

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

"Cheaters"

14:1-11

Someone sent me the following quote attributed to A.W. Tozer. It's a little lengthy but important.

I think we are going to have to restudy this whole teaching of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Church, so the Body can operate again. If the life goes out of a man's body, he is said to be a corpse. He is what they call "the remains." It is sad, but humorously sad, that a strong, fine man with shining eyes and vibrant voice, a living man, dies, and we say, "the remains" can be seen at a funeral home. All the remains of the man, and the least part about him, is what you can see there in the funeral home. The living man is gone. You have only the body. The body is "the remains."

So it is in the Church of Christ. It is literally true that some churches are dead. The Holy Spirit has gone out of them and all you have left are "the remains." You have the potential of the church but you do not have the church, just as you have in a dead man the potential of a living man but you do not have a living man. He can't talk, he can't taste, he can't touch, he can't feel, he can't smell, he can't see, he can't hear - because he is dead! The soul has gone out of the man, and when the Holy Spirit is not present in the Church, you have to get along after the methods of business or politics or psychology or human effort.

If a church is to remain alive instead of just 'remaining' then it's leaders must be seeking the Holy Spirit.

We see this exemplified in Acts thirteen. As certain key men in the church at Antioch met for prayer, the Holy Spirit spoke to them through one of them. Paul and Barnabas were set aside for their amazing mission.

It happened because those men met for prayer - the kind of prayer that expected God to speak and to work.

In our text “some of the elders of Israel” came to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord. It sounds good until you read that their hearts were not right with God.

So this is my prayer: That our leaders here at Calvary Hanford would have right hearts and continually come together to meet for the kind of praying that expects God to speak and to work.

Ezekiel 14:1 Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me.

“Elders” were the spiritual leaders of the Israelites. These were the elders over the Jews in Babylon, over the exiles. “Elder” is from an old Anglo-Saxon word, *eldra*, meaning older, with a practical meaning of more experienced. It's used to translate a number of original words of the Scriptures, such as the Hebrew word (pronounced) gaw-dole, meaning *greater* (in any sense, whether age, stature, dignity etc.) and the Greek word (pronounced) pres-ber-ter-os, meaning older, or senior. While "elder" was commonly used for an older sibling, or a parent, during Bible History it was also a political and/or religious office held by responsible individuals.¹

Ezekiel didn't really travel. He prophesied and performed visual prophesy at and around his house. Coming to see him indicated the elders wanted to inquire of the Lord. They wanted a message from the Lord.

Was that a good sign? Not really, and here is why. They already had heard from the Lord through Ezekiel and had done nothing about it. Well, they had done something in that they rejected the Word of the Lord given by Ezekiel in favor of the messages of the false prophets and sorcerers we read about in chapter thirteen.

¹ <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2003/20030722.htm>

It appears that they knew what was coming, and what they ought to do about it, but were wondering if perhaps God would give some new message - perhaps one more to their liking.

It is not uncommon in counseling a Christian that they already know God's Word. They already know what to do. Instead of obeying God they are really looking for wiggle room to continue in at least partial disobedience.

Look, God has spoken in His Word. His Word is His enabling, meaning that whatever it says you are able to do. There should be a JDIV version of the Bible, the Just Do It Version.

Ezekiel 14:2 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

God spoke even though their hearts are going to be revealed as being far from Him! How gracious and patient is our Father in Heaven.

At the same time He is loving, He always speaks His truth. Here it comes.

Ezekiel 14:3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?"

The elders had set up "idols in their hearts." They were probably not openly worshipping idols. But they were secretly. Always before them therefore was "that which causes them to stumble into iniquity." In other words, they were every bit as much in sin as those openly worshipping idols.

In fact, they were more at fault because they did nothing to stop the worship of idols. As leaders they ought to have heeded Ezekiel's earlier messages and urged the people they were overseeing to repent.

It's hard to urge repentance of open sin if you are practicing secret sin. Or, if you do, there is no power in the urging.

God said, "Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?" I think this is an attitude check for Ezekiel. On one level the answer is "No," don't let them seek you since they have over-and-over again rejected your messages.

And who had faithfully and with great hardship and sacrifice delivered those messages? Ezekiel! I can't speak for him but I know I'd be at the point where I thought that these guys should be cut off.

But God will speak again to them and it 'speaks' to us that He will. While there is life there is hope. Hope of repentance and obedience.

It's like when Jesus was explaining forgiveness and He told His followers to forgive the same person for the same offense 70x7 times in a day if necessary. He was communicating to us the merciful patience of God. Or is it the patient mercy of God?

Either way we must look past the person and their hardness of heart and continue to minister the Word of God to them.

