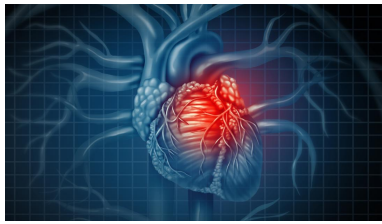


## Childish to Childlike: Hard Hearts

Exodus 11

Matthew 7: 21-23



There is a condition of the heart called cardiomyopathy. Cardiomyopathy causes the heart to be unable to pump blood to the rest of your body.

The reason the heart has trouble pumping blood is basically the heart has become enlarged, stiffened, or thickened to the point of causing scar tissue.

Literally, it's a hardening of the heart.

Now this type of hardened heart is obviously a physical issue, one that your doctor can tell you more about. That's about all I know about cardiomyopathy, and even that little bit I had to Google.

But there is another hardening of the heart we can talk more about, and that one is a spiritual issue. That one you can learn more about in your Bible, and that's exactly what we're going to examine today.

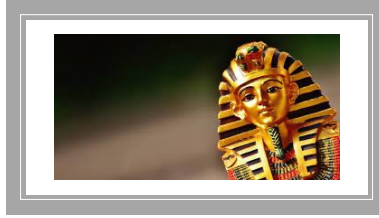


Last week, we started a sermon series titled "Childish to Childlike." As we move through Lent, a season that prepares us for Easter by encouraging self-examination, honest personal reflection, and then spiritual growth, we are looking at matters of faith to see where we may need to grow.

I'll remind you as I did last week, if something today hits a little close to home for you, that's not cause to feel distressed. Actually, if over these five weeks you can honestly say to yourself, "I could use a little work in this area," that's a good thing. That means you are being honest enough with yourself to take this time of self-examination seriously.

Today, as we've already established, our area of self-examination is our hearts.

But first, I need to present you with two problems. The first of these was from our Old Testament reading.



Earlier, we read about Pharaoh's heart in the Exodus story. It's a difficult passage because we are left to interpret God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

If we're being honest, it doesn't feel very fair to Pharaoh, does it? As we sit here today and read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, we can come away with a feeling that he never even had a chance to do the right thing - that God was controlling and using him the whole way through.

To make matters worse, this directly leads to the deaths of thousands of Egyptian children.

That's not fair.

It's problematic for us to believe in an all-loving, all-good God who seems willing to not let Pharaoh decide for himself. It's problematic for an all-just God who exacts vengeance on thousands of innocent people.

It's not fair.

But Pharaoh's heart is only our first problem.

Our second problem is perhaps more difficult because it doesn't deal with the heart of an ancient king. Our Gospel passage reveals that Jesus says our second problem for today is our own heart.



Let's read the 21<sup>st</sup> through 23<sup>rd</sup> verses of Matthew chapter 7:

*<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.<sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*



This is some difficult teaching to swallow. Jesus is telling us that we could spend our lives doing amazing things in his name, only to get to that side of eternity and find out it wasn't right. We weren't doing the right things.

Even when we call ourselves followers of Jesus, we can be on the path to condemnation.

I know it's not fun to imagine, but sometimes we need to look at the reality of the situation. So I want you to picture exactly what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus didn't sugar-coat it, so let's not sugar-coat it either. Let's sit in that for a minute.

You've taken your last breath in this world and crossed that veil into the next life. You are finally face-to-face with Jesus Christ, and you're overjoyed. You cry out exactly like he said, "Lord, Lord!" But you can tell by the look on his face that you don't want to hear what's next.

And indeed, you hear those dreaded words: "I never knew you. Depart from me."

This is harder than the Pharaoh stuff, isn't it? Because this deals with us directly.

Now, putting ourselves at the center of this, now we certainly don't think this sounds fair.

You mean we can tell others we follow Jesus, we can even perform miracles, we can call him Lord, and *still* that's not enough? How can that be fair?

But friends, this is exactly the childish view we need to be careful of. "That's not fair!" when applied to the condition of our hearts is the childish way to respond here.



Cartoonist Bill Watterson is best known for his long-running comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*. The cartoon features a young boy, Calvin, and his best friend Hobbes, a stuffed tiger toy that acts quite real thanks to young Calvin's imagination.

In a comic strip that was published on April 14, 1986, we see Calvin engaging his father in a conversation that I'm sure every parent and child has engaged in at one point or another.



In the first panel, Calvin asks his father, “Why can’t I stay up late? You guys can!” This escalates in the next panel as Calvin yells, “It’s not fair!” To which his father replies, “The world isn’t fair, Calvin.”

In the last panel, Calvin stomps off to bed muttering, “I know. But why isn’t ever unfair in my favor?”

I think we can be tempted to look at these passages and feel the same way. Why can’t we catch a break here? Can’t God see we’ve been trying real hard? Can’t he give us a break in the end?



