

A Theology on Hardness of Heart

by Tim Conway

This sermon delves into the theology of hard hearts, exploring the concept of believers having hardened hearts. It emphasizes the dangers of falling into unbelief and hardness of heart, drawing from various Scriptures in Hebrews, Romans, Mark, John, Ephesians, and 2 Corinthians. The speaker highlights the importance of exhorting one another against hardness of heart and the deceitfulness of sin, stressing the need to run to Christ for healing and restoration, regardless of past struggles or doubts.

Scripture: Hebrews 3:7, Hebrews 3:12, Romans 2:5, Mark 6:52, John 12:40, Ephesians 4:18, 2 Corinthians 3:14, Romans 11:7, Romans 11:25, Ephesians 4:18, 2 Corinthians 4:3

Topics: "Hardness of Heart", "Exhortation and Restoration"

Description

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Transcript

We're going to do a little bit of a theology of hard hearts. Hi Pastor, from Anonymous. I had a question that I would like to hear your thoughts on.

My question is simple. First of all, can a genuine born-again believer have his heart hardened for a season? And to clarify, a season may include weeks, months, or maybe even years. I can think of Scriptures both in the Old and New Testament that speak of an unbeliever's heart becoming hard with the hardening effect either from their own sin, God's influence, or even both.

But I'm not exactly sure if there's any places that speak of a believer becoming hardened. I would appreciate any insight you can share from the Scriptures on this subject as well as any pastoral advice or wisdom you may have. Thanks for your time considering my question.

We have to recognize that when questions like this get answered, typically you hear them that they would like any pastoral advice or wisdom you may have. That right there is a dead giveaway. This isn't a person that just simply thought one day, hmm, I wonder, can this happen? This is a person that has had an experience that is causing them concern and probably some anxiety.

And so they're saying, okay, I need some help here. What the person is doing is they've had an experience in their life. They're looking for me to give an answer.

And then they're going to take their life and compare it. So we recognize that this isn't just the kind of thing where you answer it, and it's a nice theory that we throw out. Things like this have pastoral implications.

People all the time ask questions like this. They've had a certain experience. They think they've committed the unpardonable sin.

They think they've fallen away and they're no longer able to be restored under repentance. People claiming to be Christians and having dark seasons, and sinful seasons, and hardening seasons. And so you get questions where people wonder, well, how long could I go on? How long can I go on? You know, the question comes out, we did the message years ago on being a slave of sin, struggling with sin over against being a slave of sin.

And I don't know how many views that's had, but I can imagine that that's the kind of thing that a lot of people probably wonder about. So let's do a theology of hard hearts. I want you to open your Bibles here.

The first place that I want us to explore hard hearts, because this is the first place my mind went, Hebrews deals with hard hearts. I know I'm not going to dive immediately into whether a Christian can have a hard heart. What I want to try to help us do first is just define what one is.

What is a hard heart? We have an idea, some kind of imagery comes to our mind. We've got some kind of ideas swim around in our head when we hear that. Probably not good.

It's a bad thing. But let's just... Somebody read Hebrews 3.7. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore, I was provoked with that generation, and said, they always go astray in their heart.

They have not known my ways. As I swore my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Wow, that is a strong word on hard hearts.

Saying they shall not enter my rest? Yeah. The Hebrew children were headed towards the promised land. Those people perished.

Those people perished in the wilderness. They died in their sins, save two souls. They didn't enter the rest in the greater sense.

Not just the promised land. The promised land is but a picture of heaven. It's a picture of glory.

So right there, you get an idea. And they didn't enter because of unbelief. And they didn't enter because the hardness of their heart was rebellion.

They rebelled. A hard heart means what? It's a heart that's against God. It's a heart that's rebelling against God.

It's a heart that calls it unbelieving in this portion of Scripture. Now, read 3.12-14. Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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.

Which is interesting. Go ahead and read the last verse. For we have come to share in Christ, if, indeed, we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

As it is said, today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. I mean, it's like He is equating a hard heart with an evil, unbelieving heart. That they're synonymous.

