



The Puritans on human impediments in coming to Christ

Despite the freeness and graciousness of the gospel offer, and Christ's willingness and ability to save sinners, many people do not come to Him. Some hold back, lingering in doubt, while others flatly refuse to come. Why do people hesitate or vacillate about whether to come? Why would people refuse the only remedy for their fatal sickness? What impediments are present? What stands in the way of their coming to Christ?

The Puritans addressed these questions thoroughly. Richard Baxter wrote of twenty hindrances of conversion:

- 1) the willful neglect of the means of grace,
- 2) bad company,
- 3) gross ignorance of biblical truths,
- 4) unbelief,
- 5) thoughtlessness,
- 6) hardness of heart,
- 7) great esteem and interest in the world,
- 8) habits of sin subduing the mind,
- 9) foolish self-love and presumption,
- 10) counterfeit conversion,
- 11) living among strong temptations to sin,
- 12) scandal and division in the church,
- 13) the poor education of children,
- 14) striving against the Holy Spirit,
- 15) half-heartedness in religion,
- 16) delay,
- 17) failure to follow through on good beginnings,
- 18) misunderstanding some Scriptures,
- 19) pride and unteachableness, and
- 20) willful obstinacy.¹

Though several hundred years separate us from Puritan times, we are still very much connected to them in terms of the tendencies of human nature. As in the days of the Puritans, there are many obstacles that prevent sinners from coming to Christ today.

Let us address several of these obstacles. As we do, I encourage you to examine yourselves and see if these obstacles stand in your way. If so, cast yourself at the feet of the merciful Savior to find relief from your burdens and to find help to overcome these impediments through the gracious Holy Spirit. Know that, with God, you are always welcome to come to Jesus Christ. Any impediments therefore must be man-made. The fault lies with us, not God.

Impediment #1: Neglecting the Christ of the Bible

Some people refuse to come to Christ because they fail to apprehend Him as revealed in the Scriptures. This happens in at least two different ways. First, some seek comfort in coming to Christ without paying any regard to Scripture; they seek Him on their own terms. This should not be. We do not urge people to read their Bibles out of a legalistic mentality. We do not encourage people to read their Bibles so they can commend themselves to God and others. Nor do we say that people should read their Bibles to receive some mystical experience or vision. We encourage reading the Scriptures because in them the Holy Spirit reveals Christ as He truly is, and the true way of coming to Him for salvation. Without Scripture, we cannot know or come to Christ.

A second group fails to apprehend Christ, even though they may read the Bible, or listen to sermons, while persisting in a false view of what Scripture teaches. As a result, they are blind to the way Scripture reveals Christ. They are like the Pharisees, of whom Christ says,

"Ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."

(John 5:38-39)

They see the Bible as a book of sentiments and morals, intended for inspiration and self-improvement, and fail to see that the Bible lifts up Christ as the Savior of lost sinners, and the only hope for fallen humanity to escape the wrath of God. They fail to understand that the Scriptures revolve around Him. Thomas Watson said that the promises of the Bible are just the box; Christ is the jewel in the box. The Scriptures are the dish; Christ is the food on the dish.²

These people miss the mark. To have any hope of coming to Christ, we must turn to the Bible as the testimony of God to Christ. We must look to Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. We must come to Christ on God's terms, not ours.

Impediment #2: False conversion

Some people think they have already come to Christ, but their conversion is a superficial sham, not a conversion of heart. Alleine said that a man may take a soft mass of lead and shape it into a plant, and then into the form of an animal, and then into the likeness of a man, but it remains lead. In the same way an unsaved man may acquire some knowledge of the Bible, refrain from using profanity, avoid gross sin, and even perform religious duties; but if his nature is not changed, he remains unsaved.³ Conversion is not just a new manner of living; it is a new life.

