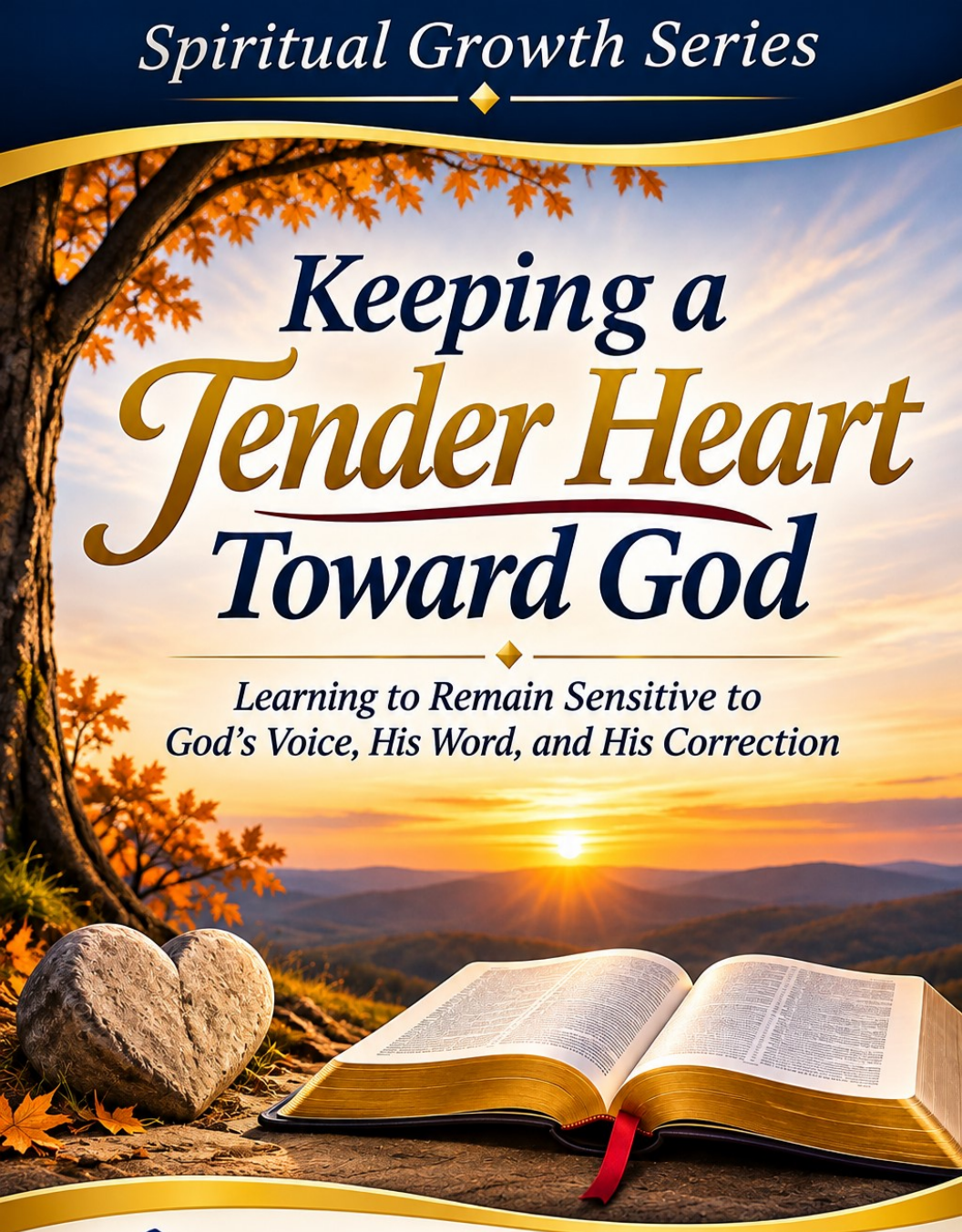
Spiritual Growth Series

Keeping a Tender Heart Toward God

Learning to Remain Sensitive to God's Voice, His Word, and His Correction



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KEEPING A TENDER HEART TOWARD GOD

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Main Text: Hebrews 3:7–15

Supporting Scriptures: Ezekiel 36:26–27; Psalm 51:10–17; 2 Chronicles 34:26–27; Ephesians 4:30–32; James 1:21–25; Hebrews 12:5–11; Revelation 2:1–5.

Central Truth: Spiritual maturity is not simply measured by how much Scripture we know, how long we have served God, or how faithfully we attend church. It is also revealed by how willingly we respond when God speaks to our hearts.