After I was saved I could remember several encounters with believers sharing the Gospel that were met by my hardness of heart, by the blindness of my soul. But one day that Word, that Gospel, quickened me and I was born a second time, born spiritually, born again.

How can I be less merciful with others just like me than God was with me?

Ezekiel 14:4 "Therefore speak to them, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols,

Interesting. The Lord seems to be saying that the sheer "multitude of... idols" was cascading to a point at which they would have to admit their sin and repent. They were totally captivated with idolatry and could no longer deny it even to themselves.

Ezekiel 14:5 that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols." '

Sin was abounding in their hearts. Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound! We should never sin in abundance so we can experience grace abounding. But there comes a point in which we are crushed under the weight of our sin and can only be removed from under it by superabounding grace.

Ezekiel 14:6 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.

There was no Plan B. There was no way to deliver them from the Babylonian captivity and still allow them to worship idols.

God's command was amazingly simple. All they need do is agree with Him that they were idolators and then turn to God from their idolatry.

Ezekiel 14:7 For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the Lord will answer him by Myself.

God kept rehearsing their problem. His diagnosis was 100% on the money.

Why does God say He will "answer Him Myself?" They had the Word, in the form of the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible. God's teaching on idolatry was clear. There was no need, really, to inquire of any "prophet."

The elders had thrown in with the false prophets and sorceresses. It seemed, however, that their message was failing as Babylon threatened. So now they attempt to get Ezekiel to soften the message he has already delivered.

If we, for whatever reason, don't like something God has said, we try to find a person or a group that will agree with us. Thus there are liberal churches all over that allow and openly practice all manner of things that are prohibited or condemned outright in the Word. Those who gather there feel comfortable because the leaders tell them it's OK.

Ezekiel 14:8 I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.

The remedy for behavior God calls sin is not to seek and receive alternative counsel. It is to agree with God and repent. To that end God acts in discipline to bring the sinner to a place of seeking repentance.

Ezekiel 14:9 "And if the prophet is induced to speak anything, I the Lord have induced that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel.

The "prophet" in this verse is the false prophet. This verse sounds a little troubling. The Lord says He "induced" the false prophet to speak, then He destroys him.

It's not that complicated. There is a spiritual principle that God will give you over to what it is you desire. You see this articulated in the first chapter of the Book of Romans where you read,

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Romans 1:19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,

Romans 1:21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Romans 1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

Romans 1:23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

Romans 1:24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,

Romans 1:25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:26 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.

Romans 1:27 Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

Romans 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;

If a person rejects the natural and supernatural revelation of God, then God “gives them up” and “gives them over” to what their sinful hearts desire.

You see this same principle later in Romans when Pharaoh is mentioned. You’re told both that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and that Pharaoh hardened His own heart.

Which was it? Well, Pharaoh acted sinfully and, so, God gave him up and gave him over to his sin.

There are those who want to argue that men like the false prophets and Pharaoh had no freedom of choice - that it was God in His sovereignty and for His glory causing them to so act apart from any possibility of free will.

I’d believe that if the Bible taught that! But I see in Romans one that there is, in fact, a free choice.

Ezekiel 14:10 And they shall bear their iniquity; the punishment of the prophet shall be the same as the punishment of the one who inquired,

Everyone is held personally responsible for their sin. Even though God “induced” the false prophets it did not minimize those who followed them.

I referred to Deuteronomy thirteen in our previous study. In that passage God said He uses the false prophets as a test to see whether or not His people will remain faithful to Him or follow a lie.

We might want to claim “entrapment” but it should reveal to us that our hearts are not where they ought to be.

Let’s think of all that has just been said in light of God’s goal as stated in verse eleven.

Ezekiel 14:11 that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me, nor be profaned anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be My people and I may be their God," says the Lord God.' "

If God tests, when God judges, **it is for your good.** Sin profanes and interrupts the fellowship God wants you to enjoy with Him.

There’s a show on TV called “Cheaters.” My disclaimer is that I’ve never watched an episode, only seen commercials. Private detectives follow spouses believed to be cheating and document everything on film.

The producers describe it as “documenting the pain of a spouse or lover caused by infidelity.” Then they say, “This program is both dedicated to the faithful and presented to the false-hearted to encourage their renewal of temperance and virtue.”

Well, that’s not really true. The program is dedicated to ratings and is looking for the most salacious cheats.

When we step out on God, it’s seen by Him. He busts us - but in His case it really is to encourage the renewal of our relationship.

Even at this late stage in Israel’s sin, after a second siege by Babylon, God still called for repentance. It was not too late.

It’s not too late for us, either. It’s never too late. Our God is a wonderfully jealous God.