

Do Not Harden Your Hearts

by Richard Owen Roberts

The sermon warns against hardening one's heart and missing out on God's rest, emphasizing the importance of faithfulness and the dangers of dead works and refusing to listen to God's voice.

Duration: 1:34:56

Scripture: Hebrews 2:1

Topics: "Drifting"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the book of Hebrews and highlights two main parts: the elevating of Christ's superiority and the warnings given. The speaker acknowledges that there are different interpretations regarding the number of warnings in Hebrews, but emphasizes that it doesn't matter who is right. The sermon then takes a personal turn as the speaker shares a powerful experience with an African boy who expressed feeling neglected and uncared for. The sermon concludes with a focus on the fourth warning in Hebrews 10:19-29, which addresses the danger of sinning willfully and the misconception that God's love and grace negate the need for repentance and obedience.

Transcript

Well, let's turn our hearts to the Lord before we sing. Our gracious King, eternal, incomprehensible in all your glory and God in your love. We are amazed, God, that you would turn your face toward us.

We are amazed that you sent your son to the rebels and to the traitors. We read the Psalms, and God, we see it replayed over and over in our lives, in our world, in our homes, in our children, in our friendships. The world rages against you and wishes that it could cast off the fetters that you put upon us.

That we might be self-ruled, but you have already appointed a king. You've already given us your son. We are amazed that when we crucified him, that humanity was not destroyed, but you sent forth your Spirit to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near.

To give repentant hearts, to give believing hearts, to those who don't understand you, who didn't want you. God, we were a people who hid behind every form of idolatry and every type of excuse. We even used our religion as a cloak or as a wall between us and you.

We hoped that if we gave you Sunday mornings, that would be enough. You'd leave the rest of our week alone. We thought if we gave you a little bit of our money, if we said our prayers at night, that that would

be the end of it.

But God, you have not given us what we deserve, and you've not given us what we want. You've given us the very best. You've sent your Son.

So many here this evening can say by experience that they have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Oh God, we pray that you would help those who know you, that where true religion exists in the soul, it would flourish this week. And for those who stand far off and understand all the words and agree, and yet to them it's all plastic, it's all a facade.

God, we pray that you would bring life into those dead hearts, light into their darkness. That you'd bring them up out of the grave of self-centeredness and free them to live unto Christ. God, we ask that the things that were written 2,000 years ago to people, in so many ways very unlike us, and yet in the most important ways, God, we see ourselves here.

We ask that these words would carry great weight with our souls tonight. That they would cling to us. That they would be like the hammer to break through the hard parts.

That they would be like fire to burn up the chaff and the rubbish that so easily collects about our minds and hearts. God, we pray that you might work in us in such a way to refine your people, that our lives might be a sweet and clear reflection of the glory of Christ. Lord, we pray that you would deliver us from a kingdom of words, from the kingdom of good intentions.

God, we've lived there for so long and we've prayed so many prayers, God, and we've walked so little with you. We feel that we're like children, just at the first steps, just at the ABCs. Come, God, stoop down and stretch out your arm and give us your face and not your back and work in our hearts.

For the glory of your Son, we ask it. For thine, God, thine is the kingdom, not ours, and the power and the glory for ages unending. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen. Hebrews chapter 3 and verse 1. Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to him who appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this one has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses in as much as he who has built the house has more honor than the house.

For every house is built by someone, but he who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken afterward. But Christ, as a son over his own house, whose house we are, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Therefore, I was angry with that generation and said, they always go astray in their heart. They have not known my ways.

So I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God, but exhort one another daily while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.

While it is said today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not with those who had sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear, lest any of you seem to come short of it.

For indeed, the gospel was preached to us as well as to them. But the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed to enter that rest, as he has said, as I have sworn in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.

Although the works were finished from the foundation of the world, where he spoke in a certain place of the seventh day in this way and God rested the seventh day from all his works and again in this place, they shall not enter my rest. Since, therefore, it remains that some must enter it and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience. Again, he designates a certain day, saying in David today, after such a long time as it has been said today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

For if Joshua had given them rest, then he would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains, therefore, a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his.

Let us, therefore, be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

May the Lord add his blessing to that significant passage. The second warning, as clear and as succinct as anything could possibly be. I don't know how many of you have ever marked out the several warning passages, but I'd like to begin by making a very strong recommendation to each of you.

In a moment, I'm going to list the six passages that we'll be focusing upon. I would like to urge you to make note of the passages and then to very carefully read them through as if they were one single passage. A lot of people struggle with the book of Hebrews.

Perhaps the most common questions that come to me in the course of a typical year are questions pertaining to issues that are raised in chapter six. I had several ask me questions about that passage just this past week, and it's a very common thing. People are not quite clear as to whether or not when it speaks about a person who has tasted of the good things and of the Holy Spirit and falls away, they're not at all sure what is meant by that.

