to deify ourselves, and disown the propriety He has in us by creation and care for us? It is the honor of every rational creature to serve the First Cause of his being, just as the welfare of every creature consists in the order and proportional motion of its members according to the law of its creation.

He who acts according to his own law clearly commits wrong against God, the highest wisdom and chief good, disturbs the order of the world, and nulls the design of the righteousness and holiness of God. The law of God is the rule of that order He would have observed in the world. He who makes another law his rule thrusts out the order of the Creator and establishes the disorder of the creature.

But this will yet be more evident in the fourth thing.

#### 4. Man would make himself the rule of God and give laws to his Creator.

We are willing God should be our benefactor but not our ruler. We are content to admire His excellency and render Him worship, provided He will walk by our rule. Instead of obeying Him, we would have Him obey us. Instead of owning and admiring His perfections, we would have Him strip Himself of His infinite excellency and clothe Himself with a nature agreeable to ours. This is not only to set up self as the law of God, but to make our own imaginations the model of the nature of God.

Corrupted man takes pleasure in accusing or suspecting the actions of God. We would not have Him act appropriately for His nature, but act what gratifies us and abstain from what displeases us.

This is evidenced

1. In striving against His law. How many men imply by their lives that they would have God deposed from His government, and some unrighteous being step into His throne. “They have forsaken my law, and walked after the imaginations of their own heart” (Jer 9:13).

When an act is known to be a sin, and the law that forbids it acknowledged to be the law of God, and after this we persist in it, we tax His wisdom as if He did not understand what was appropriate for us. We would “teach God knowledge” (Job 21:22). It is an implicit wish that God had laid aside the holiness of His nature and framed a law to please our lusts. The more the love, goodness, and holiness of God appear in any command, the more are we naturally averse from it, and cast an imputation on Him, as if He were foolish, unjust, cruel, and that we could have advised and directed Him better. The goodness of God appointed a day for His own worship for us to converse with Him and He with us, for our souls to be refreshed with spiritual communications from Him. We rather use it for the ease of our bodies than the advancement of our souls, as if God were mistaken and injured His creature when He urged the spiritual part of duty. Every disobedience to the law is an implicit giving law to Him, and a charge against Him that He might have provided better for His creature.

2. In disapproving the methods of God’s government of the world. If the counsels of heaven roll not about according to their schemes, instead of adoring the unsearchable depths of His judgments, they call Him to the bar and accuse Him. We file a lawsuit against God, as though He had not acted righteously and wisely and must give account of His proceedings at our tribunal. This is to make ourselves God’s superiors and presume to instruct Him—as though God hindered Himself and the world by not making us of His privy council.

Is not this manifest in our immoderate complaints of God’s dealings with His church? Is there a coldness in God’s affections to His church, and a glowing heat towards it only in us? This is the source of those importunate desires for things which God never promised, as though we would overrule God to comply with our wishes. We have an ambition to be God’s tutors and direct Him in His counsels. “Who hath been his counsellor?” saith the apostle (Rom 11:34).

When any of our friends have been struck with a rod against our wishes, have not our hearts been apt to swell in complaints against God, as though He disregarded the goodness of such a person, did not see with our eyes, and measure him by our esteem of him? If He is patient with the wicked, we are apt to dispute His holiness and accuse Him as an enemy to His own law. If He inflict severity upon the righteous, we are ready to suspect His goodness.

How unreasonable is it thus to impose laws upon God? Must God govern according to the dictates of His creature? This is not to be God, but to set the creature in His throne.

3. In impatience in our particular concerns. Men often charge God in their complaints when they are afflicted. The Holy Ghost commended Job that “in all this,” that is, in those many waves that rolled over him, he did not charge God foolishly (Job 1:22). He never spoke nor thought anything unworthy of the majesty and righteousness of God. Yet afterwards, we find him bending when he calls his affliction God’s oppressing him, and not an act of His goodness: “Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress?” (Job 10:3). He seems to charge God with injustice for punishing him when he was not wicked, for which he appeals to God, “Thou knowest that I am not wicked” (v. 7).

If our projects are disappointed, our hearts fret against God’s management! How ugly passions bubble up in us. When we complain of God’s instruments in our afflictions, God counts it a reflection upon Himself. The Israelites speaking against Moses was, in God’s interpretation, rebellion against Himself (Num 16:41 compared with 17:10). Rebellion is always a desire to impose laws and conditions upon those against whom the rebellion is raised.

Men set a high price upon themselves and are angry when God does not value them at the same rate. This is to disannul God’s judgment, and condemn him, and count ourselves righteous, as it is in Job 40:8. This is the epidemic disease of human nature. They think they deserve caresses instead of rods, and when upon a cross they are more ready to tear out the heart of God than reflect humbly upon their own hearts. What an instance of practical atheism this is, to desire that God’s infinite wisdom should be guided by our folly.

4. It is evidenced in envying the gifts and prosperities of others. Envy hath a deep tincture of practical atheism and is a cause of atheism. We are unwilling to let God be the proprietor and do what He wants with His own.

We take the liberty to direct God how much, when, and how He should bestow upon His creatures. We do not allow Him to choose His own favorites and pick His own instruments for His glory. It is as if God must ask our counsel how He should dispose of His benefits. This tendency is natural. It is as ancient as the first age of the world. The passion that God had given Cain to employ against his sin he turns against his Creator; he was wroth with God (Gen 4:5) and with Abel. But envy was at the root, because his brother's sacrifice was accepted and his refused. Envy is not likely to cease till all atheism be banished, and that is in heaven.

This sin is an imitation of the devil, whose first sin upon earth was envy, as his first sin in heaven was pride. It is an anger with God because He hath not given us a patent for government.

This is an unreasonable part of atheism. If all were in the same state and condition, the order of the world would be impaired. Is God bound to take care of you and neglect the rest of the world? "Shall the earth be forsaken for thee?" (Job 18:4). Joseph had reason to be displeased with his brothers if they had muttered when he gave Benjamin a double portion and the rest a single. It was inappropriate for them who deserved no gift at all to prescribe him rules how to dispense his gifts. Much more unworthy is it to deal so with God.

5. It is evidenced in corrupt subject or motives of prayer and praise. We are insistent for things that we know not whether the righteousness, holiness, and wisdom of God can grant, because He hath not promised to bestow them. We would then impose conditions on God that He never obliged Himself to grant. We pray for things not so much to glorify God, which ought to be the end of prayer, as to gratify ourselves. We acknowledge that there is a God, but we would have Him un-God Himself to be at our beck and serve our turn. We desire those things which violate the attributes by which He manages the government of the world. Sometimes, by some superficial services we think we have gained indulgence to sin, like the harlot when she paid her vows to wallow more freely in the mire: "I have peace-offerings with me; this day have I paid my vows" (Pro 7:14).

A man imposes laws upon God contrary to His revealed will and wisdom when he prays for God to save him but neglects the means of salvation God appointed. He prays for God to renew him while he neglects the Word, the only instrument to that purpose. When we come into the presence of God with lusts reeking in our hearts, and leap from sin to duty, we

would impose the law of our corruption on the holiness of God. When we make vows under affliction, what is it often but a secret contrivance to bend and flatter Him to our conditions! We will serve Him if He will restore us. We think we can bring Him down to our terms.

6. It is evidenced in positive and bold interpretations of the judgments of God in the world. Normally, to interpret the judgments of God to the disadvantage of the sufferer is presumption. Only if it is an unusual judgment, and has a remarkable hand of God in it, and the sin is rendered plainly legible in the affliction [it may be appropriate]. Men will judge the Galileans, whose blood Pilate mingled with the sacrifices, greater sinners than others, and themselves righteous because no drops of it were dashed upon them.

Thus we fasten our own wills as a law upon God. We interpret His acts according to the motions of self. Is it not too common, when God sends affliction upon those that bear ill-will to us, to judge it to be a righting of our cause, to be a fruit of God's concern for us in revenging our wrongs, as if we had heard the secrets of God? This is a judgment according to self-love.

7. It is evidenced in adding rules for the worship of God to those He ordered. Since men are most prone to live by sense, it is no wonder that worship that dazzles their outward senses is dear to them. To them, spiritual worship is most loathsome. Pompous rites have been the powerful weapon wherewith the devil has deceived men's souls and drawn them to despise the simplicity of divine worship as unworthy of the majesty and excellency of God (2Co 11:3).

