

# Living from Your Heart

## *Softening a Hard Heart*

Mark 8:10-26

January 28, 2007

On this table I have two lumps of clay. As you can see, one lump is dry and hard. It's not very useful – except to hold things in place, or to hit you over the head with a blunt object. It's certainly not very flexible and adaptable. In its present state, even a master potter would find this clay unworkable. The second lump of clay is soft and pliable. In the skilled hands of a potter, it can be molded and shaped and adapted for hundreds of uses to meet hundreds of needs. Like the first lump of clay, this lump is unfinished, rough, raw; however, unlike the hardened clay, this soft clay is in process. It isn't done. It's open and responsive to the hands and the will of the potter.

Which lump of clay best represents the condition of your heart? One of the most common heart-conditions mentioned in the Bible is the hard or stubborn heart. The Bible constantly warns us with words like these from Psalm 95: “Do not harden your hearts” – or these words from the prophets: “they made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to (God)” (Zechariah 7:12). Or “these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts; they have turned aside and gone away ... they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts” (see Jeremiah 5:23 and 7:24).

Before God had mercy on us and changed our hearts, the human heart condition is described this way: “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4:18). According to the Bible, our minds need to be informed due to our ignorance; but on an even deeper level, our hearts need to be transformed “due to the hardening of (our) hearts.” Hardness of heart is the fundamental barrier to living a holy and happy life in Jesus. That's why we must be careful when we say things like “I have to follow my heart.” Which heart are you following - your new, redeemed heart in Christ or your old sin-hardened heart?

This passage will show Jesus confronting a hardened heart. How does he deal with a hardened heart? Here's the background to this story: in chapter 7 Jesus gave a short sermon on the human heart. It was his idea that the heart is the center of our spiritual life. Everything flows from the heart (see Mark 7:21-23). Now at the beginning of chapter 8 Jesus has just miraculously fed a crowd of over 4,000 people with only seven loaves of bread. Wow. The disciples of Jesus saw it all. They heard Jesus say, “I have compassion for these people.” They watched as he broke the bread and passed it around. Then they walked around and collected seven baskets of leftovers. All of that is fresh in their minds – at least it should be – as they get in the boat (see verse 10) and head for the little fishing village of Dalmanutha.

Then in verse 11 the Pharisees accost Jesus. Read verse 11. Let's be careful to distinguish two heart conditions. The curious, seeking heart is different from the hardened heart. In other words, the Bible is not opposed to intellectual inquiry and honest seeking for answers. Faith is not opposed to reason. When we meet in small groups or after this worship service or throughout the week, people should be asking honest questions about the Bible or the nature of God or the way of Jesus. The curious, seeking heart can be open and pliable (point to the soft lump of clay). But the hardened heart won't bend no matter what you do to it (point to the hard lump of clay).

The Pharisees have hard hearts. The New Testament was originally written in Greek and sometimes the specific Greek words that were used add a color to a scene. For instance, the word for came in verse 11 ("The Pharisees came") literally means "came out" as if in military rank. (Demonstrate a soldier marching in). This is serious and they're on a mission. The word for "question" really meant to dispute or to oppose. The word for "test" meant to set up a stumbling block to discredit. And the word for "asked" meant to gain control of someone – as in a parent saying to a child, "I am asking you, did you do your homework?" It's not an honest inquiry; it's an assertion of control. And this whole conversation has nothing to do with sincere seeking; it flows from a hard heart.

Sometimes it's difficult to spot the difference between a hard and a seeking heart. I remember once as a student at the University of Minnesota I was having an intense conversation with a fellow-student named Jack about Christ. He kept peppering me with questions about the Bible, the problem of evil, science and Christianity, etc. After about two hours of patiently answering his questions (and honestly admitting when I just didn't have an answer), I finally blurted, "Jack, if we could meet for the next few months once a week and patiently study these issues, and if you found answers that were intellectually satisfying, would you be open to accepting Christ as your Savior?" Without hesitation, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Not in the least. I have chosen my path in life and I don't want God or anyone else interfering with me." When the Pharisees asked for a "sign from heaven" it was in line with Jack's questioning.<sup>1</sup> They didn't have an open mind; they had a closed and hardened heart. And according to the Bible, this is true for all of us: we are seekers, we are thirsty for knowledge and truth; but on a deeper level, we're also twisted in our search for truth, we're on a spiritual journey away from God not towards God (Romans 3:11-12).

