"How to Examine Your Heart"
(Revelation 3:17-18)

I. Introduction.
  A. Orientation.
    1. Last week, we began to break ground on Flavel's view of the marks of grace.
      a. We didn't consider his view of the marks directly, but considered why the subject was important to him.
      b. There were two reasons:
        (i) The first was that he did not want to perish: "He was not only a zealous preacher in the pulpit, but a sincere Christian in his closet, frequent in self-examination, as well as in pressing it upon others; being afraid, lest while he preached to others he himself should be a cast-away" (x).
        (ii) The second was that he did not want his hearers to perish. Through his experience of grace and the ability to recognize it, he would be better equipped to lead his congregation to a well-grounded assurance: "These things being previously dispatched, he tried himself by the Scripture marks of sincerity and regeneration; by this means he attained to a well-grounded assurance, the ravishing comforts of which were many times shed abroad in his soul; this made him a powerful and successful preacher, as one who spoke from his own heart to those of others. He preached what he felt, what he had handled, what he had seen and tasted of the word of life, and they felt it also" (xi-xii).

    2. His life also demonstrated what was possible with a strong assurance – how it can help us in at least two ways:
      a. First, it relieves our concerns about our own salvation to free us up to serve the Lord with all our might.
      b. And second, it also carries with it an assurance of the reality of the things of the Lord that will also strengthen our efforts:
        (i) Being fully convinced there is a judgment day coming and a heaven and hell where all souls will go can radically alter the course of our lives.
        (ii) We won't be as apt to spend them on fruitless things, but use them to serve the Lord we and all men will one day face.
        (iii) Flavel's life showed us what these convictions can produce.

  B. Preview.
    1. Last week's purpose was twofold:
      a. First, to get to know the man whose work we're considering.
      b. And second to see a living example of the difference a sound assurance can make, as one of the cloud of witnesses surrounding us (Heb. 12:1).

    2. Tonight, we'll consider the question of how to examine our own hearts in this regard.

a. We'll consider some new things, as well as review some of what we saw last week.
b. We'll look at three things:
(i) That self-examination is difficult.
(ii) That it is necessary self-examination.
(iii) And how it may be carried out.

II. Sermon.
A. First, the difficulty of self-examination.
1. Flavel believed it was every Christian's duty to examine his own heart to know its condition.
2. At the same time, he believed this was among the most difficult of all Christian duties to perform well.
a. In his *The Touchstone of Sincerity*, he writes, "Among the difficulties and severities of true religion, the faithful searching, and diligent keeping of our hearts are found in the first and highest rank of difficulties: These two take up the main work of a Christian betwixt them, *Hic labor, hoc opus est*" (509).
b. In his book *Husbandry Spiritualized: The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things*, he tells us what makes this work so difficult: it's because the wheat and the tares bear a great resemblance to each other. He writes, "The difficulty of distinguishing them is very great. And this difference will yet be more subtile [sic] and undiscernible, if I should tell you, that as in so many things the hypocrite resembles the saint; so there are other things in which a real Christian may act too like an hypocrite. When we find a Pharaoh confessing, an Herod practising, as well as hearing, a Judas preaching Christ, and an Alexander venturing his life for Paul; and, on the other side, shall find a David condemning that in another which he practised himself, an Hezekiah glorying in his riches, a Peter dissembling, and even all the disciples forsaking Christ in an hour of trouble and danger: O then! how hard is it for the eye of man to discern betwixt chaff and wheat? How many upright hearts are now censured, whom God will clear? How many false hearts are now approved, whom God will condemn? Men ordinarily have no clear convictive proofs, but only probable symptoms; which, at most, can beget but a conjectural knowledge of another's state. And they that shall peremptorily judge either way, may possibly wrong the generation of the upright; or, on the other side, absolve and justify the wicked. And truly, considering what hath been said, it is no great wonder that dangerous mistakes are so frequently made in this matter" (*Works*, 5:96-97).

B. Second, the need of self-examination.
1. Though difficult, Flavel believed it was a work that must be done, especially in his day, and quickly.
a. In his opinion, Revelation 13:3 – "His deadly wound was healed" – indicated that though the Reformation had dealt a terrible blow to the Roman Church, there would be a time when popery would once again "over-run the reformed nations" (*Touchstone*, 510).

b. He mentions an unnamed expositor – one greatly respected among the churches – who indicated that this short period "is like to fall heaviest upon the worshippers in the *outward court*, namely the formal professors of the times" (Ibid.).
c. That being the case, Flavel exhorts, "O how much is every man now concerned to have his estate and condition well cleared, and to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure!" (Ibid.).

2. Though we may differ with Flavel's understanding of Revelation 13:3, we can certainly agree with him as to the importance of knowing the state of our hearts.
   a. Sadly, most are not as concerned as they should be about the state of their souls.
   b. "It should both amaze and grieve a pious mind, to see how some ingenious persons can sit with unwearied patience and pleasure, racking their brains upon some dry *school problem*, or some nice *mathematical point*; whilst no reasons or persuasions can prevail with them to spend one serious hour in the search and study of their own hearts!" (Ibid.).
   c. Things haven't changed much. Most today neglect to examine their hearts, either because they are afraid of what they will find, or because they take for granted they already belong to Christ and that all will turn out well for them in the end.
   d. Flavel reminds us that allowing ourselves or others to continue in either state is not wise. We must know our standing before God, for only then can our souls be at rest and our lives fruitful in the Savior's work.

