

Adult Sunday School Class: Religious Affections

Last Class

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(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by [Winston Churchill](#) for his speech notes. The HTML version doesn't show indentation but the PDF does.)

This is our last class.

In our previous 12 classes,  
we've covered a lot of material,  
including  
a bit about Jonathan Edwards life and works,  
why he wrote  
*The Religious Affections*,  
what the affections are —  
the mind yearning —  
and why they are important.

We've also studied twelve things  
that Edwards explains  
do not distinguish between godly  
and ungodly affections.

We then studied  
twelve distinguishing marks  
that Edwards asserts  
are signs that religious affections  
are godly:  
Spiritual origin of affections,  
Appreciation of divine things in themselves,  
Love for the holiness of divine things,  
Enlightened understanding,  
Certainty of divine things,  
True humility,  
Change of nature,  
Christ-like spirit,  
Tender-spirit,  
Beautiful symmetry and proportion,  
Desire to grow, and  
Life of obedience.

Today,  
we're going to look at  
some dangers to avoid when applying what we've learned,  
and I'm also going to  
try to tie up a few loose ends.

Before we do either of these, however,  
it seems appropriate to me  
to read to you a fairly lengthy  
excerpt from Jonathan Edwards' closing to the book.

This provides,  
I think,  
    an excellent rationale  
        for why we ought to try  
            to apply the ideas  
we've talked about for the past 12 weeks.

[If we will learn  
to judge ourselves  
    and others  
        by] those things,  
which Christ  
    and his apostles  
        and prophets  
            chiefly insisted on  
                ... regarding *practical* exercises  
                    and effects of grace  
it would be  
    of manifold happy consequence;

it would above all things  
tend to the conviction  
    of deluded hypocrites,

...; it would tend to deliver us  
    from innumerable perplexities, ...;

it would greatly tend to prevent  
    professors neglecting strictness of life,  
        and tend to promote  
            their engagedness  
                and earnestness  
                    in their Christian walk;

and it would become fashionable  
    for men to show their Christianity,  
        more by an amiable  
            distinguished behavior,  
than by an abundant  
    and excessive  
        declaring their experiences;

and we should get into the way  
of appearing lively in religion,  
    more by being lively  
        in the *service* of God and our generation,  
than by  
    the liveliness and forwardness  
        of our *tongues*,  
            and making a business  
                of proclaiming on the house tops,  
with our mouths,  
    the holy and eminent acts  
        and exercises of our own hearts;

... and many occasions of spiritual pride  
would be cut off;  
and so a great door shut against the devil;

and a great many  
of the main stumbling blocks  
against experimental and powerful [Christianity]  
would be removed;

and [Christianity] would be  
declared and manifested  
in such a way that,  
instead of hardening spectators,  
and exceedingly promoting infidelity and atheism,  
would,  
above all things,  
tend to convince men  
that there is a reality in [Christianity],  
and greatly awaken them,  
and win them,  
by convincing their consciences  
of the importance and excellency of [Christianity].

Thus the light of professors  
would so shine before men,  
that others,  
seeing their good works,  
would glorify their Father which is in heaven.

For this to happen,  
we must apply the things taught  
by Edwards —  
which are nothing more  
than what is taught by the Scripture —  
thoughtfully,  
and diligently.

As we make application,  
there are some dangers  
we need to be careful to avoid.

Let's talk about  
some of those dangers now.

I've listed two dangers  
for each of the three application areas  
we've been using throughout  
our study of the distinguishing signs  
of godly affections.

In each case,  
the two dangers are  
basically opposites  
of each other,  
and the danger to which

you are more prone  
will likely be a function  
of your personality.

As a quick aside  
concerning personality differences,  
I'm sure you've all heard the saying  
that an optimist  
sees a glass as half-full,  
while a pessimist  
sees it as half-empty.

What you may not have heard,  
unless you've spent some time in Illinois,  
is the Cubs corollary,  
which says that there's a third option,  
and that's to ask,  
"When is it going to spill?"

