

“The Problem of Counterfeits”
(1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. We've seen something of Solomon Stoddard's position on the marks of grace.
 - a. Stoddard was a minister in New England in the 17th and 18th centuries.
 - (i) He was called by many the pope of the Connecticut Valley because of his stature, presence and power of reason.
 - (ii) He lived at a time when there was a great interest in the marks of grace, and he wrote a great deal on the subject.
 - (iii) He also happened to be the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards.
 - b. Edwards was also interested in the marks of grace for the same reason Stoddard was:
 - (i) As fallen human beings, the most important thing we can know in life is that we're saved from hell and on our way to heaven.
 - (a) We don't want to arrive at Judgment Day and find we're mistaken.
 - (b) We also don't want to be crippled during our time here, spending most of our time and energy trying to figure out whether we're saved or not.
 - (ii) As a pastor, he also wanted to lead his people to a sound assurance.
 - (a) In an age where we're told on the one hand praying the sinner's prayer is enough to secure our place in heaven (broad evangelical), and on the other that if we have faith we should also have all the assurance we need (Continental Reformed), we again need to examine the Scriptures.
 - (b) The Lord gave us a great deal of light on this subject so we wouldn't be mistaken: He doesn't want us to be mistaken.
2. And so what have we seen?
 - a. Love is the most important thing: we must love God and Jesus Christ, if we are true believers. But how can we know we do?
 - (i) Have our hearts been spiritually enlightened/illuminated to see the glory of God: Do we see God as He really is and do we love what we see?
 - (ii) Do the things of Christianity appear real to us and not as something we hope but aren't convinced is true? We're not going to act on things we aren't convinced are real.
 - (iii) Is the Spirit of God drawing love out of our hearts and does it show by what we do, by the fact we're becoming more like Christ?
 - b. And what about our sins?
 - (i) Both believers and unbelievers sin; just because we sin doesn't mean we're not saved.

- (ii) However, if we practice sin – give ourselves to any sin without fighting against it, without repenting and trying to put it off – then we can know we are unconverted.
- (iii) Do we see love in our hearts towards God and are we repenting of every known sin? If so, we are true believers.

B. Preview.

1. This evening, we're going to conclude Stoddard's view by considering the very real problem of counterfeits: Unbelievers can also do good works.
 - a. We cannot claim to be a Christian unless we do good works, but the fact that we do good works by itself does not prove that we are Christians.
 - b. Remember, unbelievers can do just about everything the believer can: he just does them for the wrong reasons.
 - c. What is important here is why we do what we do:
 - (i) If we do our good works out of love for God and Christ, and a desire to glorify Them, then we have grace; God has saved us.
 - (ii) But if we do them for any other reason, we are still unconverted.
2. We'll look at three things:
 - a. First, the very real problem of counterfeits.
 - b. Second, that true grace can be distinguished from its counterfeits.
 - c. Finally, how we can tell them apart.

II. Sermon.

A. First, let's consider the very real problem of counterfeits.

1. The Spirit of God can work on the conscience in a way that can be confused with conversion:
 - a. We call this Common Grace, its most powerful form being awakening.
 - (i) When an unbeliever is under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, his heart can produce a counterfeit for just about everything the saints' experience.
 - (ii) Stoddard writes, "Sometimes under the work of preparation, persons are so exact in their conversation and have such affections and comforts that not only others, but they themselves also think that they are converted. They have very great resemblances of grace; they have many meltings of heart, delight in Sabbaths, zeal against sin as carry a great appearance of a gracious spirit. But all that they attain unto is no part in the work of conversion. They remain still in a natural condition, and their religious affections are but counterfeit graces. . . And whatever show they make, they are destitute of holiness; in all their affections there is no love to God; in all their lamentations for sin, there is no godly sorrow. Their religion proceeds only from natural conscience. These men are afraid of hell, and that makes them walk orderly, resist temptations, and be sorrowful for sin. They hope that God is not so angry as He was, and that makes them forward in duties of religion. They consider the moral evil of many sinful practices, and that begets some kind of loathing in them. They hope in such and such ways to win the favor of God, which makes them forward

in duties of religion and charity. They hope sometimes that God has pardoned them, which makes them have strong affections. But all these things are no part of conversion” (*Nature*, 2-3).

