

“The Great Difference”
(Matthew 25:1-13)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. So far we’ve looked at several sources in our quest to understand the marks of grace.

a. From the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments:

(i) This is where our study must begin, since it is the touchstone of truth: if what we read in our uninspired human authors doesn’t agree with this, then we must reject it.

(ii) In the OT, the primary thing we saw is that true religion is a religion of the heart: God must turn to us, He must circumcise our hearts, take away our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh, if we are to love Him with all our heart and all our soul; without the circumcision of the heart, we cannot love Him.

(iii) The first letter of John in the NT gave us more of the details of this circumcision of the heart:

(a) It will cause us to love everything that has God’s holy image stamped on it: God Himself, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Word, and the children of God.

(b) At the same time it will cause us to hate everything contrary to that holiness: the evil one, the world, and the flesh.

b. From there we moved on to consider the writings of two very famous pastors, both of whom were considered to be experts on this subject by Jonathan Edwards:

(i) Solomon Stoddard:

(a) JE’s grandfather on his mother’s side, graduate of Harvard College and the pastor of the Northampton Church JE eventually ministered to.

(b) His main contribution was that grace may only be known from its workings in the heart, since both believers and unbelievers are capable outwardly of doing the same things.

(c) To have the assurance that we are true believers, we must see this grace – we must know that our actions arise from God’s Spirit in our hearts.

(d) If we know that even one of them does, then we may know they all do and that we are saints and not hypocrites.

(ii) John Flavel:

(a) A Puritan pastor of the 17th Century, who labored in the port town of Dartmouth, England.

(b) He also studied this subject in great depth because 1) He didn’t want to perish, and 2) He didn’t want his hearers to perish.

- (c) His main contribution was that God shows us whether or not there is grace in our hearts through a variety of trials he has ordained for this purpose.
 - (d) It's true that they will also show us our corruption more clearly, but it will purify our faith and help us to see it.
2. Last week, we were introduced to Thomas Shepard. With regard to him, let me just note these two things in review:
- a. That Shepard was either a major influence or a major ally of Jonathan Edwards (I think the latter). He was quoted by Edwards more often than all the other authors combined.
 - b. That Shepard himself was a very humble man, greatly convicted and grieved over his sins.
 - (i) Remember Shepard's estimation of himself, "The more I do, the worse I am."
 - (ii) As an illustration of this, he preached to his people, "There is no difference. I am as you are, and you are as I am. Just try the thing yourselves. Just begin to love God with all your heart, and you will soon see that the more you try to do that the less will you feel satisfied that you succeed. And, in like manner, when you begin to love your neighbour as yourself you will begin to get a lesson with a vengeance in the spiritual life. Just try to rejoice in all your neighbour's well-being as much as you rejoice in your own. Just try to relish and enjoy all other men's praises of your neighbour as you relish and enjoy all other men's praises of yourself. Just try to take delight in all your neighbour's rewards, promotions, prosperities as you take delight in your own. And go on trying to do that toward all men around you, friend and foe, and you will get a lesson in the infinite and exquisite holiness and spirituality of God's law of love, and at the same time a lesson in the abominable and unspeakable corruptions of your own heart that will make you wiser in all these matters than all your teachers.'
 - (iii) When we study his insights in our present subject, we should never think he wrote the things he did to lift himself up and put others down. He is a true physician of the soul who wanted to help those he ministered to find their way to heaven.

B. Preview.

- 1. This evening, we'll begin to look at the thoughts of Shepard on the subject of the marks of saving grace, primarily from his work *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*:
 - a. Each author has a different perspective, and through a consideration of the contributions of each, we will get a better picture of the whole.
 - b. Shepard begins where the subject must begin and on grounds we now know exist from the Scripture:
 - (i) That there is a *difference* between saints and hypocrites.
 - (ii) And that this difference is so great that they may easily be distinguished.
- 2. This evening, we'll consider two things:
 - a. First, that there is a great difference between saints and hypocrites.
 - b. Second, why this difference exists.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, Shepard tells us that there is a great difference between saints and hypocrites.
1. Perhaps the best place to begin in the thought of Shepard is with this statement, “There is a vast and great internal difference between those that are sincere indeed and the closest hypocrites; or there are certain qualifications within, and operations of God upon the souls of the faithful, which make a very great difference between them and the closest hypocrite” (Parable, 206).
 - a. It might appear from this that for Shepard the reality of one’s conversion is an easy matter to determine, for the greater the difference between two things, the more easily they are distinguished. But this is not necessarily the case.
 - b. The counterfeits generated by the flesh and promoted by the devil are often very convincing.
 - c. However, the more a man studies this subject of the marks of grace and examines his own heart, the clearer the differences will appear.
 - (i) Notice that Shepard very wisely locates this difference in the soul of man, rather than in his actions.
 - (ii) Though it’s true that right actions flow from a regenerate heart, it’s also true that right actions may flow from an evil heart.
 - (iii) A man may do what the Law requires without any love for God. Consider *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 16.7, “Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.”
 - (iv) That which distinguishes grace is internal, therefore one must be able to see a man’s heart before he will be able to see this difference.
 - (v) This means that the one making the assessment must be the subject himself. Others who may have an interest in the conclusion, such as the elders of the church when they examine candidates for membership, must rely on the testimony of the candidates themselves, when their actions do not disqualify them.
 2. To show us that this internal difference exists, Shepard points to the plain statement of Christ regarding the ten virgins, “Some were wise, others were foolish” (Parable, 206).
 - a. “Wisdom and folly are different qualities, and though these keep their residence chiefly in the mind, yet the Lord never did infuse any true wisdom into the mind but there was a great change of the heart, nor never was any man left unto his own folly but it did not only argue an evil heart, but did ever arise from thence” (Ibid.).
 - b. The Lord’s redemptive grace produces a marked difference in the regenerate.

