

Follow the LORD: Having a Soft Heart

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[0:00] Put this when you're ready. Go ahead. So the meal, Stephanie, this was outstanding. Now, what you experienced today is not a traditional Seder because there's a lot of dialogue that goes on.

! But I'll tell you, the food is right on. It's great. I hope we can do this next year as well. And so, you have to do a Jewish song.

She ruled a Yahweh, Ki ga o ga ah. That's all I know. Okay, so we go on. Speaking in tongues, huh? Speaking in tongues. Speaking in a Hebrew tongue.

So, as Raymond mentioned, each week built in this series. And one of the neat things is that the Lord gave this to Raymond this year.

This is the way it should be. And it's fit wonderfully. And we've had good speakers. So, my job is just sort of to cap it off. And mine is following the Lord.

[1:14] To follow the Lord, we need probably to get near Him. I mean, you can follow. Have you ever tried to follow somebody in traffic? Yeah. Have you ever tried to follow somebody in traffic at night?

Yeah. You pull in right close behind all the way or you're going to get lost. And so, what we say about following the Lord is, The closer, the better. And in fact, the Bible talks about that in Hebrew 10, 22.

Okay, now, draw near in the Bible really equals the word approach. Okay, so basically, draw near is Bible language for approach.

Okay, so it says, Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

In a sense, the writer of the Hebrews, and I suspect St. Paul had a lot to do with the writing of this letter. In a sense, he's saying, As we draw near to God, as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, our life gets changed.

[2:34] That's the whole thing of what we call discipleship, or holiness living. And so, today, we talk about how we draw near to the Lord.

And probably, a good way of looking at this is something that Pat Dague said last week. She said, It has to do with having a right heart attitude.

And, that's not easy, to have a right heart attitude. Because everything in me wants to go wrong heart. I want to do my own thing.

I want to be my own captain. And, as long as we keep that stubborn attitude, we're never going to get close to the Lord. So, our prayer is to have a right heart attitude.

And, that means malleable. When our first daughter became a teenager, she hit hormones like you would not believe.

[3:39] And, we didn't believe it. And, finally, Mary Ellen 1-8, as we were kind of praying and crying, said, Her heart has turned to stone.

Well, it stopped, it became soft and malleable, eventually. In fact, for the last 10 or 15 minutes, it's been great. No, joke.

Anyway, our daughter is 52, and she's a lovely, lovely woman. She's been a lovely woman for a lot of years. But, her teenage years were not easy for us.

She had to get a soft and malleable heart. And, often for us, that only comes by crashing. And, so, all of us have had to crash in one way or another, and to just fall into the arms of Jesus.

As we look at our life, we wonder, how can we develop this malleable, soft heart? So, I want to give you four, four examples of people who have had hard hearts and they became soft and malleable.

[4:56] first one goes back a lot of centuries back to the fourth century. His name was, we call him Augustine.

Some people call him Augustine. He was actually even before I was born. How about you, Leroy? Did you know Augustine? Oh, just the other day.

Just the other day you saw him, yeah, yeah. Third or fourth century, well, no, fourth and fifth century. He was born like in the late 300s. He was born to a Christian mother and a pagan father. In fact, his father came to the Lord on his deathbed and before that it was pure hell for his mother. And his mother, whose name is Monica, for a while took to the bottle.

She just didn't know what else to do. So she became an alcoholic. And Augustine, it appears, as soon as he could got out of that house. And he did like a lot of people do today.

[5:56] He went in to kind of wild living for a while. And then he joined a cult. And then he started a shack up with a woman.

Living together without marriage, he stayed shackled up with that woman for 15 years. They had a little boy. And his mother never stopped praying for him.

But Augustine had a hard heart. He had a lot of anger. He had a lot of bitterness. And it was not until he was in his 30s that he came upon someone that was kind of a midwife for Christ.

His name was Ambrose. He was a bishop. And Ambrose helped Augustine to soften his heart. And he talks about being in the garden and hearing a little girl say, open and read.

There was a Bible there. He never could see the little girl again. He never saw her in the first place. He just heard her voice. So we believe that was an angel. And he turned to the book of Romans.

[7:04] And in that book, he came to Christ for the first time in his 30s. You might say everything was wonderful after that.

It wasn't. The woman that he had lived with, he had to drop her. And she died. His son died as a child.

As he was heading back from Italy back to his home in Africa, his mother who was with him died. He got back to Africa and eventually was ordained.

And then he was made a bishop at just the right time when the persecution fired up again. And he had to go into hiding trying to run his diocese from a cave.

He had a rough life. But because he had a soft heart, he was able to just follow the Lord.

[8:09] Day by day, through hard times, he followed the Lord. And he said he was the happiest when he was just totally disarmed before God.

So that's the first one. He had to get a soft heart. Second was a number of hundred years later, into the 1700s, a Church of England priest.