INTRODUCTION — CAN A HEART BECOME HARD WITHOUT US REALIZING IT?

One of the greatest dangers in our Christian walk is not always some great temptation or obvious sin.

Sometimes the danger is much quieter.

We can become so accustomed to hearing the Word of God that we no longer allow it to examine us.

We can become so familiar with church that we lose our sense of wonder at what God has done for us.

We can become so busy serving God that we stop taking time to listen to Him.

And sometimes, after years of disappointments, difficulties, misunderstandings, and struggles, we begin building walls around our hearts.

We may still love God.

We may still believe His Word.

We may still attend church, pray, worship, and fulfill our responsibilities.

But something inside us has changed.

Things that once troubled our conscience no longer seem to bother us.

The needs of others no longer move us as they once did.

When the Word of God challenges us, instead of examining ourselves, we begin defending ourselves.

And gradually, without intending to, our hearts can become less responsive to God.

This is why the Bible repeatedly warns us about the condition of our hearts.

Hebrews 3:15 declares:

"To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation."

Notice something important.

The warning is not merely about whether we hear God's voice.

It is about what happens in our hearts when we hear Him.

We can hear the truth and reject it.

We can hear correction and resent it.

We can hear conviction and excuse it.

Or we can hear God's Word and respond with humility, repentance, and obedience.

Tonight, I want us to examine a very personal question:

Is my heart still tender toward God?

Not whether it was tender twenty years ago.

Not whether it was tender when I first received the Holy Ghost.

But is my heart tender toward God today?

1. GOD DESIRES A HEART THAT RESPONDS TO HIM

Ezekiel 36:26–27:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."

God was speaking of the spiritual renewal He would bring to His people.

He described a remarkable transformation.

He would remove the stony heart and give them a heart of flesh.

A stony heart is resistant.

A heart of flesh is responsive.

This is not simply about emotions. It is about our willingness to allow God to change us.

Some people think spiritual strength means becoming so tough that nothing bothers them.

But there is a difference between being spiritually strong and becoming spiritually hardened.

We need convictions that cannot be shaken, but we also need hearts that can still be touched.

We need to stand firmly upon the Word of God without becoming harsh toward the people God has called us to love.

Jesus demonstrated this perfectly.

He never compromised the truth, yet He was moved with compassion toward the multitudes.

He confronted hypocrisy, but He also welcomed the repentant sinner.

He could rebuke unbelief and still weep at the tomb of Lazarus.

Spiritual maturity should make us more like Jesus, not merely harder to offend.

A question for personal examination

When God deals with me about something in my life, do I respond willingly, or do I immediately begin explaining why I should not have to change?

2. A HEART CAN BECOME HARD THROUGH THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN

Hebrews 3:12–13 warns:

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

Notice that this warning was addressed to believers.

The writer was not speaking only about people who had never known God.

He was warning those who had begun their walk with Him.

Sin is deceitful because it seldom announces what it intends to do to us.

It does not always begin with open rebellion.

Sometimes it begins with a small compromise.

We ignore something that troubles our conscience.

We justify an attitude we know is wrong.

We allow bitterness to remain because we believe someone has treated us unfairly.

We begin making excuses for behavior that we once would have brought before God in repentance.

And every time we resist what we know is right, we risk becoming a little less sensitive to it.

Consider Pharaoh.

Throughout the account of the plagues in Exodus, we repeatedly read about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

He witnessed the power of God, yet continued resisting God's command.

His problem was not a lack of evidence.

His problem was his refusal to submit.

We must be careful not to develop the same attitude in our spiritual lives.

It is possible to know what the Bible says and still refuse to obey it.

The danger is not only that sin separates us from God. It is also that continued sin can make us less concerned about that separation.

This is why repentance must remain part of our daily walk with God.

Not because we should live in constant fear, but because we want nothing to interfere with our fellowship with Him.

3. A TENDER HEART RECEIVES CORRECTION WITHOUT RESENTMENT

Second Chronicles 34 tells us about King Josiah.

When the book of the law was discovered and read before him, Josiah recognized how far the nation had departed from God's commandments.

He did not attempt to justify their disobedience.

He humbled himself.

Second Chronicles 34:27 records God's response:

"Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest his words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before me; I have even heard thee also, saith the LORD."

What a remarkable statement.

God said, "Because thine heart was tender."

Josiah's tenderness was demonstrated by his response to the Word of God.

He was willing to acknowledge what was wrong.

He was willing to humble himself.

And he was willing to make changes.