Alleine wrote, *"Conversion is a deep work, a heart work. It makes a new man in a new world. It extends to the whole man, to the mind, to the members, to the motions of the whole life."*⁴

The Puritans would not allow people to delude themselves in thinking they are saved simply because they had reformed their outward lives, or because they assented to the proposition that Christ died for sinners.

Alleine wrote, *"Many urge this as a sufficient ground for their hope, that Christ died for sinners; but I must tell you, Christ never died to save impenitent and unconverted sinners, so continuing."*⁵

Impediment #3: Despair due to great sins

Some people refuse to come to Christ because they are convinced that they are such great sinners that they cannot be saved. "Why would God save such as me?" they ask. They believe that they are beyond the hope of salvation. They think, "If people could see the real me, they would realize that I could never come to Christ." They see themselves beyond the mercy and grace of Christ. They believe their sins are too great to be forgiven.

Dear friend, why would your sin prevent you from coming to Christ? Does not the cross itself testify of the exceeding sinfulness of your sin? Does not Christ's promise of rest to all who labor and are heavy laden speak to you? We do not come to Christ in the smallness of our sins or the greatness of our works. David cried unto the Lord, *"For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great!"* (Ps. 25:11).

Consider as well what an insult to Christ it is, to hold that there is a limit on His power to forgive sin, or on the power of His atoning death to justify from the guilt of all sin, or on the power of His cleansing blood to wash away sin and uncleanness. In effect you are saying that what God has provided in Christ simply falls short of what you need. God hasn't done enough for you, even though He sent His Son to the cross to suffer and to die as the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2).

There is hope for you. John Flavel said, *"The Lord is pleased to nourish still some hope in the soul under the greatest fears and troubles of spirit... In hell, indeed, there is no hope to enlighten the darkness, but it is not so upon earth."*⁶ Come to Christ with your enormous sin, with all of your baggage, and discover that He is a great Savior. The hymn writer rightly says,

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.*

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.*

Come to Christ now, come as you are, and receive the pardon of Jesus Christ!

Impediment #4: Spiritual complacency

Some people refuse to come to Christ because of spiritual laziness. They think there is no need to do today what they can put off until tomorrow. The gospel does not suit such people because they refuse to come to Christ today, while it is still the day of salvation. They presume on tomorrow, thinking that the gospel call will later come to them. Even worse, they calculate that they can go on sinning for the present, and always make it up with God another day.

They get immersed in everyday concerns. They are consumed with the world's pleasures. They see coming to Christ as an uncomfortable, unwanted burden. They would rather sit in the imagined ease of unbelief than endure the hardships of faith. Many of these people will die for refusing to endure any difficulty or discomfort.

As David Clarkson said, *"Many will not part with that which keeps them at a distance from Christ. They will not part with sin to come to Christ, and there is no coming to him without turning from that."*⁷

Alleine said that true conversion is a man's turning to the triune God *"as his all sufficient and eternal happiness."* As long as the heart seeks its rest in idols it has not yet turned to the living God. *"Have you taken God for your happiness? Where does the desire of your heart lie?"* Alleine asked us.⁸ He called men to set the world with all its "pleasures and promotions" on one hand, and God with all His excellencies on the other hand, and to choose God. By grace, choose the Father as your Father, the Son as your redeemer and righteousness, and the Spirit as your sanctifier and comforter. Choose God in His forgiveness and His holiness. Choose Him in His all-sufficiency to meet your needs and His sovereignty to rule your life.⁹

Do not fall into the rut of spiritual laziness. Do not get comfortable living among the dead. Do not perish because you find the treasures of this world more worthy than the glories of Jesus Christ. Listen to the plea of Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661):

*"I exhort you and beseech you in the bowels (compassion) of Christ, faint not, weary not. There is a great necessity of heaven; you must needs have it ... Think it not easy; for it is a steep ascent to eternal glory; many are lying dead by the way, that were slain with security."*¹⁰

Rather, by the Spirit's grace, come to Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light!