They're the same thing. And, I mean, hit verse 13 again. 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.

And so, okay, if we are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, what does verse 12 say? Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. I mean, this warning is indicating that a hard heart is incredibly dangerous, because it takes us away from God. Falling away.

So, we see it's bad. It's real bad. Now, is the author likely writing because he sees some level of hardness already arising in their hearts? I mean, if you think about the book of Hebrews as a whole.

Go ahead, somebody read 3:15. You went down that far. How about 4:17? Comes up again there.

Again, he appoints a certain day, today, saying through David so long afterward, and the words already quoted, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Interesting. If you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

A hard heart has to do with the voice of God. So, God speaks. A hard heart is one that rejects what it hears.

It resists the voice of God. Can you think of anywhere else where a hard heart comes up in Scripture? Okay, how about the New Testament? Romans 9 specifically talks about... You know what? Let's take our theology of hard hearts and kind of cruise through Romans. Go to Romans 2:5 first.

And then we'll go to Romans 9 and look at Pharaoh. What does 2:5 say? But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. Okay, again, if we're just putting it in a good category, bad category, it's in a really bad category.

Storing up wrath for the day of judgment. I mean, what Hebrews shows us and what this text shows us is a hard heart is a way to fall away from God. A hard heart is a way to store up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath.

This is bad. It's synonymous with an evil, unbelieving heart. It's not good.

And what can happen... Now here's the thing. If you think back to Hebrews 3 and verse 13, it seems like that is dealing with life in the church. And so what does the author of Hebrews see needs to be happening in the life of the church? We need to be doing what to each other? And if you exhort one another, what's the result of that exhortation? You don't become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Whereas if you're not exhorted, this is one of the vital reasons that you need to be in a good church and you need to be committed to that church. And you need to be encompassing yourself, surrounding

yourself with brethren. This is life-preserving.

You say, wait, are you saying that a true Christian could fall away? Listen, what I'm saying is this, people in the church fall away all the time. All we have to do is open our eyes and look around. And the author of Hebrews is anticipating that people can fall away from the living God.

You say, how can that be? That's the way Scripture talks. We know how that is. We know that there are people who seem to be walking with the Lord and walking with the people of God and worshiping right alongside us, and then they do become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and they fall away.

That happens. People make shipwreck of the faith. We can't get away from that reality.

And he's warning. See, again, we cannot be hyper-Calvinistic. This is real.

God has designed ways to keep us on target, on the path, on the narrow way, making progress, enduring to the end. He has provided a means for that. And if you don't use the means, he warns, hardness can set in.

And if that hardness sets in, that's a bad thing. That is a threat to your spiritual well-being. So, back to Romans.

So we saw Romans 2-5. Now let's go to Romans 9-18. 9-18 is the next place where hardness shows up in the book of Romans.

And yes, this has to do with God hardening Pharaoh. Now, what we would ask ourselves is this. There's a comparison being made in Romans 9. What's the comparison? Children of promise over against children of the flesh.

Who is a child of promise? Jacob have I loved. Esau have I hated. What did God say to Moses? I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion.

And? And? Yeah, he'll harden whom he will. Now, here's the question. You've got a comparison of vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath.

If somebody falls under this hardening influence, which way do they go? Right. I mean, look, you've got those that God shows compassion to, and then there are these people that are coming under this hardening influence. We're not really here to debate.

Ooh, we're shocked. God hardens people? We can explain that on another time. But the point again is that hardness takes you down a path where you're a vessel of wrath.

Let's go further in Romans 11.7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking? The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened? Well, there it is. The elect obtained it, the rest were hardened. You have the elect in Israel, which is a remnant, and the majority were hardened.

The elect obtained what? What did they obtain? Well, they obtained life. They're in the tree. They weren't broken off because of their unbelief.

Again, hardness here is a bad thing. Hardness here leaves you outside the people of God. Keep going.

Romans 11.25 Blessed be wise in your own sight. I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers. A partial hardening has come upon Israel.