The Israelites, in the midst of miracles, and under the memory of a famous deliverance, would erect a calf. The Pharisees, who sat in Moses's seat, would coin new traditions (Mat 23:2-4). Jeroboam fitted a worship to political ends and posted up calves (1Ki 12:27-28). How often have the practice of the early church, the custom we were brought up with, and the views of our ancestors been owned as a more authentic rule for worship than the mind of God in the Word! It is natural by creation to worship God; and it is as natural by corruption for man to worship Him in a human way, and not in God's way. Is not this to impose laws upon God? Men for the most part value their own imaginations equal to God's oracles. This is not only to impose laws on God, but also to make self the standard of them.

8. It is evidenced in fitting interpretations of Scripture to their own minds. As God is the author of His law and Word, so He is the best interpreter of it. The Scripture has the imprint of divine wisdom, holiness, and goodness, and it must be regarded according to that imprint with submission, meekness, and reverence for God. But when in our inquiries into the Word, we inquire not of God, but consult flesh and blood, the tendency of the times wherein we live, or the satisfaction of a party we agree with, and impose explanations on it according to our own imaginations, it is to put laws upon God, and make self His rule. He who interprets the law to bolster up his own eager appetite against the will of the lawgiver ascribes to himself as great an authority as the One Who enacted it.

9. In falling away from God when His will crosses ours. They will walk with Him as long as He pleases them and leave Him upon the first distaste. It is as though God must observe their whims more than they must observe His will. The young man came not to receive directions from our Savior, but expected a confirmation of his own rules (Mar 10:17, 22). He wants approval rather than instruction, and so turns his back at the disappointment. Some truths that are at a further distance from us we can hear gladly; but when the conscience begins to ache under others, if God will not observe our wills, we will with Herod be a law to ourselves (Mar 6:20, 27).

More instances might be observed: ingratitude, insatiable desires after wealth, incorrigibleness under affliction, etc.

### III. Man His Own End<sup>6</sup> and Happiness

The second main thing: as man would be a law to himself, so he would be his own end and happiness in opposition to God.

Here four things shall be discoursed on:

1. Man would make himself his own end and happiness.
2. He would make anything his end and happiness rather than God.
3. He would make himself the end of all creatures.
4. He would make himself the end of God.

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<sup>6</sup> **end** – reason for existence; purpose; goal.

## 1. Man would make himself his own end and happiness.

As God ought to be esteemed the first cause in our dependence on Him, so He ought to be our last end in our enjoyment of Him. When we trust in ourselves, we refuse Him as the first cause; and when we act for ourselves and expect a blessedness from ourselves, we refuse Him as the chief good and last end. This is undeniably a kind of atheism. Man, as a higher creature than others, was not made to glorify God only materially, as were animals, plants, and other works of the divine power. Rather, man was made a rational creature, to honor God intentionally by obedience to His rule, dependence on His goodness, and zeal for His glory. Therefore, man disregards God as much when he sets himself up as his own end as when he regards himself as his own law.

### *a. Self-love and man making himself his own end*

There are three kinds of self-love:

1. Natural, which is common to us by the law of nature with other creatures, inanimate as well as animate, and so closely involved with the nature of every creature that it cannot be dissolved but with the dissolution of nature itself. God's wisdom and goodness did not create an unnatural nature, nor did He command anything unnatural. When He commands us to sacrifice ourselves and give up our lives for Him, it is not without a promise of a more noble state in exchange for what we lose. This self-love is not only commendable, but necessary, as a rule to measure that duty we owe to our neighbor. We cannot love our neighbor as ourselves if we do not first love ourselves. God planted this self-love in our nature and makes this natural principle the measure of our affection to all mankind of the same blood with ourselves.

2. Carnal self-love. This is evident when a man loves himself above God, in opposition to God, or with contempt for God. It is when our thoughts, affections, and designs center only in our own fleshly interest. We spoil God of His honor and make a present of it to ourselves. Thus, natural self-love, good in itself, becomes criminal by its excess when it would be superior and not subordinate to God.

3. Gracious self-love. This is manifest when we love ourselves for higher ends than our nature as a creature. We love ourselves in subservience to the glory of God. This is a reduction of the rebellious creature to his true and happy order. A Christian is therefore said to be created in Christ to good works (Eph 2:10). As all creatures were created not only for themselves but for the honor of God, so the grace of the new creation

carries a man to answer this end and to order all his operations to the honor of God and His well-pleasing.

The first is from nature, the second from sin, the third from grace. The first is implanted by creation, the second by corruption, the third by the powerful operation of grace.

Carnal self-love is set up in the stead of God as our last end like the sea into which all the little and large streams of our actions run.

This self-love is *natural*. It sticks as close to us as our souls. It is as natural as sin, the foundation of all the evil in the world. As self-abhorence is the first stone that is laid in conversion, so an inordinate self-love was the first inlet to all iniquity. As grace is a rising from self to center in God, so is sin a shrinking from God into the mire of a carnal selfishness. What is wrath but defense of self against some real or imaginary evil? Where is envy from but from self-love grieved at its own lack in the sight of another's enjoyment? What is impatience but regret that self is not provided for as quickly as we wish? What is pride but a sense of self-worth, a desire to have self of a higher elevation than others? What is drunkenness but seeking satisfaction for sensual self in the spoils of reason? No sin is committed as sin, but as it pretends to satisfy self. Sin indeed may well be termed a man's self, because it is the form that overspreads every part of our souls. The understanding assents to nothing false but under the notion of truth. The will embraces nothing evil but under the notion of good. But the rule whereby we measure the truth and goodness of the object is not the unerring Word but the inclinations of self, the gratifying of which is the aim of our whole lives.

Sin and self are all one. What is called living to sin in one place (Rom 6), is called a living to self in another: "That they which live should not...live unto themselves" (2Co 5:15). And upon this account it is that both the Hebrew and Greek words used in Scripture to express sin properly signify to miss the mark and swerve from that target to which all our actions should be directed, the glory of God. When we fell to loving ourselves, we fell from loving God. Therefore, when the psalmist says there were none that sought God (as their last end) he presently adds, "they are all gone aside," from their true mark, and therefore become filthy (Psa 14:3).

Since it is natural, it is also *universal*. Not seeking God is as universal as our ignorance of Him. Every man in a state of nature has this predominant; every renewed man on this side heaven has this partially. The

natural man has it flourishing; the renewed has it struggling. To aim at the glory of God as the chief end and not to live to ourselves is the greatest mark of the restoration of the divine image (2Co 5:15) and conformity to Christ. He glorified not Himself (Heb 5:5), but the Father (Joh 17:4). Therefore, every man wallowing in the mire of corrupt nature pays homage to self, as a renewed man is affected by the honor of God.

The Holy Ghost excludes none from this crime: "All seek their own" (Phi 2:21). It is rare for them to look above or beyond themselves. Whatever may be the immediate subject of their thoughts and inquiries, the utmost end and goal is their profit, honor, or pleasure. Whatever it is that immediately possesses the mind and will, self sits like a queen, sways the scepter, and orders things at such a rate that God is excluded and can find no room in all his thoughts. "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts" (Psa 10:4). The whole little world of man is so overflowed with a deluge of self that the dove, the glory of the Creator, can find no place where to set its foot. If man ever gives it admittance, it is to disguise and serve some carnal project.

The power of this principle is what makes conversion so difficult. There is no greater pleasure to a believing soul than giving itself up to God, and no stronger desire in him than to have a fixed will to serve the designs of God's honor. Just so, there is no greater torment to a wicked man than to part with his carnal ends and lay down the Dagon of self at the feet of the ark (1Sa 5:3). Self-love and self-opinion in the Pharisees waylaid their reception of the truth. They sought honor one of another, and not the honor that comes from God (Joh 5:44). It winds itself into the exercise of moral virtues, mixes with our charity (Mat 6:2), and finds nourishment in the ashes of martyrdom (1Co 13:3).

*b. Instances of man making himself his own end*

This making ourselves our own end will appear in a few things:

1. In frequent self-applause and thoughts of self-importance. There is nothing more common in men's natures than to dote on their own perfections, acquisitions, or actions. Most think of themselves above what they ought to think (Rom 12:3-4). Few think of themselves so humbly as they ought to think. This sticks as close to us as our skin. As humility is the beauty of grace, this is the filthiest soil of nature. Our thoughts run more delightfully upon the track of our own perfections than the excellency of God. When we find anything of apparent worth that might make

us glitter in the eyes of the world, how cheerfully do we embrace ourselves! When men have discarded gross profaneness and dammed up its floods, the fountain of corruption from which they sprang will swell the higher within. They will applaud themselves with their own reformation, without acknowledging their weaknesses or desiring God's help for further progress. "I thank thee, that I am not as...this publican" (Luk 18:11). Self-reflection with contempt to his neighbor, rather than compassion, is frequent in every Pharisee. It is from this principle we are naturally so ready to compare ourselves with those that are below us rather than with those that are above us. We often think those that are above us are inferior to us.