And of course, the imagination can work over time. One of the persons who talked to me this past week was expressing almost distraught conviction that they had sinned away the opportunity of grace and seemed fortified in that thought by a misunderstanding of Hebrews chapter six. So let me give you the six passages and then, as I said, urge you at some time soon to read them through consecutively.

Sometimes we miss the message of Hebrews because we try to take it verse by verse all the way through, and we fail to recognize the two parts that I spoke of this morning, the wonderful portions elevating Christ, demonstrating his incredible superiority to everything else, and those passages that are indeed warnings. I'll give you a word for each of the six, but trying to summarize them in a word isn't necessarily the most accurate thing to do, but it does at least help to remember them. But before I proceed with the list, may I in perfect candor say to you, some find five warnings, some find seven.

I'm speaking about six. Does it matter who's right? No, not at all. The issue is not a count.

The issue is a careful heeding of everything that the Holy Spirit says. So if you number five, like Andrew Murray did, you no wonder. Andrew Murray has a wonderful book on Hebrews in which he maps out the warning passages as he perceives them.

Or if you find seven, or if you follow my pattern of six, that's not the issue, as I've said. Well, warning number one, the passage that we looked at this morning, Hebrews chapter two, verses one to four. And a key word that helps to retain in our memories the great issues is the word drifting.

And that is obviously the word that we focused upon this morning. The second passage, which is before us tonight, and which Pastor John has read, and we have joined him in the reading, chapter three can start at verse one. I normally start at verse five.

But if you don't have verses one to four in mind, it's not quite as distinct and clear. But chapter three, verse five, through chapter four, verse 13. And a key word in that passage, the word that we will focus upon tonight, is the word hardening.

Do not harden your heart. And that is such a critical danger for all of us. It is so easy to harden the heart.

And there are so many in the church across the land whose hearts are hard, and they don't even know it. The third passage, chapter five, starting at verse 11, and running through chapter six, verse 12. And the key word in that passage is dullness, or sluggishness.

Both words appear in the passage. It is so deeply troubling to me. You know, I live in perpetual wonder.

It's hard for me to even believe that it's true. But I keep getting invitations from all over the country to preach. And while I cannot accept all of them, nor do I feel led to do so, I do in the course of a typical year accept many of the invitations that I receive.

But time after time, place after place, I'm distressed at the dullness of the congregation, at the sluggishness. They hear the word, and they act as if what they had been listening to is some politician telling a polished lie. They're not moved.

They're not stirred. They're not affected, for the most part. They don't really take it as the word of God.

And yet, indeed, that's precisely what it is. Number four, the fourth warning, chapter 10, or excuse me, yes, chapter 10, verses 19 to 29, Hebrews chapter 10, 19 to 29. And the focus of that passage is sinning willfully.

And again, so many have done that. And it is such an easy thing to slip into. If you think that God is all love and all grace, and that he has no severity, if your view of God is a contemporary modern view, but not the biblical view, then you see God is too kind, too good, to be firm, to be harsh, to deal specifically with the

small little sins in our lives.

It's almost as if the notion prevails that if I'm right in the huge issues, that's all that matters. Don't worry about the little things like fornication, adultery, lying. I mean, the big thing is to believe.

And there's a failure to realize that belief is not some academic exercise. But to believe is to take God seriously and to walk in obedience to everything that God says. So, sinning willfully, warning number four.

Then warning number five, chapter 12, verses 1 to 17 in particular, resisting discipline. The passage deals with personal discipline. It talks about the runner who has to discipline himself.

But it also talks about the discipline of the Lord. And again, over and over, it is so apparent to me that a high percentage of professing Christians thoroughly misunderstand the role of discipline. The passage says, whom the Lord loves, he disciplines.

But in a typical church that still has a prayer meeting, many, of course, no longer have prayer meetings. But of those that do, the major subject of prayer is relief from the discipline of the Lord. So, a person is ill and immediately they're praying and asking others to pray, Lord, deliver me from this illness.

Now, illness does not happen by accident. God sends illness. God sends all manner of conflict and difficulty to us.

There are evidences of his love, but we're busy trying to pray ourselves out of the very disciplines that God sends in grace and mercy. So, a right relationship with the discipline of the Lord, excuse me, is the subject of the fifth warning. And then number six, also in chapter 12, and in particular, verses 25 to 29, refusing to listen to him who is speaking.

So, let me recommend it again, just so that hopefully you will not forget. Mark out those passages and then set some time aside to read them through consecutively. And you will discover indeed, thank you, sir, there are wonderful benefits and blessings of getting old, but also a few handicaps.