Let's look at dangers now.

In seeking to evaluate  
ourselves  
by using the twelve distinguishing signs,  
we must be careful  
to avoid  
**not being honest or thorough.**

The first time  
that I read *Religious Affections*,  
which was quite a few years ago now,  
I was scared to death  
of evaluating myself  
according to the signs Edwards identifies.

I was scared to do it,  
because of the possibility  
I might discover that  
I wasn't a Christian at all,  
and this was a result  
that I wasn't willing to accept.

With that type of attitude  
there was no way  
I was going to make  
an honest and thorough  
evaluation of myself.

Don't even try to evaluate yourself,  
until you're confident  
you can do it honestly and thoroughly.

When we do evaluate ourselves,  
a second danger  
we must avoid is

**mistaking lack of perfection  
for lack of the sign.**

None of us will perfectly display  
any single one of the twelve signs  
always.

So if you're looking for perfection,  
and you're being honest and thorough,  
your score will be 0 for 12,  
just as mine would be.

Don't look for total perfection;  
instead look for some presence.

If you are a believer,  
and you aren't a brand new convert,  
there should exist some times  
when you display in some way  
every one of the signs —  
some signs  
you'll display much more often  
than some other signs —  
but you should  
display each of the twelve  
at least occasionally,  
and,  
as time goes by,  
the frequency with which  
you display the signs  
should be increasing.

In this sense,  
then,  
your score should be 12 for 12,  
remembering that some of these  
might be very often,  
and others relatively rarely.

Take me, for example,  
I almost always display  
the sign  
certainty of divine things,  
but  
I much, much, much less often  
display the sign of a tender spirit.

What should not be the case,  
I don't think,  
for anyone who is truly regenerate  
is that one or more of the signs  
is never, ever displayed in his life.

This answers,  
I hope,

the question about  
how to score yourself.

Before we look at dangers  
in applying the signs to others,  
are there any questions?

When it comes to using  
the distinguishing marks to evaluate  
the spiritual condition of others —  
to inspect their fruit, if you will —  
there are also at least two dangers to avoid.

First,  
we should avoid  
**inspecting when we need not inspect.**

Second,  
we should avoid  
the opposite danger,  
which is  
**failing to inspect when we must inspect.**

If you are inclined  
to be analytical,  
you need to be particularly  
on the alert against the first danger.

If, on the other hand,  
you are inclined  
to be deferential,  
you need to be particularly  
on the alert against the second danger.

In either case,  
you need to be able to discern  
between times you must inspect,  
and times when you ought not (or need not).

What are some instances  
in which we ought not (or need not)  
apply the signs we've learned  
to trying to determine someone's spiritual condition?

When the person is dead.

When you have no direct dealings  
with the person  
(consider a famous person,  
for example, John Grisham)

When the person explicitly claims  
to not be a believer.

In none of these cases

is there any legitimate reason  
for us to try to evaluate a person's  
spiritual condition  
using the signs Edwards gives us.

What are some instances  
in which we must inspect the fruit  
of another person,  
if we want to obey the Scripture?

When considering who to marry.

When considering whether  
to go into a close business partnership  
with someone.

When choosing close friends.

Parents with their children.

Elders when considering admitting  
someone to membership.

In each of these cases,  
if we fail to honestly and thoroughly  
inspect a person's life for evidence  
of true conversion,  
we'll not be true to Scripture ourselves.

Before we look at dangers  
in applying the signs to ministries,  
are there any questions?

There are also at least two  
dangers to avoid  
when using the distinguishing signs  
to evaluate the godliness of particular ministries.

We need to avoid  
**throwing the baby out with the bath water,**  
and we need also to avoid  
**mistaking bubbles for babies.**

I've already talked about  
this in some detail  
from time to time in the previous weeks.

We throw the baby out with the bath water  
if we completely dismiss a ministry  
simply because  
it is not perfect.

If this is the approach we take,  
we're in great danger of ending up

like Arthur Pink,  
rejecting every church,  
and everybody.

