

“The Need for Self-Examination”
(Revelation 3:17-18)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation: We have been studying the marks of grace.

1. First, from the Bible, to gain the necessary background.
 - a. From the OT, we’ve see that the primary marks of the circumcision of the heart are love to God with all the heart and soul, that results in a turning from sin into the path of obedience.
 - b. From the NT, we’ve seen essentially the same thing, only laid out more explicitly: love to God, to Christ, to the Spirit, to His people, for God’s truth, for His church.
2. Then we began looking at what was written on the subject from Church History, beginning with Solomon Stoddard:
 - a. Again, he showed us that love is the most important thing: we must love God and Jesus Christ, if we are true believers.
 - (i) We can know that we love Him when the Spirit opens our eyes to the reality of the things of God.
 - (ii) When we see Him through the eyes of faith and love what we see.
 - (iii) And when this spiritual sight of God draws our hearts out towards Him in loving and universal obedience.
 - b. If we sin, this doesn’t mean we don’t love Him, unless we are practicing sin – if we do this, we don’t love God.
 - c. But even if we do what is right, we must beware of counterfeits.
 - (i) An unbeliever can do almost everything a believer can *outwardly*.
 - (ii) But what he can never do is love God, repent of his sin out of love for God, and aim all his actions at God’s glory because of that love.
 - (iii) If this is what motivates your good works then you are saved; but if you do them for any other reason, you are still in need of salvation.

B. Preview.

1. This evening, we’ll begin looking at John Flavel, another Puritan minister whose writings influenced Edwards.
 - a. Iain Murray writes, “While it is apparent that Edwards read theological writers who were his contemporaries, including promoters of ‘new divinity’, the names which predominate in the catalogue [a list of books Edwards kept that interested him] are those of the old authors of Reformed and Puritan persuasion: Calvin, Perkins, Van Mastricht, Sibbes, Manton, Flavel, Owen, Charnock and so on” (Murray, *A New Biography*, 68).
 - b. B. B. Warfield also notes Flavel’s influence on Edwards’ thinking where he writes, “As would have been expected, he fed himself on the great Puritan divines, and formed not merely his thought but his life upon them. We find

him in his youth, for instance, diligently using Manton's 'Sermons on the 119th Psalm' as a spiritual guide; and in his rare allusions to authorities in his works, he betrays familiarity with such writers as William Perkins, John Preston, Thomas Blake, Anthony Burgess, Stephen Charnock, John Flavel, Theophilus Gale, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Shephard, Richard Sibbes, John Smith the Platonist, and Samuel Clark the Arian. Even his contemporaries he knew and estimated at their true values: Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge as a matter of course; and also Thomas Boston, the scheme of thought of whose 'View of the Covenant of Grace' he confessed he did not understand, but whose 'Fourfold State of Man' he 'liked exceedingly well'" (Warfield, *Encyclopedia*).

- c. The editors of the Banner of Truth Edition of Flavel's *Works* note, "The repeated editions of Flavel bear their own witness to his popularity: five times were his Collected Works issued in the 18th century and at least three times in the 19th. He was a favourite with Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield (who ranked him with John Bunyon and Matthew Henry), and a century later, with such Scottish evangelical leaders as R. M. M'Cheyne and Andrew Bonar" (*Works*, dust jacket).
 - d. Edwards, in his classic work on the marks of saving grace, *The Religious Affections*, quoted John Flavel third most frequently, behind only Thomas Shepard and Solomon Stoddard. This by itself shows the importance of Flavel's writings to the present subject.
2. What we'll do now is look at something of Flavel's background.
 - a. This will help us to value more what he writes: if we learn to respect him before we study him.
 - b. But it will also, as it did in the case of Solomon Stoddard, give us some insight into why this subject was so important to him.