Okay, and I think what that means there is what we just heard in 7. The elect obtained it, the rest were hardened. A partial hardening means not everybody was hardened. Some were hardened.

Let's go to John 12.40 He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their hearts and turn and I will heal them. Wow, who hardened who? God hardened sinners lest they would be healed. Again, hardness leaves you outside, like totally outside.

This is a bad deal. Let's go to Ephesians 4.18. Somebody read that when you get there. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart.

Hardness of heart. Okay, hardness of heart is right there with alienated from the life of God. The ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart.

Hardness of heart in ignorance. Hardness of heart in being alienated. This is the way of the Gentiles that we should no longer walk by.

Again, this is outside the community of God. I'm just saying, when you come across the word hard in these verses, it's bad. It puts you outside the community.

Another one, 2 Corinthians 3.14. "...but their minds are hardened, for to this day when they read the Old Covenant, that same veil remains unlisted." Okay, he's talking about the Jews. Now we already saw in Romans that they're hardened. There's a partial hardening.

The elect received it. The rest are hardened. And what he's saying here is this is the state of the Jews.

They're hardened. They don't have the ability to see. Remember, Ephesians? There's ignorance.

What does this mean? It means Moses has read to them, and you know who Moses spoke about? He spoke about Christ, but they don't have any ability to see it. The veil is still there. They can't see.

You go to 2 Corinthians 4.3. Somebody read 4.3 and 4.4. Now, my point here was those who are hardened have this veil. But who is it that's veiled? Who is it that's kept in ignorance? It's those who are perishing. Again, outside the realm.

So, it's a really bad thing. But now, Mark's Gospel is actually the Gospel of all of the Gospels that shows us hardness, and it's specifically related to God's people. So let's look at this.

Mark 3, verse 5. We're going to walk through four of these verses. Maybe five verses. Mark 3, verse 5. Okay, now that one isn't specifically dealing with believers necessarily.

It doesn't entirely rule it out. But what was their hardness of heart? What did that hardness look like? Lack of faith? Maybe even just unfeeling. I mean, here's a guy that's crippled and they're just hard.

They're unfeeling. He's healing the guy and they're getting all upset. He's breaking the Sabbath.

Okay, now that doesn't really help us with regards to believers. But again, we see just the nature of hardness. Let's go to Mark 6.52. Now we're specifically dealing with Christians.

So, the basic question, can a true Christian be hardened in heart? Can they be hard of heart? Yeah, we see it there. These are His disciples. Their hearts were hardened.

It seems to equate to they were unbelieving. Let's go to another one, 8.17, which is very similar. "...And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" Yes, this is when they were in the ship and they got talking about, hey, you didn't bring any bread.

And, yeah, it's their unbelief. So, I mean, we probably could clear hardness out and bring in unbelieving. And the truth is that unbelieving is a very common word that describes people that are outside the community of God's people.

And yet, can God's people fall into unbelief? Hardness and unbelief is often through these verses synonymous. But I think we have to admit this, a hard heart is poison. A hard heart is like many things.

It's like walking in the flesh. Can a true Christian be fleshly? Can they be carnal? Well, we know the Corinthians were called that. And yet, there's lots of absolute texts that say if you walk according to the flesh, you will die.

So, okay, if we walk according to the flesh, we'll die. In other words, this is the kind of thing where can a Christian become hard? Yes. Is hardness that which is very characteristic of people that are perishing? Yes.

Very characteristic of Pharaoh? Yes. Very characteristic of the Gentiles whom we're not supposed to imitate in Ephesians 4? Yes. Very characteristic of those Jews that are perishing in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4? Yes.

Of those that Satan has blinded? Yes. Of those that God has hardened? Yes. Can a Christian do that? Yes.

But it's like anything that a Christian might do that is not at all characteristic of a child of God, that is more characteristic of the lost and the perishing that a Christian can fall into, he can be described as having. But it's the kind of place, and especially I think Hebrews 3.13 is helpful because what the author there sees that if people go off into this unbelieving heart, this hard heart, they fall away. It's a very dangerous place to be.

