

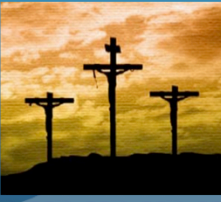




Bill Hybels: Interactions Small Group Series

- Jesus sometimes called religious leaders and even some followers hard-hearted
- If seed is thrown on hard, rocky soil, it is wasted and will never grow
- One thief on the cross was repentant, the other hurled insults and abuse at Jesus until the end

There is a very serious heart disease we should all know about. I call it “the disease of hard-heartedness.” There is also a very painful but effective cure for this disease.

In the Bible, “hard-hearted” refers to the unresponsive, stiff, angry, insensitive, rebellious, and independent attitude ruling our hearts. This attitude is first directed toward God, but also toward other people.

Jesus told a parable of a farmer who went out and sowed seeds. You don’t have to have a green thumb to know that the object of sowing seed is to get into fertile soil so it can take root and produce fruit. He went on to explain that some people’s hearts are impenetrable, hardened, unresponsive, and callous. The Word of God just bounces off. It doesn’t even take root.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, there was a thief hanging on either side. One was repentant and asked Jesus to remember him. The other thief had a heart and hurled abuse and insults at Jesus.

There is absolutely no limit to what God can do with soft-hearted women or men. He pours love into our hearts b/c it will be received, He blesses us b/c it leads to worship. He guides us b/c it will be followed. He gives us opportunities for effectiveness in the kingdom because He knows we will treasure them. He gives us ideas and creative bursts of inspiration because He knows they will be appreciated and used for His glory.

This session exposes the truth that hard-hearted people need to receive new hearts from God. Then, once we have our new hearts, we need to continually soften them so that we are responsive to God moment by moment and day by day.

Ezekiel 11:17-21

“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’

“They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

Ezekiel realized that his people needed a whole new heart, the old one had been irreparably damaged and diseased.

Ezekiel 36:24-28

“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

God says through the prophet, “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The old stone heart that was unresponsive to God and insensitive to others would be replaced by a new heart of flesh that was soft, responsive to God and sensitive to others.

We need more than a few subtle modifications on the inside, we need complete transformation. We don't need heart repair, we need a transplant.

Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, “You don't need modification, you need to be born again. You need a whole new you. A whole new heart.”



A Hard Heart

As a person's heart grows hard...

- The hardness drives them farther away from God. There is no openness, no sensitivity to spiritual things, no desire to hear God speak. Hard hearts finally say, "I have no need for God or the things He has to offer."
- There is a lack of sensitivity toward others. Selfishness sets in and generosity is driven away. Other people become commodities, pawns in the game of life, a means to an end. True love in relationships and care for others is no longer a possibility for people with hearts lined with steel.

Hearts get hard when we habitually say no to God. The very first time you say no to God, a little layer forms around your heart. The second time another layer goes around your heart. Each time, another layer forms, and on and on it goes. A person who ends up saying no to God for a lifetime ends up with a heart encased by steel.

As a person's heart grows hard, two things begin to happen (see slide).

If you're hard-hearted toward God, to some degree you will be hard-hearted toward people.

King Herod was paranoid because he heard that another king had been born. He was so threatened by Jesus' birth that he sent the Roman soldiers into Bethlehem to murder all baby boys 2 years old or younger.

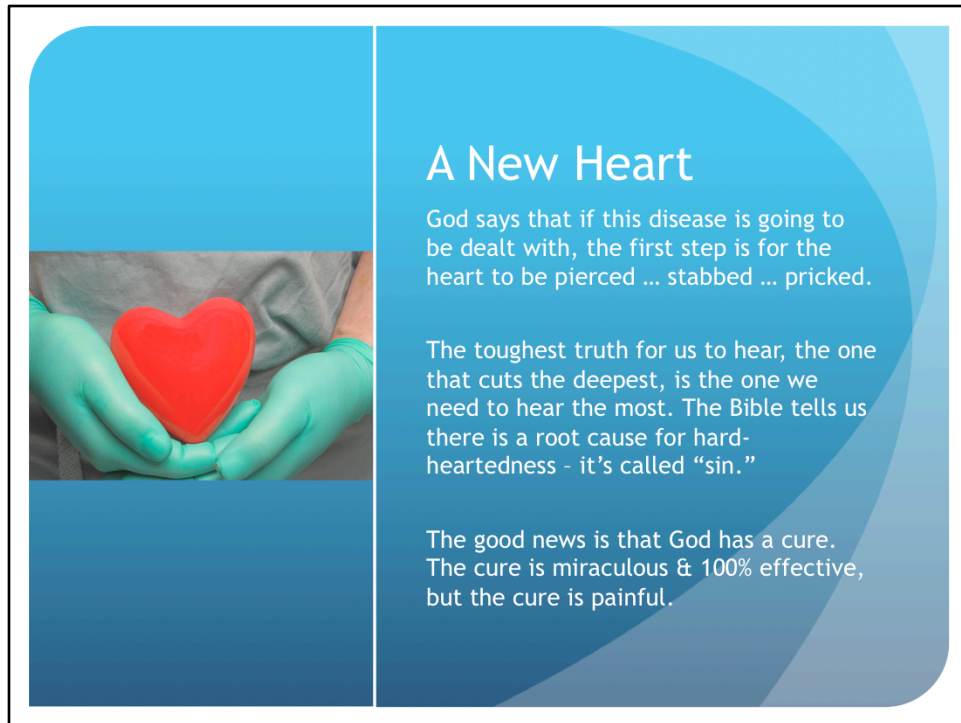
There are also modern-day examples, very recent atrocities in the news - accounts of sexual abuse in day-care centers, senseless beatings, rapes, etc., and we realize that we live in a hard-hearted world.