II. Sermon.

- A. Early life and ordination to the Gospel ministry. (Taken from *The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth; Works*, 1:iii-xvi).
 1. John was born in 1628, the eldest son of Richard Flavel, a Puritan minister who died in prison for his Nonconformity.
 2. "He was religiously educated by his father, and having profited well at the grammar schools, was sent early to Oxford, and settled a commoner in University College. He plied his studies hard, and exceeded many of his contemporaries in university learning" (iv).
 3. "Soon after his commencing bachelor of arts, Mr. Walplate, the minister of Diptford, in the county of Devon, was rendered incapable of performing his office by reason of his age and infirmity, and sent to Oxford for an assistant; Mr. Flavel, though but young, was recommended to him as a person duly qualified, and was accordingly settled there by the standing committee of Devon, April 27, 1650, to preach as probationer and assistant to Mr. Walplate."

4. "Mr. Flavel considering the weight of his charge, applied himself to the work of his calling with great diligence; and being assiduous in reading, meditation and prayer, he increased in ministerial knowledge daily . . . so that he attained to an high degree of eminency and reputation for his useful labours in the church."
5. About six months after his settling at Diptford, he heard of an ordination to be at Salisbury, and therefore went there with his testimonials, and offered himself to be examined and ordained by the presbytery there: they appointed him a text, upon which he preached to their general satisfaction; and having afterwards examined him as to his learning, &c. they set him apart to the work of the ministry, with prayer and imposition of hands, on the 17th day of October, 1650."
6. "Mr. Flavel being thus ordained, returned to Diptford, and after Mr. Walplate's death succeeded in the rectory" (iv).
7. "The people of Dartmouth (a great and noted sea-port in the county of Devon, formerly under the charge of the Reverend Mr. Anthony Hartford, deceased) unanimously chose Mr. Flavel to succeed him" (v).
8. "Mr. Flavel being settled at Dartmouth by the election of people, and an order from Whitehall by the commissioners for approbation of public preachers, of the 10th of December, 1656, he was associated with Mr. Allein Geere, a very worthy, but sickly, man. The ministerial work was thus divided between them; Mr. Flavel was to preach on the Lord's Day at Townstall, the mother-church standing upon a hill without the town; and every fortnight in his turn at the Wednesday's Lecture at Dartmouth. Here God crowned his labours with many conversions" (v-vi).

B. Ministry.

1. "By his unwearied application to study, he had acquired a great stock both of divine and human learning. He was master of the controversies betwixt the Jews and Christians, Papists and Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists, and betwixt the Orthodox, and the Arminians and Socinians: he was likewise well read in the Controversies about Church-discipline, Infant-Baptism, and Antinomianism. He was well acquainted with the School-divinity, and drew up a judicious and ingenious scheme of the whole body of that Theology in good Latin, which he presented to a person of quality, but it was never printed. He had one way of improving his knowledge, which is very proper for young divines; whatever remarkable passage he heard in private conference, if he was familiar with the relator, he would desire him to repeat it again, and insert it into his Aversaria: by these methods he acquired a vast stock of proper materials for his popular sermons in the pulpit, and his more elaborate works for the press."
2. "He had an excellent gift of prayer, and was never at a loss in all his various occasions for suitable matter and words; and, which was the most remarkable of all, he always brought with him a broken heart and moving affections: his tongue and spirit were touched with a live coal from the altar, and he was evidently assisted by the holy Spirit of grace and supplication in

that divine ordinance. Those who lived in his family, say, that he was always full and copious in prayer, seemed constantly to exceed himself, and rarely made use twice of the same expressions” (vi).

