

The Man With a Withered Hand, and Men With Hardened Hearts

Those who are blind sometimes learn to read Braille – and as such, their fingertips become all the more sensitive. On the other hand, those who do a lot of manual labour with their hands often develop callouses, and they lose sensitivity in those areas.

Sometimes, through an injury or a third-degree burn, a person may lose all feeling to their hands. That's a dangerous thing. They could place their hand on a rusty nail, and not feel it piercing them. They could be being stung by a poisonous insect, and not feel it. They could rest their hand on a very hot surface and not realise it. Their lack of sensitivity only saves them from pain – it does not save them from damage.

While there is grave danger in losing sensitivity in the physical realm, an even greater danger lies in losing sensitivity in the spiritual realm. To insensate spiritually is even more dangerous because what is at stake is not just your body, but your eternal soul. We consider this in the Bible passage about Jesus healing a man with the withered hand.

And it came to pass also on another sabbath, that he entered into the synagogue and taught: and there was a man whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day; that they might find an accusation against him. But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man which had the withered hand, "Rise up, and stand forth in the midst." And he arose and stood forth. Then said Jesus unto them, "I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? To save life, or to destroy it?" And looking round about upon them all, he said unto the man, "Stretch forth thy hand." And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other. And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus.

Luke 6:6-11

Here we have an ironic picture. A man with a withered hand – one that had shrivelled up in the process of losing all sensitivity, its nerve endings dying and its blood supply lessening, so that his hand was all but dead. And sitting in the pews we have Pharisees whose hearts look, to God who can see the heart, much like that hand – shrivelled up, devoid of tenderness, of sensitivity, of mercy and of good religious emotions. Their hearts were much like that hand – useless, deformed, ugly.

The amazing thing is that the man walks out with his shrivelled hand restored, and the Pharisees walk out with their shrivelled hearts even harder.

The hardness of the Pharisees

I want you to see how the ugliest thing in that synagogue was not the man's hand; it was the Pharisees' hearts. Try to see what a hard heart looks like.

Firstly, the Pharisees had no mercy on a man in need. This man to them was a mere pawn. They did not care for his condition. He was merely a means to condemn Jesus, whom they viewed as a threat. They knew Jesus would want to help this man, and such was their depraved hearts, that they may well have planted the poor man in the synagogue to see if they could trap Jesus. There was no concern for him – just pure hatred for Jesus. In fact, as Jesus pointed out, they valued their animals more than this man.

Secondly, they refused to acknowledge what was obvious – that Jesus was the Messiah. God was in their midst, and they did not acknowledge Him. Jesus lived a sinless life, and they considered him a sinner. The protection of their religious system was more important than opening their eyes to who Jesus might be.

Their religion had actually become more valuable to them than God. The principle had become bigger than people. The Sabbath rule was more important to them than God's power. The law, meant to help, was now harming. The Sabbath day, meant to refresh man, was now a burden of 'do not's.

The Pharisees could see Jesus' power, but insisted that it be subject to their system. "Is it lawful to heal?" they ask Him. What a preposterous question – as if they could heal a man on any day of the week! They reckoned if He did not use His power to support their teaching, then His power must be of Satan, because they were so self-righteous. These religious leaders simply refused to be taught.

Jesus answered them with a question: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" This question only has one answer – yes! And to heal an unwell man would be good. But for the Pharisees to answer 'yes' would be to abandon their hope of condemning Jesus. And in fact, Jesus did not work when He healed the man, He merely spoke – telling the man to stretch out his hand – and the man was healed.

But even after witnessing the power of God before their very eyes – and with God declaring at Jesus' baptism, "This is My Son," – the Pharisees kept denying and rejecting. Instead of humbling themselves, they sought to destroy Jesus. As if plotting how to murder someone isn't working on the Sabbath! But such was the hardness of their hearts – they could not see how twisted and perverse they had become.

How did they get such hard hearts? And how do we get hard hearts?

It's important to answer this question, especially for church-goers. Remember, these Pharisees were religious. They were in the Old Testament version of church – the synagogue – but they had the hardest hearts of all. In other words – hardness of heart does not skip over churchgoers. In fact, it may actually afflict them all the more.

The Pharisees began with religious substitutes – in essence, idolatry.

The Pharisees began as a group dedicated to the preservation of God's Word and the purity of God's people. But over time, they replaced their devotion with duty, their love with legalism. Soon, wearing phylacteries and tefillin was devotion; fasting twice a week was devotion; keeping all the Sabbath rules they had made up was devotion; keeping all the clean and unclean laws was devotion.

The Pharisees came up with all these rules to make a fence around the commands – but ironically, all they do is make a fence around God. They were now moving away from God – becoming more focused on their rules and systems.