- b. This deception of our hearts is a very real concern. It can make us think we’re converted when we’re not.
 - (i) As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, for those living during the time of the charismatic gifts, it can confuse the gift of speaking in tongues (a gift that was a blessing) for true conversion (a person didn’t have to be converted to possess the gifts – consider Judas Iscariot).
 - (ii) Or the gift of prophecy, or the faith to do miracles (again consider Judas and Balaam).
 - (iii) Even great sacrifices such as giving all our possessions to feed the poor or giving our bodies to be burned as martyrs for Christ’s cause doesn’t mean we’re converted.
 - (iv) If we do this for any other reason than love for God, it is not motivated by His Spirit and unacceptable to Him.
- 2. Since there are so many counterfeits, how can we know that our experience is the genuine article? How can we know we truly love God?
 - a. Stoddard writes, “The habits of grace cannot be seen immediately. As no man can see his own soul, or any of the faculties of it immediately, so he cannot see the gracious principles that are there immediately. And there is no external act of obedience that is evidential, for an ungodly man may do an external act of obedience. He may give his all his goods to the poor and his body to be burned, though he has no charity (1 Corinthians 13:3)” (*Sincerity*, 107).”
 - b. We can’t know by what a person does; but we can know by what he experiences in his heart.
- B. This brings us to our second point: it is possible to distinguish true grace from its counterfeits. Stoddard believed we can know we have grace through particular acts of grace which are a different character than what we experience in a state of nature (100).
 - 1. He finds examples in the saints who knew there was something different about their experiences.
 - (i) “We find Christ inquiring of one whether he believed. John 9:35: ‘Dost thou believe on the Son of God?’ And of another whether he loved Him. John 21:16: ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?’ That shows that such things may be known, else to what purpose would it be to ask those questions?” (Ibid.).
 - (ii) Job appeared to be certain of his genuine repentance: “Now mine eye seeth Thee, wherefore I abhor myself in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6); David was confident of his affections for God, “I love the Lord” (Psalm 116:1), and for God’s Law, “O how I love Thy law” (Psalm 119:97). Peter confessed to

Jesus, when He asked him whether he loved Him more than others, “Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee” (John 21:17).

2. When we see this grace at work in our hearts, we can know we belong to Christ.
 - a. Stoddard writes, “More generally, godly men hope and think that they exercise grace many times every day in their prayers, in their callings, and in their conversation with men. But it is but now and then that they can certainly speak up to it. There are great mixtures of corruption with grace; there are many false appearances of grace which make them afraid whether they indeed exercised grace. And this makes it evident that it is thus with saints, that many of them are for a long time under doubts whether they are indeed godly. Thence we have these precepts: 2 Peter 1:10: “Give all diligence to make your calling and election sure.” 2 Corinthians 13:5: “Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith.” Some hypocrites are a great deal more confident than many saints. Many godly men are at a loss whether their faith is anything other than what unconverted men may have. And so they are about their other graces; there are some saints who have assurance, but the foundation of it is that now and then they see the plain actings of faith, love and repentance. They see something of encouragement from their daily walk. *But that which begets assurance is that sometimes they plainly see grace* (108; emphasis added).
 - b. How often we see these “particular actings” makes no difference. Stoddard writes, “If you have certainly seen the working of a gracious spirit, if a hundred times, if ten times, or if one time, you may conclude that you are godly” (Ibid., 114).
 - c. And he writes, “If a principle of grace was once there, it is always there. . . . Under the new covenant, if a man is once godly, he always will be godly; for everyone who is godly has fulfilled the condition of the covenant. Grace may decay, but it never will be lost. . . . Philippians 1:6: ‘I am confident of this very thing, that He that hath begun a good work in you, will perfect it to the day of Christ.’ . . . Sometimes they are afraid they shall fall away, but whether they have more strength or less strength they shall never fall away. God’s covenant is their security” (*Sincerity*, 115-16).
 - d. Only “visible exercises of grace” are sufficient to make this determination, for all of them “are evidential,” such as faith (John 1:12), love to God (James 1:12), godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10), and love to the brethren (1 John 3:14). “Hence, if any of these workings are clearly seen, the man has a sure evidence of his good estate. . . . He has a divine warrant to give sentence for himself. At such a time when he pronounces himself a saint, he goes according to law and evidence. His confidence is assurance, for those exercises of grace that he is conscious of are peculiar to godly men, and assuredly distinguish them from all other men.” Therefore, “the more these visible exercises of grace are renewed, the more certain you will be; the more frequently these actings are renewed, the more abiding and confirmed your assurance will be” (Ibid., 119).
 - e. It is possible to distinguish true grace from counterfeits.