The gracious authors of Scripture were very far from this. When they were directed by the Spirit of God and filled with a sense of Him, instead of applauding themselves, they publish their own faults to all the eyes of the world!

2. In ascribing the glory of what we do or have to ourselves—to our own wisdom, power, and virtue. How Nebuchadnezzar flaunts at the view of Babylon, which he had raised to be the head of such a great empire. "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?" (Dan 4:30). He struts in his palace, as if there were no God but himself in the world. He regards Babylon as his heaven, and himself as his idol—as if he were all, and God nothing.

When anything succeeds well, we are ready to attribute it to our own prudence and industry. If we meet with opposition, we fret against the stars, bad fortune, and second causes, and sometimes against God, not acknowledging any defect in ourselves. So much as we sacrifice to our own credit, the dexterity of our hands, or the sagacity of our wit, we detract from God.

3. In desiring self-pleasing doctrines. We cannot endure to hear anything that opposes the flesh, though the wise man tells us, "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than...the song of fools" (Ecc 7:5). If Micaiah declares to Ahab the evil that shall meet him, Amon the governor will receive orders to clap him up in a dungeon (1Ki 22:26-27). Fire no sooner seizes upon combustible matter than fury will be kindled if self be only pinched.

4. In being highly concerned for injuries done to ourselves, and little or not at all concerned for injuries done to God. It is often seen when the violation of God's authority and the stain of our own reputation are coupled together. We are more troubled for what disgraces us than for what

dishonors God. When Saul had transgressed, he wants Samuel to turn again to preserve his own honor before the elders, rather than being grieved that he had broken the command of God (1Sa 15:30).

5. In trusting ourselves when we consult our own wisdom more than inquire of God and ask permission from Him. We attempt things in the strength of our own heads and abilities, and trust in our own industry, without going to God for direction, blessing, and success. We claim the privilege of Deity and make gods of ourselves. Confidence in ourselves is defection from God (Jer 17:5). Now, we should not neglect the reason and abilities God has given us. We should not necessarily spend more time in prayer than in consulting about our affairs, but rather we should mix our own intentions in business with ejaculatory prayers to heaven, and take God along with us in every activity. But at the same time, it certainly is an idolizing of self when we are more diligent to pay attention to our own intelligence than fervent in our seeking of God.

6. In our serving carnal self against the light of our own consciences. We see this when men of careful reason and clear natural wisdom are voluntary slaves to their own lusts, row against the stream of their own consciences, and serve carnal self with a shameful and distressing drudgery. They make carnal self their god. They sacrifice all feelings of virtue and the quiet of their lives to the pleasure, honor, and satisfaction of carnal self. This is prostituting God's deputy, the conscience, to carnal affections. Their eyes are shut against its light, and their ears are deaf to its voice. But they are open to the least breath and whisper of self—a debt the creature owes supremely to God.

### *c. How this is atheism*

Much more might be said, but let us see what atheism lurks in this and how it encroaches on God's honor.

1. It usurps God's prerogative. It is God's prerogative to be His own end, and act for His own glory, because there is nothing superior to Him in excellency and goodness to act for. He did not get His being from anything outside Himself. Nothing obliges Him to act for anything but Himself. To make ourselves our ultimate end is to rival God as the supreme good and blessedness to Himself, as if we were our own principle, the author of our own being, and were not obliged to a higher power than ourselves for what we are and have. When we love only ourselves and act for no other end but ourselves, we invest ourselves with the dominion which is the right of God and take the crown from His head.

2. It vilifies God. When we make ourselves our end, we are plainly saying that God is not our happiness. Man cannot dishonor God more than by referring to his own glory what God made for His praise. God alone has a right to glory and praise from what He has made, and none else. Man changes the glory of the incorruptible God into a corruptible image (Rom 1:23).

3. It is a destroying of God, to the extent we can. Setting up self as our end nullifies the true Deity. By paying to ourselves respect and honor due to God, we make the true God as no God. Whoever makes himself a king over his prince's rights and territories manifests an intent to throw him out of his government. To choose ourselves as our end is to undeify God, since to be the ultimate end<sup>7</sup> of a rational creature is God's right. Therefore, not to set God but self always before us is to acknowledge no being but ourselves to be God.

## 2. Man would make anything his end and happiness rather than God.

An end is so necessary for all our actions that whoever does not aim at an end for himself does not deserve to be called a rational<sup>8</sup> creature. This is the distinction between rational creatures and others. Rational creatures act with formal intention, while other creatures aim at their end by natural instinct. Other creatures are moved by nature to what rational creatures should be moved by reason. Therefore, when a man acts for an end that was not intended for him by the law of his creation, or an end that is unsuitable for the noble faculties of his soul, he acts contrary to God, overturns His order, and merits no better title than that of an atheist.

### *a. How we make something our end*

A man may be said to make a thing his ultimate end and chief good in two ways:

1. Formally. When he actually judges this or that thing to be his chief good and aims everything toward it. Man does not formally judge sin to be good, or any object which is the incentive of sin to be his ultimate end. He cannot judge sin to be good while he has the exercise of his rational faculties.

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<sup>7</sup> **end** – final cause; object or purpose.

<sup>8</sup> **rational** – possessing reason.

2. Virtually and implicitly. When he loves anything against the command of God. When by his habitual actions he prefers the enjoyment of anything before God. When he lays out more strength and expends more time in gaining that thing than fulfilling the true end of his creation. When he acts as though something below God could make him happy without God, or that God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties, the ambitious man of his honors, the indulgent man of his lust, and the covetous man of his wealth. They do not believe their happiness lies in God Who made the world, but in the pleasure or profit they have made into their god.

In this, though a created object be the immediate and subordinate term to which we turn, yet principally and ultimately the affection to it terminates in self. We naturally cherish nothing except what affects our sense or mingles with some promise of advantage to us.

*b. Instances of making created things our end*

This is seen,

1. In the fewer thoughts we have of God than of anything else. If we apprehended God to be our chief good and highest end, would we grudge Him the effort of a few days' thoughts upon Him? Travelers frequently think of their destination, but our thoughts run to new acquisitions of wealth, the rearing of our families, revenging wrongs done to us, and supporting our reputation. Trifles possess us. God is not in all our thoughts (Psa 10:4), and seldom the sole object of them. We have durable thoughts of transitory things, and flitting thoughts of what is durable and eternal good. The covenant of grace obligates the whole heart to God and bars anything else from engrossing it. But what strangers are the souls of most men to God! Though we have the knowledge of Him by creation, yet He is for the most part an unknown God because we do not delight in Him.

2. In the greedy pursuit of the world. When we pursue worldly wealth or worldly reputation more than the riches of grace or the favor of God. When we have a foolish imagination that our happiness consists in them, we prefer earth before heaven, broken cisterns which can hold no water before an ever-springing fountain of glory and bliss. As though there were a defect in God, we cannot be content with Him as our portion without adding something inferior to Him. The apostle gives covetousness the title of *idolatry*, and a covetous person the title of *idolater* (Col 3:5; Eph 5:5).

3. In strong addiction to physical pleasures (Phi 3:19). Men make their belly their God when they debase their higher faculties to aim at the satisfaction of the physical appetite as their chief happiness. Men openly and unquestionably refuse God as their ultimate end when they are constantly thinking up new methods for satisfying their bestial appetite. They forsake the pleasures which are to be found in God, which are the delights of angels; they pursue the satisfaction of brutes. We refuse God as our end, when our rest is in these things, as if they were the chief good, and not God.

4. In giving more honor to instruments God used than to God the sovereign author when we have any success in the world. "They sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag" (Hab 1:16). Not that the Assyrian offered a sacrifice to his weapons, but he ascribed to them what was due to God alone. He attributed the victory to his forces and weapons. When we receive good things, are not our affections more focused on the instruments that brought them than on the chief Benefactor from Whose treasures they are taken?

5. In paying more respect to man than to God. In public worship of God, we will not laugh or be silly because men see us. But our hearts are often in a ridiculous posture, playing with feathers and vain things, even though God sees us. It is as though our happiness consisted in pleasing men, and our misery consisted in respect to God. Every fool that says in his heart there is no God sets up something in his heart as a god.

