

January 3, 2010 by Steve Brandon



Care For Your Hearts

Hebrews 3:12-13

1. Be Aware Of The Disease (verse 12).
2. Practice the Cure (verse 13).

When I was a little boy, perhaps 7 or 8 years old, I remember a tradition that we had in our family. We would attend church each Sunday morning, and afterwards we would go out to dinner at a place called, "Mr. Steak." I'm sure that the dinner fulfilled several purposes. First of all, it gave my mother a Sunday off from cooking. But, it also gave us an opportunity to support our neighbors, the Chiachos, who lived next door and owned the restaurant. I remember that Mr. Chiacho would often come over and speak with us during our meal. I also remember that my oldest sister was old enough to order from the adult's menu and often ordered teriyaki steak, which I thought sounded very special.

Anyway, there was a day when we stopped visiting the restaurant so often. It had nothing to do with our neighbors. It had nothing to do with the food at the restaurant. It had nothing to do with my father wanting my mother to cook more. Rather, it had to do with a blood test. Apparently, my father had taken a blood test and it was discovered that his cholesterol level was extremely high. No more Mr. Steak for the Brandon household. In fact, as I recall, beef became a rare commodity in our house for many years.

My parents did a bit of research to figure out how to lower my father's cholesterol levels, and they discovered "the Pritikin diet." The Pritikin diet is a diet developed by Nathan Pritikin. It is low in fat and high in fiber, low in red meat and high on carbohydrates, and has a strong emphasis on exercise. I remember spaghetti sauce with mushrooms and no meat. We ate fish and lots of fruit and vegetables. We often ate vegetarian.

As my father learned more about cholesterol and the hardening effect that it has upon veins and arteries, he has taken steps to promote a healthy heart. He began eating oatmeal in the morning, which would help to absorb some of the cholesterol out of his system. To this day, my father often eats oatmeal in the morning and a cup of raisin bran at night. My father has exercised consistently throughout the years. My father has kept his weight under control. He takes an aspirin every night to help thin his blood. Today, his cholesterol levels are under control, and they have been for years. His cholesterol levels didn't come down by some pill or some easy way out. Rather, they came down through a consistent pattern of life: a low fat diet, constant exercise, and keeping his weight under control. I have much to learn from my father's example of simple, consistent, healthy living.

All of these things have been preventative. Now, that's not to say that he won't have a heart attack. His days are in the hand of the Lord, and he knows it. In fact, when I spoke with him about these things last week, he reminded me of the irregular heartbeat that he has, as if to say that his heart still isn't totally healthy. Psalm 139:16 says, "In Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them."

This morning, we will be looking at preventing heart disease. But, I'm not talking about our physical hearts. I'm talking about our spiritual hearts. If you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to Hebrews, chapter 3. Our focus this morning is upon verses 12-14.

Last week, my message was entitled, "Don't Harden Your Hearts." My title came straight from verse 8: "Do not harden your hearts." This week, my message is entitled, "Care For Your Hearts." My title comes from verse 12: "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart." Whereas last week, we looked at the mere command not to harden your heart, this week, we will look at the ways in which we can prevent spiritual heart disease. Last week was the command. This week is the cure.

My first point this morning comes from verse 12, ...

1. Be Aware Of The Disease (verse 12).

It may seem obvious. But, I state it nonetheless: in order to prevent a disease, you need to be aware of the disease. When my father learned about heart disease and how susceptible he was to it, it was the first step of preventing heart disease. And the same is true in the spiritual realm. We all need to be aware that we are susceptible to spiritual heart disease. Look at verse 12, ...

Hebrews 3:12

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.

This first word in verse 12 translated, "take care" literally means, "to see." It has the idea that our eyes are wide open to the potential dangers that await us, and that we take measures to avoid the dangers. If our eyes are closed and if we are not aware of the disease, we may well stumble into it.

If a blind man leads a blind man, they will both fall into a pit (Luke 6:39). In the physical world, it's important that we are aware of the diseases that exist. In our day and age, there are many "awareness" campaigns. There are cancer awareness campaigns. There are diabetes awareness campaigns. And today, I am running a "spiritual heart disease" awareness campaign. Not so much because it's my idea, but

because the author of Hebrews is calling us to be aware of the dangers of the disease.