We mistake bubbles for babies  
if we completely accept a ministry  
simply because  
it gets a few things right.

If we take this approach,  
we're in great danger of ending up  
as heretics,  
or at best,  
deeply confused, and  
to use Pete's phrase,  
living well below the line.

That's it for the dangers,  
**are there any questions**  
**before I move on to loose ends?**

I mentioned last week  
that there were three issues  
that had been raised by folks  
that I wanted to address in more detail  
in this class —  
these are loose ends,  
so to speak,  
that need to be tied up.

I've already addressed one of them,  
which leaves only two.

Let's discuss those now.

The first loose end  
involves the meaning of egalitarianism,  
especially as it relates to the church.

A couple of people —  
that's a figurative 'couple',  
not a literal 'couple' —  
disagreed with my assertion  
that egalitarianism is a serious problem  
in the church today.

This disagreement came in two flavors:

one — egalitarianism is a problem,  
but it is not a problem within the church,  
at least not the reformed church;

two — egalitarianism is not a problem at all,  
but rather it is taught in Scripture.

Both of these disagreements  
turned out to be based —  
as so many disagreements are —  
on lack of understanding of what I meant  
when I used the word  
egalitarianism.

This word is a relatively new one  
in English —  
The Oxford English Dictionary's first citation of its use  
came from 1932.

The adjective form,  
egalitarian,  
is a bit older,  
with an OED first citation from 1885,  
along with the definition:  
“that which asserts the equality of mankind.”

There are, in fact,  
some areas in which the Scripture  
is egalitarian.

For example,  
all mankind is equal in being sinners,  
deserving the wrath of God.

All Christians are equal  
in being saved by grace:

[Galatians 3:28](#)

There is neither Jew nor Greek,  
there is neither slave nor free man,  
there is neither male nor female;  
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So, those who asserted  
that the Scripture teaches egalitarianism  
are partially right,  
but in my discussion of the term,  
I wasn't claiming that people  
aren't equal in  
*anything*,  
only that they aren't equal in  
*everything*,  
or in  
as *many things*,  
as our modern culture wants to believe.

As the Scripture makes clear  
in many places,  
including Jesus' parable of the talents  
in Matthew 25:14-30,  
God does not give everyone  
the same abilities.

Some people can sing,  
others cannot.

Some people can run fast,  
others cannot.

Some people are smart,  
others are not.

Some people consistently make wise decisions;  
some people consistently make unwise decisions.

Egalitarianism, in the way I'm using the term,  
says that these distinctions,  
should not matter,  
at all,  
no matter what the circumstances.

If you're choosing a company president,  
whether the person can sing  
probably doesn't matter,  
and whether the person can run fast  
probably doesn't matter,  
but whether the person consistently makes wise decisions  
had better matter;  
to say it should not matter  
is to speak nonsense.

This nonsense  
is completely rejected by the Scripture.

Although it is rejected by Scripture,  
does egalitarianism of this sort  
exist within the church today,  
even within the conservative, reformed church?

I believe it does,  
not quite as strongly as it does  
within the culture at large,  
or even within other church cultures,  
but it is still with us.

I'll leave as an exercise  
for each of you  
to come up with specific examples  
of manifestations  
of egalitarianism  
within the reformed community.

I'm not going to give you  
any examples myself,  
because doing so  
has gotten me into lots of trouble  
in the past,  
and my current ambition is,

as Paul wrote it should be in  
1 Thessalonians 4:11,  
to lead a quiet life,  
and mind my own business.

That ties up,  
as best as I'm going to do,  
the loose end concerning egalitarianism.

The other loose end  
involves the relationship  
between our desires  
and our choices —  
our affections  
and our will.

Back when we were  
talking about the meaning of affections,  
I made the statement  
that a person always  
does what he wants to do.

Several people told me  
after the class that  
they didn't think  
this was a true statement.