He was born in a house with his father, the vicar, they called it, the priest of the parish. and he was one of 15 children.

And he grew up very strict and went off to college at Oxford, which is a really good school.

And he became what's called a rigorous. Everything is put together this way, the way you read the Bible. In fact, he and his brother started a group, they called it the Holy Club.

[9:14] people made fun of them. But he had a hard heart. John Wesley, which is the name, he had a hard heart.

He became a missionary, did you know that? He was a missionary to Savannah, Georgia. And he was, back then that was hostile. But there were British there, and he instead of missionizing the Indians much, he mostly took care of the English people living in Savannah.

He fell in love, thought he was going to get married, and she dumped him. And what did he do as a priest? He excommunicated her, father, which didn't go over real well.

And so the next week he was on a ship back to England. Total failure, totally angry. He got to know the Moravians, and as he got to know them on the ship, he noticed they were calm, they were not angry, they were not wild.

they seemed to love the Lord in just an easy way. He got back to England, and he happened to wander into a prayer meeting that the Moravians were putting on a street.

[10:43] They still know the name of the street, Aldersgate. And he, his heart, what was, what happened to his heart? Sure, even Anglicans know this.

His heart was strangely warmed that night, and for the first time, his heart became soft and malleable. Now, was the rest of his life wonderful?

Not really. He got ordained, but nobody would allow him to preach in their churches. He became an itinerant preacher, preached out on stoops, and wherever he could find a place, he'd preach. He'd go like at six o'clock in the morning, he'd go to the factory, so he could preach to the workers as they were going to work. That's what he did for a lot of his life. He never found a love again. He did get married at age 48, and their marriage was happy for about a minute and a half, and it was a total failure.

[11:47] And they sort of broke up, made up, broke up, made up, and finally broke up. he felt that was a failure. He thought he had a soft heart, he thought she had a hard heart, and they never were able to put that together.

But that didn't stop him from his work. You know, he eventually allowed for worship to take place in the colonies, colonies, and he always wanted to stay a Church of England priest.

He believed this group that he was building, which was called, they were called Methodists, because there was a method to their way of living the Christian life.

He believed that everybody should be in a small group. They should meet frequently for prayer, accountability, and Bible study, which is a great plan. It should happen everywhere.

He tried to contain Methodism in the Church of England. It actually didn't work because the Church of England was a little bit like the Episcopal Church today.

[13:02] They were not quite able to handle people who were serious about Jesus. And so eventually the Methodists had no choice but to go off on their own, at which time, they vastly outnumbered the Anglicans and had a lot to do with colonizing the United States.

John Wesley died, a priest of the Church of England, and he was an old, old man. He died happy. He died with a soft heart. He had given up the fight. That's the second one. Third person, about the same time frame, but much younger.

Young girl was born, she was not a girl when she got born, she was a baby, in New York City. And she was in society.

And of course that meant she was Episcopalian. It was called the Church of England in the colonies then. And then the United States broke free and they changed the name to the Episcopal Church.

[14:10] And she was raised to go to church. That's what you do, you go to church. Her name was Elizabeth Ann Seton.

A very, very stable, prominent person. But when she was three, her mother died and her father married a woman who was not thrilled with Elizabeth.

It was that typical story that we hear about. And so her father took her stepmother to Europe and left Elizabeth with her uncle and aunt.

And she brought up when she was old enough, when she was 19, she got married to another wealthy New Yorker whose last name was Seton.

And they thought they would do well. They had five kids and they also, I mean, it was like boom, boom, boom, just like this family here.

[15:22] Boom, boom, boom, boom. And, but to make more things more complicated, they inherited some other children. Back in those days, if anybody in your family who was a parent died, you took the children.

They didn't go up for adoption, except if there was nobody in the family to take them. So they had a number of children. She was a good Episcopalian and, in fact, I don't know if you've ever heard of Bishop John Hobart.

He's one of the first bishops in New York. He pretty much evangelized all along the Mohawk River. And, in fact, he died right over here in Auburn.

Is that way? Somewhere. Auburn's around here somewhere. Anyway, he died in the rectory there.

But, Elizabeth Ann got good training from Bishop Hobart on how to live a good life.

But, what did she have? Hard heart. She just felt that she had gotten gypped. And, to make matters worse, she and her husband, her husband had tuberculosis.

[16:38] They moved to Italy at the advice of their doctor because it was a better climate. And, they got to Italy and he died. Now, she's a widow with five kids and four that she had adopted.

And, everything was crashing in on her. Well, there was a lovely Roman priest. I'll bet his name was Anthony. I don't know what his name was Anthony. Antonio. And, Antonio led her to the Lord.

And, her heart softened. So, she came back to the States, opened a school for young ladies in New York City, and was doing great until the word got out.