*c. The effects of making created things our end*

This is,

1. A debasing of God.

In setting up a creature. It says that God is less desirable than His creature, that He lacks the perfections that some silly thing has that has engrossed the affections. It says that the Cause of all being can be surpassed by His creature, that a vile lust can equal, yea, surpass the loveliness of God. It says to God as the rich to the poor, "Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool" (Jam 2:3). This is intolerable! We must not make God's footstool, the earth, climb up into His throne. We must not set in our heart what God has made even lower than ourselves, under our feet. We must not make that which we trample upon to displace the rights God has to our hearts. It is worse than if a queen fell in love with a little statue of her prince in the palace and despised his beauty in person.

It debases God more to set up a sin, lust, or carnal affection as our chief end. To steal away God's honor and give it to what is not even a work of His hands—to what He loathes, what has disturbed His rest, and what has wrung out His just breath to kindle a hell for its eternal dwelling, a God-dishonoring and soul-murdering lust—this is worse than to prefer Barabbas before Christ. The lower the thing, the worse is the insult to Him with Whom we associate it. If it were some generous principle, a thing useful to the world, that we made equal to or above Him, it would be bad, though not altogether so criminal. But to gratify some unworthy appetite with the displeasure of the Creator, something below the rational nature of man, infinitely below the excellent majesty of God, is a worse way to treat Him.

And let no one excuse themselves that they exalt only one lust or one creature as their ultimate end. Is he not an idolater who worships only the sun, one idol, just as well as he who worships the whole host of heaven?

If we prefer wealth, riches, friends, and the best thing in the world, our own lives, before God as our chief happiness and end even one moment, it is an infinite wrong because we denied the infinite goodness and excellency of God. Though a man actually and intentionally prefers God before all other things before and after that failure, yet he does Him an infinite wrong because God is infinitely good in every moment. He is always absolutely desirable and can never cease to be good. He cannot have the least shadow or change in Him and His perfections.

2. A denying of God. "If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; And my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above" (Job 31:26-28). This denial of God is not only the act of an open idolater, but follows from secret confidence and immoderate joy in earthly things.

Kissing the hand in reference to an idol was an external sign of religious worship. This is far less significant than internal confidence of the heart. If the motion of the hand is a denial of God, much more is the affection of the heart when it is set on a worthless creature or a brutish pleasure. It is a kind of a denial of Him since the soul's supreme affection is the right of the sovereign Creator alone. No honor peculiar to God can be given to a creature without plainly excluding God from being God.

Any person who has immoderate fondness for anything in the world has good reason to examine themselves. Though they acknowledge that

God exists, they are guilty of such great disrespect to Him that it must be considered a form of atheism. Even those renewed by the Spirit of God have reason here for daily humiliation because their souls frequently display confidence and affection for creatures, an act of practical atheism, though they are free from the habit of it.

### 3. Man would make himself the end of all creatures.

Man would sit in the seat of God, and “set his heart as the heart of God,” as the Lord says of Tyre (Eze 28:2). The consequence of this is that man seeks to be esteemed the chief good and end of other creatures. This is a goal that the heart of God must be set upon, as it is an inseparable right of Deity. He would have to deny Himself if He denied this affection of the heart.

Man desires to be equal with God, and so he desires that no creature should be equal with him, but serve his ends and his glory. He who wants to make himself God wants to have the honor proper to God. He who thinks himself worthy of his own supreme affection thinks himself worthy to be the object of the supreme affection of others. Nothing is more natural to man than a desire to have his own judgment the rule and measure of the judgment and opinions of the rest of mankind. He who sets himself in the place of the prince, by that act, challenges all the prerogatives and dues that belong to the prince. He who thinks himself fit to be a king thinks himself worthy of the homage and loyalty of the subjects. He who loves himself chiefly, and all other things and persons for himself, would make himself the end of all creatures.

This is evident,

1. In pride. When we have a high opinion of ourselves and act for our own reputation we dispossess God from our own hearts. While we would have our fame to be in every man’s mouth, and be admired in the hearts of men, we would chase God out of their hearts and deny His glory a residence anywhere else. Every proud man wants to be considered by others in the same way he considers himself: the highest piece of goodness. He wants to be adored by others as much as he adores and admires himself. No proud man in his self-love and self-admiration thinks himself to be in error. If he is worthy of his own admiration, he thinks himself worthy of the highest esteem of others. They should value him above themselves, and value themselves only for him.

2. In using other creatures contrary to God’s appointed end. God created the world and all things in it as steps whereby men might ascend to

a sight of Him and the acknowledgment of His glory. But we would use them to dishonor God and gratify ourselves. He appointed the creatures to supply our needs and support our rational delights. But we use them to cherish our sinful lusts. We turn those things He created for Himself to be instruments of rebellion against Him to serve our turns. This is a high dishonor to God, a sacrilegious undermining of His glory. It perverts the whole order of the world and directs it to another end than what God has constituted. As all things were made by God, so they are for God. But when we aspire to be the end of other creatures, we envy God the honor of being Creator.

3. This is diabolical. The devil has been hurled down from the state of an angel of light into darkness, vileness, and misery, to be the most accursed creature. This was all due to his first desiring authority in heaven. Yet he still aspires to rival God, even though he knows it is impossible to succeed in it. Since all men by nature are the devil's children, the serpent's seed, they have something of this venom in their natures, along with his other qualities. We see that there is a monstrous atheism lurking under the belief of a God. The devil knows there is a God, but acts like an atheist, and so do his children.

#### 4. Man would make himself the end of God.

Whoever makes himself his own law and end in the place of God, would make God the subject and himself the sovereign. He who steps into the throne of a prince, sets the prince at his footstool. Our affection toward God should center in Him as the infinite object, our chief happiness and highest end. Our affections to ourselves should be finite; they should refer ultimately to God as the origin of our being. But sin has turned man's affections wholly to himself. When he should love God first, and love himself for God's sake, he now loves himself first, and God in order to [gratify] himself. Love to God is lost, and love to self has taken the throne. We often aim to please ourselves when we pretend to pursue the honor of God. We make our Creator a tool for our own ends.

##### *a. Evidence of man making himself the end of God*

This is evident,

1. In our loving God because of some pleasing benefits He distributes. Men have a kind of natural love for God, but it is a secondary one. They love God because He gives them the good things of this world, spreads their table, fills their cup, stuffs their coffers, and brings surprisingly good providences their way. All the apostasies of men in the world witness to

this. They act devout while they have a prosperous profession, but they will not bear one chip of the cross to really serve God. A time of trial discovers these mercenary souls to be more lovers of themselves than their Maker. They pretend friendship to God, but they really love lust and only use God. A good man's character is the opposite: "Quench hell, burn heaven," said a holy man, "I will love and fear my God."

2. It is evident in abstinence from some sins, not because they offend God, but because they oppose another beloved corruption or worldly desire. Many motives the world uses to draw their friends and relatives from vices are drawn from self. They are used to prop up natural or sinful self in them. "Come, reform yourself. Change your course, or you will damage your reputation. You will destroy your finances and become a beggar. Your family will be ruined, and you may rot in prison." They do not press them with the duty they owe God, the dishonor their unworthy course brings Him, and their ingratitude to the God Who shows them mercy. Not that earthly motives are to be completely ignored or omitted. But this focus on earthly motives shows that self is the inclination both in our own lives and in our dealings with others. We make superior what should be subordinate to the honor of God.

3. It is evident in performing duties merely for selfish interest, making ourselves the end of religious actions, while we pretend to do it for God. Things ordained by God may happen to support our carnal purposes. God may be the object, but self is the end, and a heavenly object is made to serve a carnal purpose. Hypocrisy speaks to God's honor but is called flattery: "They did flatter him with their lips" (Psa 78:36). They gave Him a parcel of good words for their own preservation.

*b. Instances of man making himself the end of God*

This is seen,

1. In reluctance to religious duties that do not benefit self. With what lively thoughts will many approach God when it supports their own ends? But when it honors God, the duty is not a delight but a hindrance. Jonah was sick of his work, and ran from God, because he thought he should get no honor by his message. He knew God's mercy would discredit his prophecy (Jon 4:2). Prayer is often most fervent when it is least godly, and most selfish. Carnal ends and affections pour out lively expressions.

2. In calling upon God only in a time of necessity. How zealous will men be toward God in affliction when they neglect Him in prosperity! "When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and

enquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their rock” (Psa 78:34-35). Often men come to God when they have some business they want Him to do for them. This is not affection to God, but to ourselves.

Again, when we have gained the mercy we needed, how little do we warm our souls to consider the God Who gave it. How little do we put to use the gifts of His mercy for His service! This is not to glorify God as God, but to treat Him as our servant. Such a person would hardly beg at God’s door if he could please himself without Him.