This is one of the clearest indications of a tender heart.

It does not mean we enjoy being corrected.

Nobody particularly enjoys having their mistakes pointed out.

But when correction is biblical, truthful, and given appropriately, a tender heart is willing to consider it.

Proverbs 12:1 says:

"Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish."

There is an important distinction here.

Not every criticism comes from God.

Not every accusation is true.

Not every person who attempts to correct us is necessarily right.

We must examine everything according to Scripture.

But we must also be careful that our desire to defend ourselves does not prevent us from recognizing something God wants to change.

Sometimes the very thing that irritates us most is something we need to examine carefully.

A question worth asking

When was the last time I heard something from the Word of God and actually changed something in my life because of it?

Not merely agreed with the sermon.

Not simply said, "That was good preaching."

But allowed the Word to change my attitude, my behavior, or my priorities?

4. BITTERNESS CAN HARDEN A HEART THAT ONCE WAS TENDER

Ephesians 4:31–32:

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

I believe this is an area where many sincere Christians struggle.

Life does not always treat us kindly.

People disappoint us.

Sometimes people we have trusted hurt us.

Sometimes our efforts are misunderstood.

Sometimes we give our best to help someone, only to have that person turn against us.

And if we are not careful, those experiences begin changing the way we look at everyone else.

We become suspicious.

We become defensive.

We stop giving people the benefit of the doubt.

We tell ourselves that we are simply being wiser because of our experiences.

And certainly, experience should teach us wisdom.

But wisdom and bitterness are not the same thing.

Wisdom teaches us to recognize danger. Bitterness teaches us to expect evil from everyone.

Wisdom establishes appropriate boundaries.

Bitterness builds walls that keep everyone out.

The Apostle Paul did not tell us that people would never hurt us.

He told us to put away bitterness and become tenderhearted.

That does not mean ignoring wrongdoing or allowing someone to continue abusing our trust.

Forgiveness does not require pretending that nothing happened, and reconciliation may require genuine repentance and restored trust.

But it does mean refusing to allow another person's behavior to determine the condition of our own hearts.

We cannot always control what people do to us.

But with God's help, we can choose how we respond.

We must not allow yesterday's wounds to destroy today's compassion.

5. A TENDER HEART IS SENSITIVE TO THE CONVICTION OF THE HOLY GHOST

Ephesians 4:30 says:

"And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

This verse reminds us that our relationship with God is more than a collection of religious practices.

We are called to walk in fellowship with Him.

The Holy Ghost works in our lives to lead us into truth, convict us of sin, and produce godly character.

But we must be willing to respond.

There is a difference between conviction and condemnation.

Conviction reveals what needs to change and calls us toward repentance and restoration.

Condemnation, in the sense of hopeless self-accusation, tells us there is no reason to try.

God's purpose in correcting His children is not to destroy them.

It is to restore them.

Hebrews 12:11 reminds us:

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

Sometimes the Lord deals with us about something that seems small.

- An unkind word.
- A critical attitude.
- An apology we need to make.
- A habit that is beginning to take too much of our attention.
- A responsibility we have neglected.
- A person we have failed to treat with compassion.

We should not dismiss these things merely because they do not appear to be great sins.

God is interested in the condition of our hearts.

And when He brings something to our attention through His Word, we should respond.

The more willingly we respond to biblical conviction, the more we cultivate a life of obedience.

We should never become so accustomed to religious activity that we stop allowing the Holy Ghost to work in us.

6. A TENDER HEART DOES NOT LOSE ITS LOVE FOR PEOPLE

Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus:

"But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd."

Jesus saw more than the outward appearance of the people.

- He saw their condition.
- He saw their needs.
- He saw their confusion.

And He was moved with compassion.

One of the dangers of serving God for many years is that we can become so familiar with people's problems that we begin losing patience with them.

We have heard the same excuses.

We have watched people make the same mistakes.

We have tried to help people who did not seem to appreciate our efforts.

And eventually, we may begin thinking, "Why should I bother?"

But consider how patiently God has dealt with us.

- How many times has He forgiven us?
- How many times has He shown mercy when we did not deserve it?
- How many times has He patiently brought us back to the truth?

If we have received so much mercy, should we not also be willing to show mercy?

This does not mean compromising biblical standards.

Jesus never did that.

But He never allowed His commitment to righteousness to eliminate His compassion for those who needed salvation.

We must learn to speak the truth in love.

We must be willing to correct without humiliating.

We must be willing to help without becoming controlling.

And we must remember that the people who sometimes frustrate us most may be the very people who need our prayers the most.

