

“HARDENING OF THE HEARTARIES” - PART ONE

Sermon-Sunday November 10, 2019

Have you ever known people who consistently question or doubt what others readily accept as truth? These people are not easily convinced. They consistently have reservations about the truth of something they have heard. This can be a beneficial trait in some instances because it can prevent them from experiencing loss or investing in a scam. But if their consistent skepticism remains unrestrained their hearts can get hardened to truth itself. When this happens, they will find it very difficult to receive any type of correction.

Skepticism is a trait we all have in common. It happens most naturally when someone wants to sell us something. Whether we see a product on TV, receive a phone call or an advertisement in the mail, we are initially skeptical of the claims that are being made by the salesman or manufacturer. Having been disappointed in products before, we either dismiss the product immediately or look for the fine print and the return policy. Because if we DO commit to buying the product we expect it to do what it promises to do; and when it does not, we expect to be reimbursed fully with no hassle. We want consumer protection from false claims.

We also want intellectual protection from misleading information. In this age of mass media, we are daily bombarded with the news on a multitude of channels, be it TV, radio, or the internet, as well as newspapers and magazines. If you listen to or read multiple sources, you quickly realize that each one has a particular point of view regarding the news of the day. Some news outlets simply repeat what their fellow outlets are saying as if they have been given the same script. Others differ significantly in how they present the news. Because most of us have our favorite news sources which we watch or read regularly, we naturally remain skeptical of other news outlets, even questioning the accuracy of their statements.

Skepticism is not limited to impersonal sources. We can also be skeptical when engaging in private conversations. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone where you started out open to the other person's ideas but soon found that you were experiencing negative reactions welling up inside of you? For some reason what the other person has said is causing you to either pull away from them or put up an invisible barrier so their words will not affect you. Whether it be news channels, advertised products, or private conversations, I believe there may be two possible explanations for our skepticism: Either we sense that untruth is being spoken or we are unwilling to commit.

When someone says something that doesn't ring true, we sense there is something false in their statements. This causes us to call into question either their integrity or the reliability of their sources. So, we pull away instinctively from those untrue statements, prohibiting them from penetrating our hearts or minds.

We can pull away from a sales pitch by either hanging up the phone, ignoring the ad, or politely excusing ourselves. We can pull away from news we don't trust by changing the channel or by cancelling our subscription to the paper or magazine. When we feel uncomfortable in private conversations, we can either politely walk away or simply choose to avoid specific topics in the future.

However, when it comes to spiritual truths pulling away is not an acceptable practice for avoiding untruth. As believers we must uphold the integrity of our God and His word, challenging and correcting anything that questions the truth of who God is and the truth contained in His word. We do this so that others will not be led astray by the false teaching of others. James tells us that *“If anyone among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his*

way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20). We are to confront and not ignore untruth whenever it involves the gospel of Christ.

Because we are not only believers in the truth but have the Spirit of Truth residing in us, we are capable of confronting untruth and bringing lies and misinformation out into the light. Depending on the seriousness of the statement and the venue in which it was delivered, we may need to point out untruth publicly perhaps even in a confrontational manner such as Paul did with Peter when he was not straightforward about the truth of the gospel (Galatians 3:11-14). But most of the time we would take the person aside like Priscilla and Aquilla did with Apollos (Acts 18:18-28) and explain the reasons why we believe they or their statements are wrong. In all cases we are to adhere to the truth and not let misinformation undermine our faith or our integrity.

I think we could all use some help in this area, both in confronting untruth and in our ability to distinguish between what is biblically true and what is biblically untrue. But because I believe confrontation is more of a growth issue - something we grow more comfortable doing when we mature in God's word – I have chosen to concentrate today on the second possible explanation for pulling away from a conversation, the fact that we are unwilling to commit.

Sometimes, while a person is talking, we get a sense that some type of commitment will be asked of us and we are feeling uncomfortable with that. We pull away, either from fear, unbelief in our ability, the untrustworthiness of the person making the request, or simply because we have no desire to participate. That's when the walls start coming up and we begin to disengage from the conversation.

When we do this, we are in essence hardening our hearts against the person or the ideas that are being presented to us. As with the previous example of a product sale, when we become skeptical of the product or the claims the person is making about the product, we harden our hearts against it. We then become unwilling to commit to the sale because we do not trust the person or the claims he or she is making about the product. This process of hardening our hearts is a natural and protective response to something or someone which we do not trust.