Impediment #5: Despair due to backsliding

Some people refuse to come to Christ because they believe their backsliding has disqualified them from doing so. They believe they have committed the unforgivable sin. They think they may have been saved at one time, but now all hope is lost because they have committed a terrible transgression. They have sinned against the Holy Spirit, and thus they are cast off forever.

O backsliding friend, come to Christ, for He says, *"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."* This includes you. There are no exceptions in Christ's promise. All whom the Father gives to Christ, He will raise up.

The Lord said in Jeremiah 3:12, *"Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger forever."*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) wrote that these words reveal *"God's readiness to pardon sin and to receive and entertain (welcome with blessings) returning repenting sinners."*¹⁰

He is ready to forgive you when you come to Him! Remember that Christ taught that we must forgive the sin of a brother, *"until seventy times seven"* (Matt. 18:22). Divine forgiveness must exceed such a human standard.

You may object: "I am clearly not one that the Father has given to His Son. For if I was, I would not have backslidden so grievously." Dear friend, do you long after Christ? Do you despise your sin? Do you feel remorse for what you have done? If you say yes, the gospel promise is for you. But if you continue to push it away, saying, "It can't belong to me," think of David or Peter, and many others, who returned to Christ after a lapse into gross sin. You, too, are not beyond the reach of sovereign grace. Heavy laden as you are, come to Christ and cast your burden at His feet.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

(1 John 1:9)

Impediment #6: Confusion about election

Some people refuse to come to Christ because they do not think they are among the elect of God. They say, "If Christ only saves His elect, and I don't think I'm elect, then all my attempts to come to Him will fail." You, dear friend, have misunderstood the doctrine of election. This doctrine does not keep people away from Christ; when rightly understood, it draws people to Christ. Without the glorious doctrine of Christ's free election, no one would come (Rom. 3:10-12). Election is the friend of sinners; it paves the way for sinners to come to Christ. The door is open.

"But it is not open to me," you say. Dear friend, do not let your election decide your coming; let your coming decide your election.

Joseph Alleine wrote, *"You begin at the wrong end if you first dispute about your election. Prove your conversion, and then never doubt your election... Whatever God's purposes be,*

which are secret, I am sure His promises are plain... Do not stand still disputing about your election, but set to repenting and believing.”¹¹

The doctrine of election should drive us to Christ. Come to Christ and He will enable you to make both your calling and your election sure (Acts 5:31).

Impediment #7: Ignorance of the gospel call

Some people refuse to come to Christ because they have never heard the command to come to Christ; they have never repented of their sins and have never felt the Spirit open their hearts to embrace the Christ offered in the gospel. For such persons there is a message of warning and a message of hope. The message of warning is that if you continue in your ignorance and unbelief, you will perish in it, and there will be no hope of coming to Christ. The door of the kingdom of heaven will be barred fast. You will be kept far away from the Lord Jesus Christ, forever and ever. To you, I lovingly exhort, learn of Christ, come to Christ, and trust in Christ, while there is time to do so (John 6:37).

Impediment #8: Unbelief

All of these impediments and there are many more – are rooted in the soil of unbelief. Unbelief is the “mother sin” of all sin, the root and receptacle of all sin. Unbelief is the belief of Satan’s lie. Unbelief makes us cling to the world rather than to Christ. Unbelief is the ultimate reason for not coming to Christ.

John Calvin wrote, *“The blindness of unbelievers in no way detracts from the clarity of the gospel; the sun is no less bright because blind men do not perceive its light... Unbelief makes us rebels and deserters; (it) is always proud... Our own unbelief is the only impediment which prevents God from satisfying us largely and bountifully with all good things.”¹²*

Matthew Henry said, *“Nothing is more offensive to God than disbelief of his promise and despair of the performance of it because of some difficulties that seem to lie in the way... Unbelief may truly be called the great damning sin, because it leaves us under the guilt of all our other sins; it is a sin against the remedy.”¹³*

Ultimately, it is unbelief that will drag to hell all those who refuse to come to Christ.