3. In begging His assistance to our own projects. When we plan out our own affairs and then come to God, not for counsel, but blessing. Self alone gives us counsel how to act; but because we believe there is a God that governs the world, we will desire Him to contribute success. God is not consulted till the counsel of self is fixed; then God must be the One to carry out our plan. It is even worse when we ask God to favor some sinful purpose.

We scarcely seek God till we have modelled the whole plan in our minds and decided how we will make it work—as though there were not the fulness of wisdom in God to guide us in planning, as well as the power to breathe success on the plans.

4. In impatience when He refuses our desires. How often do men’s spirits rise against God, when He does not step in with the help they want! Selfish hearts charge God with neglect if He is not as quick in supplying as they are in desiring. “Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our souls, and thou takest no knowledge?” (Isa 58:3). When we aim at God’s glory in our importunity, we will fall down in humble submission when He denies our request. But self rises up boldly complaining, as if God were our servant and had neglected the service He owed us, not to come at our call.

5. In the actual aims men have in their duties. In prayer for temporal things, when we desire health for our own ease, wealth for our own sensuality, strength for our revenge, children for the increase of our family, gifts for our applause, as Simon Magus desired the Holy Ghost. This is to ask God to be a servant to our worldly interest. In spiritual mercies begged for, when pardon of sin is desired only for our own security from eternal vengeance; sanctification desired only to make us fit for everlasting blessedness; peace of conscience only that we may lead our lives more comfortably in the world; when we have not actual intentions for the glory of God,

or when our thoughts of God's honor are exceeded by the aims of our own advantage. Now, God has motivated us to these things by the blessedness we get by them, so we may desire them with a respect to ourselves. But this respect must be contained within proper banks, in subordination to the glory of God—not above it, nor in equal balance with it.

*c. Such low purposes defile spiritual duties*

Seriously consider: Though a duty be heavenly, does not some low purpose on our part defile it?

1. How is it with our confessions of sin? Are they not more to procure our pardon than to shame ourselves before God, or to be freed from the chains that hinder us from bringing Him the glory for which we were created? More to partake of His benefits than to honor Him in acknowledging the rights of His justice? Do we not bewail sin as having ruined us, not as it opposes the holiness of God? Do we not try to manipulate God, confessing one sin and reserving another?

2. Is it any better in our private and family worship? Do not some attend simply because someone they are dependent on is watching them and they want to please them? If God were the sole end of our hearts, would our hearts not glow as much under the lone eye of God as our tongues seem to under the eye of man? Do not some perform family duties simply so that their voices may be heard and their reputation supported among godly neighbors?

3. Is not the charity of many men tainted with this end, self? It is when we give alms not so much because people need it, as because of friendship we owe them for some reason. It is when we want our doles to be visible to the world and commended by others. It is when we think to oblige God to pardon our transgressions by bestowing a few pence upon indigent persons. And,

4. Is it not the same with the reproofs of men? Do not masters reprove their servants more vehemently for the neglect of their business than for the neglect of divine duties? These masters summon religious arguments, pretending to honor God. But when servants neglect what they owe God, no noise is made, and they pass without rebuke. It is a kind of atheism to ignore wrongs done to God.

5. Is it not so in our seeming zeal for religion? Demetrius and the craftsmen at Ephesus cried aloud for the greatness of Diana of the Ephesians, not out of any true zeal for her, but for the gain they got by the sale of her shrines (Act 19:24, 28).

6. In making use of the name of God to excuse our sin. We set up an opinion that supports our lusts, and then we dig deep into the Scripture to find crutches to support it and authorize our practices. Men will thank God for what they got by unlawful means, hiding their dishonesty by His name. The Jews appealed to the law of God for the crucifixion of His Son. "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die" (Joh 19:7). They wanted to make God a partner to their private revenge.

*d. The effects of making himself the end of God*

Is not all this a high degree of atheism?

1. It vilifies God. Other sins attack the creature and outward things, but acting in religious services for self makes the Creator Himself subject to the creature. It makes God contribute to the pleasure of the devil. It is a greater insult than to cast a prince's gifts to a herd of nasty swine.

2. Because it vilifies God, it undeifies or dethrones God. It acts as though we were the lords and God our servant. It sets up earthly ends in the place of God, Who ought to be our ultimate end in every action. He who thinks he can cheat and deceive God by his pretending cannot heartily believe God exists.

A man who serves God only for his own benefit is prepared for any idolatry. His religion will warp with the times when it benefits him. He would deny the true God for an idol if his worldly interest advised him to it. He would pay the same reverence to the lowest image which he pretends now to pay to God. The Israelites were as real for idolatry under their worst princes as they were pretenders to the true religion under those that were pious.

Before I come to the application of this, let me prove the reality of this practical atheism by two other considerations: unworthy imaginations of God and no desire for God.

## IV. Unworthy Imaginations of God

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." That is, He is not such a God as you report Him to be. This is meant by their being "corrupt." In the second verse *corrupt* can be taken to mean acting the part of idolaters (Exo 32:7). We cannot comprehend God. If we could, we should cease to be finite. And because we cannot comprehend Him, we erect strange images of Him in our imaginations and affections. After guilt came upon us, because we cannot root out the idea of God, we try to debase the majesty

and nature of God that we may have some ease in our consciences. This is universal in men by nature. There are as many carved images of God as there are minds of men, and as many monstrous shapes as those corruptions into which they want to transform Him. From this sprang,

## 1. Idolatry

This includes vain imaginations of the God whose glory they changed into the image of corruptible man (Rom 1:21, 23). They had set up vain images of Him in their imagination before they set up idolatrous representations of Him in their temples. Though evangelical light has chased that idolatry away from a great part of the world, yet the principle still coins more spiritual idols in the heart, which people bring before God in acts of worship.

## 2. Superstition

From this has come all superstition. When we mint a God in our own image, like us in changing and varying passions, soon angry and soon appeased, it is no wonder that we invent ways of pleasing Him after we have offended Him. We think we can atone for our sins by sad devotions and chastening ourselves. Superstition is nothing else but unscriptural fear of God. When they imagine Him a hard and severe Master, they look around for ways to appease Him Whom they think so hard to please. It is a very low opinion of Him when we think a showy devotion could as easily bribe Him out of His strictness as a few good words or toy rattles could quiet little children—when we think that whatever pleases us could please a God infinitely above us.

From this also arises the tendency to doubt His mercy once we have repented. To doubt God's mercy is to measure Him by the petty model of our own spirits, as though His nature were as reluctant to pardon our offences against Him as we are to forgive wrongs done to ourselves.

## 3. Presumption

From this springs all presumption, the common disease of the world. All the wickedness in the world is a presuming upon God. It rises from wrongly interpreting the goodness of God in the works of creation and providence. Men's corrupt nature produces vain imaginations of God's goodness and, therefore, folly and darkness in their minds and manner of life. "They glorified him not as God" (Rom 1:20-21), but imagined Him good that they might be bad. They imagined He was so indulgent to their sensuality that He would neglect His honor. They considered God's

patience to be an approval of their vices: “Thou thoughtest that I was...such an one as thyself” (Psa 50:21).

Compare these two together: Superstition arises from terrifying misapprehensions of God, presumption from self-pleasing thoughts. One represents Him only rigorous, and the other careless. One makes us over-scrupulous in serving Him by our own rules, and the other overly bold in offending Him according to our whims. The superstitious man believes God has scarcely enough mercy to pardon; the presumptuous man believes He does not have such a perfection as justice to punish. Between the idolater, the superstitious, and the presumptuous person, God would look like no God at all.

Other unworthy imaginations of God are similar: vilifying Him, debasing the Creator to be a creature of their own imaginations, putting their own stamp upon Him, and fashioning Him not according to that beautiful image He impressed upon them by creation, but according to the defaced image they inherit by their fall, and which is worse, the image of the devil! Were it possible to see a picture of God according to the imaginations of men, it would be the most monstrous being, such a god that never was, nor ever can be. We honor God when we have worthy opinions of Him suitable to His nature, as a being of unbounded loveliness and perfection. We detract from Him when we ascribe to Him such qualities as would be a horrible disgrace to a wise and good man, as injustice and impurity. Thus men debase God when they invert His order and would create Him according to their image, as He first created them according to His own. They debase Him when they think Him not worthy to be a God unless He fully fit their mold.

This is worse than idolatry. The grossest idolater does not commit a crime so heinous. While the idolater changes God’s glory into the image of senseless creeping things, this man imagines God to be as one of our sinful selves and likens Him to the filthy images of our imagination.