In our lives, that's when we start to use good things as a substitute for truly communing with God. It might be reading a Christian book. It might be giving money to the Lord. It might be attending church. It might be even teaching or serving other believers. But if you are doing that in place of actually relating to God – talking to Him, listening to Him, yielding to Him – it is a substitute, and it will start to harden your heart.

Even the things of God can become idols. In Numbers 21, the Israelites complained before God, and God sent snakes to bite and punish them. The people cried out for mercy, and God instructed Moses to set up a bronze snake on a pole – and whoever looked at it would be healed. That was a good thing.

Well, hundreds of years later, when Israel was in the land, they had taken that bronze serpent and set it up as a god, which they began to worship. It became a substitute – an idol in the place of a relationship with God. King Hezekiah later took it, broke it in pieces and called it *Nehushtan* – meaning ‘just a piece of bronze’. A good thing becomes a bad thing when it robs you of the best things.

Secondly, they made the approval of man bigger than pleasing God – which is pride.

For the Pharisees, their religion was all about honour and prestige. It became about the status, the admiration others would give them for being so devout, so pious, so committed. Because they were already looking to substitutes, it meant their satisfaction in life was not praising God, it was receiving praise from man.

As soon as your relationship with God starts to deteriorate into substitutes, then know the next thing is you’ll be looking to impress people. You’ll want to talk the Christian talk to be accepted, admired and approved of. You’ll begin to enjoy acting the part of the obedient, committed Christian – in fact, you’ll even feel like you are that way while you’re acting. And it is enjoyable when people seem to believe the act and admire you. But as Jesus warned about the Pharisees, *“Truly... they have their reward”* (**Matthew 6:16**).

Thirdly, they continued their religious practices without dealing with their sin – which is hypocrisy.

Though the Pharisees were filled with all kinds of secret sins of the heart, yet they continued the outward acts of prayers, fasting, tithing, washing and Sabbath observances. That’s why Jesus called them whited sepulchres (**Matthew 23:27-28**). Beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men’s bones on the inside.

And if you have known patterns of sin in your life which you refuse to confess before the Lord, and refuse to deal with, while coming to church, singing the hymns, merrily fellowshiping and going through religious motions – beware, you are baking your heart hard as a rock. Note, I am not saying, ‘only come to church if you are perfect.’ And I don’t say, ‘when you are battling, don’t come to church.’ When you are sick – go to the doctor!

But what I am saying is if you make no effort to deal with a sin, no confession, no repentance, no desire to get accountability, and come and sing ‘*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty*’ – you are causing your heart to develop serious scar tissue.

What does hardness of heart look like? 4 signs of hardness

1. Very little or no gratitude to God

A hard heart has become so self-absorbed it thinks it deserves everything. Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve. A hard heart can say ‘thank you,’ but it is not characterised by gratitude. It is more often characterised by murmuring and complaining. Consider when Israel was in the wilderness.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.'"

Hebrews 3:7-10

What was it that the Israelites did? They murmured – continually complaining about the bread, the water, the situation.

2. Very little or no sensitivity to sin

A hard heart cannot feel the pricks of conscience as clearly anymore. You can go a whole day and not hear the Holy Spirit convict you of sin. At the end of the day, you try to pray to confess your sins and you can't remember what they were, because you did not feel them. Things which used to make you blush no longer do so. You have reasoned away your sin for so long, you begin to think that you have less of it.

Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; Nor did they know how to blush.

Jeremiah 6:15

3. Very little or no receptivity to God's Word

You open the Word of God, and it seems to be closed. Sermons seem like faraway lectures to you. The Word has no relish, no inviting flavour to you. Your watch is your hope during a sermon, because it holds out the promise that it will end soon. You can easily sleep during a sermon, for the Word is unreal and irrelevant. As Jesus said:

"For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them."

Matthew 13:15

A foolproof means of determining if someone is growing or declining in the Lord is to look at their attitude toward God's Word. Hunger – means growth. Distaste means sickness. At its worst, a hard heart is unyielding and impenetrable, stubbornly indifferent and inflexible. Committed to going its own way. You can see, but refuse to do so. You pull down the shutters of your mind, so to speak. You are forced to see what you will not acknowledge. You know, but refuse to consider. You hear, but refuse to understand.

4. Very little or no mercy for others

Like the Pharisees, you find yourself with less than a compassionate heart toward your neighbour. You pass your colleagues and neighbours, and you wish for them is that they would not ruin your day. Your wish for them is that they would leave you alone as you leave them alone. The thought of sharing the Gospel with them has not crossed your mind in ages – after all, they'll just throw it in my face, so why bother?