3. “When the act of uniformity [1662] turned him out with the rest of his nonconforming brethren, he did not thereupon quit his relation to his church, he thought the souls of his flock to be more precious than to be so tamely neglected; he took all opportunities of ministering the word and sacraments to them in private meetings, and joined with other ministers in solemn days of fasting and humiliation, to pray that God would once more restore the ark of his covenant unto His afflicted Israel. About four months after that fatal Bartholomew day, his reverend colleague, Mr. Allein Geere, died; so that the whole care of the flock devolved upon Mr. Flavel, which, though a heavy and pressing burden, he undertook very cheerfully” (vi-vii).
4. “Upon the execution of the Oxford act [1665], which banished all nonconformist ministers five miles from any towns which sent members to parliament, he was forced to leave Dartmouth, to the great sorrow of his people, who followed him out of town; and at Townstall church-yard they took such a mournful farewell of one another as the place might very well have been called Bochim. He removed to Slapton, a parish five miles from Dartmouth, or any other corporation, which put him out of the legal reach of his adversaries. Here he met with signal instances of God's fatherly care and protection, and preached twice every Lord's-day to such as durst adventure to hear him, which many of his own people and others did, notwithstanding the rigour and severity of the act against conventicles [1664]. He many times slipped privately into Dartmouth, where by preaching and conversation he edified his flock, to the great refreshment of his own soul and theirs, though with very much danger, because of his watchful adversaries, who constantly laid wait for him, so that he could not make any long stay in the town” (vii).
5. “In those times Mr. Flavel being at Exeter, was invited to preach by many good people of that city, who for safety chose a wood about three miles from the city to be the place of their assembly, where they were broke up by their enemies by that time the sermon was well begun. Mr. Flavel, by the care of the people, made his escape through the middle of his enraging enemies; and though many of his hearers were taken, carried before Justice Tuckfield, and fined; yet the rest, being nothing discouraged, re-assembled, and carrying Mr. Flavel to another wood, he preached to them without any disturbance; and, after he had concluded, rode to a gentleman's house near the wood, who, though an absolute stranger to Mr. Flavel, entertained him with great civility that night, and next day he returned to Exeter in safety. Amongst those taken at this time, there was a Tanner who had a numerous family, and but a small stock; he was fined notwithstanding in forty pounds; at which he was nothing discouraged, but told a friend, who asked him how he bore up under his loss, *That he took the spoiling of his goods joyfully, for the sake of his Lord Jesus, for whom his life and all that he had was too little*” (vii).

6. "In 1687, when it pleased God so to over-rule affairs, that King James II thought it his interest to dispense with the penal laws against them, Mr. Flavel, who had formerly been confined to a corner, shone brightly, as a flaming beacon upon the top of an hill. His affectionate people prepared a large place for him, where God blessed his labours to the conviction of many people, by his sermons on Rev. 3:30, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." This encouraged him to print those sermons, under the title of England's Duty, &c. hoping that it might do good abroad, as well as in his own congregation. He made a vow to the Lord under his confinement, that if he should be once more entrusted with public liberty, he would improve it to the advantage of the gospel this he performed in a most conscientious manner, preached twice every Lord's Day, and lectured every Wednesday, in which he went over most of the 3rd chapter of St. John's gospel, showing the indispensable necessity of regeneration. He preached likewise every Thursday before the sacrament, and then after examination admitted communicants. He had no assistance on sacrament days, so that he was many times almost spent before he distributed the elements. When the duty of the day was over, he would often complain of a sore breast, an aching head, and a pained back; yet he would be early at study again next Monday. He allowed himself very little recreation, accounting time a precious jewel that ought to be improved at any rate" (ix-x).
7. "We may guess what a sweet and blessed intercourse he had with heaven, from that history we meet with in his *Pneumatologia*, p. 323. which I refer to, and likewise of that revelation he had of his father and mother's death, p. 339. He was a mighty wrestler with God in secret prayer, and particularly begged of him to crown his sermons, printed books and private discourses, with the conversion of poor sinners, a work which his heart was much set upon. It pleased God to answer him by many instances, of which the two that follow deserve peculiar notice" (xii).
8. "In 1673, there came into Dartmouth port a ship of Pool, in her return from Virginia; the Surgeon of this ship, a lusty young man of 23 years of age, fell into a deep melancholy, which the Devil improved to make him murder himself. This he attempted on the Lord's-day, early in the morning, when he was in bed with his brother; he first cut his own throat with a knife he had prepared on purpose, and leaping out of the bed, thrust it likewise into his stomach, and so lay wallowing in his own blood, till his brother awaked and cried for help. A Physician and Surgeon were brought, who concluded the wound in his throat mortal; they stitched it up however, and applied a plaister, but without hopes of cure, because he already breathed through the wound, and his voice was become inarticulate. Mr. Flavel came to visit him in this condition, and apprehending him to be within a few minutes of eternity, laboured to prepare him for it; he asked him his own apprehensions of his condition, and the young man answered, that he hoped in God for eternal life. Mr. Flavel replied, that he feared his hopes were ill-grounded: the scripture tells us, that *no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him*: self-murder was the grossest of all murder, &c. Mr. Flavel insisted so much on the aggravations of the crime, that the young man's

