

The Deafening Power of Stubbornness

Prayer Emphasis

By Pastor Paul Tautges

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Bible Text: Zechariah 7:11-14

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Immanuel Bible Church

2428 Superior
Sheboygan, WI 53081

Website: www.delightintheword.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/ibcsheboygan

God listens to those who listen to him. That statement might take you a bit by surprise, so let me say it again. God listens to those who listen to him. He makes that clear in his Word. For example, God said to his people through the prophet Isaiah:

“...to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.”¹

But Isaiah was not the only prophet who announced this kind of thought, this kind of warning to the people of God to listen to his Word, to tremble at his Word. Zechariah was another as has just been read for us, the word of the Lord came through the prophet's mouth and we see in verse 13:

““And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,” says the LORD of hosts.”²

That is a powerful warning to us as we have been thinking about prayer and been thinking about causes of unanswered prayer that we began to look at last Sunday evening and now zeroing in on one of the most powerful passages concerning this topic.

The words come to us from God through the mouth of a man named Zechariah. But who was Zechariah? Well, obviously he was one of the Old Testament prophets. He was not only used by God to foretell the first and second coming of the Messiah, but he was also used by God to call his people to repentance. His name means “The Lord remembers.” And so it is through the voice of Zechariah that the Lord is saying, “I remember you, my people. I remember you. Even though I have been chastening you for 70 years in Babylon, I have not forgotten you. I remember you. I will not forge the covenant that I made with you and your forefathers.”

The book of Zechariah is second only to Isaiah in the breadth of its mention concerning the Messiah.

¹ Isaiah 66:2.

² Zechariah 7:13.

But this Zechariah was a priest. He was a priest actually who was born in Babylon during the Babylonian captivity. His father's name was Iddo and Iddo has returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua. Zechariah was a contemporary of the prophet Haggai.

It was 18 years before he wrote this prophecy that Cyrus the Persian king had freed the captives of Israel, let them return to their home land. And about 50,000 had returned from Babylon. And when they got back to Jerusalem they began to immediately rebuild the temple that, you know, had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. But they were immediately met by opposition, external opposition, internal discouragement, the work on the temple stopped immediately and it was stalled for 16 years.

And then God raised up Zechariah and Haggai, two prophets who would call the people of God back to the task of rebuilding the temple. Both prophets confronted the surface religion that the people of God had adopted. Both prophets confronted the self-centeredness of the people of God. Haggai focused more on the actual rebuilding of the temple and he confronted the people of God. He said, "You are so busy pouring your money into remodeling your own houses, you have nothing to pour into the temple of God." He confronted them for their self-centeredness and their surface religion.

Zechariah is doing the same thing throughout his book. The book begins this way in chapter one.

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you"³

Now why did God call his people to return to him? Obviously if God is saying, "return" that means that they have wandered. They have gone astray. They have wandered away from God. The question is how. How have they wandered away from the Lord?

Well, the text reveals at least three ways in which they have wandered from the Lord. Take note of these four along with me this morning. Three ways in which they have wandered from the Lord.

First, they would not listen to God's messengers. They had wandered away from the Lord in that they would not listen to the men that God had sent to them to deliver his message, this revelation.

In chapter one and verse four we read these words.

³ Zechariah 1:1-3.

“Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD.”⁴

So the first way in which they had wandered away from the Lord is that they would not listen to the prophets that God had sent to them. They had not tuned their ears to be attentive to the way that God speaks to us through his messengers. They had closed their ears to God’s prophets. That is the first way they had wandered.

The second way they had wandered is that their religion had degenerated to heartless ritual. Their religion had become just surface duty, heartless ritual, doing what they knew they were commanded to do and yet they were not doing it for God, but they were doing it for themselves. This is confronted in chapter seven which has been read for us. Go back there to verse four.

Notice chapter seven follows a number of visions that were given to the prophet which concerned the present state of Israel and the judgment that was to come. And we find questions being asked here that stir the conscience of God’s people. And that is interesting, because that is a pattern of God in his Word. He uses questions to stir the conscience of his people.

I had a faithful brother do that for me this week. He was asking me questions. “What did you mean by that when you said that?” Probing questions. God used that to help me, to help me see through some thought.

