

Introduction to Spiritual Heart Disease

Hebrews 3:12-15

August 13, 2023

INTRO ...a Significant Passage to Explain Small Group Ministry

Nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska, is no longer Christian. That's not unusual. Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12 percent of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history. As a Christian, I feel this shift acutely. My wife and I wonder whether the institutions and communities that have helped preserve us in our own faith will still exist for our four children, let alone whatever grandkids we might one day have.

...A new book, ...*The Great Dechurching* finds that religious abuse and more general moral corruption in churches have driven people away. ...But Davis and Graham also find that a much larger share of those who have left church have done so for more banal reasons. The book suggests that the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up." **Jake Meador**, "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church", *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2023

Hebrews 3:7-15

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

"Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,

on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your fathers put me to the test

and saw my works for forty years.

¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation,

and said, 'They always go astray in their heart;

they have not known my ways.'

¹¹ As I swore in my wrath,

'They shall not enter my rest.'"

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

This passage joins the MANY verses in Hebrews that summon us to some kind of Action! Its Table of Contents/Structure include — (1) There are 4 Commands in this passage ... (2) There is an emphasis of "sober weightiness" & "intentionality" ... (3) There is an insight into something about ourselves ... (4) There is a prescribed means of help

Intro to "Spiritual Heart Disease"

— *The Christian heart is vulnerable to "Spiritual Heart Disease" ...Hebrews is speaking to struggling Christians—it is not written to unbelievers who have not yet experienced Regeneration. It is this audience that is asked to consider the possibility that they could experience a "heart that gets hardened" ... a "heart that goes astray" ...an "evil, unbelieving heart"*

- Hebrews, other N.T. Scriptures, and Solid Theologians in Church History are aware of passages like **Ezekiel 36** and **2 Corinthians 5**

Ez 36:25-27 *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

...These verses don't contradict or eliminate the following verses

Acts 5:3-4 *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."*

...our understanding of the N.T. Life does not present the heart of a Christian as inaccessible to sin, Satan, and temptation.

2 Corinthians 4:16 *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*

...There is an inner "process" that has ebb and flow to it—not a once and for all switch that got flipped

Ephesians 4:22-24 *...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

...That which is "accomplished" in N.T. Theology becomes the Basis for our Ongoing Actions & Attitudes—Not reasons to NEGLECT or become Less Intentional about our Actions & Attitudes!

- Church History (of Reformed Theologians) promote Intentionality and an awareness of Spiritual Heart Disease!

*"Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I' constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above."* **Robert Robinson**, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (1758)

"The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart to God and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God." (Puritan **John Flavel**, quoted in *Watchfulness* by Brian Hedges, p. 5)

"The problem is that our hearts have become sick, diseased by a deadly contagion of sin. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it.' (Jer 17:9) ...The good news for believers is that God has, in fact, changed our hearts. ...Into the darkness of our benighted minds, God brings light. Into the chaos of our inner worlds, He brings order. ...But even after new birth, our hearts must be kept. They must be guarded from fleshly desires that wage a relentless guerilla warfare against our souls (1Pet 2:11). Sin's dominion over us is broken, but its seditious influence remains. The heart must be watched..." **Brian Hedges**, *Watchfulness*, p. 42

¹² *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*

...The writer of Hebrews—is Speaking to “BROTHERS” ...those who “Share in Christ” ...These weighty concerns are addressed to Christians! ...Vigilance and Sober Carefulness is applied throughout the N.T.!!

1 John 5:21 “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

“In a 105-verse treatise on living in vital fellowship with Jesus, the Son of God, how on earth does that unexpected command merit being the final word? ...John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?” **David Powlison**, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair’”

Prov 4:23 Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

...The N.T Christian is NOT somehow exempt from this—even though he does have different equipment and tools to work with! ...The writer of Hebrews is going to reach back to a “Pre-regeneration” group of followers to make his point—certainly he’s not making a giant theological mistake, by referencing a set of people whose experience is irrelevant to ours! The crux of his argument is basically, ‘what happened to them could happen to us’!

...The heart is Vulnerable to “Spiritual Heart Disease” — “hardening” ... “going astray” ... “evil, unbelieving heart”

— These heart conditions are associated with: “days of testing” (v. 8) ... “ignorance of God’s ways” (v. 10) ... “exposure to the deceitfulness of sin” (v. 13) ... the fatigue of persevering (v. 14)

"There is need of great care, heedfulness, watchfulness, and circumspection, for a due continuance in our profession, to the glory of God and advantage of our own souls. A careless profession will issue in apostasy open or secret, or great distress, ...Our course is a warfare; and those who take not heed, who are not circumspect in war, will assuredly be a prey to their enemies." **Owen, John**. John Owen On Hebrews: A Classic Puritan Commentary (pp. 850-851). Kindle Edition.

"Your heart is valuable, but it is always in danger of being hardened. Have you ever felt the Spirit's prompting to kneel in prayer, or reflect on Scripture, or write a generous check for someone in need—and ignored it? Instead, you decided to make a phone call, channel surf, or check email. ...And then, after a short while, the spiritual impulse disappeared. The inclination to pray vanished. Your desire for God's word evaporated with the morning dew. The spirit of generosity? Gone. ...What happened? Your heart was hardened. The heart's proneness to hardness is another reason why watchfulness is necessary. ...without spiritual vigilance, our hearts default to unbelief. Unbelief always leads to departure. Sin deceives us, and our hearts are hardened. And we begin to drift away from the lover of our souls. Left unchecked, our hearts are soon impenetrable, calcified by sin." **Brian Hedges**, Watchfulness, p. 44

v. 12 = "TAKE CARE ...Because your hearts can be deceived, led astray, and hardened to such a degree that your heart's agenda becomes unbelieving and evil!"

Preventative Treatment - The Prescribed Humans Means of Help

v. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

[Heb 3:7] Having given solemn warning, the author now promotes encouragement: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (v. 13). Think how different it might have been for Israel if they had daily encouraged one another instead of falling to negativism and grumbling and quarreling. Isolation, and particularly isolation from the mutual encouragement of the body, is a dangerous thing. In isolation we are "prone to be impressed by the specious arguments which underline worldly wisdom." When you are alone and unaccountable, it is tempting to take the easy course instead of the right one. ... We are to encourage each other daily, not just on the first day of the week." **Kent Hughes**, Hebrews, (Preaching the Word Commentary)

παρακαλέω parakalēō [to exhort, comfort], παράκλησις paráklēsis [exhortation, comfort]

to call to one's side, call for, summon to address, speak to, which may be done in the way of exhortation, entreaty, comfort, instruction, etc. to admonish, exhort, to beg, entreat, beseech to strive to appease by entreaty ...to console, to encourage and strengthen by consolation, to comfort (Olive Tree Enhanced Strong's Dictionary)

2 Cor 1:3-11 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

...Those who engage others "afflictions, suffering, and need for comfort" do so out of their own humbling experience! ...Paul knows what it is to be "BEYOND Himself" and even to "despair of life itself"!!

This is a verse whose tone features "INTENTIONALITY"! ... "Take care" ... "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'"

Eph 4:14-16 *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

v. 14 describes the forces that threaten to "harden and deceive the heart" and create conditions of "drift and going astray"

v. 15 ... RATHER (a contrast word) —We are to create an environment that is informed by these 3 words:

- "Speaking"
- "The Truth"
- "Love"

The much needed medicine for Spiritual Heart Disease is NOT merely getting around people ...it is having a living exchange with others that brings encouragement, edification, and the energizing/inspiring of faith!