

**Softening the Hard Heart**  
a sermon by the Rev. Kenneth J. Alden  
(Readings appended below.)

So when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other."  
(Mark 3:5)

- 1 How could anyone's heart be so hard that they would forbid the doing of good on the Lord's day?
  - A. Here the Lord's own command that people not do work on the Sabbath was being turned against the Lord's very purpose in giving the law.
    1. The spiritual idea behind the Lord's command that we should rest from our work on the Sabbath was to acknowledge that all the work we have done is really work that the Lord has done, for without Him, we can do nothing.
      - a. Thus the Sabbath is interiorly about not acting from self.
    2. The Pharisees were not acting in the spirit of this law, for they turned it on its head.
      - a. They used it as a way to exercise power over others when they made sure everyone strictly observed the letter of this law.
      - b. Turning away from the Lord's goodness and making things all about self is the essence of a hard heart
- 2 This morning, we will be looking at what hardens the heart so that we may allow the Lord to replace hard-heartedness with a softness of heart akin to His own.
- 3 Picture a miser who has all the money to meet his worldly needs and obligations for the present and into the future.
  - A. What but a hard heart could keep him from using his surplus to aid a responsible, thrifty, hard-working, but impoverished neighbor?
  - B. What could harden his heart to his neighbor but his all-surpassing regard for his own riches?
- 4 Picture an able-bodied young man who has free time but refuses to help victims clean-up after a major flood or storm in a nearby county--simply because it is their hard luck and they cannot pay him for his work.
  - A. He should examine his motives to see if they are hardened by an over-ruling desire to meet his own needs and comforts.

- 5 Picture a woman who laughs scornfully at someone who has an accident that both embarrasses and injures them, and then passes by without lending a hand or offering comfort.
  - A. Could such hard-heartedness come from any other source than self-absorption?
  
- 6 Imagine a person who sees another actually experiencing grief because their beliefs are misplaced or misguided and who scornfully withholds truths which could relieve their suffering.
  - A. Would not that hard-heartedness also stem from self--that they were better than others and that their truths should not be wasted on the common herd?
  
- 7 Opposite to a hard heart, is a soft heart.
  - A. Sometimes we put people down for being "soft hearted."
    1. This can be a just criticism when their kind acts help others avoid taking responsibility, develop self discipline, or contribute to society.
  - B. But soft-heartedness can also describe genuine human love.
    1. Ironically, sometimes the softest of hearts in a spiritual sense, can actually appear hard, as did Jesus' heart on those occasions when He denied that Mary was His mother.
    2. "Hard heartedness," however, never describes a good character.
    3. It has to do with an insistence on self, an absorption with self, a regard for self, or acting from and for self with no genuine pity or mercy.
  
- 8 Although we often think of hard-heartedness as a supreme coldness against the plight and needs of the neighbor, it is inmosty a coldness against and disdain of the Lord.
  - A. We see this hardness against the Lord in the following passages.
    1. In the prophet, Zechariah, we read: "they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent" (Zechariah 7:12)
    2. In Ezekiel the Lord says, "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My

judgments and do them” (Ezekiel 11:19-20. See also 36:25-27)

- B. *Arcana Coelestia* explains the hardness and softness of heart toward the Lord when discussing humility.
1. We read: “Without humility there can be no worship or adoration of the Lord, because what is Divine and the Lord's cannot flow into a proud heart, that is, into a heart full of self-love, for such a heart is hard and in the Word is called 'a heart of stone'. It can flow only into a humble heart, since this is soft and in the Word is called 'a heart of flesh', and so is receptive of good flowing in from the Lord,....” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9377)
  2. The passage elaborates on the way in which self-centeredness is hard-hearted toward God even when engaged in outward acts of humility before Him, as illustrated by the actions of the ancient Israelites.
    - a. We read: “It was not the humility of a heart looking to God from God, but one of looking to God from self; and a heart that looks from self looks from what is evil, since whatever goes out from a person, from the self alone, is evil.... Those who humble themselves in the belief that they are holy of themselves and who offer adoration from a love of God which begins in themselves, humble themselves and offer adoration from self-love, thus from a hard heart of stone and not from a soft heart of flesh. Also they are interested only in external things and not at the same time in internal ones; for self-love lives in the external man and cannot enter the internal because the internal man is opened solely by love to and faith in the Lord....” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9377:2)
  3. Did you make a key observation here?
    - a. You cannot judge the hardness or softness of someone's heart by their outward actions alone.
      - 1) Some people can seem from their actions to have hearts of flesh, but because their motives revolve around themselves, they are actually acting from hearts of stone.
      - 2) So, too, can we be useful and doing charitable, merciful things for others, yet still be looking to our own advancement, reputation or reward as our chief end.
        - A) This is acting from a heart of stone.
        - B) That is because we are looking away from what is good and true to that which has nothing good and true about it.