That is what Zechariah is doing. He is asking questions that stir the conscience and expose the problem in the heart of Israel. Look in verse four.’

Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: “Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?”⁵

So God is saying, “All of those fasts that you performed, all those 70 years, who did you do it for? Did you do it for me? Or did you do it for yourself?”

Verse six.’

“And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?”⁶

So you fasting, who was it for? And your feasting, who was that for? Was that for God out of a heart of worship for him or was that for yourself?

⁴ Zechariah 1:4.

⁵ Zechariah 7:4-5.

⁶ Zechariah 7:6.

“Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets?”⁷

Are these not things that God has said to you previously?

Their religion had become heartless. Their fasting had become mere ritual, not a longing for God. Instead of being broken before God their hearts had become hardened and eating and drinking was done for their own pleasure, not of the glory of God. It was for the satisfaction of their own lusts of the flesh. They needed correction. They needed divine correction. And so it goes in verse eight:⁸

Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, "Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'"⁸

God is calling for them to repent. He is saying, “I don’t need and I don’t want your empty, heartless ritual. What I want is real faith, real action. I want justice, kindness, compassion. I want you to stop oppressing the widow, stop oppressing the orphan, stop living for yourself. Love me and live for other people.” That is what God is calling them to.

Basically Zechariah is saying, “People, stop trying to impress God by your ritual. Instead, come to God in a true heart of brokenness and faith.” Their religion had become mere heartless ritual.

There is a third evidence of their wandering away from God and that is what we will spend the rest of our time looking at and that is their hearts had become proud and stubborn. They had wandered away from God in that their hearts had become proud and stubborn. And that, then, is what relates to the issue of prayer which is our focus these two Sundays.

Look at verse 11.

“But they refused to pay attention, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing.”⁹

You can see the picture, turning their direction away from the Lord, stopping their ears, covering their ears saying, “I don’t want to hear from God anymore.” They made their hearts like flint. You know what flint is. Flint is a very, very hard rock.

When we were kids we tried to start fires by scraping flint together. Never were able to

⁷ Zechariah 7:7.

⁸ Zechariah 7:8-10.

⁹ Zechariah 7:11.

accomplish it. So all my life I relied on liquid boy scout. Flint is hard. It is impenetrable. That is the word, that is the description that God uses to describe the hearts of his own people. They made their hearts like flint. It was their choice. It was their responsibility. It wasn't anybody else. It was their own choice to make their hearts hard.

“And they made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets.”¹⁰

Notice the order there. They cannot hear the word, but the cannot of the hearing of the Word is a result of the will not. The will not produces the cannot and that is a great warning for us that with all sin, there reaches a point of no return. If we continue to say, “I will not hear you, Lord,” we will come to the point where we can no longer hear.

It is like Pharaoh. It is a most horrifying place to be in. They wouldn't hear the Word, the Word that had been sent by the Spirit of God, verse 12, through the former prophets.

“...therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.”¹¹

Just in case that catches you off guard, please remember that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not a new doctrine in the New Testament. Sometimes we think that the Holy Spirit was inactive until the day of Pentecost. He was very active in the Old Testament. And this is just one example. He was preaching to the people through the prophets. And because they would not listen, therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts.

God is calling them to listen to his Word. Look at verse 13.

“And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen.”¹²

So their true heart problem is exposed and that is stubbornness, pride, stubbornness. The most penetrating verse in this entire book is verse 13 which is the connection between stubbornness and unanswered prayer. When we will not listen to God, he closes his ears to us just as we saw last Sunday night. When we cherish sin in our hearts, he says, “I will not hear you.”

If we choose to close our ears to his Word and the work that he is doing in our lives in calling us to repent, then there may come a time, if we do it long enough, there may come a time in which we no longer can hear the voice of God. And that, I think, is the greatest form of judgment that God could ever place upon a person.

So what is the relationship between stubbornness and prayer and what does stubbornness do to our prayer lives?

¹⁰ Zechariah 7:12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zechariah 7:13.

Well, let's answer those questions. First, what is stubbornness? What does stubbornness look like? If I want to examine my heart this morning, if I want to look into the mirror of God's Word, what should I be looking for in my heart, in my life that would reveal a streak of stubbornness, which I know I already have, but I need to see it again. I need to see it afresh.