The call is for all of us. Again, we read in verse 12, "Take care, brethren." In other words, "take care, all of you professing believers." None of us are exempt from this problem. There aren't any of us who are spiritual supermen, with hearts different than anyone else, so that we don't have to take heed of these things. There aren't any of us who have hearts that are immune to this disease, including pastors and their wives.

Spiritually, we all have high cholesterol levels, and are in danger of falling away. In the physical world, every one of us doesn't have to be aware of all of the diseases that float around. Small pox, for instance, has been eliminated through vaccinations. Living here in the United States, we don't need to be too concerned about malaria, unless, of course, we plan on traveling to the jungle. There are some diseases that I don't need to be aware of for myself. I do not have to be aware of the dangers of breast cancer, for myself. I'm a man. I do not have to be aware of the dangers of juvenile diabetes, for myself. I'm an adult. But, as adult male, I do need to be aware of the dangers of prostate cancer. The same is true for you as well. There are certain diseases that you don't need to worry about. There are others that you need to know about.

But, such is not the case with spiritual heart disease. We all need to be aware of the dangers that await us. This is a call to the entire church. "Take care, brethren." It's a call to all of you. It's a savior's call.

The danger of disease is death. But, the danger of spiritual heart disease is far worse. The danger is that of falling away. I trust that you can see it there at the end of verse 12, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." To fall away from the living God is to fall away from His presence. To fall away from the living God is to fall away from His blessing. To fall away from the living God is to fall away from any hope of salvation. To fall away from the living God is to be lost, forever.

The supreme aim of the writer to the Hebrews is to warn his readers about falling away. He warns against "apostasy," which is literally what the Greek word is. Take care brethren, that there is not in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that "apostatizes" from the living God. We see this in every single one of the five warning passages in Hebrews. It's said in different ways with different words and different illustrations. But, in all of the warning passages, the same alarm is sounded: "Don't fall away."

Consider the following verses in the book of Hebrews: "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (2:1). "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it" (4:1). "Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (4:11). Chapter 6, verse 6 speaks of those who have "fallen away." "If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment" (10:26-27). "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God" (12:15). "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking" (12:25).

Don't turn away from God!

On the flip side of that, the exhortations to endurance come as well. Instead of falling away, the call is to persevere. You can see it there in verse 14, "We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance until the end."

There's the call: hold fast until the end. It's a call that comes up several times in the book of Hebrews. "Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest" (4:11). "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end" (6:11). "You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (Heb 10:26). In Hebrews 11, we see example after example after example of those who persevered in their faith. In chapter 12, we read, "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14).

Don't fall away, but persevere until the end. This is the call of our text. Know that we all are susceptible to spiritual heart disease. If you say, "I don't have that disease," to you, I say, "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

A big step in the cure of an alcoholic is his confession that he has a problem. The drug user will never be cured until he admits that he has a problem. And you will never be saved if you don't confess your disease. You need to come to the point where you say, "I have a heart that strays from God. I need God's grace to turn me back again."

What makes apostasy wicked is that we are falling away from "the living God" (as it says at the end of verse 12). To fall away from an idol is nothing, because an idol is nothing. To fall away from an ideology is nothing, really, because it's merely a thought. To fall away from Buddha is nothing, because Buddha is dead. But, to fall away from the living God is dreadful, because, He is alive and well and ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:5). He has all power to bring you into His glory and know true life with Him forever! He has all power to cast you into the lake of fire.

Jesus said it this way, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). You don't mess with a living God, especially He who holds out to you the free offer of the gospel of grace. God has extended a call that has gone all throughout all the world, crying, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). "Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Is. 45:22).

God's hand is extended to help all those who see their sin and cry to Him for mercy at the cross of Christ. And, the offer is free: "Let him who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Rev. 22:17). Church family, "Don't fall away."

Well, you ask, "What are the causes of spiritual heart disease?" I'm glad you asked, because verse 12 tells us the causes, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God."

An evil unbelieving heart is the cause of falling away. You don't fall away from your faith if you are believing. You fall away from your faith if

you are unbelieving. You don't fall away from your faith when you see the sanctifying work of God in your life. You fall away when sin gets the best of you and it leads you to doubt. Those in Israel had an evil, unbelieving heart. They had seen the wonders of God, but refused to trust God for the future. They had experienced the miracles of God, but were unpersuaded. So, they grumbled and complained and put God to the test. It's no wonder that they fell away.