This is the problem of the hardened heart. And notice Jesus' response: he doesn't play their game. We have a tendency to think that Jesus was always nice and sweet. He wasn't. Actually, in verse 12 Jesus said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? I tell you the truth (a phrase that literally meant "I'll die before I do this"), no sign will be given it." In other words, Jesus was saying, "I'm not playing your petty game. When your heart is hardened by sin, and you're not willing to face it, there's really nothing I can do for you. Another 'sign' won't change your heart." And then in verse 13 we read "Then he left them, got into the boat and crossed over to the other side." The body language is clear: Jesus was saying, "Any further discussion with you guys is a waste of

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<sup>1</sup> In chapter 3 we learned that they've already made up their minds about Jesus – he's power is straight from hell (see 3:22).

my time. The problem isn't here (point to my brain); the problem is here (point to my heart). And until you deal with your heart condition, you'll never be happy with me."

That's confrontation. Yea, go Jesus! Nail the bad guys with the hard hearts. In your face, Pharisees! Hold on here: because Jesus will also confront our hard hearts. Notice what happens with the disciples in verses 14-21. I love this little exchange. And once again, Jesus surprises us. One thing you can say about Jesus: he's never boring. If you want to know how to live from the heart, look at Jesus. He's alive! He is fully engaged all the time. He's always like a dose of Tabasco sauce – a full-bodied, strong, undeniable burst of flavor!

Now in this scene someone forgot to bring the picnic lunch so all they have is a loaf of Wonder Bread. The disciples are absorbed with the missing lunch. Jesus is pondering profound spiritual realities. He's warning them about evil influences. "Be careful," he says in verse 15, watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod." In this instance, yeast is clearly bad stuff. A little bit of it can penetrate and change the structure of a whole lump. In the same way, once your heart starts to get hardened, it changes you and it changes an entire family or community. A little hard heartedness goes a long way. So watch out, Jesus said. Pay attention to your heart condition. That's why the Bible says that we need to encourage one another every day not to have a hard heart (Hebrews 3:12-13).

So Jesus is laboring to keep their hearts soft and open. All they can think about is the food: *No food. Bummer. No chips and dip. No canned sardines and pickled herring. Major tragedy.* So they pick up on Jesus' statement and verse 16 literally translates as, "They discussed this with one another why they had no bread." In other words, they were arguing, debating, quibbling about who forgot to bring the lunch on the boat. "Peter, you idiot, I thought you brought it." "Are you kidding? I brought it last time." "James, it was your turn." "Hey, you guys, I'm hungry and it's your fault." Isn't this wonderful? They're surrounded by hard hearts, they're starting to clog their arteries with spiritual hardness, and all they can do is point a finger and blame someone else.

Does this sound like your family or your marriage or your church or your work place? When you're busy blaming everyone else for your problems or the problems of the world, it's often a sign of a hardened heart. The Bible has a marvelous plan to change the world – one heart at a time – but it always starts right here (point to my heart). So we always begin by praying, "Lord, in this situation, what are you trying to do in *my* heart? How do you want to soften *my* heart?" If you're busy pointing fingers, displaying contempt and disgust, blaming others around you, you may miss a wonderful opportunity to allow God to transform you.

At this point Jesus could just let things slide. So they have a little hardening of the spiritual arteries? So they're more interested in blaming each other? Let's just cut them some slack. Jesus doesn't do that. Actually, that would be like a heart surgeon saying, "Well, you have 95% blockage in three arteries, but don't worry about it. Come back when ever *you* feel like coming back." Instead, Jesus hammers away at their hard hearts.

About a hundred years ago the writer Franz Kafka gave some advice to a friend about how to choose your reading material: “I think we ought to read only books that bite us and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place ... a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”<sup>2</sup> Many of us have been coming to church, reading our Bibles, singing great hymns and songs and we wonder why we don’t grow and change. Why am I still the same human being I was two years ago and ten years ago? Maybe it’s because we just want Jesus to make us feel better when we should start asking and expecting Jesus to be the axe for the frozen sea in our hearts.

So here in this story Jesus confronts the hardness of their hearts and he hammers away at them by asking question after question – seven questions in all. Read verses 17-21. This is a strong confrontation. Jesus is hammering away at the frozen sea within us. This should be normal Christianity. Jesus confronts and hammers away at *my* hardness of heart. When you’re open and pliable and soft in your heart, God can get through to you anywhere and anytime. (Example).