Well, the prophet reveals two symptoms of stubbornness. What does stubbornness look like? Well, first it looks like closed ears, verse 11.

“But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing.”¹³

They said, “I don't want to hear what God says.”

Closed ears. That is what stubbornness looks like.

Secondly, it looks like hardened hearts. So we already touched on those. They refused to listen. They refused to pay attention. They hardened their hearts.

Stubbornness closes our ears to God and to the prophets that he sends into our lives to speak truth into our lives, which I hope that you have. I hope that you have brothers and sisters in Christ whom you rely upon to speak truth into your life, because we so easily blind ourselves. The heart that becomes so hard that God's Word no longer can penetrate it is a terrifying thing.

What are the fruits of stubbornness? Stubbornness looks like closed ears. It looks like hardened hearts. But what are the fruits of stubbornness? What does stubbornness in my heart toward God and the Holy Spirit and his work in my life, what does that produce? What kinds of fruit? There are five fruits of stubbornness. The first two we will see illustrated by David in Psalm 32, so if you will turn back there with me to Psalm 32.

Psalm 32 is one of the most blessed psalms to turn to when you are at a place where God has convicted you of sin, the Holy Spirit has revealed something to you through his Word, through brothers or sisters who love you and you go to Psalm 32 and you cry out with David. I don't know how many times I have prayed Psalm 32 and Psalm 51. I just go back to them so often.

Psalm 32 begins with a great declaration of the blessedness of being forgiven.

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered!
How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And
in whose spirit there is no deceit!¹⁴

¹³ Zechariah 7:11.

¹⁴ Psalm 32:1-2.

David says, “Happy is the man who is forgiven. How happy is the heart that knows it has been cleansed by God.”

And then he quickly goes from rejoicing in what it feels like to be forgiven to what it felt like when he was too stubborn to confess his sin to God. So that is the first fruit that we see. The first fruit is that stubbornness makes you slow to admit you were wrong. Stubbornness makes you slow to admit you are wrong. Stubbornness is what made David slow to admit his sins against God which then produced a great deal of grief in his life.

Look at verse three.

“When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long.”¹⁵

It had a physical effect upon him. It drained his body of strength.

“For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.”¹⁶

That is, God was disciplining David by...

“My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.”¹⁷

Those of you who know me well, know that I don’t do well in heat. I never have as long as I can remember in hot, hot summer days. They just zap me of my energy, drain me. That is what sin, that is what unconfessed sin does to our Spirit, to our body. It drains us of energy.

Verse five.

“I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; And You forgave the guilt of my sin.”¹⁸

So sandwiched between verses two and five, which are both declarations of the blessedness of being forgiven is the description of what stubbornness had done to David. It had drained him.

Therefore he says in verse six:

“...let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Psalm 32:3.

¹⁶ Psalm 32:4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Psalm 32:5.

¹⁹ Psalm 32:6.

So, because God is gracious to forgive us, to cleanse us when we call upon his name, then let the godly pray. Now that is a very important lesson, because look at verse six again with me. Notice that it says that the godly person is not the person who does not sin. The godly person is the one who deals rightly with his sin when he does commit it.

Now, obviously the one who never sins is godly, but that person doesn't exist apart from the Lord Jesus. So how can we be godly in our sin? That is a good question. The answer is: By responding to God's conviction in a way that pleases him.

So if God, not if, but when God convicts us of sin, if we deal with it rightly before him, we are acting in a godly manner, it is a godly thing to do. That should give all of us great encouragement.

So stubbornness made David slow, slow to admit he was wrong. He kept silent verse three says, about his sin. He would not go to God.

Now the second fruit, a second fruit we see in the next few verses and that is stubbornness makes you unteachable and unwilling to change. Stubbornness makes you unteachable and unwilling to change. Stubbornness closes your ears, makes you unwilling, unteachable.

Verse seven David declares the glory of God being our hiding place. He preserves us in time of trouble. He surrounds us with songs of deliverance.

Now he says in verse eight:

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go.”²⁰

This is David saying, “Let me now be your teacher. Having learned what stubbornness did to me, having learned what unconfessed sin did to my life and the wonder of being forgiven, let me now teach you so that you don't make the same mistake that I made. Let me teach you in the way that you should go.”