And one of those, well, I'll not go into detail, but I'm not quite as strong as I used to be and have a lot more physical problems, but I'm grateful that I still have breath and vigor and passion and that I can still proclaim the truth, even though in a handicapped fashion. Well, with that background, let's turn then to the second warning passage. So, you have your Bible open, and we're focusing now, to begin with, on the statement as to the nature or the character of the true believer that is found in verses five and six.

And as already noted, and as John emphasized in starting the reading at verse one, faithfulness is a characteristic of the true believer. Let me read again verses five and six. Now, Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later.

But Christ was faithful as a son over his house, whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. Now, I tried to make it clear this morning that Christianity is not a good beginning, but a glorious ending. I said plainly, it doesn't really matter how you start, it's how you finish that counts.

Harkening back to some day in the past when you prayed the sinner's prayer or when you went through some motions of accepting Christ simply has no merit. For multitudes of people in the American church, their profession of faith is simply a dead work. Now, Hebrews speaks very plainly about dead works in the

third warning passage, but let me advise you now the nature of a dead work.

A dead work is anything you do to seek to gain merit with God. It is impossible for any of us to gain merit with God, and we are not saved by gaining merit. We're saved by the merits of Christ, not by our merits.

So, a person can go through the motions, they can be utterly sincere, they can pray a very earnest prayer acknowledging their need that could be a good beginning. But if that's all there is to it, it's nothing but a dead work. A true Christian is the person, according to verse 6, who holds steadfast the beginning of their confidence firm until the end.

So, all of us need to be very kind to ourselves and very true to the word of God and be certain that we're not hanging on to something we have done. It says a dead work is anything you do in an endeavor to gain merit with God. So, a profession of faith, an acknowledgement of sin for some is very real, but for many it's nothing but a dead work.

But a dead work is not only anything you do to try and gain merit with God, a dead work is anything you do that cannot be quickened and made alive by the Holy Spirit. Now, we are taught very plainly in Scripture, if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. So, if the person who prays the so-called sinner's prayer is still regarding iniquity in their heart, then their prayer is an idle prayer, it's an unheard prayer by God.

It's not a prayer that can be quickened. It is impossible for a person who still holds iniquity in their heart, who loves iniquity, it's impossible for them to be saved. Of course, the way the gospel is so often presented is a hindrance rather than help.

I think somewhere in the past, one of the precious opportunities you've given me to speak to this congregation, I've spoken about the issue of love. Perhaps some of you may remember my saying that many years ago, I was preaching in one of those large California churches, and I made this statement, couching it in the language of the Sermon on the Mount. You have heard it said that God loves the sinner.

It's only the sinner's sin that God hates. But I say unto you, God hates both the sinner's sin and the unrepentant sinner himself. Well, not everybody in the church appreciated that remark, and I got within the next few days a very hot letter from a man quite prominent in the field of world missions.

He, in his letter to me, said, I believe you're the most dangerous person I ever listened to. You have a way of presenting things that make people think you're speaking the truth when it's a bald-faced lie. You have done incredible damage by saying that God hates unrepentant sinner.

Well, it was necessary for me to reply, but it was quite apparent it wouldn't do any good to reply in kind, because his letter was very nasty. So I prayed about it, Lord, how should I respond? So I sent him a really sweet letter in which I said to him, I'm afraid I have an advantage over you. I have studied every passage in Scripture on the subject of the love of God, and every passage in Scripture on the subject of God's anger and God's wrath.

I could provide you many passages making it clear that God hates the unrepentant sinner, and you can't provide me with one single passage representing your viewpoint. I would be pleased to carry on a dialogue with you on this subject, but not until you have done your homework. Well, after the passage of not too long a time, he wrote me back the sweetest letter saying, I apologize.

It's exactly as you said. I hadn't done my homework. It is crystal clear now that indeed God hates both the unrepentant sinner and his sin.

Well, strangely, a few days after that incident, my son, who was at that time living in California, called his mother and said, do you have any recent tapes of Dad's sermon? So among others, she sent them the message preached in that California church. So the next time I was home, he called. He said, Dad, many times I have known you to go way out on the limb, and I've thought to myself, Dad will never recover from that dreadful error, but somehow you've been proven right, but this time you have gone too far.

You are clearly distinctly in error, and you will not recover. This was on the telephone line. So I said, tell me, Bob, what goes to hell, sin or sinners? I looked at it.

I don't think I'm prepared to carry on this conversation. No, I said, Bob, you better do your homework, and it's been interesting to me in the years since to often be with him when he's been witnessing to somebody, and he has carefully explained to them that God hates both the unrepentant sinner and his sin. I don't know how clear that is to you, but you see, the problem lies in this notion that people hold that it's possible to love your sin and yet confess it to Christ and be forgiven of it.