C. Finally, how self-examination may be carried out.
   1. How can we know that we have eternal life?
      a. We must have the marks of God's saving grace, the evidence that the Spirit is at work within us making us like Christ, as we have seen and as Flavel will show us.
      b. But how can we know we possess these marks? Flavel tells us in his book, *Preparations for Sufferings; or, the Best Work in the Worst Times*, that the Spirit must show us that we have them:
         (i) "In short, it is nothing else but the Spirit's shining upon his own work, in the hearts of believers, thereby enabling them sensibly to see and feel it to their own satisfaction" (Works, 6:37).
         (ii) Assurance does not come merely from the fruits being present in our lives, but by the Spirit's showing us that we have them, as Stoddard also indicated.

      c. But how can we see the Spirit's illumination of these marks?
         (i) Flavel tells us: You must "'enter into thy chamber and shut thy door;' sit close to this employment thou are here directed to: and however times shall govern, whether it be fair or foul weather abroad, thou shalt never repent such an expence [sic] of thy time. . . . And be not discouraged at the difficulty of obtaining it: This *white stone* is no *philosopher's stone*,

which no man could ever say he had in his own hand; for many a Christian hath really found it in waiting upon the Lord by prayer, and diligently searching the scriptures and his own heart" (*Touchstone*, 510-511).

(ii) We must have the marks, the Spirit must illumine them, we must know what to look for, and we must search our hearts to see if they are there.

2. Last week, Flavel gave us some good counsel, some prerequisites to this examination that we will conclude with this evening:
   a. It is important and difficult: "To make sure of eternal life, (said he) is the great business which the sons of death have to do in this world. Whether a man consider the immortality of his own soul, the ineffable joys and glory of heaven, the extreme and endless torments of hell, the inconceivable sweetness of peace of conscience, or the misery of being subject to the terrors thereof; all these put a necessity, a solemnity, a glory upon this work. But, Oh! the difficulties and dangers attending it! How many, and how great are these? What judgment, faithfulness, resolution, and watchfulness doth it require? Such is the deceitfulness, darkness, and inconstancy of our hearts, and such the malice, policy and diligence of Satan to manage and improve it, that he who attempts this work had need both to watch his seasons for it, and frequently look up to God for his guidance and illumination, and to spend many sad and serious thoughts before he adventure upon a determination and conclusion of the state of his soul."
   b. We must have a good understanding of what to look for (the marks): "To the end therefore that this most important work may not miscarry in my hands, I have collected, with all the care I can, the best and soundest characters I can find in the writings of our modern divines, taken out of the scripture, and by their labours illustrated and prepared for use, that I might make a right application of them."
   c. We must have the illuminating work of the Spirit: "I have earnestly sought the Lord for the assistance of his Spirit, which can only manifest my own heart unto me, and shew me the true state thereof, which is that thing my soul doth most earnestly desire to know; and I hope the Lord will answer my desire therein, according to his promises, Luke xi. 13. John xiv. 26" (x).
   d. We must lay aside the idea of being a friend to ourselves and become our own judges: "I have endeavoured to cast out and lay aside self-love, lest my heart being prepossessed therewith, my judgment should be perverted, and become partial on passing sentence on my estate. I have, in some measure, brought my heart to be willing to judge and condemn myself for an hypocrite, if such I shall be found on trial, as to approve myself for sincere and upright. Yea, I would have it so far from being grievous to me so to do, that if I have been all this while mistaken and deceived, I shall rejoice and bless the Lord with my soul, that now at last it may be discovered to me, and I may be set right, though I lay the foundation new again. This I have laboured to bring my heart to, knowing that thousands have dashed and split to pieces upon this rock. And indeed he

that will own the person of a judge, must put off the person of a friend" (x-xi).

e. We must look at what we see as though it was at the final judgment: "It hath been my endeavour to keep upon my heart a deep sense of that great judgment-day throughout this work; as knowing by experience what a potent influence this hath on the conscience, to make it deliberate, serious and faithful in its work; and therefore I have demanded of my own conscience, before the resolution of each question, O my conscience, deal faithfully with me in this particular, and say no more to me than thou wilt own and stand to in the great day, when the counsels of all hearts shall be made manifest."

f. Understanding what each mark is, we must take them to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to show us whether we have it or not: "Having seriously weighed each mark, and considered where in the weight and substance of it lieth, I have gone to the Lord in prayer for his assistance, ere I have drawn up the answer of my conscience; and as my heart hath been persuaded therein, so have I determined and resolved: what hath been clear to my experience, I have so set down; and what hath been dubious, I have here left it so."

g. We must examine our hearts when they are at peace, and especially not when our corruption is stirred up within them: "I have made choice of the fittest seasons I had for this work, and set to it when I have found my heart in the most quiet and serious frame. For as he that would see his face in a glass, must be fixed, not in motion, or in water, must make no commotion in it; so it is in this case."

h. Finally, we must carefully examine our sins to see if they reveal hypocrisy or are only reasons to be humbled: "*Lastly,* To the end I may be successful in this work, I have laboured all along carefully to distinguish betwixt such sins as are grounds of doubting, and such as are only grounds of humiliation; knowing that not every evil is a ground of doubting, though all, even the smallest infirmities, administer matter of humiliation; and thus I have desired to enterprize this great business. O Lord, assist thy servant, that he may not mistake herein; but, if his conscience do now condemn him, he may lay a better foundation whilst he hath time; and if it shall now acquit him, he may also have boldness in the day of judgment" (xi).

i. Equipped with these rules for judging our hearts, Flavel will begin to show us next time what the marks are and under what conditions they may best be seen.

j. But for now, let's take to heart the directions he has given us to examine our own hearts and be true to the Lord and to ourselves. Amen.