Before we focus on the worst examples, let's not forget the everyday emotional atrocities we inflict on each other. We launch verbal missiles at each other with regularity and deadly accuracy. We send cold stares that chill the hearts of others and turn our backs on those we could help but refuse to because of our selfishness.

We need to recognize the slander, the nicknames, the potshots, and the subtle jabs that decimate a brother or a sister bit by bit. Our unwillingness to forgive is also a sign of hard-heartedness. Even withholding desperately needed encouragement shows our heart is not as tender as it should be.

Table Discussion

- According to Ezekiel, idolatry was a sign of hard-heartedness. What did idolatry look like in Ezekiel's days? ...in our days?
- Ezekiel tells of some specific changes that are going to happen in the lives of God's people as their hearts are softened. In what ways are these same changes needed in our lives today if we are going to experience transformed hearts? (Ezekiel 11:17-21, 36:24-28)
- Describe a time in your life when you experienced hard-heartedness toward God. How did this impact your faith and relationship with Him? ...with others?



A New Heart

God says that if this disease is going to be dealt with, the first step is for the heart to be pierced ... stabbed ... pricked.

The toughest truth for us to hear, the one that cuts the deepest, is the one we need to hear the most. The Bible tells us there is a root cause for hard-heartedness - it's called "sin."

The good news is that God has a cure. The cure is miraculous & 100% effective, but the cure is painful.

Slide p1

In Acts 2:38, we read about the Day of Pentecost when Peter received the Holy Spirit and began to preach with great power. At the end of the message we read that all of the people who heard were "pierced in their hearts." They were stabbed with truth from the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says that the Bible is like a razor-sharp, double-edged sword ... it cuts, stabs, pierces, and sometimes hurts. But it's the only hope for a hard heart.

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." – Hebrews 4:12

Slide p2

SIN - we're born in it - conceived in it. We have a sin nature, and we make sinful choices. We all have this heart disease. Romans 6:23 tells us that it is a terminal illness (the wages of sin is death). All of us are infected with the disease of hard-heartedness toward God and others and we can't cure ourselves.

Slide p3

There's no getting around it. The only way to get a new heart is to acknowledge your sin (that your heart is damaged beyond repair) and to let God forgive you and give you a new heart. There are no bypass surgeries or simple solutions. It is going to take a heart transplant if we are going to experience change in our lives. It will be painful, but the new heart you receive will make all the difference in this life and for eternity!



A Soft Heart

Part of having a new heart is having a soft heart toward others.

Saul: Intimidated, persecuted & killed many Christians
 Acts 9 - Damascus road experience = heart transplant
 Paul: legendary responsiveness to God, softened hearts toward others

When we let God move in us, He will give us a soft heart toward others.

When you acknowledge your heart condition and ask God to soften your heart, your attitudes will begin to change, first toward God and then toward others.

Slide p1-2

Saul thought he was doing the right thing, but his heart was hard as stone. He was pierced with the truth of Christ on the Damascus road, and he received a heart transplant.

Paul soon referred to himself as a bond servant, a slave, and clay in God's hands. He became sensitive and soft toward others. He authored many New Testament books, and his favorite term for other followers of Christ was "brothers and sisters." He also called new Christians "my dearly beloved little children." In Philippians 1:7 he simply says, "I have you in my heart."

People with new softened hearts melt their way into each other's lives.

- They become bound together as brothers and sisters with cords that can't be broken.
- They look for ways to express their love and life each other's burdens.
- They sense when someone is wandering off the path and ask, "What can I do to help you get on the right path? How can I support you and pray for you?"
- They sense when someone is exhausted and under pressure or frightened or insecure, and they minister to that person.

With the new, soft hearts, our love for God and others grows deeper every day.

Table Discussion

- If you have acknowledged your heart disease to God and received a new heart through Jesus Christ, how has this decision changed your life? If not, what is standing in the way?
- How have you seen God soften your heart toward others since you have become a follower of Christ?

Putting it into action...

- Take time in prayer every morning this week and offer your heart to God. Ask Him to soften your heart and make you responsive to His will and leading.
- Commit yourself to follow His will as He reveals it through Bible study, experiences, and promptings of His Holy Spirit.
- Identify someone in your life who still has a hard heart toward God. Commit yourself to take at least 5 minutes every day for the next month to pray for this person's heart to soften toward God. Pray that they will recognize their own need for a spiritual "heart transplant" and pray for the Holy Spirit to begin doing surgery on them, even if it hurts.

When you have a new heart, you have a desire to be submissive to God. Every morning you need to say, "I give You my life today, Lord." You can start your day singing, "Have Your own way, Lord, have Your own way. You are the potter, I am the clay." You begin to pray, "Mold me, make me, do whatever You want with my life, it's Yours."

It's a submission issue, a flexibility issue, a surrender issue.

Your life motto becomes "Just say the word, Lord." Your soft heart says, "Whatever the Scriptures teach, that's what I want to do." A responsive heart is the one that always says yes to the Holy Spirit.