So, what's the remedy for such a condition? The cure is not what you might think. You might think that the remedy is merely to believe and act righteously. After all, that's the opposite of the two causes: evil and unbelief. You might think that the remedy is to get away some place and pray. But, that's not the remedy given here in verse 13. The remedy for a hardened heart is found in community. A properly functioning believing community will help to prevent evil and unbelieving hearts from taking root in our lives.

Verse 12 tells us to "Be Aware Of The Disease." And now, in verse 13, my second point, ...

2. Practice the Cure (verse 13).

So, what's the cure? I trust that you can see it right there in verse 13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called, 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." What's the cure? Encouragement.

Let's break down this verse a bit. There's a command, and then a reason. The command is to encourage one another. The reason is so that you won't be hardened in your sin. Sin is deceitful. It deceives you going in. It deceives you going out. Going in, sin tells you that it's really not so bad. Sin is like a fishing hook to a fish. On the outside, it squirms and wiggles around like a scrumptious worm. But, once you bit into it, you are trapped and at the mercy of the fisherman. It looks good going in, but soon you're trapped with nowhere to go.

Going out, sin corrupts your mind. Sin is like a dimmer switch. When you engage in sin, the light turns down a bit, and the room becomes darker. When you engage in sin again, the room turns darker still until finally, you are walking in the darkness. The greatest example of these things is the first sin of our parents: Adam and Eve. Satan engaged Eve in a conversation about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-5). He began to tempt her with his false ideas. He made the fruit look more attractive than it had ever been before. Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, [and] she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6). Sin was attractive going in, but it was a snag upon their souls.

Their eyes were opened to realities that they had never seen before, like their own nakedness (Gen. 3:7) and the fear of God (Gen. 3:10). Their minds were darkened in their sin. Rather than confessing it, they sought to hide from God (Gen. 3:10). The result was a great curse that was placed upon their lives, and upon our lives as well.

Sin is a deceiver. The sin of jealousy caused Cain to kill his brother. The sin of fear caused Abraham to lie. The sin of pride caused Saul to offer a forbidden sacrifice. The sin of adultery caused David to murder. If you have ever been around those who are trapped in their sin, it's quite amazing how much people are deceived. I have witnessed people lying because of their sin. I have witnessed outbursts of anger when their sin was confronted. I have witnessed people turning their backs on those who love them because of their sin. I have witnessed people destroying their lives because of their sin.

In the case of the original readers, there were some who were being deceived into returning to their old ways of religion. Rather than staying with Christ, they were abandoning Him. They were abandoning Him for their sacrifices, for their priests, for their feasts, for their rituals. In light of the greatness of Christ, it makes absolutely no sense. But, sin is deceitful.

So, now comes the question, "How can I escape this deceitfulness of sin and hardness of heart?" It comes in the first half of verse 13, "Encourage one another day after day." Notice again the connection. You encourage one another so that none will be hardened. The preventative medicine for preventing spiritual heart disease is mutual encouragement. Me encouraging you; you encouraging me. As you are encouraged, your faith is strengthened. As I am encouraged, my faith is strengthened. We both are protected from the hardness of heart that comes with the deceitfulness of sin.

People take preventative drugs to help them face a difficult situation. People take Dramamine to help them thwart sea-sickness. People take Lysine to help prevent cold sores. People take Claritin to help prevent allergic reactions when working outdoors during pollen season. Mutual encouragement is a preventative drug for hardness of heart. Encouragement is like oatmeal, exercise, aspirin, and keeping your weight under control.

I hope that you see several things here with these verses. First of all, I hope that you see how others-centered this is. The command comes to you, so that you can encourage another from hardness of heart. In other words, the call here isn't so much for you to do something to prevent your own hardness of heart. Rather, the call here is for you to help others, so that they don't fall into hardness of heart. Do you see that? You are called to encourage others to help them avoid hardness of heart. It is the surprising thing about this text. It's not about you guarding your own heart. It's about you doing your part in helping that the heart of others doesn't get hard. Do you see it? We'll come back to this, but I want to give you a few more observations.