That indeed, it's how you start that really matters, not how you finish. So the repentance of many people has to be described as that which they have done for themselves, not that which is for Christ. Because when you repent for Christ's sake, you repent of everything that disturbs him, everything that distresses him, everything that brings him grief, everything that is offensive to him.

And when you have done that, then you are in a position to take seriously the words of chapter 3 verses 5 and 6. Moses was faithful in all his house as a servant for a testimony of those things which were spoken later, that Christ was faithful as a son over his house, whose house we are, if we hold steadfast the beginning of our confidence firm until the end. Now that statement of holding fast the beginning of our confidence is really making reference to our being in a position to go on throughout all the days of our life, making this bold confident statement, Jesus Christ is Lord. It is being outward in our confession, it is being bold in our confession, it is being confident in our confession.

Now if you're entertaining some sin in your life, you cannot outwardly proclaim with integrity Jesus Christ is Lord. If you were to speak with any integrity at all, you would be forced to limit it. There are certain areas in my life where Christ is Lord, but you could not make a bold, open proclamation, Christ is Lord, unless truly he is.

The point that the passage is making is if we cannot go on making that bold, open, outward confession, then indeed we are not of Christ's household. Now the writer comes back to that issue in verse 14, perhaps you notice this already, for we have become partakers of Christ. If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, now it's obvious isn't it, if you've got something in your life that is offensive to Christ, you can't hold fast your assurance.

In order to maintain any level of assurance whatsoever, you've got to forget facts, you've got to be unrealistic in dealing with issues. For every person who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of Christ knows what is acceptable and what is unacceptable conduct, what is pleasing to Christ and what is displeasing to him. Well, that's a sufficient statement about the true character of a genuine believer.

Let's move from that to this second issue, which is the primary issue in the passage, the danger of hardening the heart, as it's illustrated in the account of Israel. So, starting at verse 7, therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried me by testing me and saw my works for 40 years. Therefore, I was angry with this generation and said, they always go astray in their heart, they do not know my ways.

As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Now, as I tried to make it clear this morning, these warning passages are based upon the conduct of Israel as declared in the Old Testament Scripture. And as I tried to help you to be alert to, they received but little in comparison with what we received.

Therefore, our responsibility is vastly greater than their responsibility. Now, that's in no way to imply that they had no responsibility. It is simply to verify what Scriptures teach, that the more you get, the more responsibility you bear.

And any careful look at what the Christian has received over against what Israel received clearly demonstrates that we are responsible for a great deal more than they were. So, in the midst of this illustration of the way Israel hardened their hearts, there is this tender appeal, starting with verse 7, just as the Holy Spirit says, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Now, the illustration itself makes reference to the ways in which Israel provoked God during that long period of trial in the wilderness.

Now, I don't know that you've thought about this, but this is a very urgent thing to think of. We have people here tonight who have been on trial for the same length of time that Israel was on trial. They were on trial for 40 years.

Some of you have been professed Christians for 40 years, some longer, many for shorter periods of trial. But our lives on this earth constitute a trial in which God is giving us ample opportunity to demonstrate that we love him, and we hate iniquity, and we will not harden our hearts. And the pathetic thing is that many have failed in their trial for the bulk of their professed Christian life.

So, put it down as an immensely consequential issue. Your initial proclamation of Christ is far less consequential than your daily walk with Christ from the time of your first profession. Obviously, in the case of Israel, there were times when as an entire body they rose up and adamantly stated, as for us, we will serve the Lord.

But their claim of faithfulness was proven to be an idle claim because they did not keep the promises that they made to God. They regularly defied God. They regularly broke covenant with him.

Now, in this passage, it states plainly in verse 10, Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, they always go astray in their hearts, and they did not know my way. Elsewhere in scripture it speaks of the ten times that Israel provoked God in the wilderness. Now, quite honestly, I don't know what that statement about ten provocations consists of precisely.

I have pored over the pages, and I've come up with twelve provocations. Somebody else might have come up with eight or fourteen. But let's think about the ways and the occasions in which Israel provoked God in the wilderness.

I've come with a list to share with you, a list carefully compiled, and a list well worth pondering. If you are serious about heeding the warning passages, there would be a great deal of value in comparing your progress, your faithfulness, with the lack of progress and the lack of faithfulness on the part of Israel. So, the first provocation that I would mention, when they were just out of Egypt, they were gripped with fear, because the army of the Pharaoh was hard on their track, and they grieved God.