conscience began to fail, his heart began to melt, and then he broke out into tears, bewailing his sin and misery, and asked Mr. Flavel, If there might yet be any hope for him? he told him there might; and finding him altogether unacquainted with the nature of faith and repentance, he opened them to him. The poor man sucked in this doctrine greedily, prayed with great vehemence to God, that he would work them on his soul, and entreated Mr. Flavel to pray with him, and for him that he might be, though late, a sincere gospel-penitent, and sound believer. Mr. Flavel prayed with him accordingly, and it pleased God exceedingly to melt the young man's heart, during the performance of that duty. He was very loth to part with Mr. Flavel, but the duty of the day obliging him to be gone, in a few words he summed up those counsels that he thought most necessary, and so took his farewell of him, never expecting to see him any more in this world. But it pleased God to order it otherwise; the young man continued alive contrary to all expectation, panted earnestly after the Lord Jesus, and no discourse was pleasing to him, but that of Christ and faith. In this frame Mr. Flavel found him in the evening; he rejoiced greatly when he saw him come again, intreated him to continue his discourse upon those subjects, and told him, Sir, the Lord hath given me repentance for this and for all my other sins; I see the evil of them now, so as I never saw them before! O I loathe myself! I do also believe, Lord, help my unbelief. I am heartily willing to take Christ upon his own terms; but one thing troubles me, I doubt this bloody sin will not be pardoned. Will Jesus Christ, said he, apply his blood to one, who has shed his own blood? Mr. Flavel told him, that the Lord Jesus shed his blood for them who with wicked hands had shed his own blood, which was a greater sin than the shedding of his; to which the wounded man replied, I will cast myself upon Christ, let him do what he will. In this condition Mr. Flavel left him that night" (xii-xiii).

9. "Next morning his wounds were to be opened, and the Surgeon's opinion was, that he would immediately expire: Mr. Flavel was again requested to give him a visit, which he did, found him in a very serious frame, and prayed with him. The wound in his stomach was afterwards opened, when the ventricle was so much swoln, that it came out at the orifice of the wound, and lay like a livid discoloured tripe upon his body, and was also cut through; everyone thought it impossible for him to live; however, the Surgeon enlarged the orifice of the wound, fomented it, and wrought the ventricle again into his body, and, stitching up the wound, left his patient to the disposal of providence."
10. "It pleased God that he was cured of those dangerous wounds in his body; and, upon solid grounds of a rational charity, there was ground to believe that he was also cured of that more dangerous wound which sin had made in his soul. Mr. Flavel spent many hours with him during his sickness; and when the Surgeon returned to Pool, after his recovery, Mr. Samuel Hardy, that worthy minister there, thanked Mr. Flavel in a letter, for the great pains he had taken with that young man, and congratulated his success, assuring him, that if ever a great and thorough work was wrought, it was upon that man" (xiii).