And Jesus is not at all pleased to find that in His disciples. He admonishes them. Why? Because He doesn't want that to be there.

He's teaching them. He's instructing them. You know what Jesus is doing to them? He's doing to them exactly what each of us should be doing to each other if we're functioning properly within the local church that's spelled out there in Hebrews 3.12-14. We need to be admonishing one another and exhorting one another against being hardened.

That's exactly what Jesus was doing. He's reminding them, guys, soften your heart. Be soft about this.

Don't be unbelieving. So then the question comes, because people are going to ask these kinds of things. Can a true Christian be hard for days? For weeks? For months? For years? You know that the warnings in Hebrews are to people who are drifting.

What the author of Hebrews says is God doesn't take pleasure in people that drift off into this unbelief. God doesn't let people like this into His rest that drift off. This is a falling away.

It's possible to get to the point where you're no longer able to be renewed or restored unto repentance. There's a place where you get, where you come face to face with truth and you go on willfully sinning and there's no more hope. Fearful expectation and fury.

I don't know when people cross that line. And you don't either. But we know there's a line to be crossed.

And so when people ask this question, it's kind of like James said concerning a spouse for his daughter. The thing that I would ask somebody is where are you at now? See, I think sometimes you get people that they had an experience, they went through something, and you know what? They're walking with the Lord right now. But the devil comes in and says, you know that experience you had? No other Christians had that.

You're not real. And so people start looking over their shoulder back at their past somehow and the devil's got them all convinced I could have never had that experience. I would say, look, if your present state is you're walking with the Lord and talking with the Lord and loving the Lord and you love Him more than husband or wife or son or daughter and you want to live for Him, your only hope is in His shed blood and His righteousness, then I would say, let the devil know that.

Whatever I did in the past, I know this. My one hope is Jesus Christ. And press on.

If a person is right now living in this state where they feel like they're hard and unbelieving and have fallen away and it's been for an extended period of time, well, yes, they should be concerned. Just as concerned as the people that the author of Hebrews was writing to. And you say, what's the only hope? The only hope is this.

Flee to Christ at once. Because you can never undo the truth that Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. You cannot undo that truth.

Listen, what happens when people become hard, hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, is, remember, people that are hardened, there's a veil. That veil causes them not to run to Christ. You see, they're blinded.

They don't see Him to run to Him. The reason why people can get to the place where there's no more repentance, it's not because they're trying to repent and God is saying, well, I see you're repenting, but I'm not going to save you. I see you believing.

I see you coming to My Son, but I'm not going to save you. No, it seems like what happens when a person drifts away is such hardness falls in that they no longer have a desire to run to Christ. Because the truth is that no matter what state you are in, if you run to Christ, He says, I won't cast you out.

And so I would say to anybody, whatever condition you're in, the devil's right there going to be telling you, there's no hope now. There is no hope after what you've done. You remember how Apollyon spoke to

Pilgrim in Pilgrim's Progress? I mean, he brought his sins.

Since he came through the narrow gate, since he had been to the cross, he came and he said, you know, he threw this and he threw that. He was throwing this stuff in his face. That's what he'll do.

But it never negates that truth. If you go to Christ, He will not turn you away. No truth negates that.

Jesus is not going to say that and say, wow, there's all these exceptions. If you commit the unpardonable sin, you say, yeah, but if somebody commits the unpardonable sin, they can't be pardoned. Well, then I would say that there must be something that is consistent with the unpardonable sin that would also lead a person to never come to Christ.

I think that goes without saying because if a person commits the unpardonable sin and goes to Christ, will Christ turn them away? Christ never said He would turn anybody away. I mean, you come to Me, I won't cast you out unless you committed the unpardonable sin. He never said that.

He said if you come to Me, I will not cast you out. Well, could we conclude then that they must not have committed the unpardonable sin? Yes, we could conclude that. But see, what's real in the absolute sense isn't the issue.

You've got all sorts of people thinking they committed the unpardonable sin and you can just about be sure the devil's right there telling them they committed it. Why? Anything to cause people to throw up their hands in hopelessness. Anything to keep people away from Christ.