They sinned wickedly against God. What an absurd thing it is to be brought out of Egypt with the powerful arm of God made bare, and then barely out of Egypt to be wondering, are we going to perish now? What does it say about their view of God, when immediately after deliverance from Egypt, they're dwelling upon fear that somehow Pharaoh will destroy them? But some of us personally have been in situations of that sort. I'm embarrassed to make this honest admission to you, but a number of years ago, my dear wife Maggie and I had felt clearly that we needed to purchase a certain property, and we did so with very carefully arranged financial terms.

And it was a situation where we made a large down payment, then we had some other major payments due, and then a huge balloon payment. And we had everything covered by the sale of various things. But we came to the night before a huge payment was due.

We had sold another piece of property, we thought. But at the last minute, that sale fell through, and the next day we owed \$200,000. And the Christian organization, so-called, to which we owed the money, made it clear, we hope that you fail.

We're anxious to get control again of the property. Then, having no alternative, we had a family prayer meeting, spent the evening as a family seeking divine intervention. As we had drawn to a conclusion, having exhausted our ability to pray, the telephone rang.

I went to answer it. And the only truly wealthy man I know was on the line. He said, it's come to my attention that you have a large payment due tomorrow.

Is that true? I said, yes. He said, I'll have the money in your hands first thing in the morning. I went and shared the call with the family.

We were thrilled. We were so grateful to the Lord. About two weeks later, we owed somebody maybe \$120.

And it was a debt incurred on someone else's behalf, someone who had purchased books from us and hadn't paid. So, my son and I were conversing together, and I was groaning about, what are we going to do about this \$120? And my son rose up in indignation. He said, Dad, I'm ashamed of you.

We had that incredible answer to prayer only a week ago, and now you're grouching about a mere \$120. Where is your faith? Well, many of us are like Israel, aren't we? God gives us some incredible answer to prayer, some glorious victory. We are filled with joy and thankfulness, and a few days later, we've forgotten the incredible way that God responded.

That's the story of Israel, barely out of Egypt and moaning about the prospect of Israel being destroyed by Pharaoh's army. Provocation number two. They reached Merah.

They'd only been in the wilderness for three days, and they had a problem with water. It was bitter. They were angry.

They were despondent. They were proclaiming their animosity against God. A tree was thrown into the water, and somehow the bitterness was removed, provoking God to anger by hardening the heart, by forgetting former graces, by a short-sightedness that so clearly demonstrates that we are not holding fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast until the end.

The third provocation that I've noted, when they were in the wilderness of Zin, this is recorded in Exodus chapter 16. On the 15th day of the second month, after they had left Egypt, they were hungry, and they were murmuring, Oh, wouldn't it if we had died in the wilderness? And again, God was provoked. He was grieved.

He sent them manna from heaven. You see the picture. It does not matter what God does for them.

They still have, they think, solid grounds for discontent. And I must pause and ask, how long a time is it between your seasons of despair and disgust? Many of us have had incredible mercies from the Lord, incidences of divine intervention, absolutely clear, without question, the hand of God on our behalf. But so often, it's only a matter of hours or days before we're murmuring and complaining and expressing our unbelief again.

The next incident recorded in Exodus 17, while they were at Rephidim, they were lacking water to drink. They were thirsty. They tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord with us or not? If he were with us, how could he let this sort of awful thing happen? I've been there myself.

I have felt on occasion, surely God has forgotten I'm even here. Most of us are far better at rebellion, at exercises of stubbornness and betrayal of God, than we are being faithful. So, on that occasion, their problem was resolved by water being drawn from the rock at Horeb.

Then, not very long thereafter, they're in the wilderness of Sinai. Moses is up on the mountain with God, receiving the commandments engraved on stone. The people below are murmuring and complaining and making this asinine statement, As for this Moses, we don't know what has become of him.

Well, they knew where Moses was. What a silly thing for them to say. But again, their conduct so similar to our own in so many ways.

And on that occasion, their associate pastor, Aaron, invited them to bring articles of gold. And he made a golden calf. And they bowed down and worshipped that golden calf, making the amazing statement, This is the very God that brought us out of Egypt.

Is it any wonder God was provoked with them? But obviously, our concern is not a situation that cannot be remedied. We can't go back and correct their problem. The question is, are we maintaining this bold, outward, ongoing proclamation, Jesus Christ is Lord? Or are we letting the difficulties of our lives bring us along just as they did? The sixth provocation, Leviticus chapter 10, the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood.

And the two sons of Aaron offering strange fire to God, provoking God to such a serious level where God says, These people draw near to me with their lips, but they do not treat me as holy. And so the Lord sends fire from heaven to destroy that. Provocation seven, Numbers chapter 11, in the journey from Sinai to Edom, the people were complaining again of adversity.

And the Lord's anger was kindled. And the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed many of the people. I probably don't need to go on listing these provocations.