She was not Episcopalian. She was Roman Catholic. Catholic. They pulled their kids out of her school. She was about to give up when she was invited to move to Maryland and start a school. She started the Catholic parochial school system. And, she did it with a soft heart. The kids loved her. And, eventually, she formed, she never remarried, she became a nun.

[17:51] and, she formed a religious order called Daughters of Charity. And, I think they're still operating today. And, if you were to go, oh, she did all this by the age of 47 when she died.

But, she died happy because her heart was softened. Last story. A young girl grew up in China. her parents were medical missionaries. They were Presbyterians. And, when she came back, she graduated from high school in Montreat, North Carolina.

She'd been there for a year. And, went to Wheaton College. Anybody ever heard of Wheaton College? It's probably a premier evangelical college. And, she met her boyfriend, she met the guy that became her boyfriend.

And, after several years, they got married. Who am I talking about? Billy Graham's wife, Ruth Bell Graham. Hard heart. She had a hard heart.

[18:59] She had trouble. She got mad. Couldn't control her temper. And, um, Billy kind of, kind of softened her heart a little bit.

She knew religious exercise. She went to church. She was faithful, said her prayers, but she still had this core that was hard. They started having kids, and they had five kids.

And, in the process, in being a loving mother, the Lord softened her heart. Now, she lived with a guy that was never home.

home. And, when he was home, he was always getting ready for his next trip. You might get the idea of neglected syndrome there.

But, because her heart was softening, she was, she got to where she released Billy Graham. She saw it as her ministry to support him in his crusades.

[20:06] What a wonderful thing it was. Somebody asked her, she really did say this, Mrs. Graham, with your husband traveling so much, have you ever thought of divorcing him?

She said, divorce never, murder all the time. She was that kind of a person. I've seen her gravestone in North Carolina.

It's engraved, it says, end of construction, thank you for your patience. softened hearts make a difference.

And now to you, now to me. I had to get a soft heart myself. I was kind of a nasty kid, kind of stuck up.

And at some point, I had to crash in my life. so the softness would come, the malleability. And with you all, you know, some people get that soft heart when they're five.

[21:15] Some people get that soft heart when they're 83. Some die in the Lord with hard hearts. One of the things about a parish family is we're all in one degree or another softening.

that's why we need to be easy with each other. We're not all moving at the same speed. These four people I mentioned all had different circumstances.

The thing they had in common was hard life. They all had hard things they had to deal with. And so with us, we all have hard things to deal with and degree by degree the Lord is softening our hearts to follow him.

I want to end by just talking for a minute about this Seder. You'll know, and I don't know if you've been able to read the four gospels this week, the passion of each gospel.

So, today was Luke, tomorrow it'll be John. But in this, in three out of the four of the gospels, Jesus talks about taking the matzah, the bread, breaking it, blessing it, giving it.

[22:41] This is my body which is given for you. We believe it was done in the context of a Seder dinner, a Passover meal. And he took the wine, you know, in Luke, he lifts up the glass twice, doesn't he?

Well, he does it twice because as part of the Passover meal, there's like four glass raisings, or chalice raisings.

The one where we celebrate communion was called the cup of blessing. And that's when he said, drink this all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is given for you, shed for you. do this as often as you do it in memory of me. A family meal. That's why we are so buggy about getting together for meals.

And it drives the church women crazy. And the guys say I have pretty good food. Not bad. But, you know, it's worth it because we are a family.

[23:51] So we're gathered tonight to enjoy each other's company, to get a sense of what Jesus and his people ate on that first Passover. Tomorrow night, we will celebrate the Maundy, which is a word which means Mandatum, a new commandment I give to you.

Do this as often as you do it as in memory of me. So tomorrow night we'll have communion at 7 o'clock. And as Anglicans we'll do some kind of strange stuff.

At the end we're going to take everything off the altar. It's called the stripping of the altar. It's done in a quiet attitude thinking about Jesus being, losing everything on that night and the next day.

So Thursday night, tomorrow night we'll have our communion service. And then on Friday at noon we'll have devotions from the prayer book centering around the cross, devotion to the cross.

And we'll have a cross brought in and put lying against the altar for us to pray. and then at seven o'clock Friday night we will have the traditional stations of the cross.

[25:16] And we'll march around the building and we will relive what Jesus went through on that terrible walk from Pilate to crucifixion.

Several years ago some of us were in Jerusalem and we had a cross. We took turns carrying the cross along the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows, reliving what Jesus went through.

That's all a way of preparing us for the resurrection on Sunday morning. And if you come at nine o'clock you get to eat again.

By golly we do that well. It's been said that we are eating our way to heaven and we're doing a darn good job of it.

So brunch at nine o'clock and then holy worship at ten to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. So that's what's going on.

[26:20] I want to salute you if you were able to attend one of these sessions and tonight counts for one. Or whether you were able to attend all of them.

It's been a wonderful thing. Raymond thank you for putting that together. Yeah I believe we've drawn closer to the Lord. Thank you.