“No sin makes less noise, but none so surely damns the soul, as unbelief,” J. C. Ryle said.¹⁴

I once pastured a man who strove hard against his unbelief. With tears streaming down his face, he cried out, “I hate my unbelief! O my cursed, cursed, cursed unbelief!” Do you hate and curse your unbelief? Do you flee to Christ from it as that which is most offensive to God (John 6:37)?

Conclusion: Reject the world’s pig food and be Christ’s willing slave

Rowland Hill (1744-1833), a popular, evangelical, English preacher, hit a low point in his ministry for a few months in the midst of his ministerial career. He was sorely disappointed with the lack of fruit on his ministry. One day he looked out of his study window and saw a pig farmer going to market. To Hill’s amazement, the pigs followed the farmer straight into the slaughter house. When he later saw the farmer emerge from the slaughter house without the pigs, Hill went out to meet him. The minister said, “How did you get those pigs to follow you to their own death? I cannot get people to follow Christ to their eternal life.” The farmer replied, “Didn’t you see that as I walked along I had some pig feed in my pockets and that I just dropped a few crumbs every few steps as I walked? For a few crumbs of food they followed me to their death.”

Will you believe and follow Satan for a few crumbs of this world’s pleasures to your eternal death? Or will you believe in and follow the Savior to eternal life who said,

"I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."

(John 6:35)

Take to heart the words of Charles Spurgeon, *"Unbelief will destroy the best of us. Faith will save the worst of us."*¹⁵

If, by grace, you do come to Jesus, think of what you will have.

David Clarkson said, *"You shall be admitted to such union with him, such a relation to him, as will not only engage his tenderness and love, but his joy and delight... He will join you to himself in an everlasting covenant, a marriage-covenant, that shall never be broken, nor you ever divorced."*¹⁶

A wealthy Englishman went to California in the 1850s to enrich himself during the gold rush. After much success, he left to go back to England. He stopped at New Orleans on the way home, and, as all tourists did at that time, visited the infamous slave trading block. As he approached the place where people were sold for cash, he saw a beautiful young African woman standing on the block. He overheard two men, who were trying to outbid each other for her, talking about what they would do to her if they could buy her. To their surprise the Englishman joined in the bidding by offering twice the price.

The auctioneer was astonished. "No one has ever offered this much for a slave," he said.

After purchasing her, the Englishman stepped forward to get her. When he helped her down to his level, she spat in his face. He wiped away the spit and led her to a building in another part of town. There she watched uncomprehendingly as he filled out forms. To her astonishment he handed her some manumission papers and said, "There, now you are a free woman." She spat in his face again.

"Don't you understand?" he asked, as he wiped her spit away again. "You are free! You are free!"

She stared at him in disbelief a long while. Then she fell at his feet, and wept. And wept some more. Finally, she looked up and asked, "Sir, is it really true that you paid more than anyone has ever paid to purchase me as a slave, only to set me free?"

"Yes," he said, calmly.

She wept some more. Finally, she spoke: "Sir, I have only one request. Can I be your slave forever?"

Come to Jesus Christ, for He will not cast out those who come to Him. He alone has purchased them with the price of His own blood. He alone can set them free from bondage to sin and death. He alone can lead them to eternal life. And in so doing, He makes them willing and ready to live unto Him, as His willing servants in this life and forever (Ps. 110:3).

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Endnotes:

¹ "A Treatise of Conversion," in Baxter, *Works*, 7:251-332.

"To Lady Cardoness," in *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), 170.

² Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 216.

³ Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶ Flavel, *Works*, 2:163.

⁷ Clarkson, *Works*, 1:337.

⁸ Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

¹⁰ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 4:331.

¹¹ Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 12.

¹² Quoted in Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 661.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 662.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 663.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Clarkson, *Works*, 1:347.