It is worse than absolute atheism. It is more commendable to think He does not exist than to think Him to be such an one as is inconsistent with His nature. Better to deny His existence than to deny His perfection. Any wise man would rather have his memory forgotten than be remembered as infamous. When we think of God as deceitful in His promises, unrighteous in His threatenings, unwilling to pardon upon repentance, or resolved to pardon without our repentance—these are things unworthy of the nature of God and contrary to His self-revelation.

## V. No Desire for God

Practical atheism is evident by our natural desire to be distant from Him. Sin set us first at a distance from God; and every new act of gross sin estranges us more from Him. It makes us both afraid and ashamed to be near Him. We do not seek Him as our happiness; and when He offers Himself, we do not like it, but insult Him by choosing other things before Him. The stronger impression of God anything has, the more we flee from it. The saints themselves have so much frailty that they have cried out as undone if they had more than an ordinary revelation of God—as if they wished Him more remote from them. Vileness cannot endure the splendor of majesty, nor guilt the glory of a judge.

We have naturally no desire to 1) remember Him, 2) or converse with Him, 3) or thoroughly return to Him, 4) or carefully imitate Him. This is all to act as if there were no such being as God in the world, or as if we wished there were none at all.

### 1. No desire to remember Him

How delightful are other things in our minds! How burdensome the memorials of God, from Whom we have our being! With what pleasure do we contemplate the nature of creatures—even of flies and toads—while our minds tire in the search of Him Who gave us our knowing and meditating abilities! God shows Himself to us in every creature, in the lowest weed as well as in the highest heavens. He is more apparent in them to our reasons than the things themselves are to our sense. Yet, though we see them, we will not behold God in them. We will view them to please our sense, to improve our reason by considering their natural perfections; but we pass by the consideration of God's perfections that visibly beam from them. Thus, we act like beasts and atheists in the very exercise of reason and neglect our Creator to gratify our sense. We act as though the pleasure of that were more desirable than the knowledge of God. The desire of our souls is not towards His name and the remembrance of Him (Isa 26:8), when we set not ourselves in a posture to feast our souls with deep and serious meditations of Him. Are we afraid of being too intimately acquainted with Him? Are not thoughts of God rather our invaders than our guests, seldom invited to reside and take up their home in our hearts? Have we not, when they have broken in upon us, bid them “depart from us” (Job 22:17), sent them packing as soon as we could, and were glad when they were gone? Have we not often been glad of excuses to shake off thoughts of Him or found excuses to

keep God far from our hearts? Is not this a part of atheism, to be so unwilling to employ our faculties to consider the Giver of them? Is the One Who thinks on us every day in a way of providence not worthy to be thought on in a way of special remembrance? Do not the best, who love the remembrance of Him, and abhor this natural averseness, find that when they would think of God many things tempt them to think elsewhere? Do they not find their thoughts too feeble, their responses too dull, and their impressions too slight? This natural atheism is spread over human nature.

## 2. No desire to commune with Him

The word *remember*, in the command to keep the Sabbath-day holy, includes all the duties of the day which are the choicest of our lives. “Remember” implies our natural unwillingness to these duties and our forgetfulness of them. The fact that God presses this command with more reasons than the rest manifests that man has no heart for spiritual duties. In every spiritual duty that sets us immediately face to face with God we find a natural resistance from a powerful principle. Everyone may agree with the apostle that when we would do good, evil is present with us (Rom 7:21). The only reason for this is the natural tendency of our souls.

When we do give Him our attention, are we not more pleased with the kinds of worship that gratify our desires than with delighting our souls inwardly with the Object of worship Himself? This is part of our natural atheism. To fully or partially neglect such duties by coldness in them is to cast off the fear of the Lord (Job 15:4). Not to call upon God and not to know Him are one and the same thing (Jer 10:25). Either we think there is no such being in the world or He is so slight a one that He deserves not the respect He calls for. Or He is so weak and poor that He cannot supply what our needs require.

## 3. No desire for thorough return to Him

The first man fled from Him after his defection, though he had no refuge to fly to but the grace of His Creator. Cain went from His presence and would be a fugitive from God rather than a suppliant to Him. By calling out to the promised Redeemer in faith, he might have escaped the coming wrath for his brother’s blood and mitigated the sorrows he was justly sentenced to bear in the world. Nothing will stop prodigal man from sharing with swine and make him return to his father, but an empty trough. If only we have some husks to feed on, we shall never think of a Father’s presence. It would be better if our sores and poverty would drive

us to Him; but when our strength is devoured, we will not return to the Lord our God, “nor seek him for all this” (Hos 7:9-10). Not His drawn sword as a God of judgment, nor His mighty power as a Lord, nor His open arms as the Lord their God could move them to turn their eyes and their hearts toward Him. The more He invites us to partake of His grace, the further we run from Him to provoke His wrath. We turn our backs when he stretches out His hand, stop our ears when He lifts up His voice.

Whoever is to be turned back to God makes the Holy Spirit go to the extent of striving. He is not easily brought to spiritual submission to God. He is not persuaded to surrender by a simple summons. He must be sweetly overpowered by storm and victoriously drawn into the arms of God. God stands ready, but the heart stands off. Grace is full of entreaties, but the soul full of excuses. Divine love offers, but carnal self-love rejects. Nothing so pleases us as when we are furthest from Him, as if anything were more amiable, anything more desirable, than Himself.

#### 4. No desire for close imitation of Him

Since we are alienated from the life of God, we naturally desire no more to live the life of God than a toad or any other animal desires to live the life of a man. A heart that knows God has a holy ambition to imitate Him. Every soul that refuses to copy Him is ignorant of His excellence. All mankind is naturally of this character. Corrupted man is opposed to being like God in holiness. What could be worse than this? Can the denial of God’s being be a greater injury than this contempt of Him? Does He have no goodness that deserves our remembrance, nor amiableness fit for our fellowship? Is He not a Lord fit for us to submit to? Does He not have a holiness that deserves our imitation?

## IV. Application

Now for the application of this consideration of practical atheism. It serves,

### 1. For information

#### *a. God’s mercy*

It gives us occasion to admire the wonderful patience and mercy of God. How many millions of practical atheists breathe His air every day and live off His generosity who deserve to be in hell rather than possessing the earth! An infinite holiness is offended, an infinite justice is provoked, yet an

infinite patience forbears the punishment, and an infinite goodness relieves our wants. At the first invasion of His rights, He softened the terror of His threatening to defend His law with the gracious promise to relieve and recover His rebellious creature (Gen 3:15). Oh, how great is His compassion to His aspiring competitors! Has He not opened His arms when we spurned Him with our feet? It is as though He was unwilling to lose us who were ambitious to destroy ourselves! Have not our lives been supported by His goodness while we endeavored to climb up to His throne? Have not His mercies continued to charm us, while we have used them as weapons to injure Him? Has He not proclaimed pardon, upon repentance, to those who would take away His glory? He has so twisted together His own honor and man's salvation that a man cannot truly seek his own good and salvation without seeking God's glory. Man cannot be intent upon God's honor without by the same act promoting himself and his own happiness, so careful God is to give no just occasion of dissatisfaction to His creature or dishonor to Himself. All those wonders of His mercy are enhanced by the heinousness of our atheism. What rebels, fully armed against their prince, aiming to destroy his life, ever found such favor from him, as we have from God? We rebels have all our necessities richly afforded us by Him, without which we would starve, and without which we would be unable to manage our attempts to oppose Him.

*b. God's justice*

It brings in a justification of His justice. If it gives us occasion to loudly praise His patience, it also stops our mouths from accusing any acts of His vengeance. What can be too harsh a punishment for despising and disgracing so great a being? The highest contempt merits the greatest anger. When we will not acknowledge Him for our happiness, it is appropriate we should feel the misery of separation from Him. If a traitor is worthy of death, what punishment is great enough for one who prefers himself before such an infinitely good God? What punishment is great enough for one who is so foolish as to invade the rights of the infinitely powerful God? It is no injustice for a creature to be forever left to himself to see what advantage he can make of that self that he was so busily employed setting up in the place of his Creator. The soul of man deserves an infinite punishment for despising an infinite good.