- (i) Paul writes, “For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8), “You were dead in your trespasses and sins,” but He made you “alive together with Christ” (2:1, 5).
 - (ii) This difference is so great that the faithful see it (207). The saints may not know what has happened to them when this change first takes place, but eventually they do. (Cf. WCF: assurance is not of the essence of faith).
 - (iii) John writes, “We know that we are of God” (1 John 5:19), and Paul commands us to examine ourselves to know whether or not we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5), presumably because such a determination is possible. He also commands us to thank the Lord for His saving mercies, which assumes we can know we have them (Colossians 1:12, 13).
3. But what about counterfeits? Isn't it possible that my flesh or Satan may deceive me as to my true spiritual condition?
- a. Shepard replies that the difference between grace and nature is so great, that nature cannot counterfeit it.
 - b. Unbelievers may receive “prophetical gifts and common graces; but there is a higher and more divine work which they can not [sic] receive,” namely, the desire to subject themselves to the holiness of God (Ibid.).
 - (i) Paul writes in Romans 8:7, “Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*.”
 - (ii) They may be able to counterfeit actions, but not grace. Not only are they unable to counterfeit grace, they cannot even understand what it is (1 Corinthians 2:14: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised”), and so they do not know what they should ask God for in their seeking after it (John 4:10: Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water”): “A beast cannot conceive what a life a man leads” (Ibid.).
- B. This brings us to the second point: Shepard tells us why there is a great difference between saints and hypocrites. Why does God give these “marks” to the saints in the first place? It is so that they may know they are saved.
- 1. Having seen there is a great difference that exists between the converted and the unconverted, Shepard raises the question, Why does the Lord create this difference?
 - a. The first reason is that the Father wants His children, even the least of them, know of His infinite love towards them (John 17:23: “I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me”; 207-208). When the evidence of His grace is present, so is the certainty of His love.
 - b. Second, is it possible that Christ would have shed His blood to do nothing further in His people than He does in the hypocrite? He died not only to cleanse His people from their sins, but also to free them from its power. This He does, little by little, to distinguish His children from the world (Ephesians 5:25-27: Paul

writes, “Christ . . . loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless”; 208-209).

- c. Third, God gives His saints the same grace that is in Christ (John 1:16): “Hence we are said to ‘bear his image;’ and because it is but little at first, hence ‘from glory to glory.’ 2 Cor. iii.18.” The Lord wants those who receive the same grace as Christ to manifest the same divine character; this will also set them distinctly apart from the hypocrite (209).
 - d. Fourth, if the Lord didn’t create any difference between the believer and the hypocrite, this would lay a foundation for the “contempt of grace, and of the beauty of holiness in the hearts and lives of God’s people. . . . If the Spirit of Christ should sanctify or call a saint no more than a hypocrite, then the one has no more cause to be thankful for the work of the Spirit than the other; and when a man comes to look upon the work of the Spirit, and the grace of it, there is cold water cast upon those; this is no more than what a hypocrite has. Christ has not only redeemed by price, but also by power, from the power of Satan, sin, darkness, delusion; and not to be thankful for this is not to be thankful for the redemption of Christ” (209-210).
 - e. Further, if there were no differences between the regenerate and the unregenerate, this would void all the conditional promises in the Word, for He made these promises to particular qualifications the Spirit produces in the saints, as we read in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:3-5; cf. vv. 6-12; 210).
 - f. Lastly, if there was no difference between saints and hypocrites, then the saints themselves could not know whether they were in a state of grace. Then the apostle John misled himself as well as others when he wrote his first letter (Ibid.).
2. Shepard concludes,
- a. “Hence it may appear that the true believer may know the blessedness of his estate, by the peculiarness of a work within him. For if, indeed, there should be no difference between those graces that be in hypocrites and in saints, if no difference between love, and faith, and desire in one, and that which is in another, then none could know the blessedness of their estates by any work; but seeing that the Lord has made a vast and a known difference, so that God knows it, and themselves know it, as has been proved, and all the world might know it, but that they want eyes to see men’s hearts, and they shall know it at the last day to their eternal anguish, ‘when the hidden things of darkness’ and the ‘secrets of all hearts shall be opened;’ then it must needs follow, from the knowledge of such a work, a man may conclude his blessed and safe estate” (213).
 - b. We know the difference exists. From here, we’ll examine what those differences are, and how to know whether or not we have them. Amen.