

### LENT 3

#### **Overcoming hardness of heart. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Isaiah 55:1-9**

Last week, we looked at how we can overcome complacency through recognising our sin and returning to Christ. Today, the readings suggest another type of overcoming – overcoming hardness of heart.

When I was at Theological college, one of the pastoral care courses I did was on marriage and divorce. The lecturer had an interesting view on divorce. He noted how divorce was never God's ideal, but that in the Scriptures, there were instances of 'exceptions,' in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus cited two exceptions which allowed divorce – one was adultery, and the other was if an unbelieving spouse decided to end the marriage because of the believer's new found faith. He felt that had Jesus lived in today's culture there may have been other exceptions. His view was that the exceptions Jesus mentioned - adultery and intolerance - were merely symptoms of a much more destructive force in a marriage –that of hardness of heart.

I can see where he was coming from. Once people have hardened their hearts in a particular direction, closing themselves off to other possibilities, it is really difficult to get them to change. So for instance, in a marriage, where one partner has decided that he or she wants out of the marriage, there is rarely any going back.

You may remember this phrase from Psalm 95, (or the Venite) from morning prayer: "Today, if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as Israel did in the wilderness, when you fathers tested me and put me to proof, though they had seen my works."

The Israelites hardened their hearts through disobedience to God's commands. Little by little, as the Israelites allowed their consciences to be blunted through continual disobedience, they reached a point where they were no longer were able to hear God's voice. Repentance then became impossible – not from God's standpoint - but because the Israelites had shut the door on God and there was no going back.

Israel's covenant with God became fractured because they sinned. But their sin was a symptom of a heart that had become hardened towards God, which was the far greater tragedy.

What does it mean to have a hard heart towards God? It means to reach a point in our relationship with God where we have shut out the voice of

the Spirit so often, that his voice becomes increasingly faint, until we can no longer hear it at all. We find that not only do we not hear from God, but increasingly, we no longer care. We're content to do what we want to do, and find we have managed to silence our consciences – which is often the avenue through which the Spirit speaks to us.

Many years ago, before I was in the ministry, I was part of the pastoral care team at my church. One of the couples I looked out for unfortunately ran aground. The husband became involved in a relationship with a co-worker. I remember a session where we sat talking in his car for a long time. As a Christian, and a powerful prayer-warrior in the local area, he knew what he was doing was wrong. But he told me he was 'in love' with this woman and that he no longer loved his wife. Despite his strong Christian commitment, he reached a point where he was able to still the voice of the Holy Spirit. He left his wife and moved in with his new lady. A year later, he was divorced and his family fractured. I was very sobered by that, because I considered him such a strong Christian. Just because we are strong in our faith, doesn't mean we can't fall.

To sin does not mean we have hard hearts towards God. To *continue* to sin, however, ignoring God's prompting to repent, is an indication that we are headed in that direction.

In the Corinthians reading this morning, Paul encouraged his readers to learn from the mistakes of the Israelites. He said that the Israelites had experienced God, as his readers had, but that they got caught up in things like sexual immorality, idolatry and whinging about God. They sinned – and kept on sinning – and their hearts became hardened. Finally they experienced God's judgement.

Listen to v.11 & 12 from the Contemporary English Version “[These things happened to them as a warning to us. All this was written in the Scriptures to teach us who live in these last days. Even if you think you can stand up to temptation, be careful not to fall.](#)”

That's a very strong warning not to go down the same track the Israelites did! However, Paul also had some encouragement for his readers. In the next verse he said, “[You are tempted in the same way that everyone else is tempted. But God can be trusted not to let you be tempted too much, and he will show you how to escape from your temptations.](#)”

Being tempted is not sin. Jesus was tempted, wasn't he? But he didn't sin. However, to entertain temptation and give into it – that is sin. To sin

does not mean you have a hard heart, but to *continue* to sin, rationalising that it is ok, is to move towards it.

Paul says that whenever we sin, God will make sure the temptation isn't beyond our capacity to resist. We can trust God to always show us a way out.

Some of you met our son Micah yesterday. Micah doesn't drive - yet. He didn't get the opportunity to go for his driving test when he was in yr 12. That was because he needed 120 hours of logged driving experience to do so and he didn't quite have it. We knew if he didn't get his licence before moving to Sydney, it could be years before he'd be able to sit for his driving test.

The temptation was to fudge the log book. "People do it all the time Mum!" said Micah -which is actually true. I read an article in Open Road which revealed that 14% of learners surveyed admitted they'd fudged their log books. I wondered how many others had and didn't admit it! It crossed my mind how much easier life can be for non-Christians at times!

I had very nearly rationalised that it was okay to fudge the log book, when I obeyed a prompting to phone my spiritual director. I explained the situation, rehearsed my rationalisation, and after a brief conversation, put the phone down knowing I couldn't do it.

To make that phone call was my way of escape. Of course I could have not made the phone call, but I think deep inside every Christian is a well of strength from the Holy Spirit, which floods into our hearts if we will simply turn and face him.

But what can we do if we think we have gone too far, and our hearts have become hardened? Let me say for starters that if that's a genuine question, then there's still hope! If our heart was completely hard, we wouldn't ask the question. We wouldn't care.

So what *can* we do if we feel we are moving down the path towards a hard heart? It can be very hard to turn ourselves around.

I'm rather fond of British mysteries on TV. There are re-runs of "A Touch of Frost" on at present, which I'm enjoying. In a recent episode Inspector Frost was chasing a supposed villain through the English woods. He was nearly upon him when the ground gave way and he fell

into a game pit. The walls were tall and smooth, and there was no way he could get out on his own.

I think we can find ourselves in that sort of space spiritually. It's a place we've slipped into - somewhere we don't want to be. Perhaps we feel we have drifted from God, or perhaps we've sinned and feel cut off from God. Maybe it's one of those 'Dark Nights of the Soul' where God seems to have all but disappeared. When we're in that sort of place, we can't get ourselves out.

In the programme, the supposed villain heard Inspector Frost fall, and then because he really wasn't a villain at all, came back and got him out of the pit. It was actually quite a graphic scene, filmed from the bottom of the pit. It showed the hand of the man reaching down to pull Frost out. The image has stuck in my head. It reminds me of God.

God is always reaching out to us.

Listen again to the words of our Old Testament reading from Isaiah:  
 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."

So what do we need to do to overcome a hardening heart? It's simply to "Come." If we are spiritually thirsty, Jesus says "Come to me – I am the living water." If we are spiritually hungry, Jesus says, "Come to me – I am the bread of life." Not only does Jesus want to pour out rich and abundant spiritual food and drink, what he offers is *necessary*. We *need* it, says God, "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."

God's hand is outstretched towards us. He bids us come. If we have been facing in the opposite direction, or moving down a path towards a hard heart, all we need do to begin the journey back is to turn around and face God once more. To accept his invitation to come, begin praying again – in whatever form you can manage. (even if it's yelling at God, at least it's communication!) Pick your Bible and read it. Decide to become more regular at church. Watch Songs of Praise on T.V.

God has already made the first move. Once we respond and turn back to him, we are already on the road back.

Let's pray.