11. “The second instance is this: Mr. Flavel being in London in 1679, his old bookseller, Mr. Boulter, gave him this following relation, viz. That some time before, there came into his shop a sparkish gentleman to enquire for some play-books; Mr. Boulter told him he had none, but shewed him Mr. Flavel's little treatise of *Keeping the Heart*, intreated him to read it, and assured him it would do him more good than play-books. The gentleman read the title, and glancing upon several pages here and there, broke out into these and such other expressions, What a damnable Fanatic was he who made this book? Mr. Boulter begged of him to buy and read it, and told him he had no cause to censure it so bitterly; at last he bought it, but told him he would not read it. What will you do with it then, said Mr. Boulter? I will tear and burn it, said he, and send it to the Devil. Mr. Boulter told him, that he should not have it. Upon this the gentleman promised to read it; and Mr. Boulter told him, if he disliked it upon reading, he would return him his money. About a month after, the gentleman came to the shop again in a very modest habit, and with a serious countenance, bespoke Mr. Boulter thus; Sir, I most heartily thank you for putting this book into my hands; I bless God that moved you to do it, it hath saved my soul; blessed be God that ever I came into your shop. And then he bought a hundred more of those books of him, and told him he would give them to the poor who could not buy them, and so left him, praising and admiring the goodness of God. Thus it pleased God to bless the sermons, discourses and writings of Mr. Flavel” (xiii-xiv).

C. The importance of self-examination.

1. “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. To prove this, I shall transcribe what follows from his own diary.”
2. “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.”
3. “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.”

- a. “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).
- b. “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).
- c. “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.”
- d. “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.”
- e. “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.”
- f. “*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).

4. “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).

F. Conclusion.

1. “We shall conclude with a character of Mr. Flavel. He was a man of a middle stature, and full of life and activity: he was very thoughtful, and when not discoursing or reading, much taken up in meditation, which made him digest his notions well. He was ready to learn from every body, and as free to communicate what he knew. He was bountiful to his own relations, and very charitable to the poor, but especially to the household of faith, and the necessitous members of his own church, to whom, during their sickness, he always sent suitable supplies. He freely taught academical learning to four young men whom he bred to the ministry, and one of them he maintained all the while at his own charge. He was exceedingly affectionate to all the people of Dartmouth, of which we shall give one remarkable instance. When our fleet was first engaged with the French, he called his people together to a solemn fast, and, like a man in an agony, wrestled with God in prayer for the church and nation, and particularly for the poor seamen of Dartmouth, that they might obtain mercy; the Lord heard and answered him, for not one of that town was killed in the fight, though many of them were in the engagement. As he was a faithful ambassador to his Master, he made his example the rule of his own practice, and was so far from reviling again, those that reviled him, that he prayed for those that despitefully used him: one remarkable instance of which is as follows: In 1685, some of the people of Dartmouth, accompanied too by some of the magistrates, made up his effigy, carried it through the streets in derision, with the covenant and bill of exclusion pinned to it, and set it upon a bonfire, and burnt it; some of the spectators were so much affected with the reproach and ignominy done to this reverend and pious minister, that they wept, and others scoffed and jeered: it was observable, that at the very same time, though he knew nothing of the matter, he was heaping coals of fire of another nature upon the heads of those wicked men, for he was then praying for the town of Dartmouth, its magistrates and inhabitants; and when news was brought him, upon the conclusion of his prayer, what they had been doing, he lifted up his prayer unto God for them in our Saviour's words, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (xvi).
2. “The repeated editions of Flavel bear their own witness to his popularity: five times were his Collected Works issued in the 18th century and at least three times in the 19th. He was a favourite with Jonathan Edwards and

George Whitefield (who ranked him with John Bunyan and Matthew Henry), and a century later, with such Scottish evangelical leaders as R. M. M'Cheyne and Andrew Bonar. But it was in the homes of Christian people that Flavel made his greatest appeal and influenced rising generations: Archibald Alexander, the first professor at Princeton Seminary, read him while still a 'teenager' and recorded in later life, 'To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author.'"

3. "His complete works had long been unobtainable until we reprinted them in 1968. His six volumes are in themselves a library of the best Puritan divinity and a set will be a life-long treasure to those who possess it. He is one of that small number of evangelical writers who can by their lucidity and simplicity help those at the beginning of the Christian life and at the same time be a strong companion to those who near its end" (*Works*, dust jacket).