Obviously, the purpose is simply to ask, do you provoke the Lord with your various exhibitions of hardened heart and unbelief? This warning, this warning number two, is of such a serious nature. We tend to overlook our provocations against God. We tend to minimize them.

Oh, the Lord understands. He knows I'm weak. He's forgiving.

He's gracious. Well, those are true statements. But the Lord wants us to act like adult believers instead of still children.

Israel had incredible ability to act like children when they had the blessing of God that should have made them strong. They were still acting as if they were three years of age. So what about you? The eighth provocation in Numbers 11, also the rabble among the people expressing their greedy desires, their murmuring about unsavory food, and their urge, oh, give us meat to eat.

We remember in Egypt, it was so lovely. In Egypt, we had fish, we had cucumbers, we had melons, we had leeks, we had garlic. No, there's nothing but this awful manner.

But again, the question, how about you? In resolving their complaint, God gave them meat for a whole month. He said, I'll give you meat until it comes out of your ears. But they didn't quit provoking him.

Numbers 12, when Moses married a Cushite woman, Miriam and Aaron began to complain. How does Moses get the notion that he's important to God and we are not? Jealousy, bitterness. And again, in Numbers 13, they provoked the Lord.

When they sent spies to search out the land, they came back and talked about the giants and again, refused to believe that the arm of the Lord was made bare on their behalf. And then we have the provocation at Meribah in the wilderness, when the second time they were complaining about the lack of water and their provocation was so deep and so serious that Moses himself sinned the sin of a lifetime and was prevented from entering the land of promise. Moses never finished his life work because he let the mean spiritedness, the wicked complaining of the people stir him to wrath.

And therefore, he ended up not finishing the work that God had for him to do. Well, let's move from those provocations to verse 12. Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart.

Lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Let me ask, is there any hardness in your heart? Have any of you in any way allowed yourselves to be hardened? Let's focus upon that. How does one go about hardening their heart? What kind of serious effort does it take to gain a hard heart? Well, friends, it doesn't take any effort at all.

Your heart, because of your very nature, is hard. Remember in Moses' dealings with Pharaoh, in that long list of plagues that came upon Egypt, many times it says, Pharaoh hardened his heart. And many times it says, God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Now, what does God have to do to harden a person's heart? Nothing. Nothing. All God has to do is to cease to soften the heart.

Our hearts are perfectly capable, all on their own, of growing such calluses that we no longer hear the word of the Lord, that the Spirit of God no longer breaks through into our consciousness and transforms us. Let me mention as a very prevailing way of hardening the heart, simply neglecting your duties. It is our duty to seek the Lord.

This is a duty brought forward time after time throughout the Scriptures. This is a duty strongly emphasized by Christ when he made it crystal clear that all men, by their very nature, seek something. If we do not deliberately choose to seek God, we will end up seeking something.

So, the simple neglect to seek God, there is that terrible king that followed Solomon, whose entire life story is expressed in these simple words. He did not set his heart to seek the Lord, therefore he did evil. Every one of us who does not constantly seek the face of God runs the incredibly great risk of hardening our hearts.

We are also commanded in Scripture to fear God. This is one of the most neglected subjects in the whole of the Christian church. When we neglect to develop a genuine fear of God, we live in perpetual danger of hardening our hearts.

For many, the neglect of Christian fellowship over the years, I have seen many truly sad things. But I don't believe anything has saddened me more to grow well acquainted with an individual and to see their fiery passion for Christ and his kingdom gradually cool off to the point where they don't even speak about Christ. They don't seek his face.

They don't fear him. They live with incredible hardness of heart. I'm simply saying that by neglect, one can truly harden their heart.

By not maintaining a daily personal walk with Christ, the risk is truly great. But let me mention another area that concerns each of us very, very deeply. This is made very clear in the passage.

The passage speaks not only of hardening the heart. In verse 19, it speaks of unbelief. In verse 18, it speaks of disobedience.

One of the most prominent ways of hardening the heart is through disobedience. Let me speak with as much care as I'm capable of. There are many in the church who intend eventually to obey the Lord, but who frequently respond to the Lord by saying, I'll think about that.

I don't know how often it happens, but I think ordinarily several times in the typical week, people will come up to me after service and say to me, oh, that was interesting. I'll have to think about that. And I will respond to them saying, I was proclaiming to you the word of the Lord.

I was focused upon a direct commandment that God makes. How do you dare say you'll think about it when God calls for action? You say, I'll think about it. Disobedience that takes the form of delay.

Oh, yes, I fully intend to obey. Some of you young people who are here tonight, you've heard a good bit of gospel truth. There have been times when you have waited with a measure of earnestness.

You've even said to yourself, I do intend to become an earnest Christian, but not yet. How do you dare to say to God, not yet? Do you realize when you say not yet, you harden your heart. How hard does the heart have to be until it's no longer able to respond affirmatively to the Lord's command? My dear friends, it's

dangerous to delay even a moment.

