

What's Wrong with Flattery?

Proverbs 29:5; 2 Timothy 4:3

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Greg L. Price

How often speech is used not to convey the truth, but to promote a good feeling in others or a good response from others. This is nowhere better evidenced than when ministers, family members, or friends stand at a funeral to eulogize one who has died. From what is said by others about the many virtues of this departed soul, you would hardly recognize him/her to be the same person you once knew. By the time the funeral has ended, he/she has become angelic. This is what is condemned in Scripture as flattery.

How often do we make comments to others that are highly exaggerated (if not outright false) so as to place ourselves in a more beneficial position with them than we would otherwise have? So we appeal to their vanity, to their pride, to their appearance, to their knowledge, to their wealth, or to their gifts and graces, in order to puff them up for our own advantage. Perhaps we want something very badly from others. So we bribe them with flattery rather than with money in order to obtain what we want. Dear ones, flattery is a deceptive bribe by which we secretly extort what we want from others. Flattery is always condemned by God in Scripture (just as it is in our text today).

Let us consider this sin and how to overcome it by God's grace as we look at Proverbs 29:5 where we will focus our attention on the following two main points: (1) The Nature of Flattery; and (2) The Consequences of Flattery.

I. The Nature of Flattery.

A. The Hebrew word used for flattery here in our text conveys the idea of one who is a "smooth" talker. Oh how slick is the flatterer. He candy coats what he says and exaggerates the truth so that he might benefit in some way from the response of those he flatters. Let me give you 4 different biblical contexts in which this word is used so that you might better understand the nature of this word.

1. First, this word is used of one who butters others up with his smooth words in Psalm 55:21. Here David speaks of Ahithophel, his trusted friend and counselor, who betrayed him and counseled Absalom how he might destroy David. However, David also prophesies here how Jesus would be betrayed by Judas, one of His own disciples, into the hands of the Jews. In both cases, the words and actions of the flatterer were not sincere. Ahithophel and Judas were opportunists, looking to benefit from their flattery. I ask you, are not flatterers worse enemies than those who openly oppose and persecute you? They do so by stealth, under the color of friendship and kindness, and at the right time they reveal their true colors as enemies.

2. Second, this word is also used of the seductive woman who tells the young man whatever he wants to hear, so that she might weaken him to gain advantage over him (Proverbs 2:16; Proverbs 7:5). Of course the same may be said of a seductive man who beguiles and flatters a vulnerable woman. How many men and women have been duped by flattering words into marriage or into an illicit affair for money, for mere lust, for prestige, or for political favors and lived to regret how they slept with an enemy rather than with a trusted companion by covenant.

3. Third, this word is found in Psalm 36:2. Here it speaks of the wicked man, who because he has no fear of God, flatters not others, but flatters himself that he is a good person, that he is a religious person, that he is a law-abiding citizen, deserving of the honor and applause of others. Flattery in this case issues forth in sweet-talking oneself with untrue compliments which only lead to self-deception concerning the true condition of one's heart (Psalm 36:3-4). So many people have flattered themselves so long that they

even justify their most conspicuous sins with self-flattery (“at least I’m not like so and so”, or “even though what I did was wrong I’m still a good person at heart”). Self-flatterers whistle and sing their own virtues all the way to hell. For this reason, flattery has been called self-murder by many of our divines. They have never awakened to the holiness of God to see their own sin in light of God’s holy law, which judges not only their actions, but their thoughts, desires, intentions, and words.

4. Fourth, this Hebrew word is found in Ezekiel 12:24. This speaks of those who claim to be ministers of God and to speak on behalf of the Lord, but who flatter the people with their alleged visions and words from the Lord (Ezekiel 13:1-3). How many preachers today flatter their congregations with what the people want to hear: how to be successful in the eyes of the world, how to be wealthy, how to be free of illness, how to get what you want from others, how to feel good about yourself and flatter yourself, how to receive the applause of others, how to obtain miraculous gifts (and the list goes on). This would appear to be the type of flattery in view in Proverbs 29:5, for the Hebrew word used for “man” is not the generic word ordinarily used, but a word which carries the added idea of “one who is mighty or strong” (i.e. one who is in a place of power or authority). The Apostle Paul foretold (in 2 Timothy 4:3) that the time would come when professing Christians would not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts would heap to themselves teachers who would tickle their ears with what they want to hear. This is perhaps the most aggravated form of the sin of flattery; for the flatterer in this case claims to speak on behalf of God. How flatterers hate sound doctrine, for those who know what they are to believe about God and man are far less likely to succumb to the smooth words of the flatterer who would shamelessly butter them up from the pulpit. How a minister should examine himself that he not preach according to the lusts of people to gain more members and a bigger church, but that he preach to the true spiritual need of his flock regardless of how unpopular the truth may be.

