

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 65 – The Condition of the Heart

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In the April-June 2014 *Word Study* entitled, *The Heart of the Matter*, we delved into the issue that matters the most to Jesus, which is *the spiritual condition of a person's heart*. In that *Word Study*, we discovered how much Jesus' teachings clashed with the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees of His day. Jesus looked at the inner-man, the hidden-man of the heart (I Peter 3:4) which is precious in God's sight. They saw only the outer man. Their entire religious tradition was performance driven, based on works of the flesh. By strictly adhering to outward rules, regulations, and rituals (the ceremonial washing of hands, etc.), they believed they were clean (undefiled) before God.

As you recall, Jesus countered their religious leaders, telling them flat-out that their religious philosophy was all wrong. He shined the light on their darkened activities, exposing their motives, which were all superficial. Confronting them with the *source* of all defilement, Jesus aimed directly at the heart.

Mark 7:21-23 (KJV) – “*For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.*”

Instead of humbly taking the correction Jesus offered, which would have set them free from the bondage of the flesh, their pride got in the way and they became offended at His words. Consequently, another layer of *hardness* encircled their already hardened heart. Closing one's heart to God's voice is a dangerous place to be. When people are *hardhearted* toward God, it is the same as being spiritually blind and deaf. Because of their hardened hearts, the religious leaders Jesus confronted could not begin to grasp that they were living a horrible hypocritical existence.

Understanding the Hard Heart

The dictionary defines *hardened* as, to make unfeeling or cold in spirit, to make insensitive and unyielding. A good example of hardheartedness, that we all are familiar with, traces back to Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. His heart was definitely cold, insensitive, unfeeling, and unyielding. Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel leave the land of Egypt as God had

commanded. Over a dozen times in the book of Exodus, the scriptures cite Pharaoh's heart as being hardened. Though God showed through the miracles, signs, and plagues that He sent upon the Egyptians, that He was stronger and more powerful than Pharaoh was, Pharaoh persisted in resisting God. Pharaoh's heart had become dull, with the inability to perceive and understand what was taking place. Every time Pharaoh stubbornly said “*No*” to God, there was another layer of hardness wrapped around his heart. His heart had become so calcified it was hard as rock.

Yes, you might be thinking, Pharaoh sure was a cold, hardhearted dude. What does that have to do with me? I am nothing like that. Before any of us jump to the conclusion that we have no traits of a hardened heart, we need to check out the characteristics of a hard-heart as laid out by Jesus to His disciples.

As background information, Jesus had just crossed the Sea of Galilee to the northeastern shore, ending His public ministry in Galilee. He had just come from a confrontation with the Pharisees, requesting Jesus to give them a sign from Heaven – even though their minds were made up *not to believe*. In their hasty departure, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread.

Mark 8:14-19 (KJV) – “*Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf. And he charged them, saying, **Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.** And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is because we have no bread. And when Jesus knew it, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? **have ye your heart yet hardened?** Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up?*” [Bolded emphasis mine]*

The disciples thought Jesus had spoken about *leaven* because they had forgotten to bring bread with them into the ship. Jesus immediately knew what was happening with all the reasoning going on among them. In all likelihood, the disciples were so concerned about whom to put the blame on for

forgetting the bread, what Jesus spoke went right over their heads. They were unable to *consider* the warning Jesus gave them.

Mark 6:52 (KJV) – *For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened.*

Here were the disciples living and traveling with Jesus and sitting under His teachings daily, yet this previous verse (after Jesus walked on the water) gives us the insight we need – that their heart was *hardened*. How could this be? Their *focus* was on their physical circumstances, rendering them oblivious to the miracle they had just witnessed of Jesus feeding the 5,000. They did not even *consider* that Jesus was talking about spiritual leaven – about the legalistic teachings and practices of the Pharisees. Jesus rebuked His disciples with the question, “Do ye not remember?”

If they had remembered the miracle of the loaves, they would know from experience that Jesus took care of them then, He would not let them go hungry now. If their hearts were soft, they would have *considered* that Jesus was talking about spiritual leaven. It was urgent that Jesus warn the disciples about the *leaven* of the Pharisees and that of Herod, because of its invasive and corrupting influence.

It takes only a small amount of *yeast* to affect a large amount of bread dough when it is mixed. Yeast was a common Jewish symbol for evil. In the context Jesus spoke about, the leaven referred to a gradual *increase of unbelief*. Layer after layer of unbelief, hardens the heart, resulting in a turning away from God and the truth of His Word. Because this attitude had affected the entire nation of Israel, Jesus warned His disciples against it.

Jesus laid out the characteristics of a hard heart.

In Mark 8:17b-18, Jesus listed the symptoms that are descriptive of someone with a hardened heart. People with these characteristics display inabilities in the spiritual realm. Jesus said these folks are,

- (1) Unable to perceive
- (2) Unable to understand
- (3) Unable to see
- (4) Unable to hear
- (5) Unable to remember

If our hearts are hardened toward God, it is because of our failure to *consider* and to stay *focused* on the spiritual truth of God’s Word. We have taken our eyes off Jesus, disregarding the leadership of the Holy

Spirit. When we harden our hearts against God’s truth through unbelief, we limit ourselves to the natural realm, because that is what we *consider* and what we stay *focused* on. Once we fully understand what causes hardheartedness, we can reverse the damage by soaking in the truth of God’s Word.

Jesus is sending out a proclamation!

Mark 1:15 (NIV) – “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mark 4:23 (NIV) – “If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Mark 4:24-25 (NIV) – “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

Questions for Personal or Group Study
(Please do not mail to CA for grading)

- 1 – In the previous *Word Study*, “My Brother’s Keeper”, April-June 2014, the scribes and Pharisees were offended at Jesus’ words. What effect did their outrage have on the condition of their heart?
- 2 – What is the definition of the word *hardened*?
- 3 – Every time Pharaoh said “No” to God, refusing to let the children of Israel leave Egypt, what further spiritual damage did this do to his heart?
- 4 – Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the *leaven* of the Pharisees. How did the disciples respond to His warning? (See: Mark 8:16)
- 5 – Describe the effect of *yeast* in bread dough. In the context in which Jesus spoke about the *leaven* of the Pharisees, what truth was He revealing to the disciples?
- 6 – Explain how layer after layer of *unbelief* hardens the heart. What is the result?
- 7 – Jesus laid out five characteristics of a hard heart. What are they? (See: Mark 8:17b-18)
- 8 – What is the cause and effect of limiting ourselves to the natural realm? (See: Mark 6:52)
- 9 – Once we understand what causes hardheartedness, how can we reverse the damage?