When the Lord speaks, our answer must be, yes, Lord, right now. Then there are those who, indeed, do not feel comfortable with all-out disobedience, but their thought is, well, I can partially obey that. I'm not ready to give in all the way on that, but partial obedience.

Partial obedience is terribly dangerous. There's many a person in hell who will be there for eternity who only obeyed the Lord partially. I plead with you, don't run the risk of partial obedience.

Then I must speak of temporary obedience, and I do this with a great deal of heavy sorrow, for I have had some very close friends who at one time were as earnest and as serious as I am, but they're not serious any longer. A man whom I have known for nearly 60 years, who used to travel with me in my younger years, and we would share the preaching. The last time I saw him was not long ago in the state of Virginia, where he was pastoring a church.

I had discovered that he was living in adultery. I pled with him to repent, and the last time we were together, he stood before me, tears coursing down his face, and he said to me, do you think there's any hope for me? And I had to say to him, honestly, I don't know. You are a very proud man.

You're silly enough to think that a decision you made 60 years ago is still valid today, when you're openly, actively defying the Lord. And I said to him then, as I said to you this morning, it's not a good beginning, but a glorious ending. Temporary obedience does not satisfy the demands of God.

Who cares what you did years ago? It's what you are today that matters. Place no confidence in temporary obedience. Then there is obedience that is accompanied with murmuring.

We saw a great deal of that in those provocations in the wilderness. We see it all around us in the church. As I mentioned this morning, I've been serving as interim pastor in a church in Illinois.

It's been a wonderful privilege for me, but a very heavy responsibility. Not very long ago, I finished a series of 25 sermons on the doctrine of salvation, a series that I had longed to preach for a long time. Some of you have seen the book that we produced, Salvation in Full Color.

The series that I gave was along that line. To my astonishment, one of the deacons of the church, and a man who professed to be a wholehearted Christian, came and told me how dissatisfied he was with the preaching and the thrust upon it, and made it crystal clear, I don't like what you're doing here. I don't like myself all that well for that matter, but I know that I had been faithfully preaching the Word, and what he was in rebellion against was not me as a dumb old man.

It was the Word of the Lord that he was struggling against. Maybe you try to be obedient, but it's with a good bit of murmuring and complaining. Maybe it's with a strong measure of reluctance.

All right, if I have to, I'll do it, but I want you to know I don't like it, and sometimes even we try to obey conditionally. I will do what you say, Lord, if, and we give directions to the Lord. The obedience that is called for is absolute.

Without hesitation, any other obedience will harden the heart, and the thrust of this passage, friends, it's much too risky to harden your heart. Don't let it happen. Do you suppose that when the people of Israel left Egypt, they intended to perish in the wilderness? I'm confident that not one single one of that large

multitude intended to die in stubbornness and unbelief, but because they hardened their hearts, that which they had not counted on is truly that which happened to them.

No, I'll just press a wee bit further on the subject of hardening the hearts, and again, a personal reference if you don't mind. Considering my age and all, my hearing is pretty good, but at home, when my wife and my daughter are visiting together at the dinner table, I can't hear their conversation. They don't deliberately mean to exclude me.

It's just that they speak in voices too soft, and I don't hear them, and my tendency is simply to tune them out. So, within the course of their conversation, suddenly they turn and say, and what do you think of that? I have to say sorry, I didn't hear a word of it. Now friends, that carries with it certain problems, but the problems of inadequate physical hearing are hardly to be compared with inadequate hearing of the voice, and one way in which we harden our hearts is that we don't pay strict attention to what the Lord says.

Just think of the times you personally have come to church with something else on your mind, and on the way home, maybe your wife turns to you and says, man, wasn't that some humdinger of a sermon? And rather than openly say, I didn't hear a word of it, you say, oh yes, that was good. But whenever you allow your mind to be preoccupied, when there's something else that you're thinking of, then you run this incredible risk of not hearing what the Lord himself says. So, I'm simply pleading with you, do not run the risk of hardening your heart.

We can harden our hearts by holding for allegiances, something alien to Christ that captures our attention. We can harden our hearts by secret sin. We can harden our hearts by spiritual pride, but whatever the method, the warning is crystal clear, don't let it happen.

And the thrust of the warning is, Israel let it happen, and they not only died in the wilderness, but they never entered into God's eternal rest. Now, just for a moment, as I come close to the end, notice the words of verse 13, but encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called today, lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Now, let me speak as plainly as I know how.

Every single one of us individually holds a responsibility for not hardening our own hearts, but the responsibility goes beyond the individual or personal responsibility. We are responsible for everyone else. The church is going to be held accountable by God himself for those in its midst who have hardened their hearts, and the church has done nothing to help them.