“I will counsel you with my eye upon you,”²¹ verse eight.

Verse nine.

“Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, Otherwise they will not come near to you.”²²

Modern translation of verse nine, do not be stubborn as a mule. That is what he is saying. My wife and I have said that to each other more than one time over the years. Do not be as stubborn as a mule.

²⁰ Psalm 32:8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Psalm 32:9.

We have that tendency, don't we? Don't be that way is what David says. Don't be stubborn. Don't be unwilling to change. Don't be unwilling to be influenced, obviously, by the right things.

So a mule like attitude causes us to shut our ears toward the people that God sends into our life to speak truth so that we will change, that we will grow, that we will be sanctified. None of us is perfect, right? We all have areas of our life in which we need to grow. And we not only need God to be working in our hearts, but we need God to be using people to help us. That is what the whole idea of a community of faith we call the church is about. None of us can survive alone. That means that we need to have humility in our relationships toward one another. We need to be willing to hear the hard things from people, which I know are not usually pleasant, but God's love for us is so great that he will not leave us the way that we are. He loves us the way that we are, yes. But he loves us too much to then leave us the way we are. Does that make sense?

Because I think in the church today we have this idea that kind of goes like this. God loves you the way you are so don't worry about it. God loves us the way we are, yes, and accepts us in Christ. But then he loves us too much to leave us the way that we are and so he works and he sanctifies and he changes us with great patience which I am so thankful for.

Stubbornness makes you unteachable, unwilling to change.

A third fruit is that stubbornness makes it easier to be disobedient to God. And here I am going to Psalm 78 to see this connection, how when we are stubborn we are really opening our hearts and lives up to greater disobedience, more sin. Not just the sin that we are being stubborn about that God is convicting us about, but now it is opening our hearts to other sins, more disobedience, which then affects more people.

Psalm 78 is what would be called a historical psalm. It is a musical history of Israel. And what the psalmist is doing here is convincing the children of Israel that they could not be stubborn like their forefathers. We will just look at a few verses. Pick it up in five.

For He established a testimony in Jacob And appointed a law in Israel,
Which He commanded our fathers That they should teach them to their
children, That the generation to come might know, even the children yet to
be born, That they may arise and tell them to their children, That they
should put their confidence in God And not forget the works of God, But
keep His commandments, And not be like their fathers, A stubborn and
rebellious generation, A generation that did not prepare its heart And
whose spirit was not faithful to God.²³

Now you just have to read though the book of Numbers, really the whole Pentateuch, but especially the book of Numbers and the book of Judges would be good, too, to see how

²³ Psalm 78:5-8.

the stubbornness and rebellion in the hearts of their fathers led to other forms of disobedience. Because of the stubbornness of their heart, their heart was not prepared, their spirit was not faithful to God and therefore they did not pass on the truth of God to their children and to their grandchildren. Their stubbornness had generational, multigenerational influence.

Another example of this Exodus 32. You don't have to turn there, but when Moses was on Mount Sinai you may remember what happened down there at the bottom of the mountain. Aaron led the people in idolatry. He led them to take all of their jewelry and melt it down and make it into this calf, this golden calf. And then they lifted up this golden calf and declared this to be the God who had brought them out of Egypt.

In verse eight God says this to Moses.

““They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them.”²⁴

Then in the next verse God tells us why, why they disobeyed.

“I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.”²⁵

God said their hearts were obstinate. They were stubborn and, therefore, their stubbornness led them into idolatry. Really, stubbornness and rebellion are very closely related. You see that in that Exodus 32 text. To be stubborn, really, is to have a rebellious attitude towards God and then that has, then, a snowball effect in our lives as it had in Israel.

Another fruit, a fourth fruit of stubbornness. Stubbornness makes you resistant to correction. Stubbornness makes you resistant to correction. This is illustrated in 2 Chronicles 24. I will just read a few portions to you. It says in verse 15:

Now when Jehoiada reached a ripe old age he died; he was one hundred and thirty years old at his death. They buried him in the city of David among the kings, because he had done well in Israel and to God and His house.²⁶

Who was Jehoiada? Jehoiada was the high priest during the reign of Athaliah and Joash. He was a good man. He was a champion of righteousness, but he died. And the text goes on to say:

But after the death of Jehoiada the officials of Judah came and bowed down to the king, and the king listened to them. They abandoned the

²⁴ Exodus 32:8.