Isn’t this a little harsh? We’ll get to some very good news in a few minutes, but for now here are two things to keep in mind: first, Jesus isn’t just angry; he’s also very saddened by all of this hardness of heart. The word used in verse 12 when it says “Jesus sighed deeply” was a rare but powerful Greek word. It implied not just frustration, but more than anything, profound grief and sadness. It’s like when you hear that a friend’s child (or your child) has just died or been arrested. It’s the way you would respond when a friend or classmate committed suicide or died in a car wreck. **Sigh!** Jesus’ heart is breaking. And, by the way, this is one sign that your heart is softening by God’s grace: rigid anger and self-righteous blaming are slowly being replaced by a brokenness of heart. You’re more likely to weep than to yell. Your heart bleeds more than it blames. Irritation (which is about me and against you) gets replaced by patience (which is all for you).

But, secondly, let’s notice why Jesus is so tough on these guys. They’ve been with him for three years. They have personally seen Jesus perform miracles. They have heard Jesus talk and teach. They are the insiders. They are the privileged ones. They watched Jesus feed huge crowds of people on at least two occasions and now they’re angry and divided over a missing lunch. So Jesus hammers away at them: “You guys should have the most open and pliable hearts in the world; instead, you’re just like everyone else. You’re no better than the Pharisees. You’ve seen it all but you don’t see. You’ve heard it all but you’re still not listening.”

But here’s the good news: Jesus doesn’t just leave us in our hardness of heart. He touches our lives and heals our hard-heartedness – the hardness that keeps us unhappy, bitter, locked up in ourselves. Notice the next story in verses 22-26. The Gospel storyteller Mark didn’t place it here by accident. It intentionally follows right on the

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in James Houston, *Joyful Exiles*, pages 25-26.

heels of verse 21 where Jesus asked: “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts still hardened?” Now we encounter a man who doesn’t see, but Jesus will touch him and change him – just as Jesus can touch and change our sin-hardened hearts. This story is a dramatic parable of how Jesus can touch and change our lives.

They bring a blind man to Jesus so that Jesus can touch him. Did you ever notice how often Jesus is touching people? The Bible assumes that healing will often come not just in your private times of prayer but in and through the touch of our brothers and sisters in Christ. So Jesus takes him by the hand, leads him out of the village, spits on the man’s eyes, and then lays his hands on the spit and the man’s eyes. What a strange way to heal! That’s Jesus for you! He’ll heal you alright; he will change and soften your hard heart; but don’t try to tell him how to do it. You just let him take you by the hand and lead you and as Dr. Seuss once said, “O, the places you’ll go!” Just stay open. Be the soft clay. Be pliable in the Master’s hands; don’t be stiff and hard and assume that you’ll tell Jesus how and when to lead you. O, the joy and fun and adventure we miss when we tell Jesus how to lead us – rather than the other way around.

So Jesus takes him by the hand and touches him. Notice this: the man does not become healed right away. As a matter of fact, this is the only story of Jesus healing someone in stages. So Jesus asks, “Do you see anything?” and the man responds, “Yes, I see people, but they look like trees walking around.” So Jesus places his hands on the man’s eyes again. Read verse 25. Isn’t that so kind and patient of Jesus? He’s like a committed head coach. He expects much from us. Jesus expects more from you than you could ever imagine. He will confront your hardness of heart. He won’t let you get away with it. He’ll hit your frozen heart with the axe of his love. But then he knows that you – like the disciples – won’t get it all at once. We all heal from our hard-heartedness in stages. We can rest in His grace.

(Turn to the two lumps of clay). Where is your heart this morning? Are you hard or are you pliable? Is your heart closed or open? Are you telling Jesus how to heal and change and lead you or are you being led by Him? O, the adventure we miss, O, the joy we pass up when we are not being led and shaped and molded by Jesus.

The natural tendency of our unredeemed hearts, our hearts outside the reach of God’s grace, is to move towards hardness. And there are so many things that can harden our hearts: circumstances, people, our work, our busyness. But when we come under the influence of Jesus, when we ask and invite the Holy Spirit to come into our lives, when we stand with Jesus at the foot of the cross, when we see that He loved us and gave himself for us and for our salvation even when we weren’t open, we weren’t seeking him, we were the hardened lump of clay (point to the hard lump); all of this begins to break our hearts wide open and then it begins to soften our hearts so God can work in us and God can use us for His purposes (point to the soft clay).

And if you’re open and pliable and ready and willing, it can happen anywhere and any time. Example – my friend John Cragg putting way too much emphasis on his son’s grades rather than his son’s influence.

Do you see how easily our hearts can harden to sin? It is our natural bent. But do you also see how powerfully and wonderfully Jesus can intervene, touch our lives and change our hearts. How about you? Is there hardness in your heart today? Is there bitterness towards someone in your life? Are you blaming someone for your lot in life? As the service closes this morning, we're going to allow ample time so you can linger in God's presence. Ask him to search your heart. Ask him to meet you here this morning. Ask him to change your heart.