But skepticism and hardening our hearts is not something which should be a normal response to spiritual truths. We should embrace spiritual truths without hesitancy and yet many of us find ourselves resisting the truth of God. Our motive for resistance to spiritual things is similar to resisting a product. It can stem from our fears, our unbelief, our mistrust in the source, our unwillingness to submit, and our lack of desire for the things of God. When confronted with spiritual truths we may disengage because we have negative emotions rooted in these areas which are driving our response. For this reason, I want to examine this area in particular today – the area of hardening our hearts against God's Spirit moving in our lives.

I've talked about a hypothetical conversation but let's bring the hypothetical into reality. Let's speak of the conversation between us and the Holy Spirit (which in Romans 8:9 is called both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ). In this conversation we are attempting to hear God speak to us, either indirectly through His word or directly through the Holy Spirit. There is no danger of the Word of God or the Holy Spirit speaking untruth. But there is a danger of us hearing words of untruth from other sources and other spirits; and there is a danger of us responding to the word of God and to the Holy Spirit with words of unbelief like the Israelites did at Meribah. So, let's unpack this whole conversation scenario by looking at a couple of basic scriptures regarding God's willingness to speak and our ability to hear His voice.

In Isaiah 30:21 the Lord says, *“Your ears will hear a word behind you, ‘This is the way, walk in*

it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left." In John 10:1-3 Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But He who enters by the door is a Shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear His voice, and He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." And again, in John 10:27 Jesus says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."

According to these passages God speaks to His people in ways that are directional and personal. He tells us what to do, where to go and even calls us by name. He does this through His word and His Spirit. But God's voice is not the only voice we hear. Sometimes we hear a different voice telling us what to do and it is not the voice of God. The world, the flesh and the devil consistently speak words meant to deceive us. Though they are untrue, because they are based on a truth that has been perverted, they have the potential to draw us away from the Lord.

The good news is that we can tell the difference between the voice of the false shepherd and the voice of the true shepherd because we know what His voice sounds like. We are able to recognize God's voice when we hear it. But still, we must be careful and discerning when we hear thoughts that are not our thoughts. And this is the reason why.

In Ephesians 6:12 Paul tells us this: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." Because of this, John tells us to "not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

So, our job is to have discernment and to test every spirit to see if they be from God. According to 2 Corinthians 10:5, when these voices are found to be from the spiritual forces of wickedness we are to "(destroy these) speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and (to take) every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."

All of this sounds like a worthwhile task and certainly a lofty goal, but once we have discerned them to be false, how do we do this? How do we destroy these false spirits and their unholy knowledge? What is our guidebook for discernment, for truth in order to compare the false with the true? It is the word of God.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

We, like Jesus Himself, must use the word of God to refute the deceptive lies of the enemy. And we tear down any stronghold of untruth and unbelief which the spiritual forces of wickedness would try and plant in our hearts by using the word of God as our sword and shield. This is our primary defense against the words of the enemy who constantly seeks to kill and destroy any spiritual fruit which may be trying to grow.

Now a moment ago I said there was a danger of us responding to the Holy Spirit with words of unbelief. In this case we are hearing genuine Holy Spirit words, but we are having trouble committing ourselves to His suggestion or direction. I believe this gets back to the root of the problem which is our fear of commitment. We do not (or cannot) commit because we either do not believe we have the ability to do what is asked of us or we do not believe we can trust the person making the request. Even if we simply have no desire to participate this lack of desire is usually based on the fear of failure – either ours

or the person upon whom we must rely in order to commit. So we harden our hearts against the request being made of us, hoping to seal ourselves off from the responsibility.

Scripture speaks of a time when the Israelites hardened their hearts against the God who had delivered them from Egypt. They tested and tried God even though they had seen all the wonders which He had done for them. It says,

PSALM 95:6-9

“Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work.”

Now the words *Massah* means “test” and the word *Meribah* means “quarrel, contention, or strife”. What happened in the wilderness was so bad that Moses named the place after what he and the Lord had experienced there. What did the Israelites do at Meribah and Massah to test and try God?

God had done many miraculous things for the Israelites. He kept all the plagues of Egypt from harming the Israelites while they waited for God’s deliverance from Egypt. He parted the Sea so they could cross through on dry land and drowned the armies of Egypt who were pursuing them. In the wilderness He provided a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them on their way. He provided water from a rock as well as quail and manna to eat. At Meribah the Israelites were through with their wandering and were about to enter the promised land. It was here, after all the miracles God had done for them, that they tested the faithfulness of God.

God said He would lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey. When they came out of the wilderness what they saw did not look like fertile land. It was another wilderness – the wilderness of Zin - and there was no water. So what they saw with their eyes was reality. But reality was not the problem. The problem was they believed God had deceived them and that He had done so purposely.

NUMBERS 20:1-13.

“If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why then have you brought the Lord’s assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.”