²⁵ Exodus 32:9.

²⁶ 2 Chronicles 24:15-16.

house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols; so wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their guilt.²⁷

After the death of Jehoiada, the leaders of Judah convinced Joash to go back into idolatry. And his first major mistake was to listen to them. They abandoned God's house and they returned to idol worship.

It says then that God sent prophets to them to bring them back to him. They testified against them. They would not listen. Zechariah was sent to them. He said:

"Thus God has said, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.'" So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD.²⁸

This is a different Zechariah who was stoned in the temple. They were rebellious. God gave them a chance to repent. They wouldn't listen. So he sent the prophet to them and they stoned him. Why did they stone him?

Stephen tells us in Acts 7:51 when he says:

"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did."²⁹

That is why. They were stiff necked. That is another way of saying stubborn, uncircumcised in heart and ears.

So this is why we have to guard against stubbornness in our hearts, because stubbornness steels the heart against correction and makes us unwilling to listen to the people that God puts into our life.

And then, number five. Stubbornness makes you want your own way even if it is not God's way.

I think of 1 Samuel here. You remember Samuel's sons should have been the ones to take over the leadership, but they had become disobedient, disgraceful to the nation. As a result the people come to Samuel and they say, "We want a king. We want a king like all the other nations."

And Samuel pleads with God, but God says, "No, no, Samuel. Give them what they want. Give them a king because they have already rejected me as their king."

²⁷ 2 Chronicles 24:17-18.

²⁸ 2 Chronicles 24:20-21.

²⁹ Acts 7:51.

So God gave them what they wanted. Samuel warned the people. He warned them that the king would tax them, that he would take their sons and send them off to war. He would take their daughters and send them off to the meal camps to feed the soldiers. But they wouldn't listen. And so Samuel says this in verse 18.

“Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”³⁰

The Lord will not listen because you would not listen to him. God would not listen to the people's cry, because they would not listen to his warnings. Getting their own way was more important than doing God's will. And we can be that way, can't we? I mean, let's be honest. Let's not look at them and say, “Oh, I would never do that. If I would have been living in that day, there is now way I would have asked for a king.”

We are that way. We just are. That is our nature. That is our heart.

Go back to Zechariah, because there are actually six fruits to stubbornness. But I didn't list it as a number six because to me it is just all over this passage and it is all over this sermon, obviously. But worst of all, stubbornness closes the ears of God and that is verse 13 again.

“And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen.”³¹

When we allow stubbornness to capture our hearts, it affects our fellowship with God. What then is the solution to a stubborn heart? Well, the solution to a stubborn heart is the opposite of a stubborn heart which is a contrite heart, the Psalm 51:17 kind of heart, that broken spirit and a contrite heart.

A stubborn heart is diametrically opposed to a humble, broken heart. So the answer to stubbornness is humility. The solution is humility.

So when we humble ourselves before God then he opens his ears again.

Look with me at the New Testament in 1 John three. There is such hope here. We glanced at this last Sunday night, but let me touch on it again. 1 John chapter three, because we should be asking ourselves this question. Ok, if my stubbornness closes the ears of God, then what is going to turn God's hearing back on for me? You know, what is going to do it is an attitude of humility and a heart of submission to the Lord and to his Word.

1 John three. Look at verse 21.

³⁰ 1 Samuel 8:18.

³¹ Zechariah 7:13.

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.³²

When our consciences condemn us because we see our sin and because the devil—according to Revelation 12—is slandering us before God day and night, when our consciences condemn us we see disobedience in our lives, where do we go to regain the assurance and the confidence for our faith? We go back to this simple truth in verse 23, that if we believe in the name of Jesus Christ, if we are trusting in Christ then God has dealt rightly with our sins and we can be assured that we are in right standing with him.

I am guessing and in a body this size there are some of you who wrestle with assurance of salvation. You struggle with that. Let me say to you in those times of struggling, go back to simple truths like this. This is what God says is true for those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ. Go to 1 John five and memorize this and talk to yourself over and over with this truth, verse 10.

