

Hard Hearts

The Lord spoke to Jeremiah the prophet and said, *“When you tell these people [that the day of disaster is coming upon them] and they ask you, ‘Why has the Lord decreed such a great disaster against us? What sin have we committed against the Lord our God?’ then say to them, ‘It is because your fathers forsook me,’ declares the Lord, ‘and followed other gods and served and worshiped them. They forsook me and did not keep my law, And you have behaved even more wickedly than your fathers. See how each of you is following the **hardness of his evil heart** instead of obeying me.”*

The Israelites had turned away from God and begun to worship foreign gods.

It's called idolatry.

And they had passed along their idolatry to their children.

When we stop worshiping God and draw away from Him our hearts become hardened.

Then, when we hear his Word proclaimed, instead of reacting with joy and gratitude, we react with anger and defiance.

In today's *Old Testament* lesson we have a textbook case of hardness of heart: Jeremiah warned the Israelites to repent of their idolatry and turn back to God they reacted by wanting to kill him.

That's hardness of heart.

Hardness of heart is not just an “Old Testament” sin; Jesus refers to it when He weeps over Jerusalem: *“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but you would not!**”*

Hardness of heart leads people to rebel against both God's law and his mercy.

It's the opinion that if it's from God, I don't want it.

Now it's understandable that someone might resent being under God's authority.

We're all rebels at heart and we don't like being under anyone's authority.

But why would someone want to reject God's love AND His mercy?

Let's examine that in the light of today's Gospel lesson.

Let me read it again: *[Read Matthew 3:1-6]*

"He was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."

Why did the Jews react this way?

Why would they have been so angered by a healing that they wanted to kill the healer?

Well, it all started with their interpretation of the *4th Commandment: Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.*"

In order to obey the Law perfectly, over the centuries the Jews had imposed restrictions upon themselves that were more stringent than those established by the law, so that they would not even come close to breaking the Law.

The rabbis referred to it as "building a hedge around the Law."

The first "hedge-builder" was Eve who in order to avoid being tempted to break God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil she added her own command to God's command: **"You may not touch it."**

God hadn't said not to touch it, but Eve apparently thought it was a good idea.

And it sounded like a good plan but the result was disastrous: instead of helping her resist temptation, adding her own words to God's word actually made her more vulnerable to temptation.

Immediately after she said it the devil struck with deadly force: promising her that if she ate the fruit she would "be like God."

"When [she] saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it."

Despite her good intentions, Eve's word was not God's word, and when man adds his own words and thoughts to God's words and thoughts he puts himself on a shaky foundation.

For centuries, the Jews had been planting hedges around the laws of Moses, especially in regard to the 4th Commandment.

The instruction to "honor the Sabbath" had been hedged with all kinds of legalistic restrictions which still apply today.

On the Sabbath, an orthodox Jew cannot drive or ride in a car, write, turn electricity on or off, cook, shop, use the telephone, do laundry or receive mail.

All these restrictions are considered ways of honoring God's command to do no work on the Sabbath, since it was intended to be a day of rest.

In the eyes of the Jews of Jesus' day, healing a sickness was considered work and working violated the 4th Commandment.

Having added so many of their own rules and traditions to God's Law they had lost sight of its original purpose, which was to give God's children a day of rest and peace with God and each other.

The Sabbath was God's gift to man.

The point is—and this is important to understand—*they thought that they were doing the right thing and that Jesus was doing the wrong thing.*

Just like Saul of Tarsus, who thought that he was serving God by killing and imprisoning Christians, they thought they would serve God by killing Jesus.

Jesus tried to break through to them by pointing out that an act of healing was an act of God's grace and not of man's work, and that by healing the man He was honoring God rather than disobeying Him.

But they could not—or would not—understand, *because their hearts had been hardened.*

Now this tells us something about how our hearts get hard.

When we begin basing our moral judgments and spiritual understanding upon man-made laws and principles and traditions rather than upon

God's Word, the net effect is to draw us away from God and turn us in upon ourselves.

Isaiah put it this way: *"These people come near to me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."*

When we substitute human wisdom for God's wisdom we are worshiping man, not God.

Our traditions, our power of reason, our human potential become the objects of our worship, rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Jesus Christ.

We become seduced by patterns of our own thinking and we draw further and further away from God.

The priests of Jeremiah's time were enraged by his warning to turn back to God because they had replaced the religion God had given them with their own traditions and observances, and the result was that *God's Word had actually become a threat to them.*

The Jewish clergy of Jesus' time, having substituted their rules and traditions for God's Word, wanted to murder the Son of God for bringing God's healing power to a cripple.

Our human way of thinking can easily become an idol that draws us away from God and hardens our hearts.

A good non-religious example of how it works is the passion with which we hold our political views.

We can all see that our country has become extremely polarized along political lines.

Whichever side we're on, we have come to think of people on the other side not as simply people who disagree with us, but as enemies of truth, justice and the American way.

Our hearts have hardened around our ideologies, and we're not interested in listening to each other.

Show us a fact that inconveniently interferes with our political viewpoint and we'll reject it out of hand.

Show us a fact that supports our political viewpoint and we'll accept it as unvarnished truth.

We have become politically tribalistic—loyal to one tribe or the other and we're no longer interested in a reasoned dialogue, we just want our opponents to either acquiesce to our point of view or just shut up.

This kind of tribalism can even infect churches.

One tribe prefers traditional hymns and the other likes contemporary hymns and neither likes the other.

I know a church that tried to solve the problem thirty years ago by offering two services every Sunday—one with traditional music and the other contemporary music.

Unfortunately that church has shrunk over the years to the point where they now have only nineteen members worshipping on Sunday.

But they still have two services every Sunday: one draws ten members and the other draws nine members.

About twenty years ago I received a three-page, single spaced letter from a fellow pastor in the Cleveland area denouncing the newly formed FISH radio station for broadcasting contemporary Christian music.

When I asked him why he felt so strongly about a radio station playing music he didn't even have to listen to, he replied that contemporary Christian music was an abomination that led people away from orthodox Christianity.

When I pointed out to him that all music was contemporary once, he said that I was merely being clever rather than engaging in a serious theological discussion.

Now of course we're all entitled to our tastes and opinions, including our taste in music and our opinions of certain styles of worship.

The problem begins when our tastes and opinions become our idols.

When that happens, we begin to think of people who have different tastes than ours as opponents within the Body of Christ rather than sisters and brothers.

The Bible tells us to “Honor the Lord your God and serve Him only”—not our own opinions or tastes.

Paul may well have had something like this in mind when he wrote to the Philippians: *“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For as I have often told you before, and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ....Their mind is on earthly things.”*

The pattern of living to which Paul is referring here—the Gospel pattern—has two parts.

The first part is forgiveness—God's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of each other's sins.

God has forgiven our sins and he has commanded us to forgive each other's sins at pain of losing our salvation if we refuse to do so.

The second part is repentance, which is seriously examining our own sins and striving to stop committing them.

Repentance softens our hearts so that they remain malleable in God's hands.

In Jeremiah's words, it changes a heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

God can reform a softened heart but he cannot reform a hardened heart.

A hardened heart will only be hardened further by anything that comes from God—just as Pharaoh's heart was hardened both by the plagues and by the cessation of the plagues.

May God give us all softened hearts, repentant hearts and forgiving hearts. Amen.