- (1) Our self cannot be the origin of anything good and true.
  - (2) But it can be a recipient of what is good and true when we cease looking out for our own benefit in the first place and put our priority on what the Lord wants.
  - (3) It is then that we turn to receive the feelings of genuine love and mercy flowing in from the Lord.
  - (4) When we soften our heart toward the Lord, the Lord softens our hearts with the human qualities that come from Him.
- 9 From the moment we are born, one of the Lord's goals for us is to take the stony heart out of our flesh, and give us a heart of flesh. (See *Ezekiel* 11:19-20; 36:25-27)
- A. Although we are born with a soft and tender body and are held in that atmosphere of outward innocence that is characteristic of infancy, our hearts, by heredity, are inclined toward self.
1. As our bodies strengthen through childhood and lose their softness we are gradually let into our native inclinations.
  2. As we approach and enter adulthood, we discover how hard-hearted we are when left to ourselves and are not uplifted by deliberately doing the Lord's will.
  3. With old age, the fibers of our bodies become hard and our bones brittle but, if we allow the Lord to regenerate us, our hearts become soft and perfect, as our bodies once were in infancy.
    - a. The Heavenly Doctrine in the book, *Spiritual Experiences* uses these changes as an illustration of the truth that the less hard a man is, that is, the less he has from himself, the softer, more fluid, and more perfect he is. (See *Spiritual Experiences* 2250)
- B. How softened our hearts can become is also illustrated by an incident Swedenborg witnessed in the spiritual world.
1. Keep in mind that angels are simply people living after death who have been regenerated by the Lord, so that they have those "hearts of flesh" which we have been discussing.
    - a. There their speech is choice and delightful because it corresponds to their affection and love which is love to the Lord and toward the

neighbor.

- b. We read in the work *Heaven and Hell*: “There was a certain hard-hearted spirit with whom an angel spoke. At length he was so affected by what was said that he shed tears, saying that he had never wept before, but he could not refrain, for it was love speaking.” (*Heaven and Hell* 238)
- c. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have the hardness of our hearts melted by the loving speech of angels?
- d. More than that, wouldn't it be wonderful to be so receptive of the Lord's life that when we spoke from the heart, it could deeply affect even a hard-hearted person?
- e. The Lord wishes that kind of softness for each of us, as well.
  - 1) For example, in our lesson from, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, we read of how worship softens the heart, as follows:
    - A) “A person comes thereby into a state such that the Divine can flow in and be perceived, because the person thereby sets aside his native character which inhibits the influx and reception. For his native character, which is love of self, hardens the heart and closes it up. He sets this character aside by acknowledging that of himself he does nothing but evil, and from the Lord only good, thus occasioning a softening and humbling of the heart from which springs adoration and worship.” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 335)
  - 2) The Lord also wills softness of heart for us in relation to the marriage of one husband with one wife.
    - A) Jesus said it was “Because of the hardness of your heart” that Moses permitted a man to dismiss his wife.
    - B) Then He said, “But from the beginning of the creation, God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’....” (See *Mark* 10:4-8)
      - (1) Here, we see a contrast between hard-heartedness with its divorce and polygamy and marriage with its process of becoming one flesh. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 162:2)
      - (2) To become one flesh, husband and wife must each

soften their heart to the Lord, receive His good and truth, and enter into the heavenly marriage by loving what Divine truth teaches, and living according to it.