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.³³

If you ever wrestle with the assurance of your salvation, please make a goal this week to memorize 1 John 5:11-13. It is so clear. If you have the Son you have life. If you don't have the Son, you don't have the life. Verse 13 tells us why these things have been written.

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”³⁴

God does not want us struggling with whether or not we are saved. He wants us to know and he says we can know. He has given us this whole book of 1 John. If you struggle with assurance of your salvation then I say to people, “Live in the book of 1 John until you get assurance. Live there. If it takes you six months, live there, because that is why the book was written, to help us.”

³² 1 John 3:21-24.

³³ 1 John 5:10-12.

³⁴ 1 John 5:13.

Now go back to chapter three because you see the connection here between this humility and obedience to God in answered prayer.

Look at verse 22.

“...and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”³⁵

So if God has convicted us of stubbornness in our hearts and lives this morning, then let’s deal with that. And let’s become obedient in whatever area he has convicted us of.

See, our hope is in Christ and in the power of Christ to change our hearts, to give us new hearts that are turned toward obedience. So let me just ask you a few questions that the Holy Spirit has compelled me to ask myself the last few days, just three questions.

Are you quick to hear or slow to listen? Ask yourself that question. Say, self, are you quick to hear or slow to listen? That will reveal stubbornness or, praise God, the absence or limited presence of it.

Secondly, would you say to yourself, would you say you are stubborn or tender? Would you describe yourself as a stubborn person or as a tender person? Say that to yourself. Self, are you stubborn or are you tender?

Thirdly, ask yourself: Is stubbornness closing God’s ears? Ask yourself as I have been asking myself, Lord, is my stubbornness in some area closing your ears? Is my refusal to change, is my refusal to change in a certain area of my life closing your ears to my prayers? Because if it is, then I need the Holy Spirit to soften my heart, to turn away from that stubbornness, to repent of that pride, to ask God for a broken and a contrite spirit. I love that verse, Psalm 51:17. There is one thing that God will never despise, a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

Sometimes I am counseling someone and God breaks them in such a way over their sin. They start weeping and they say, “I am so broken, I just don’t even know that God will ever hear me again.”

And I bring them to that verse and I say to you, “Do you know what? God does not despise you right now. You despise yourself. You just said it. But God does not. God does not despise you.”

He does not despise a broken spirit and a contrite heart. He loves those traits in a person, because when we are tender and humble before him, he opens his ears wide to listen and he stands ready to act on our behalf. So I am saying to myself, “Self, don’t get in God’s way.”

³⁵ 1 John 3:22.

Father, we pray, because your Word says you hear us. Father, I confess to you as I have more times than I can count, but I confess this publicly that sometimes stubbornness really does reign in my heart. And, Father, I don't like that. So I ask you to purge it from me. I repent of it. I repent of the stubbornness I can see and I also repent of the stubbornness that I can't see, but I will quickly confess if you will show it to me. Father, forgive us. We are not that different from your people in previous generations. We are not that different from Israel in the Old Testament. We are often stubborn. We often turn a stubborn shoulder. We close our ears to your Word and we are so thankful that your Holy Spirit convicts us of that and we can deal with it and that we have the confidence that David had in Psalm 32 that you are a God who forgives. And we bless you today for being a God who forgives us, cleanses us. Together as a church, Lord, we are calling upon you this morning to make us humble, soft, tender people whose ears are always open to you and to your Word, to what you want to teach us, how you want to sanctify us, that you will mold us and shape us that throughout 2012 you will be working in us and making us humble servants of Christ. We pray that you would deal with the pride in our hearts, but we know that the devil loves to use pride to destroy us, to harm us, to hinder us. So show us, Lord. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

We are so thankful, Lord, for your grace and mercy to us. We thank you for Jesus Christ. Father, I don't know every heart here today, so perhaps there is even someone here who doesn't have the assurance of salvation that 1 John speaks of and I pray that you would work in their hearts. I pray that whether this is the first time they have heard of Jesus Christ and his gift of life or if the 3000th time that they have heard it, Father, I pray that your Holy Spirit would work, bring about conviction, bring about faith, repentance. May they turn, turn away from their sin and turn to Jesus and find the hope that is ours in him.

We love you, Lord. We love you, because you first loved us. Thank you for the work you are doing in and among us. And we pray that it would continue for your glory and for our good. Amen.