One person suggested,  
quite cleverly —  
wrongly, but cleverly —  
that his telling me  
that I was wrong,  
proved that I was wrong,  
because he didn't  
*want to*  
question what I had said,  
but was compelled to do so,  
against his desire,  
by a concern for the truth.

Adequately addressing the issue raised here  
would require far more time than we have,  
but I'll give it a try.

Jonathan Edwards  
addressed this question in detail  
in his book on the Freedom of the Will.

Here's an excerpt:  
The choice of the mind  
never departs from that which,  
at that time,  
and with respect to  
the direct and immediate objects  
of that decision of the mind,

appears most agreeable and pleasing,  
all things considered.

If the immediate objects of the will  
are a man's own actions,  
then those actions  
which appear most agreeable to him  
he wills.

If it be now most agreeable to him,  
all things considered,  
to walk,  
then he now wills to walk.

If it be now,  
upon the whole  
of what at present appears to him,  
most agreeable to speak,  
then he chooses to speak;  
if it suits him best  
to keep silence,  
then he chooses to keep silence.

There is scarcely a plainer  
and more universal dictate  
of the sense and experience of mankind,  
than that,  
when men act voluntarily,  
and do what they please,  
then they do what suits them best,  
or what is most agreeable to them.

Two key phrases in that excerpt are  
"at that time",  
and  
"all things considered."

These are the qualifiers  
that people often omit  
when they talk about  
not doing what they want to do.

For when Edward says,  
or I say,  
that a person does what he wants to do,  
this is not saying that a person  
does what he *would* want to do,  
at some *other* time,  
or if the circumstances were *different*.

Let me give you a person example,  
which I hope will make this point clear.

When I was in high school,  
my favorite subject was history.

When I first started thinking  
about college,  
I thought I'd major in history.

As I thought about it more,  
however, I realized that the prospects  
for earning enough money to adequately  
support a family,  
if I majored in history,  
were fairly slim.

So, I chose not to major in history.

Did I not do  
what I wanted to do?

Well, I didn't do  
what I would have wanted to do  
in the absence of factors  
other than my interests.

But I certainly *did* do  
what I wanted to do  
all things considered,  
because there were factors  
other than my interests  
that had to be considered.

Does this help clarify the issue,  
or does someone have a question?

That ties up the other loose end.

Are there any questions  
or comments before I wrap things up?

In a moment,  
I will close with our final reading from Jonathan Edwards.

Before I do that, 'though,  
I want to say thank you  
for your attention during these 13 weeks.

I've very much enjoyed  
teaching the class,  
and hope that God has been pleased  
to use it to help you all.

I hope also  
that this class has kindled in you  
a desire to read more  
from Jonathan Edwards —  
you will be richly blessed  
if you will do so.

Our last reading is from a sermon,  
titled Christian Knowledge,  
or the Importance  
And Advantage of  
A Thorough Knowledge  
Of Divine Truth.

It seems a fitting closing to the course,  
and also a fitting introduction  
to the next Sunday School class that I'll teach  
in about a year from now,  
which will be "A Christian Philosophy of Learning".

Seek not  
to grow in knowledge  
chiefly for the sake of applause,  
and to enable you  
to dispute with others;  
but seek it  
for the benefit of your souls,  
and in order to practice.

...

Practice according to what knowledge you have.  
This will be the way to know more. ...

You all have by you  
a large treasure of divine knowledge,  
in that you have the Bible in your hands;  
therefore be not contented  
in possessing but little of this treasure.

God has spoken much to you in the Scripture;  
labor to understand as much  
of what he says as you can.

God has made you all reasonable creatures;  
therefore let not  
the noble faculty of reason or understanding  
lie neglected.

Content not yourselves  
with having so much knowledge  
as is thrown in your way,  
and as you receive  
in some sense unavoidably  
by the frequent inculcation of divine truth  
in the preaching of the word,  
of which you are obliged to be hearers,  
or as you accidentally gain in conversation;

but let it be very much your business  
to search for it,  
and that  
with the same diligence and labor  
with which men

are wont  
to dig in mines of silver and gold.