*c. Necessity of the new birth*

This proves the necessity of a new condition of the soul, to change an atheistic nature. We forget God, think of Him with reluctance, have no

respect to God in our course and acts. We need some new principle in us to make us fulfil the will of God, since we were created for God, not for the flesh. We can no more voluntarily serve God, while our serpentine nature and devilish habits remain in us, than we can suppose the devil can be willing to glorify God while the nature he contracted by his fall abides powerfully in him. Our nature and will must be changed so that our actions may regard God as our end, that we may delightfully meditate on Him, and draw the motives of our obedience from Him. There must be a supernatural principle before we can live a supernatural life. The aversion of our natures from God is as strong as our inclinations to evil. We are disgusted with one, and pressed with the other. We have no will, no heart, to come to God in any service. This nature must be broken in pieces and formed anew before we can make God our rule and our end. While men's deeds are evil, they cannot comply with God (Joh 3:19-20)—much less while their natures are evil. Till this be done, all the service a man performs rises from some evil imagination of the heart that is evil, only evil, and that continually (Gen 6:5). Man's service is evil as it rises from wrong notions of God, wrong notions of duty, or corrupt motives. All the pretenses of devotion to God are but the adoration of some golden image. Depraved ends must be removed, and what was God's end in framing us must be our end in acting: His glory. This cannot take place without a change of nature. We can never honor Him supremely Whom we do not supremely love. Till this be, we cannot glorify God as God, though we do things by His command, no more than the devil did when God employed him in afflicting Job (see Job 1).

*d. Difficulty of conversion and mortification*

We may gather from this the difficulty of conversion and mortification.<sup>9</sup> What is the reason men receive no more of an impression from the voice of God? It is because our atheism is great. The principle in the heart firmly shuts the door of the thoughts and affections against God. Neither the joys of heaven can allure us nor the flashed terrors of hell frighten us toward Him. It is as though we think God is unable to bestow the one or execute the other. The true reason is that God and self contest for the deity. The law of sin is that God must be at the footstool; the law of God is that sin must be utterly deposed. The spirit of man spreads its wings and flies to catch unworthy objects, but attempt to bring the spirit under the power of God,

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<sup>9</sup> See FGB 195, *Conversion* and FGB 201, *Mortification*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

the wings flag, the creature looks lifeless. The love of sin predominates in our nature and has squashed love to God, if not extinguished it.

Here also is the difficulty of mortification. This work tends to God's honor and the abasing of inordinate aspiration. If the nature of man is inclined to sin, as it is, it must be bent against anything that opposes it. It is impossible to strike any true blow at a lust till the true sense of God be re-entertained in the soil where it ought to grow. Who can naturally be willing to crucify his own flesh? To crucify what is dearest to him, himself? Man's nature is to cover his sin and hide it in his bosom. "If I covered my transgressions as Adam" (Job 31:33). His nature is not to destroy it. When he is forced to leave one, he will endeavor to espouse some other lust.

*e. Reason for unbelief*

Here we see the reason for unbelief. What has most of God in it meets with most aversion from us. What has least of God finds better and stronger inclinations in us. Why is man's heart less willing to embrace the gospel than to acknowledge the equity of the law? Because there is more of God's nature and perfection evident in the gospel than in the law. Besides, there is more reliance on God and distance from self commanded in the gospel. It is easier to bring men to some moral virtue than to faith, to make men blush at their outward vices, but not at the inward impurity of their natures. Those who assert that all happiness arises from something in a man's self, as the Stoics and Epicureans did, and that a wise man is equal with God, are greater enemies to the truths of the gospel than others (Act 17:18), because the gospel cuts at the root of their principal opinion: self-sufficiency in the Stoics, and self-gratification in the Epicureans.

*f. God the Author of grace and conversion*

It informs us, then, Who is the Author of grace, conversion, and every other good work. No practical atheist ever yet turned to God but was turned by God. Not to acknowledge that God does it is a part of this atheism, since it robs God of the honor of one of His most glorious works. God took away the sanctifying Spirit from man as a penalty for the first sin. Who can regain it but by His will and pleasure? Who can restore it but He that removed it? Every man has the same fundamental atheism in him by nature. He would be a rule to himself and the ultimate end to himself. He is so far from dethroning himself that, when God makes any attempt to regain the fort, all the strength of man's corrupted nature is called to stand to their arms. Man cannot acknowledge God without God. How could it be possible for a man to turn himself toward that God against

Whom he has a quarrel in his nature? An atheist by nature can no more alter his own character and engrave in himself the divine nature than a rock can carve itself into the statue of a man. A serpent, man's enemy, cannot and would not raise itself to the nobility of man's nature. The soul that by nature desires to strip God of His rights cannot, without divine power, be made to sincerely acknowledge the rights and glory of God.

*g. No self-justification*

We may here see the reason why there can be no justification by the best and strongest works of man's nature. Can what has atheism at the root justify either the action or person? Man's works have neither God's law for their rule, nor His glory for their end. They are not done by any spiritual strength for Him, nor tend toward Him with any spiritual affection. Can the most holy God pronounce a creature righteous on such a foundation? Man's works can justify God's justice in condemning him, but they can never sway His justice to pardon him. Every natural man picks and chooses his works; he adopts God's will no further than he can force it to suit the law of his members. He minds not the honor of God except as it fits in with his own glory and secular ends. Can he be righteous who prefers his own will and honor before the will and honor of the Creator? Can justification be hoped for from that which in itself is hopeless?

*h. The cause of apostasy*

See here the cause of all the apostasy in the world. Practical atheism was never conquered in such; they are still "alienated from the life of God" and will not live to God (Eph 4:17-18). They loathe His rule and distaste His glory. They do not find the satisfaction in Him that they do in themselves. They will be judges of what is good and righteous for them rather than allow God to judge for them. When men draw back from truth to error, it is to such opinions as cherish their ambition, covetousness, or beloved lust that competes with God. "They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (Joh 12:42-43).

*i. Excellence of the Christian gospel*

This shows us the excellence of the gospel and Christian religion. It sets man in his due place and gives to God what the excellence of His nature requires. It lays man in the dust from whence he was taken and sets God upon that throne where He ought to sit. Man by nature would annihilate God and deify himself. The gospel glorifies God and annihilates man. In our first revolt we would be like Him in knowledge; in the means He hath provided for our recovery, He designs to make us like Him in

grace. The gospel shows us to be an object of humiliation, and God to be a glorious object for our imitation. The light of nature tells us there is a God; the gospel gives us a more magnificent report of Him. The light of nature condemns gross atheism; the light of the gospel condemns and conquers spiritual atheism in the hearts of men.

## 2. For exhortation

### *a. Be aware and humbled.*

Let us labor to be sensitive to this atheism in our nature and be humbled for it. How we should lie in the dust and go low under the humbling thoughts of it all our days! Should we not be alert to that whereby we shed our souls' blood and give a stab to the heart of our own salvation? Shall we be worse than any other creature, not bewailing what tends to our own destruction? He who does not lament this atheism in his nature cannot claim the character of a Christian. He has nothing of the divine life and love planted in his soul. Every man will one day be sensitive to this when the eternal God shall examine him and charge his conscience to reveal every crime. It will then acknowledge the authority under which it acted. The heart will be torn open; the secrets of it brought to public view. The world and the man himself will see what a viperous brood of corrupt principles and ends nested in his heart.

Let the consideration of it draw tears from our eyes and sorrow from our souls. Let us press the thoughts of it on our hearts till the core of pride is eaten out and our stubbornness changed into humility; till our eyes become fountains of tears and prayer springs up in us; till we pray that God would change the heart and mortify the atheism in us.

Let us be aware of it in ourselves. Have any of our hearts been soil wherein the fear and reverence of God have naturally grown? Do we have the desire to know Him, or the will to embrace Him? Do we delight in His will, and love the remembrance of His name? Is not the world more beloved to us than the Creator of the world? Have not creatures had more of our love, fear, and trust, than God, Who framed both them and us? Have we not too often relied upon our own strength and made a calf of our own wisdom and said of God as the Israelites of Moses, "As for this Moses...we wot not what is become of him" (Exo 32:1)? Have we not often given the glory of our good success to our craft and our industry, rather than to the wisdom and blessing of God? Are we then free from this sort of atheism?

Have we not frequently neglected God? Have we not been deaf while He knocked at our doors, slept when He spoke in our ears—as if there had been no being as a God in the world? Have we not often committed folly with vain imaginations starting up in times of religious service? Had they stepped in to interrupt our worldly affairs, they would have been troublesome intruders, but while we are with God, they are acceptable guests. How unwilling have our hearts been to stir themselves with strong considerations of God before we prayed? Is it not too often that our lifelessness in prayer proceeds from this atheism, a neglect of seeking arguments and pleas from God's perfections to support our pleas and quicken our hearts? Is there any duty which leads to a clearer vision of Him where our hearts have not been ready to rise up and call it cursed rather than blessed? Are not our minds clouded with ignorance of Him? Our wills drawn away from Him? Our affections rising against Him? We are too often more willing to know anything besides His nature, and more industrious to do anything than His will. So little of God is in our hearts, when so many evidences of the love of God are in His creation. God has been so much our benefactor, but He is so little our end. He sparkles in everything which presents itself to our eyes, but He is so little in our thoughts.