B. As we consider further the Nature of Flattery, let us be clear as to What Flattery Is and What It Is Not.

1. What Flattery Is? There are two essential parts to Flattery.

a. Flattery Is a Deception. It is a lie wherein that which is known to be true is covered over by an outright falsehood or by a deliberate exaggeration. Flattery never makes oneself or others look worse than they are, but rather distorts the truth in the direction of making oneself or others look much better than they really are. “How is that so bad”, one may ask? “I have made someone feel better about himself/herself not worse.” It is bad because it is a violation of the Ninth Commandment (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”). We are not intentionally to distort what is true in our use of words. God cannot lie (He cannot flatter) and neither should we. *The Larger Catechism* lists flattery as one of the sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment. Dear ones, flattery is so easy and acceptable to sinners because we always like to be told that we are more righteous than we are, more attractive than we are, more intelligent than we are, more athletic than we are, or more gifted than we really are. You see, dear ones, flattery feeds our pride and by nature we love it to be so even if it isn’t accurate or true. That is why flattery is such a terrible enemy to our souls—it pretends to be our friend and lavishes us with kisses. But secretly it lies to us (not as a friend, but as an enemy) in distorting the truth. Dear ones, true friends don’t lie to one another (they don’t flatter one another), they speak the truth in love (because they sincerely care for one another). They don’t act like Judas in betraying the Lord with a kiss (Proverbs 27:6).

b. Flattery Is a Manipulation. Flattery is a deliberate attempt to butter someone up for the flatterer’s own advantage. He hopes to secretly extort the help, wealth, favor, or support of others at the appropriate time. The flatterer is like Absalom courting the favor of Israel, pretending to sympathize and agree with all the cases that came to King David. Although a prince in Israel, Absalom would not even allow the people to give their ordinary respectful bow to him, but would take them and insincerely kiss them instead as if they were his friend and equal. The Scripture says that Absalom “stole” the hearts of Israel through his

flattering manipulation. How often do we try to gain the favor of others by manipulating them with some exaggerated report about themselves? We may say, "They asked me what I thought and I just told them what they wanted to hear." Dear ones, God hates all strategizing on our parts, wherein we use people to seek our own selfish ends. We may even perceive that our ends are noble (perhaps we have exaggerated the truth in order to avoid a verbal battle with someone or in order to smooth over a problem with someone), but, dear ones, let us not secretly use and manipulate one another by distorting or exaggerating the truth. Let us not be associated with those who do evil that good may come. Even godly ends do not justify ungodly means.

2. What Flattery Is Not?

a. Flattery is not sincere commendation in a job well done. We should never confuse that which is sincere and honest encouragement (without exaggeration or distortion) with flattery. We are called to commend the saints as did Paul (Romans 16:1-4). We are to esteem one another for our work's sake (1 Thessalonians 5:13). We are called to speak the truth in love for the edification of others (Ephesians 4:15). The Lord in His letters to the 7 churches in Revelation (chapters 2-3), begins with a note of sincere commendation wherever He can (the only churches that had no commendation are the Churches of Sardis and Laodicea). Dear ones, there is nothing at all sacrificed when we begin a rebuke or correction with sincere words of commendation or thanksgiving where we are able. This is not manipulation, but an act of love that one be not overcome with grief from the rebuke or concern that is stated. Such a practice actually brings balance and truth to the context. For we do not want the person to think that this one concern or one area of sin necessarily overshadows every other area where there is good work and faithful service being performed. In fact, to avoid the proper commendation may itself distort the truth of the matter.