(3) *Arcana Coelestia* says that when people lost their happiness in married love they turned to pleasure in a number of wives, which is an outward delight, and that which the Lord called “hardness of heart.” (See *Arcana Coelestia* 162)

(4) But the marriage which arises from the marriage of one Lord and one heaven is the marriage of one man and one wife, (See *Arcana Coelestia* 162) and to enter this, one must put away such hardness of heart.

10 When the Lord healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, He indeed showed compassion, but not a compassion which set aside Divine law, but brought it into its real purpose of conjoining people with Himself.

A. When He grieved over the hardness of His detractors’ hearts, He was grieving over their use of His Sabbath laws for serving themselves.

1. We have seen that all hardness of heart stems from loving self above all, and that the Lord replaces that stony heart with a heart of flesh when we love the Lord above all, and enter into the heavenly marriage by joining good with truth in a life according to His commandments.
2. May our worship of the Lord help us recognize that all good is from Him, and that of ourselves, we have no qualities that can soften our hearts.
3. May we adore Him for the good He does, whether alone, through others or through us.
  - a. May we be as incensed by the intrusion into our own hearts of heart-hardening self-interest as we are by the attitudes of those whose goal was to accuse Jesus of healing on the Sabbath.
  - b. Let us rather open our hearts to be touched by His love, His purposes, His compassion, His mercy and the goodness of His Divine truth.
  - c. May we take our part with the Lord who, “when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, ...said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.”

1) Amen.

Lessons: *Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Mark 3:1-19; DLW 335*

**Divine Love and Wisdom 335.** Even though we call [all things created by the Lord] forms of use, because they have relation through mankind to the Lord, still it cannot be said that they are forms of use originating from mankind for the sake of the Lord. Rather are they forms of use originating from the Lord for the sake of mankind, because all useful ends are infinitely one in the Lord, and do not originate in mankind except from the Lord. For a person cannot do good of himself but only from the Lord. Good is what we are calling a useful end.

The essence of spiritual love is to do good to others, not for one's own sake, but for their sake. Infinitely more is it the essence of Divine love.

The case is the same as with the love of parents for their children, who do good to them out of love, not for their own sake but for the children's sake. This is clearly seen in a mother's love for her little children. [2] Because the Lord is to be adored, worshiped and glorified, people believe that He loves adoration, worship and glory for His own sake. But in fact He loves these for mankind's sake, since a person comes thereby into a state such that the Divine can flow in and be perceived, because the person thereby sets aside his native character which inhibits the influx and reception. For his native character, which is love of self, hardens the heart and closes it up. He sets this character aside by acknowledging that of himself he does nothing but evil, and from the Lord only good, thus occasioning a softening and humbling of the heart from which springs adoration and worship.

It follows from this that the uses the Lord performs for Himself through mankind exist to the end that He may do good to people out of love, and because this is His love, their reception of it is His love's delight.

Let no one suppose, therefore, that the Lord dwells in those who merely adore Him, but that He dwells in those who do His commandments, thus who do things of use. It is in such people that He has His abode, and not the first.

### **Through The Week**

#### Recall the Lessons

- ◆ Through Moses, Jehovah commanded the Israelites not to harden their hearts nor shut their hand from their poor brother.
- ◆ They were to willingly lend whatever he needed even when the year of release was at hand.
- ◆ People in the synagogue stood ready to accuse Jesus of working on the Sabbath when a man with a withered hand was there.
- ◆ Jesus was grieved by the hardness of their hearts.

#### Reflect on the Message

- ◆ The Divine cannot flow into a heart full of self-love, for it is hard, and is meant in the Word by 'a heart of stone.'
- ◆ Those who act humbly or charitably from self-love still act from a hard heart.
- ◆ As the fibers of our bodies gradually harden, the Lord's aim is to gradually replace our hard heart with a heart of flesh.

- ◆ Worship and marriage each facilitate the softening of the heart.

Take Action

- ◆ If you hurt or disappoint someone this week, check to see if your heart was hardened by putting yourself first in end.
- ◆ As you pray this week, focus on all that the Lord has to give that self cannot supply, so that you are ready to receive from Him.
- ◆ Think of some part of your spiritual life or life of use that is “withered” and what kind of self-regard stands in the way of he Lord healing it.
- ◆ Start small. Chip away at one specific part of your stony heart with the prayer “deliver us from evil.”