People say, well, I think I've committed the unpardonable sin. You will not meet a person who knows that they've committed the unpardonable sin. People just fear they've committed it.

You'll never find a person that actually knows they've committed it. I know and I experienced this when I first was a young believer. The devil was right there saying you committed the unpardonable sin.

For me, it was like if I had a blasphemous thought about the Spirit, I literally was on my knees, had my head against the wall, and no, I can't think that thought! I can't think that thought! I can't think that thought! Boom! I thought that thought. But then I found when I ran to Him, He readily accepted me. Look, the healing balm, there is a balm in Gilead and it's found in Christ.

And no matter what condition we find ourselves in, we need to flee to Him. Because He's the only one that can fix it. Our sitting here fretting about anything we've done never fixes anything.

Staying away from Christ never fixes anything. The only place where there's healing is Him. We've got to go there.

You know, the thing that, the hardness that we see that is so detestable to God is they're rejecting Him and they're rejecting His Word and they're stiffening their necks against His teaching and they're not accepting Christ and there's just a rejection there. I think any time that we embrace that which isn't true, it's not good and it's not healthy. But, yeah, I mean knowing, what I see is this, Christians in Scripture can have hard hearts.

Jesus does not see it as a good thing and sharply rebukes them. We see that hardness of heart is something that can creep into people if they're not being exhorted against this hardness of heart due to this deceitfulness of sin. And we see that hardness is that which is very characteristic of those that are

perishing.

And so, I would just say this, hardness in God's people is a characteristic that Christ strongly rebukes. Hardness in God's people is something that we should all be exhorting and admonishing one another against and that it is something that is so dangerous that if it is not properly dealt with, it leads to falling away. And it's something that's very characteristic of those that are perishing.

So, in all respects, hardness of heart is a bad thing. Now, anyway, there's kind of a theology on heart. What's a good way to exhort someone? So, exhorting people against... Well, here's the thing.

It's got to do with the deceitfulness of sin. Sin is deceitful. Scripture also talks in Ephesians about deceitful passions.

How do you deal with deceit? Sanctify them by truth. Thy word is truth. The way that you deal with people is truth.

That's what Jesus did. Wait a second, guys. Don't you remember the 5,000? Did you remember the 4,000? See, He hit them with truth.

That's what you want to do. You want to hit people with truth. Now, the more wise and discerning a person is, the more knowledgeable in Scripture, the more able and apt they are going to be to apply the proper truth to the certain lie that somebody is believing.

Scripture is truth, but there's a big book here and reading this book cover to cover over and over and over and over and over and over is the best way to fill your mind with what perhaps is the best truth. It's kind of like the pet thing. You know, what do we do? Well, we should start combing.

We should start thinking in our minds all the way through. So when I come across somebody and they're struggling, I come across somebody that needs to be admonished or rebuked or exhorted, my mind is seeking to take their situation and view it through the lens of Scripture. Where in Scripture deals with that? What is the best truth? There are many things that somebody could say to a person who's struggling or in danger of falling away.

But you know, some people have an ability to say things that are much better. Somebody can be struggling. Five different people go to the person.

One thing really helps the person. So, we just need to be striving to be there. And one of the things for certain, if you don't know your Bible and you don't know what's in that book, if we've got some people sitting here that have never read Hosea, or never read Jude, or never read Revelation end to end, or you've never read Leviticus, the truth is there's a piece of God's revelation to us that you're not familiar with, that you can't even draw from if you're seeking to... The thing is, we're not just applying Scripture to other people.

We're preeminently applying it to ourselves. Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against you. We cripple ourselves.

This is the sword of the Spirit. It's the only offensive weapon in Scripture. Ephesians 6. The last thing you want to do is carry around half a sword.

So, my encouragement is no Scripture. Anyway, it's late. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that tonight has been helpful, useful to somebody somewhere, here or abroad. Lord, we just pray that once again, may Your Word be a lamp unto our feet. May Your Word be powerful, living, abiding, piercing.

We pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

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