Second, I hope that you see the importance for your own soul to be encouraged. Receiving encouragement from others is a means of keeping your heart soft. My father eats oatmeal for breakfast to keep his cholesterol levels low, so that his arteries don't harden. You have need of encouragement, to help keep your heart soft to the things of God. This is a call against Lone Ranger Christianity. It doesn't work. We need the encouragement of others. This comes when you mix and mingle with other believers. Is this making sense? Again, we'll come back to this, but I want to give you another observation before doing so.

Third, look at the emphasis upon "today" in this passage. He writes, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called, 'Today.'" "Day after day." This speaks to how often we need encouragement. We need encouragement every day. We need encouragement "as long as it is still called 'Today,'" You tell me, when is it ever not "today"? We need encouragement every day.

There is enough in this world and in this life to discourage us that we need encouragement. There is enough pulling us away from Christ that we need the help of others to help us keep believing. There's the pull of the world, away from God (1 John 2:16). There's the pull of our flesh, away from God (1 John 2:16). Satan is after us like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). Satan is firing flaming arrows at us (Eph. 5:16). We need others to come along side of us saying, "Keep going. You can do it. Jesus is worth it. Keep trusting. Keep believing. There's reward awaiting you." That's a form of encouragement.

But, encouragement goes far beyond this. Encouragement would include anything that helps us press on in faith. I love the picture that the Greek word gives us. It has a very broad meaning. The Greek word is a combination of two words, meaning "along side." This is like the word, "parallel," two lines along side of each other. The other Greek word means "to call." You put these two things together and you get "to call along side." This takes various forms, according to the need of the moment.

Picture the coach, who's coaching the 1,500 meter race, four times around the track. Before the start of the race, the coach comes along side the runner and sits down with the runner and lays out a game plan. Who's competing in the race? What's their personal best? Is winning a possibility? What's the time that they are shooting for in order to win? In this case, the encouragement comes in the form of thinking through things. If you set your mind to it, you can win this race. This is encouragement to believe.

During the race, the coach is along the sidelines and can shout out his encouragements as his runner runs along. Perhaps he is even able to be along the infield where he can run alongside the runner for a few meters. Depending upon various circumstances, the encouragement might come in various forms. Suppose that after the first lap, the runner is ahead of the field. The coach yells out, "Keep going. You can win this thing. You are on a good pace. I think that you have it." Such counsel urges the runner along, thinking that there's a chance for victory.

Now, suppose that after the second lap, the runner has been passed up and is now in third place, about 10 meters off the pace. His time is below what they planned out. But, the coach knows that he's still got a chance if he hangs in there, because he has a good kick. He yells at him, "Pick it up. You're slacking. Get going. That was a slow lap. C'mon, you can catch up." Such counsel comes as a rebuke to the runner, who knows that he needs to pick it up. He's encouraged to run harder.

Now, suppose that after the third lap, the runner is about 100 yards behind. His legs are weary his lungs are burning. Obviously, he's not going to win the race. He's ready to quit. But, there's a chance for the bronze and a personal best. The coach yells out, "Keep going. Don't worry about catching up to the front. Shoot for third place. You are on pace for a personal best." Such counsel urges the runner to press on even more through the pain of the race, even though there's no chance of winning.

Now, suppose that on the home stretch, he tries to kick at the end. But, he ends up straining his hamstring. He starts limping and slowly goes to the ground. But, the coach discerns that he can still limp a bit. And so, he yells out, "C'mon, you can finish the race. I know that you are hurt. Take your time, but finish the race. We didn't come all this way to run and not finish." As he limps his way to the finish line, he can hear his coach saying, "Good job. I'm proud of you. You ran a good race. You'll get him next time." At the end of the race, the coach puts his arm around the runner and comforts him in his pain, saying, "That was a tough field. They deserved to win, but you gave it a good try."

Now, think about it. In every instance, the coach sought to discern what the runner needed. And he gave him the needed encouragement. At times, it was a rebuke, "Get going!" At times, it was a call to keep going, even through the pain. At times, it was comfort in the effort. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men." Such is the manifold meaning of this word, "Encourage." It's used in all of these different ways. A woman in the church came over yesterday and took the time to help our daughters with their hair. She talked about what God's doing in the lives of her family, and Yvonne went away very encouraged.