C. Finally, how can we know we have saving grace? How can we know that we're not deceiving ourselves into thinking we're experiencing saving grace when we're really experiencing common grace?

1. Common and saving grace are different.

- a. In his book *The Nature of Saving Conversion*, Stoddard is careful to point out that the difference between common and saving grace is not merely the power or strength of the actions or experiences they produce; there is a real difference in the *nature* of both.
- b. He writes, "Some have been of the opinion that saving grace and common grace differ only in degrees, that sorrow for sin increases till it becomes saving, and love to God increases till it becomes saving. But, certainly, saving grace differs specifically from all that went before.
- c. Gracious actions are of another nature than the religious actions of natural men" (*Nature*, 5). Stoddard very insightfully remarks, "If the difference between saving grace and common grace lay in the degree, no man could judge that his grace is saving." However, "Men may know that they have saving grace (1 John 3:13; 2 Corinthians 7:10). But if the difference lay in the degree, how would men go about determining that their grace was saving?" (*Ibid.*, 6). Unless there are clear differences between common and saving grace, there can be no assurance.

2. What is that difference?

- a. "Saving grace acts from other motives and for another end than does common grace. The difference in motives and end makes a spiritual difference in actions. If men do not act from gracious motives and for gracious ends, they do not do the thing that God commands" (*Ibid.*).
- b. The distinction Stoddard makes between the motives and goals of common and saving grace is the same as that of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which reads, "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" (16:7).
- c. Unconverted men can do what the Law requires outwardly. They are able to keep themselves from stealing, murdering, or committing adultery. But they lack the grace that enables them to do these things out of love for God and for His glory alone, being motivated instead by such things as selfishness, coveting, bitterness, lust, or other inward manifestations of sin, which ultimately condemn all they do as disobedience. A man may be able to restrain a good measure of his outward sin through common grace, but it can never produce the inward obedience necessary to make his work acceptable to God. The conclusion is, "There is no obedience to God in what they do; they don't attend the will of God" (*Nature*, 6). In essence, "Common graces

are lusts and oppose saving grace. Making his salvation his last end is contrary to making the glory of God his last end” (Ibid., 8).

- d. Stoddard writes, “There are some duties that cannot be done but from a gracious respect unto God. There are some holy actions that cannot be done but by a principle of grace; such as to believe in Jesus Christ, to love God, and to hate sin. Another man who does not have grace may imitate these, but he cannot do them. Whatever faith and love he has differs *toto genere* from the faith and love that is in the saints. These holy actions cannot be done but by a gracious respect unto God” (*Righteousness*, 256).
- e. We cannot know that we have saving grace by our actions alone: we must also see what is motivating us to do them. If we can see clearly that the things we do are out of love for God and a desire to give Him glory, then we can know we are converted. If we can’t see this, we can’t know.
- f. But if we do see it, then we can know that grace motivates all our works. Stoddard writes, “If it is inquired how they know that their obedience is not the fruit of natural conscience and common grace, as it is with many others, the answer is that they see now and then the plain exercises of grace, and from thence conclude that they are under the influence of a gracious spirit in their walk; that though they are guilty of much formality and hypocrisy, yet there is a spirit of holiness working in them, and a hearty care to keep the commandments of God” (*Sincerity*, 109). If we see grace in some of our acts of obedience, even in just one, then we may conclude there is grace in all of our works for God: that our whole life is “a course of gracious carriages” (Ibid.), even though those works are tainted by remaining corruption.
- g. The problem for our assurance comes when we don’t see grace in our hearts very often. This is why Stoddard’s last application to the godly is that they renew the visible actings of grace (Ibid., 117). This grace must be seen to produce assurance; it is not enough for a man merely to be ignorant of his sin. “If you do not know that you live in sin, that can be no evidence of your godliness. . . . 1 Corinthians 4:4: ‘I know nothing of myself, yet am I not hereby justified.’ . . . Men’s understandings are corrupted, and they may live in pride, worldliness and unbelief, and not know it. They may think those corruptions do not reign when indeed they do reign. . . . Proverbs 30:12: ‘There is a generation that is pure in their own eyes, yet are not cleansed from their filthiness’” (Ibid., 117-18). It is not enough that there is “a great probability that you live in a way of faith, love and repentance, that does not make it evident. . . . Probabilities prove nothing. That may be probable that may be false; there may be some probability of a thing, yet the contrary may be certain. . . . Therefore we are directed to ‘make our calling and election sure’” (Ibid., 118-19).
- h. May the Lord help us to do so, as we continue to consider this very important topic. Amen.