b. We do not have to go to the opposite extreme of speaking too critically of ourselves or others in order to avoid flattery. It is so often our natural tendency to go from one extreme to another. But, dear ones, we do not need to disparage our gifts and graces to ourselves and others in order to avoid the sin of flattery. To be overly critical toward oneself or others can be just as easily a distortion of the truth as flattery. Although we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, we are to think so as to have sound judgment about the gifts God has granted to us (according to Romans 12:3). Certainly that does not imply that we are to point out to others all of our gifts, but it doesn't imply that we are to go to the opposite extreme where we demean the gifts God has given to us either. For how can we employ the gifts God has given to us in promoting the kingdom of Christ (as He has told us to do) if we don't even recognize them or use them for His glory? How are we expressing our thanks and gratitude for the gifts He has given to us if we deny we have any gifts or if we criticize them so harshly?

c. We do not have to become so brutally honest with people in order to avoid the sin of flattery. For example, your wife asks you her opinion about a dress and you not only tell her that you don't think it looks good on her, but you go into vivid detail for several minutes as to how it makes her look grossly overweight. Please understand, dear ones, even when dealing with sin, we do not have to beat others up to a bloody pulp so that we are killing a dead horse by the words and sentiments we use. We are not the law of God or the Holy Spirit. It is the work of the Spirit to convict the Christian of sin and to bring him to the place where he sincerely acknowledges the heinousness of his sin, sorrows over his sin, looks to Christ in faith for the forgiveness of his sin, and endeavors new obedience. One who has already been deeply convicted of his sin will likely be driven to despair if we think we are avoiding the sin of flattery by our brutal honesty. When this is the case, where is the love we are to have for our neighbor when we speak the truth? Instead of being a friend who sticks closer than a brother, we join hands with the devil and become an accuser of the brethren. Yes, there will be times due to the pride in others that we will need to confront obstinacy in sin or error. But let us never be brutally honest, but always lovingly honest (speaking the truth in love). For, dear ones, brutal honesty is cruel, whereas loving honesty is helpful.

II. The Consequences of Flattery.

A. Our text states that a man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.

1. A flatterer sets a trap for his neighbor by his scheming, hoping to use (for his own advantage) the flattery he has cast upon him. There will come a time when the flatterer will seek a favor or will seek the blind loyalty of those upon whom he has cast his net. Dear ones, if you allow yourself to be flattered by others (not sincerely thanked for a favor extended, nor earnestly commended for a job well done), but embarrassingly flattered by others, you will find that such kisses from disguised friends will soon become daggers from open enemies.

a. When should you suspect that you are being flattered?

(1) When what is said to you or about you is an exaggeration of the truth or an outright falsehood.

(2) When someone has a track record of not being honest with you.

(3) When there are strings attached to the compliment.

(4) When what is said is inappropriate. For example, it is always inappropriate to flirt with another man's wife or another woman's husband by means of flattering words.

(5) When superlatives are joined one to another (the "best", the "greatest", the "most" etc).

b. What should you do when you believe you are being flattered? Honestly tell the flatterer that what has been said about you is either an exaggeration of the truth or a not the truth at all. If it continues to happen, be honest with the person and speak the truth in love, telling them that you would like the flattery to stop because it is not the truth and it only feeds your pride (which you do not need).

2. A flatterer not only spreads a net for his neighbor's feet, but he also spreads a net for his own feet. For he lives a life of hypocrisy and lies deceiving and being deceived. A flatterer murders his own soul for he will not accept the truth of God about the seriousness of his sin and his desperate need of Christ, but will continue to tell a lie so often that he comes to believe a lie and to live a lie. Thomas Brooks has written the following about flatterers (*The Necessity, Excellency, Rarity, and Beauty of Holiness*, 4:203):

Flatterers are devouring caterpillars: flatterers' tongues do more mischief than persecutors' swords, for their swords can but destroy the bodies of men, but flatterers' tongues destroy the souls of men. Flatterers are the greatest soul-cheaters and soul-undoers in the world.

B. Consider the end of some of the flatterers and those who believed flatterers in Scripture: the flattering princes to Darius (Daniel 6:7,24); the flattering prophets to Ahab (1 Kings 22:11-12, 34-35); Herod (Acts 12:22-23). All those given over to a life of flattery reveal they have never truly embraced the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone (Revelation 21:8). Let us not be like the Pharisees who merely flattered Christ with hypocritical words they did not believe. Let us cast ourselves upon Christ in sincerity, for flattery must flee in the light of truth.

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