Struggling Christians receive your impatient criticism rather than your prayer, counsel and help. There is little desire to forgive or to seek forgiveness, because self-righteousness reigns in this heart. When Jesus was rejected by the Samaritans, James and John asked Jesus if they should call down fire in their village. Jesus' rebuke was sharp:

But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Luke 9:55-56

Jesus was not impressed with such hard hearts. In fact, if you turn to Mark 3, you'll see His attitude toward hard hearts. This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is explicitly said to be angry. God's attitude to hard-heartedness is anger because of our refusal of His love, our ingratitude and our wilful, stubborn blindness. It also causes grief, because He sees how we rob ourselves. He sees where hard-heartedness will lead. And where will it lead? Here are the results.

The curse of hardheartedness

The curse of hardheartedness is that you cut off your own chances of grace. The phrase 'to bite the hand that feeds you' could have no truer application than this. When you harden your heart, you do so against God – and God is the one who loves you most. God is the one who will help you most. God is the only one who truly know your needs and can truly satisfy your heart. But when you harden your heart – you are like a wounded animal fighting against the people trying help it.

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries. The haters of the LORD should have submitted themselves unto him: but their time should have endured for ever. He should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee.

Psalm 81:13-16

In addition, you cut off the warning signals you ought to hear. It is a terrible thing to lose sensitivity in your nerve endings. Pain is a great gift from God to prevent you from severely damaging yourself. Pain is the body's jolt to get you away from what might pierce, burn, or otherwise hurt you. And when you lose that, you are open to all kinds of possible harm.

How much more in the spiritual realm – to be callous and unfeeling as you do things which are shredding your soul – destroying your happiness, emptying your life from you, draining you of joy? As **Ephesians 4:19** describes such: *"who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness."*

The terrible consequence? God eventually gives you up. Romans 1 tracks the downward path of the human heart. Three times it says: 'God gave them up' or God gave them over.' When the human heart persists in rebellion, God eventually stops fighting you and trying to soften you. This is clear from **Genesis 6:3**: *"And the LORD said, 'My spirit shall not always strive with man...'"*

Sadly, if you keep hardening your heart, then, like Pharaoh, God may judge you by assisting you in hardening your heart. God may turn you over to a strong delusion, to believe a lie; He may give you increased boldness to be rebellious; He may allow you to think your rebellion is really working. That's a very dangerous place to be. That's an extremely high price to pay.

What does a soft heart look like?

1. A tender heart feels compassion for others

A soft heart looks like the heart of Jesus Christ. Jesus' heart was often moved with compassion. He saw spiritual and physical needs, and His heart moved in the direction of the need. He was not rigid, cool, removed from people. His heart was tender, given to want to help. He was, and is, merciful. A soft heart has mercy on others. It longs to be an agent of God's grace in this lost world.

2. A tender heart feels gratitude to God

Soft hearts are more often than not saying, "Thank you God. I am an unprofitable servant. I have done that which was my duty to do, and yet you have treated me so kindly."

3. While this doesn't apply to the sinless Jesus – a tender heart feels the weight of sin

A tender heart feels the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit like a pinprick through the skin. It is often sending up prayers of confession and thanking God for His mercy.

4. A tender heart continually seeks the face of God

A hard heart is rejecting God's work, a soft heart is receiving them. The wonderful thing in the Christian life is that you do not have to initiate things with God. He is always seeking you out. If you do not harden your heart, but yield and respond, you will receive grace. It is only rejection that prevents this from happening. So a soft heart keeps seeking the face of God, because God is ever seeking us out.

So how do you get a soft heart? God will do it.

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh:

Ezekial 11:19

God uses two main means:

1. Repentance

Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

Ezekial 18:31-32

Repent of a hard heart. It is a terrible thing to have a hard heart toward such a loving God. To reject the sweet drawing of the gentle Holy Spirit is like slamming the door in the face of the kindest person you know. Worse, this Person is not only kind, He is Lord. You do not reject personal invitations from the highest authority, as if you are more important than they.

Repent of known sin. Do not become comfortable with your sin. Seek to find it and root it out in your life. If you and your sinful nature have declared a truce, then you are in a bad place. Seek to know you sin and turn from it. Also repent of lukewarmness toward God. Repent that we are so slack, casual and bored with the things of God – because we do not see.

2. Rededication

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Revelation 2:4-5

Go back to the fundamentals. God says, 'Build a personal relationship with Me in the Word and in prayer. Commune with me. Drop the substitutes – come to Me. Forget about others – know Me. Obey Me out of love. Seek to please Me. Love my Body – the church – and plug into it with all your heart. Serve, learn, and grow together with others. Embrace the pleasures and the pains of sharing your life with other believers.'

Some things, once they are hard, are set. But God graciously allows for hearts to be softened again – even when they have become hard. God will graciously tenderise your heart to Him, if you will repent of hard-heartedness, and rededicate yourself to doing the first works.