

Flattering God

“Flattery” is speech which praises someone insincerely by beguiling them with pleasing words.” Flattery, while approaching truth, often has the ulterior motivation of manipulation. Flattery often sounds true, but it comes from a deceitful heart. Consider these two examples: first, a young man who is truly infatuated with a young woman, speaks his heart and tells her that she is the most beautiful person he has ever met. He is speaking from his heart, and he means every word of what he says. Second, a different young man tells the same woman that she is the most beautiful person he has ever met, but he has ulterior motives. In his heart he wants to seduce her, and he is looking for a way to manipulate her into agreeing to be with him. Because the words spoken are the same, it is hard to determine if someone is being genuine or if they are engaging in manipulative flattery.

In Psalm 78:36, the psalmist says, “these people would then flatter him with their mouths, lying to them with their tongues.” In the context of that verse, God has rescued his people from their enemies, and immediately after their rescue, they were grateful. However, in a short time, their praises of gratitude turned to flattery. Had we been observing those people, we might not have seen the difference, but God knew that what he was receiving was not praise but flattery.

The Hebrew word for flattery is not often used of human attitudes toward God, but it is used fairly regularly of interactions between humans. We recall that Delilah, Samson’s wife flattered him so that he would explain the riddle he had created which, if Delilah’s people, the Philistines, could not answer it, would result in Samson receiving 30 sets of clothes from them. The NIV says that she “coaxed” him. Hebrew dictionaries say that what she did was flatter him so that he was in a position in which he was no longer master of himself with the result that he would reveal the answer to the riddle to his wife. Delilah wanted to control her husband, and she used flattery to do so.

We might ask the question: how is it possible to do the same thing with God? If flattery involves praising someone with the intent of taking control of them, can that work with God? It won’t work with God, of course, for he can see right through flattery because he knows the inclinations of the human heart. That doesn’t mean that people will stop trying to flatter God, however, for they still think it is possible to do so.

Flattering God has its roots in the pagan religions of the Old Testament. As we know the gods that the people of the other nations worshipped had made no commitment to the people who honoured them. Thus, the people could not depend on the favour of the gods, so they had to find some way to get the gods to bless them. They tried to find ways to make it so the gods had no choice but to provide them with rain or victory or whatever else they (the people) happened to need at the time. Recall the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When Elijah challenged them to a contest, the prophets of Baal spent all day calling on him to answer them, no doubt telling him how great a god he was. They went even further when he did not respond by cutting themselves with knives to show how committed they were to him. Surely Baal would listen to them when they sacrificed their own bodies. They believed they had to flatter him in order to get him to act. They wanted to put him into a position where he had no other option than

to give them what they asked. They wanted to back him into a corner, giving him no other choice but to bless them.

The young woman who is being flattered by the young man might begin to think that she must give in to his seductive efforts, for, after all, he has complimented her so highly that she owes him. What she doesn't realize is that he is thinking of himself first and what he can get rather than truly honouring her.

Psalm 76 tells us that the Israelites were flattering God. We are not told more, but we understand that they wanted to use God to get more of what he had already given them. He had given them victory over their enemies, and, they seemed to believe, if they could so flatter him that he owed them, he would become obligated to give them more than just victory over an attacking enemy. Perhaps they could get God to also enable them to defeat other nations so that they could loot them for the plunder that would make them (the Israelites) rich.

Flattery sounds like praise, but it is always done to manipulate another for one's own benefit.

But certainly this does not occur today, does it? A few days ago, I was having a conversation with a fellow pastor who had been listening to a TV preacher. He was shocked by what he heard. This preacher was saying that he was doing everything he could to impress God that when he died and arrived at the Pearly Gates, God would be obligated to let him in. "I want God to owe me," the preacher said. My fellow pastor was incredulous, even horrified, by what he had heard coming from the mouth of someone who supposedly was a fellow believer. This TV preacher was convinced that if he had enough faith and if he lived the right kind of life that God would owe him, not only when he got to heaven but also here on this earth. This particular preacher was of the "Prosperity Gospel" persuasion which teaches, in effect, that if we do everything right and do it with the proper amount of faith, God will have no other choice but to give us what we want. In other words, this preacher believed he could flatter God with his actions and words and so take control of God and manipulate him into what he (the preacher) wanted.

This preacher, who has quite a following, clearly does not understand God. Along with the people referred to in Psalm 76 he believes that God is susceptible to flattery. Unlike us, however, God sees the human heart, and he knows when genuine praise turns to selfish flattery. God sees through us quite easily, and he is never taken into by flattery.

The simple reality is that God cannot be flattered into thinking that he owes us something because God will never be in a position where he owes us anything. Anything we have is given to us as a gift, and we do not earn it. Everything we have is a result of God's grace. Further, we do not have to manipulate God into caring for us (as the nations had to do with the pagan gods) because God has already committed himself to us. He makes the first move by inviting us into covenant relationship with him, and he promises to take care of us. Our actions are simply responses to what God has already promised, and there is nothing we can do to make him more committed to us. Certainly, we cannot back God into a corner by our praise or faith or actions, making it so that God owes us because those are the very thing we owe God in the first place.

Flattering God never works, although we might be deceived into thinking that we can manipulate God by being faithful and obedient. God sees right through that, and he is never impressed, just as the young woman, if she understood that the man was trying to manipulate her into giving him what he wants, would not be impressed. The only advantage that the man has is that he might be able to fool her. We cannot

fool God. We don't need to because God is already committed to us, and when it comes down to it, what more do we need?

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