A tender heart does not excuse sin, but neither does it stop caring about the sinner.

7. WE MUST GUARD AGAINST LOSING OUR FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:2–4 records the Lord's message to the church at Ephesus.

He acknowledged their works, labor, patience, and commitment to testing those who claimed spiritual authority.

They were not careless about doctrine.

They were not unwilling to work.

They had endured difficulties.

Yet Jesus said:

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love."

Think about that.

A church could be doctrinally watchful, hardworking, and persevering, yet still need to repent.

Their outward activities had not completely revealed the condition of their hearts.

This is a warning we should take seriously.

We can become so occupied with doing the work of God that we neglect our love for God.

We can become so concerned about defending the truth that we forget the spirit in which we are supposed to present it.

We can become so busy correcting what is wrong around us that we stop examining what is wrong within us.

Jesus did not tell the Ephesian church to abandon sound doctrine or stop laboring.

He told them to remember, repent, and do the first works.

Revelation 2:5:

"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works..."

There is something beautiful about that invitation.

The Lord was not merely pointing out their failure.

He was showing them the way back.

And that is what He continues to do for us.

If our hearts have become cold, they can become tender again.

If our love has weakened, it can be renewed.

If we have allowed resentment to grow, we can bring it before God.

If we have become careless in our spiritual walk, we can repent and begin again.

8. HOW DO WE KEEP OUR HEARTS TENDER TOWARD GOD?

Let me offer several practical things we can do.

First, remain honest with God.

Psalm 139:23–24 says:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

We should regularly invite God to examine our hearts.

Not merely asking Him to bless our plans, but asking Him to reveal anything that needs to change.

Second, respond to the Word instead of merely listening to it.

James 1:22:

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

Every time we open the Scriptures, we should be willing to ask, "Lord, what do You want me to do with what I have read?"

Third, practice repentance.

Repentance is not something we leave behind after baptism.

It remains an essential part of maintaining our fellowship with God.

We do not need to wait until a problem becomes serious before bringing it to Him.

Fourth, refuse to nurture bitterness.

When someone hurts us, we must deal with it honestly.

We may need to address the offense, establish boundaries, or seek help.

But we should not allow resentment to become a permanent resident in our hearts.

Fifth, maintain a genuine prayer life.

Not merely praying when we need something.

Not simply repeating familiar words.

But spending time in the presence of God, worshiping Him, listening through His Word, and allowing Him to examine our motives.

Sixth, continue showing compassion.

Look for opportunities to encourage someone.

Pray for people who are struggling.

Be patient with those who are growing.

Remember how patiently the Lord has dealt with you.

Finally, never become too proud to change.

No matter how long we have served God, there are still things He can teach us.

There are still areas in which we need to grow.

There are still attitudes He may want to correct.

The moment we begin believing that we no longer need correction is the moment we place ourselves in spiritual danger.

CONCLUSION — LORD, GIVE ME A HEART THAT CAN STILL BE TOUCHED

I want to close with David's prayer in Psalm 51:10:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

David had failed terribly.

But when he was confronted with his sin, he eventually acknowledged his wrongdoing and cried out to God for mercy.

He understood that his greatest need was not simply to repair his reputation.

He needed his heart to be right with God.

And I believe that is where we must come tonight.

We do not need to spend our time examining everybody else's heart.

We need to examine our own.

Has disappointment made me bitter?

Has familiarity made me careless?

Has pride made me resistant to correction?

Have I become more concerned about being right than about having the right spirit?

Am I still moved by the things that move the heart of God?

Do I still respond when the Word of God challenges me?

Do I still have compassion for people who are struggling?

These are questions every one of us should ask.

It does not matter whether we have been serving God for six months or sixty years.

We must never stop growing.

We must never stop learning.

And we must never become so hardened by life that we lose our sensitivity to the Lord.

Psalm 51:17 says:

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

God is not looking for people who pretend they have everything together.

He is looking for people who will humble themselves before Him.

- People who will listen.
- People who will repent.
- People who will obey.
- People who will allow His Word to continue shaping their lives.

And perhaps the most important prayer we can pray tonight is simply this:

"Lord, after everything I have experienced, after everything I have learned, and after all the years I have walked with You, please do not let my heart

become hard. Keep me sensitive to Your Word, humble enough to receive correction, and compassionate toward the people You have called me to love."

Because the goal of spiritual growth is not merely to become more knowledgeable.

It is to become more like Jesus Christ.

And the closer we grow to Him, the more our hearts should reflect His.