Their unbelief was exposed by the words that escaped their lips when they grumbled against Moses and Aaron. God was about to meet their expectations but that was yet to come. He was in the process of fulfilling His promise, not concluding it. They were self-centered, not God-centered, so they spoke too soon and despaired too early. Their expectations were not being met. They were not going to commit to God’s plan because they did not believe God was committed to their welfare. And as a result, they contended with God and quarreled with Moses. Psalm 106 sheds more light on this story.

PSALM 106:32

“(The people) also provoked (God) to wrath at the waters of Meribah, so that it went hard with Moses on their account; Because they were rebellious against His Spirit, He spoke rashly with his lips.”

The people provoked God to wrath because they rebelled against His Holy Spirit. This is the key issue. They denied the power of God to sustain them in the wilderness and maligned His character by believing God had evil plans for them and not good.

This action so angered Moses that he too contended with the Lord. He was so upset with the people that he was only partially obedient to the Lord's command. As the instrument of God's provision for his people, Moses was told to speak to the rock. But his anger got in the way causing him to speak too hastily before considering his choice of words. He proclaimed that he and Aaron would bring forth water from the rock which he was about to strike. And he demonstrated this power by striking the rock twice with his rod instead of speaking to the rock as God had instructed.

Only God can bring water from a rock. Moses was only the instrument, as he had been so many times before. Yet in spite of his imperfect execution, God still provided the water. But the cost to Moses was great. He would die in the wilderness and not enter the land God had promised to His people. Now the book of Hebrews brings this story forward and applies it to us today.

HEBREWS 3:5 – 4:2

“Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house -whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried me by testing me, and saw my works for forty years. Therefore, I was angry with this generation, and said, “they always go astray in their heart, and they did not know my ways”; as I swore in my wrath, ‘they shall not enter my rest’”...

“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today”, so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, ‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me’.

“For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.”

The author of Hebrews is telling us multiple times not to harden our hearts like the Israelites did in the day of testing in the wilderness. We now have even more information about the day of hardened hearts. It was a day when God was testing the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 8:2-3 and 15-16 we read we read:

"You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord..."

“He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness He

fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end.”

We see from this that God tests us. He allows us to go through trials in order to see if we will be obedient to Him, if we will hold on to our belief in His goodness even when He seems to us as uncaring. This is something the Israelites failed to comprehend. They were quick to condemn God for His lack of provision totally disregarding all the previous times He supernaturally provided for them. They were so used to walking by sight they had no faith left.

But their story is not an uncommon one. This questioning of God’s care for us happens all around us. I dare say it has happened to all of us. And when we question His care it is hard for us to commit ourselves to Him. All we see is what we physically see with our eyes. And walking by sight does not allow us to see through the eyes of the Spirit to what lies beyond the veil of life’s circumstances. As a result, our questions multiply, and our trust diminishes with each passing day of hardship. In the midst of these hardships we often ask “why” – why is this happening to me? This was certainly a question Job asked daily of God as he struggled to understand what was happening to him and why he was suffering the loss of his family, his possessions, and his health.

Though many have tried, no one has ever successfully answered the “why” question and I don’t believe they ever will this side of heaven. Even Job came to the point of silence when he said, *“I have uttered what I did not understand...Therefore I retract (what I have said) and repent in dust and ashes”* The answer to the “whys” of life are best left for Heaven’s answer. In the meantime, we can agree with Job when he also said, *“I know (God) that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted”* (Job 42:2-3, 6).

In the midst of all that happens to us, some of it is deliberately placed in front of us by God Himself for the purpose of testing us. He wants to reveal what is in our hearts. He wants to see if we will trust Him, will follow Him; will choose Him even when life does not make sense. Will we harden our hearts and complain and quarrel against life’s injustices? Or will we stay the course with our Savior, never doubting His goodness in the land of the living?

The author of Hebrews says, *“Today if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts.”* That’s what we are instructed to do – not to harden our hearts, not to think of God as an unjust, uncaring God because we find our faith tested. God has told us in advance that we will be tested. When that test will come and what form it will take is unknown. But so is our response to such a testing. In the midst of the test will we still listen for His voice? Will we still believe in His provision for us? Or will we doubt Him and harden our hearts against Him? This is a question we will all be called upon to answer, probably more than once.

Until then we must keep listening for His voice and open our hearts to His calling. We are His sheep and we know what His voice sounds like. When He calls our name we should do what Eli instructed Samuel to do. Say, *“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”* (1 Samuel 3:9) and then do what He prompts us to do, and not harden our hearts against Him.

This morning we’ve begin the journey of seeing how our faith falters when our hearts get hardened. Next time we’ll look at how to avoid hardening our hearts so that we respond appropriately when the Spirit moves within us.

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