Have you faced the seriousness of this? In so many circles where I am privileged to go, they talk a great deal about Christian fellowship. Sometimes I just wonder what they mean when they are talking about Christian fellowship. Other times I boldly ask them, what are you talking about? But I want to share with you an incident that brought home this matter to me in an extraordinarily powerful way.

My wife is a very sociable person, much more warm-hearted and easy to relate to than I am. I think that is part of the reason I fell in love with her, because she is warm and outgoing and easy to talk to. Well, because of those characteristics.

She met a foreign student. Our home and office are immediately next to Wheaton College, and somehow in the course of things she met a foreign student at the college. She came home and told me about this boy from Africa, and she was quite interested in him and desirous of having some impact on his life.

So, after talking with me, she contacted the boy and invited him to our home. And he came several times to our home. Then I was preaching at the Wheaton Bible Church for a season, and I was dealing with passages about Christian fellowship and Christian hospitality.

In the course of things, I came under huge conviction. I came to the realization there is a difference between Christian friendship and Christian fellowship. And then an incident occurred that just really drove this point home.

It was leaked out. It was covered up, but it leaked out anyway. An older couple in the church had made a pact of suicide.

They came to the Sunday morning service. After the service, they went home. They had their lunch.

They left the dishes on the table. They left a note about the hopelessness of their circumstances. The husband took a gun and shot his wife through the head.

Then he shot himself through the head. Two very prominent people in this world-famous Bible church. The next Sunday, because the church had determined to keep it quiet, I determined to use it as evidence of the point I had been making, that Christian fellowship is not merely visiting, but Christian fellowship is truly helping one another.

Well, the church got very angry and told me I had no business speaking about that matter. But they didn't have much impact upon me. Just registered their complaint, and that's as far as it went.

But I went home that afternoon hearing the bitter comments of some of the leadership of the church, and I got to thinking about this African boy that Maggie had brought home. And all afternoon, this was weighing upon me. Finally, just before evening service, I said, Maggie, I have been realizing this afternoon that we have been extending American hospitality to this boy, but not true Christian fellowship.

And she said, well, that's odd that you would mention that. That's been upon my mind all afternoon. So I said to her, before the evening is out, you must contact this boy and get him to come again.

Well, it took a couple of days, but in a couple of days, he came to our home for evening meal. And after we had eaten together, he and I went into the sitting area, and I said to him, his name was Tunji. I said to him, Tunji, we have asked you here tonight because we need to make an apology to you.

We have been showing you American hospitality, but not Christian fellowship. And tonight, in addition to apologizing, I must ask you how you are doing spiritually. He was seated in one of those swivel rockers.

And suddenly, he erupted into this incredible wail. I suppose only an African boy could even be capable of a wail such as came out of him. He began to shake.

The whole room was shaking as he was in this rocker, just shaking and wailing. For a long time, I could not discern anything that he said, but eventually, these words became plain. No man cares for my soul.

No man cares for my soul. Eventually, he got control of himself. He was still weeping, but he said to me, I came from Africa two years ago.

When I left my home, I had memorized 700 hymns. I was singing and whistling and humming these hymns all the free time that I had. I had four protracted seasons of prayer every day.

But since being in Wheaton, I have not prayed for months. I have forgotten all the hymns that I memorized. I'm totally out of contact with God.

I've been to every faculty member under whom I'm studying, asking them for help. The best they've done is pat me on the back and say it's a touch of homesickness. You'll be all right.

On Sunday, I decided to take my life, and I was just working out the details when the telephone rang, and Miss Maggie was urging me to come here tonight. He said, by God's grace, my life has been spared. And I realized afresh that Christian fellowship means getting serious about the well-being, spiritually, of those around us.

And that's precisely what verse 12 says. Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart and falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called today.

And I ask you, how deeply are you burdened for the well-being of others? How many over the course of the last month has God enabled you to keep from hardening their hearts because you spoke to them tenderly and in great love were able to encourage them and lift them up? We'll conclude with just a simple observation. We have become partakers of Christ. If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end while it is said today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me in the wilderness.

I plead with you, some members of this church have been hardening their hearts. I've been incredibly stirred and moved at the realization of the way Satan has gotten to Frank and pushed him out of the way of Christ. How many others are being sorely tempted by the evil one and are themselves in great danger of hardening the heart? How many of the young people right here tonight have never truly come to Christ? How long will it be before some of them have turned aside into gross iniquity? Nothing remains stagnant.

We either move ahead with Christ or we slip behind. Let us set our hearts tonight not only to keep our hearts perpetually tender toward Christ, but to help and encourage and support every other believer in the fellowship.

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