*b. Be aware of it in others.*

Let us be aware of it in others. We ought to have a righteous abhorrence of the too open iniquity among us. Holy David's tears gushed out plentifully because men kept not God's law (Psa 119:136). Is it not a time to exercise this godly lamentation? Has the wicked atheism of any age been greater? Or can you find worse in hell than we may hear and behold on earth? How is the excellent majesty of God adored by the angels in heaven, but despised and reproached by men on earth! As if His name were published to be the subject of their mockery! Is not the law of God, along with its threats and curses, made light of, as if men consider it their honor to be beyond any sense of its glorious majesty? How many wallow in pleasures, as if they had been made men only to turn brutes? Were their souls given them only as salt to keep their bodies from rotting? It is as much a part of atheism not to be sensitive to the abuses of God's name and laws by others as to violate them ourselves. What is the point of their stupid senselessness except that there is no God in the world Whose glory is worth vindicating or deserves our respect?

*c. Consider its unreasonableness toward God.*

That we may be sensitive to the unworthiness of neglecting God as our rule and end, consider, first, the unreasonableness of it toward God.

1. It is high contempt of God. It inverts the order of things, making God the highest to become the lowest, and self the lowest to become the highest. To be guided by an ungodly friend, some idle vanity, some carnal interest, is to say that these abound in excellence, equity, or goodness while God does not. If making God our end is the principal duty, then making ourselves or anything else our end is the greatest evil.

2. It is a contempt of God as the most desirable object. God is infinitely excellent: "How great is his goodness, and how great is his beauty!" (Zec 9:17). Everything in Him can ravish our affections. There is infinite excellence to charm us, and infinite goodness to allure us. The author of our beings, the benefactor of our lives, is God. Why then should His image, man, be so low as to despise the beautiful Original Who stamped His image on him! God is the loveliest object to be studied, honored, and followed. His perfections have the highest right to our thoughts. To despise God one moment is worse than if we despised all creatures forever, because the excellence of creatures is to God like a drop to the sea.

*d. Consider the ingratitude in it.*

If we hate a child's ungrateful behavior toward his loving father, a servant to a kind master, a man to his true friend, why do men daily insult God? Is God less to be regarded than man? Is He more contemptible than a creature? It would be strange if a benefactor lived in the same town, in the same house with us, and we never exchanged a word with him. But this is our case, who have the works of God before our eyes, the goodness of God in our being, the mercy of God in our daily food, yet we think so little of Him, converse so little with Him, serve everything before Him, and prefer everything above Him. Where do our mercies come from but from His hand? Who, besides Him, maintains our breath this moment? Would He call for our spirits this moment, they must depart from us to attend His command. Every moment makes our unworthy behavior more egregious, because every moment He is our guardian and gives us tastes of fresh generosity. Our crime is even worse because we injure Him without Whose generosity in giving us our being we could not have cast contempt upon Him! It is terrible that man, who has the clearest stamp of His image, should be the worst of His rebels. It is terrible that he who alone has reason, as God's gift to judge the equity of His laws, should revolt

against them as grievous and against the Lawgiver's government as burdensome.

1. It debases God more than the devil presently does. He strives against a God Who shows him only vindictive justice; we debase a God Who loads us with His daily mercies. The despairing devils are excluded from any mercy, but we are under His patience and generosity. Satan would not be governed by God when He was only his bountiful Creator. We refuse to be guided by Him after He has blessed us by creating us and blessed us with redemption by the blood of His Son. How ungrateful it is to exchange the nature of man with that of devils, to dishonor God under mercy as the devils do under His wrath!

2. It is ungrateful contempt of God, Who cannot be injurious to us. He cannot do us wrong, because He cannot be unjust. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25). He abhors unrighteousness as much as He loves generous goodness. He never commanded anything but what was highly conducive to man's happiness. While we debase Him, He continues to benefit us. Is it not unparalleled ingratitude to turn our backs upon such a lovely God, such a loving God? God created intellectual creatures, angels and men, that He might communicate more of Himself and His own goodness and holiness to man. What do we do by rejecting Him as a rule and end, but oppose, as much as in us lies, God's purpose in our creation? We shut our souls against the communications of those perfections He was so willing to bestow. We treat Him as if He intended us the greatest wrong, when it is impossible for Him to do wrong to any of His creatures.

*e. Consider the misery that attends it.*

Consider the misery which will attend such a condition if it continues predominant. Those who thrust God away as their happiness and end can expect only to be thrust away by Him from any relief and compassion. Distance from God here can look for nothing but remoteness from God hereafter. When the devil, a creature of vast endowments, would advance himself above God and instruct man to commit the same sin, he is cursed above all creatures (Gen 3:14). When we will not acknowledge Him the God of all glory, we shall be separated from Him as the God of all comfort. "They that are far from thee shall perish" (Psa 73:27). This is the source of all woe. What the prodigal suffered was because he wanted to leave his father and live by himself. Whoever is ambitious to be his own heaven will at last find his soul become his own hell. As it loved all things for itself so

it will be grieved with all things for itself. As it would be its own god against the right of God, it shall then be its own tormentor by the justice of God.

### 3. For duty

Watch against this atheism and be daily employed in the mortification of it. In every action we should ask, What rule am I observing? Is it God's will or my own? Do my intentions tend to set up God or self? As much as we destroy this, we abate the power of sin. These two things are the head of the serpent in us, which we must be bruising by the power of the cross. Sin is nothing other than a turning from God and centering in self. If we aim our force against self-will and self-ends, we will intercept atheism at the spring head and take away what constitutes and animates all sin. The sparks will vanish if the fire is quenched. We should ask two things in every undertaking: Is God's will my rule? Is God's glory my end? All sin lies in the neglect of these, all grace lies in the practice of them. Without some degree of the mortification of self-will and self-ends, we cannot have profitable approaches to God. When we come with idols in our hearts, He will answer us according to their multitude and their baseness (Eze 14:4). What expectation can we have of a kind look from Him when we come before Him with undeifying thoughts of Him, a petition in our mouths, and a sword in our hearts to stab His honor!

To this purpose,

#### *a. Frequently view the excellencies of God.*

When we have no fellowship with God by delightful meditation, we begin to be estranged from Him and live apart from God. Daily communion with God would reveal to us so much of His lovely nature and sweet ways that our injurious thoughts of God would wear off. We will then count it our honor to despise ourselves and magnify Him. By this means slavish fear—which is a dishonor to God, a torment to the soul (1Jo 4:18), and the root of atheism—will be cast out, and a noble fear of Him wrought in the heart. Intentional thoughts of Him will result in affections to Him, engaging our hearts to make Him both our rule and our end. The more we enter the presence chamber of God, the more we cling to Him with our affections. The true concept of God will grow more vigorous and lively in us, and we will be able to prevent anything which may dishonor Him and debase our souls. Let us therefore consider Him as the only happiness, set up the true God in our understanding, and possess our hearts with a deep sense of His

desirable excellency above all other things. This is the main thing we must do.

*b. Value the Scripture.*

To this purpose, prize and study the Scripture. We can have no delight in meditation on Him unless we know Him, and we cannot know Him but through His own revelation. When the revelation is despised, the Revealer will be little esteemed. Men do not throw off God from being their rule, till they throw off Scripture from being their guide. God must be cast off from being our ultimate end when the Scripture is rejected from being a rule.

*c. Take heed of sensual pleasures.*

Be very watchful and cautious in the use of those comforts God allows us. Job was afraid when his sons feasted that they should curse God in their hearts (Job 1:4-5). The apostle Peter joined sobriety with watchfulness and prayer: "The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (1Pe 4:7). This is a moderate use of worldly comforts. Prayer is the greatest act of acknowledging God, and too much sensuality hinders this and is therefore a step to atheism. Belshazzar's lifting himself up against the Lord and not giving Him glory is blamed on his sensuality (Dan 5:23). Nothing is more apt to quench the idea of God and root Him out of the conscience than addiction to sensual pleasures. Take heed of that snare.

*d. Take heed of sins against knowledge.*

The more sins against knowledge we commit, the more careless we are, and the more careless will we be of God and His honor. We will fear His judicial power more, and the more we fear that, the more we will disdain the God in Whose hand vengeance is and to Whom it belongs. Atheism in life proceeds to atheism in affection, and that will attempt to sink into atheism in opinion and judgment. ❧