But if we look at Pharaoh – if we look at the teaching of Jesus – if we look at the condition of our own heart – and we come away saying, “That’s not fair!” we are missing the point.

So what is the point? What do we take away from this? How do we get from childishly saying this isn’t fair, to a childlike view of the condition of our heart?

It’s vital to understand that a spiritually hard heart is not a God-problem...it’s an us-problem. God is the solution, but God is not the problem. We are the problem.

Let’s go back to Pharaoh. As is usually the case with difficult Biblical passages, there’s more there we need to understand.

If you read through all of the plagues (which we didn’t do this morning...there’s some homework for you), you’ll see that the language doesn’t always indicate God is the one hardening Pharaoh’s heart.

There are instances where the Hebrew says Pharaoh hardens his own heart. Sometimes it just says Pharaoh’s heart is hardened without indicating who hardened it. And later, we get the passages that say God is the one hardening Pharaoh’s heart.

I don’t think those differences are insignificant. I think that starts to show us that Pharaoh’s hard heart was a problem of his own making.

There are two other things we need to know, and for these we need to look beyond scripture. Sometimes we need to understand more about the culture of the time to better understand what scripture is telling us.

First, a common Egyptian belief of the afterlife is that one's heart would be weighed after death, and the heavier the heart, the more guilty a person was of wrongdoing through life. So in this sense, the hardening or heavying of Pharaoh's heart could be an indication of guilt.

We know that Pharaoh wasn't doing God's will. So in that light, we can read that Pharaoh is adding to his own guilt, while God is ascribing guilt to Pharaoh. That sounds fair.

Second, there was an expression in ancient Egyptian that literally translates in modern English to "heavy-hearted." The meaning is probably more similar to our present-day "stouthearted." This was a desirable quality for a person and especially a leader. It was someone who didn't waver in what they said, who had great courage and determination.

In other words, and this is important, God hardening Pharaoh's heart could very well be God giving Pharaoh exactly what he wanted all along, even if it would lead to his eventual downfall.

If Pharaoh is asking for his heart to be hardened and God is giving him what he's asking for, that also sounds pretty fair.

Pharaoh is solely concerned with his own standing and his own interests, and he's not open to seeing what God is trying to accomplish.

We can apply the same logic to what Jesus tells us.

Jesus says the only ones who will enter the kingdom of heaven are the ones who do the will of the Father. We can then make a logical leap that the ones who will not enter the kingdom of heaven are the ones who do not do the will of the Father.

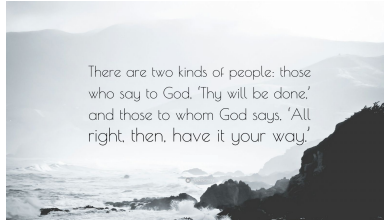
If we're not doing God's will, we're like Pharaoh, concerned with our own standing and our own interests.

So, I think it's fair to say that a spiritually hard heart is a heart that is concerned with doing our own will above God's will. It's us choosing our own way, not God's way.

A hard heart is one that is stubborn enough to insist that we know our own lives better than God does, that we know what we want and what we need more than God does.

A hard heart is an us-problem, not a God-problem.

And the more mature, yet eyes-wide-open childlike truth that is at work here is that not only is God fair when it comes our hard hearts, but God gives us exactly what we've been asking for.



There's a quote hanging in the hallway out there that goes like this: "There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'" I'll let you look for it to find out who wrote it.

But that is really the essence of what we're talking about today. It's not so much a matter of God being unfair in how He deals with us. That's a childish thought. It's that God grants us in the end what we've put foremost in our lives.

If that happens to be that we've put our own ideals first, if we've lived our lives how we think things ought to be, then ultimately we've chosen a life apart from God. And that's what we get in the end.

If God says to us then, "All right, have it your way," I don't think we'll find that unfair. We'll have regrets for sure, but we won't be able to complain about the fairness of it all.

Instead, if we do the will of God in heaven, if we strive to live in a manner that is pleasing only to Him, if we meditate on His Word and constantly go to Him in prayer, if we know our lives are not our own to live as we please, if we say to God, "Thy will be done," then we get a very different outcome.

But when we realize our punishment would be just and would be fair, we begin to grow up in our faith.



When our lives become less ours and more God's, our hearts begin to soften.

When we move away from selfishly claiming we don't deserve what we get to honestly admitting our guilt, our hearts begin to soften.

And that's when an interesting thing happens. Just when we admit our own guilt, just when we honestly say we deserve what we get, that's exactly when we are freed.

Because that's when we experience grace.

And a heart that understands this cannot remain hardened.

A heart that understands this will only want to do the will of our Father in heaven.

A heart that understands this can only beat for God.

And it is exactly this type of heart that our Savior is wanting to give us, freely and with no strings attached.

It is exactly this type of heart we are preparing to receive this Lent.

So let's prepare to have our hearts softened, and to receive that gift with a childlike wonder and appreciation.

And all of God's people said...