And this is what we are called to do for each other in verse 13. We are called to "encourage one another." We are called to open our mouths and give a timely word. "How delightful is a timely word!" (Proverbs 15:23).

There is reciprocal action here as well. It's not all one-way. When you are the means of encouraging someone, you yourself are often encouraged. When you can see in others something to be encouraged by, you also can be encouraged as well. The dynamics of what goes on in the life of a church is hard to fully explain

Now, let's step back from this verse a bit and look what it says. "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." First of all, it means that you need to be around a group of people, who you can encourage with your words. Second, it means that you need a group of people around you to encourage you with their words to you. Third, it means that you need to have some constant intimate contact with people, so you know how you can encourage them with your words.

C. J. Mahaney gives some great comments on these words.

We're told in Hebrews 3:12-13, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Appropriate and timely words that edify will very often include words that exhort, words that help others guard against sin. And we're to speak in this way every day. It's to be continual, not occasional--because sin is active continually, not occasionally.

As we do, we're first and foremost guarding the authority and the primacy of God's Word and the importance of obedience to God's Word. That's a description of biblical accountability. We aren't accountable first and foremost to each other but to

God. As we guard each other's hearts from the deceitfulness of sin, we're seeking to guard the importance of God's Word, because we are ultimately accountable to Him. In this context, the practice of guarding each other is clearly a biblical practice. It's a gift from God, a vital means of experiencing His grace for protection from the deceitfulness of sin.

It's also very interpersonal. We're to 'exhort one another every day,' the Hebrews passage says. This passage is not describing the activity of preaching. I don't want to minimize the importance of preaching or pastoral ministry; preaching and pastoral ministry are not optional, but essential. And if preaching and pastoral ministry are effective, the result will be a church where believers are guarding one another's hearts in a crucial relational interaction and involvement with each other in light of the presence, influence, and deceitfulness of sin. Guarding is *personal*.

In sacred Scripture, God doesn't just simply describe our root problem; He gives us a *practice* for overcoming it. In this passage He's telling us, 'As your Father, I want to protect you from the deceitfulness of sin and its hardening effects. So by My grace, I've designed My church and provided this practice of each of you speaking up to guard one another'. ^[1]

My question to you is this: Do you have such a group of people in your life? Do you have people around you that will encourage you when you are down? Do you have people around you who will encourage you when you are drifting and slipping? Do you have people around you who you can carry your burdens with you? How often do you have contact with these people? Is it daily?

Now, for some of you, the answer is, "Yes, I have many people in my life like this. As I look around the room, here, I can tell you the ways in which I have been encouraged by many of them. I can tell you the ways in which I have encouraged them. I see them on Sunday mornings. I eat with them every month at potluck. I see many of them on Sunday evenings. I see them on Wednesday nights. Sometimes Friday nights. Hardly a week goes by where I don't gather on another occasion with some of them."

If this is you, be encouraged this morning. You are taking your preventative medicine. You are eating your oatmeal in the morning. You are staying away from your fats. You are going soft of your salt. Your prognosis is good.

Now, for others of you, the answer to my questions about the people in your life, goes like this. "Yes, I have some friends like this. Well, maybe not many. In fact, come to think about it, I'm not sure if I have anyone in my life like this. I do come to Rock Valley Bible Church each Sunday. But, I leave early and don't really talk with many people. In fact, as I look around, there aren't too many people here who know me very well. I'm never with believers during the week."

If this is you, you are in danger of developing a hard heart. You don't have any around to encourage you when you are weak. You have nobody else to carry your burdens. When you need a rebuke, there's nobody there to rebuke you. You are eating at Mr. Steak every day. Oh, you may have one good meal on Sunday morning, low in fat, low in cholesterol, and high in fiber. But, all throughout the week, you are filling your hearts with greasy food and lots of salt. Your prognosis is not good.

Now, I can't guarantee your future. But, I can guarantee this: the stakes are higher than you think they are. Next week, as we come to verse 14, we will see that eternity is at stake. These things are so rich that I don't feel we need to go so fast through them.

As I close my message, I want for you turn over to Hebrews chapter 10. Mutual encouragement doesn't merely "happen" It requires a bit of thought. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." We are to "consider how" and not forsake assembling. Mutual encouragement, then, takes time and thought and purpose.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 3, 2010 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility*, pp. 116-7.