

One of our prayers this year has been that God would open doors for us to share the gospel. It's a wonderful prayer request, taken straight from the Apostle Paul, who uses it in several places, especially Col. 4:3. In some ways, though, it's a "step two" request. We're assuming that we're the kind of people who are ready to go through an open door when we find one! Because we are God's missionary people, commissioned by Jesus to take the gospel to the world, that's a good assumption.

But at the same time, it's always a good idea to make sure we're taking step one before we try to take step two. And so for the next few weeks, we're going to think about what kind of person goes through that open door with the gospel. The open door by itself is not enough; remember, God gave Jonah an open door, and Jonah ran the other way! So before you go through an open door, you have to have an open heart!

An open heart describes a posture of love that desires good for your neighbors, especially their *eternal* good. You want their lives to be better, and most of all, you want them to be saved. A *closed* heart like Jonah's is indifferent to the needs of others. We know that our neighbors will spend an eternity in hell apart from Jesus, and that's too bad, but it *doesn't really bother us*.

The *open* heart is a heart of concern for your neighbors. If your heart is open, then the people around you *matter* to you. You actively desire their good, and their needs, their hurts, and their struggles weigh on your heart. You can't ignore them! That's the kind of heart that fervently prays for an open door, and that's the kind of heart that runs through the door as soon as it opens.

So as we look at 2 Cor. 5-6 this morning, I want you to be asking yourself this question: Do I have an open heart towards others, towards my neighbors, towards the world?

And the first point there on your outline is that the default answer for all of us is *no*. No, we don't have open hearts. We are born with closed hearts, selfish hearts, hearts that love ourselves far more than we love others, and so in Paul's phrase in 6:12, our affections are restricted. Instead of the love of *Christ* controlling us as in 5:14, the love of *self* controls us, and self-love is the defining characteristic of a closed heart. *Selfishness* comes naturally; *self-sacrifice* takes effort. We *love* ourselves and so we *live* for ourselves, as in 5:15.

What this means is that we aren't moved to seek the good of others; we only care about ourselves, our families, our inner circle. Because we're born with closed hearts, we are naturally inward-focused, not outward focused. We see other people as a bother or even a threat, instead of somebody to love. This is our natural fallen state, and it takes a miracle of grace to open our hearts.

But that's the good news of point 2 on your outline. When God makes us new creations in Christ, then the love of Christ controls us, and our hearts are opened! The gospel opens our hearts! When we encounter the good news that God sent Jesus to die for sinners like us and reconcile us to God, we are experiencing God's open heart towards us. We are saved because God has an open heart, and when we experience that love of God in Christ, then that love takes over and starts to *control* us. Christ's love changes the way we look at the world, and it opens our hearts to love and serve our neighbors.

Point 3: when this happens, as v. 15 says, we no longer live for ourselves, but for *Him*. This is how our naturally closed hearts open up. Our self-love is overwhelmed by love for Christ, and so instead of living for ourselves, we live for Christ. This means, as 5:16 says, that we no longer think about others in the old way. Starting with Christ, we see everything differently: the old has passed away and the new has come!

And now that we are living for Christ, God has given us a particular calling towards other people. Look at 5:18-19 – God gave us the ministry of *reconciliation*. Our open-hearted God is reconciling the whole world to Himself in Christ, and to do that, He entrusts that message *to us*.

And so, Paul says in 5:20, living for Christ means living as His ambassadors, His representatives, and our job is to spread His message of reconciliation. We need to tell the world that God doesn't have an *indifferent* heart that doesn't care what happens to the world. God has an open heart towards the world; He wants the world to be reconciled to Himself!

Since we live for Him, not for ourselves, our mission in the world is to be agents of reconciliation. God makes His appeal through us. We share God's open heart with the world, and if we find ourselves struggling to get the message across, the first place we should look is at our own hearts. A closed-hearted people will never do a good job representing an open-hearted God!

And because the love of Christ controls us, and not our love for ourselves, we carry out our role as ambassadors *in a self-sacrificial way*. For Point 4, look at 6:3-10, which I've summarized this way: the open heart avoids placing obstacles in anyone's way, and it endures hardships for the sake of others.

An open heart doesn't insist that others take me as I am. An open heart examines itself and says, "Is there anything about me, or the way I present myself, or conduct myself, that would place an obstacle between my neighbor and God? If I'm trying to reconcile them, is there anything I'm doing that's making my job harder?"

Here's an example: in Acts, the Church asked itself: do we really need to tell the Gentiles that they have to be circumcised and keep the kosher laws to follow Jesus? The Holy Spirit said no, and so they removed that obstacle so that the gospel could reach farther, faster. Many of them were convinced that these laws were holy and righteous and good, and so they continued to keep them for themselves, but they didn't make the Gentiles follow Jewish rules.

For us, we should think about how we hold on to our secondary convictions. A closed or indifferent heart only thinks about itself: I believe that my views on education or entertainment or healthy eating or child-rearing are best, and I don't care what that means for you. But the open heart believes that it is more important that others feel the welcome of God's open heart than that they agree with us on secondary issues.

And look at vv. 4 and following: a closed or indifferent heart would never endure afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, or hunger for others. It takes an open heart to pursue purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God! An open heart looks at our neighbor and says "I will do all the work, I will take all the risks, I will suffer all the hardships, so that you can enjoy the blessing of knowing God." So ask yourself again: Do I have an open heart?

Finally, in vv. 11-13, look at what Paul expects: "Our heart is wide open towards you; now widen your hearts, too." That's point 5: open hearts open hearts. God's open heart opened our heart; when we share Christ's open heart with others, that's how God will open their heart, too. Being loved with Christlike love removes the restrictions we have on our affections.

And notice that word “*widen*”. For Christians, our closed hearts have been opened by Christ, but we are always fighting the temptation to shut them again. Unless we are actively pushing them open through Christ, then our hearts are becoming narrower and narrower. So it’s not as simple as asking if your heart is open *at all*. Is your heart *wide* open? Is it as wide open as the heart of Jesus, the one who died for you, the one you are living for? Just because technically, yes, your heart is open just a crack doesn’t mean your work is done. Widen your hearts!

And here’s how: First, repent of a closed heart. Repent of those moments in which you chose to live for yourself. Repent of selfish decisions and missed opportunities to show Christ’s love. Confess to God that all too often, you don’t want to move a muscle to bless others, your heart has no interest in your neighbor, your heart has never shed a tear for those who are without hope and without God in the world. Recognize this as a serious problem, and ask for God’s forgiveness.

Second, remember Christ’s love for you. Meditate on the fact that God left heaven to come and save you. Remember that Jesus died for you and was raised to life for your sake. Remember that because of Christ, you are a new creation! Remind your heart of the fact that your sinful self has become the righteousness of God in Christ! Let God’s open heartedness towards you take control of your affections, so that your heart starts to widen!

Third, pray for an open heart. Ask God to soften your heart by His Spirit, to widen your heart through His word, and to guide your heart through the godly examples of His people. Over lunch today, think of an example of an open heart, someone who was open-hearted to you, or to someone around you, and let their example inspire you. Even just talking about open-hearted people makes you want to be like them! So who in your life has an open heart that you can imitate? Remember, we all start with closed hearts, and the same God who opened their heart can open yours, too, so ask Him to do it!

Fourth application: prepare your heart for endurance. God never promises that having an open heart will be fun. Read verses 4-5 again. The closed heart uses all of these hardships as *excuses*; but the open heart will count it all joy. Having an open heart will make your life more difficult. There will be more work and more tears. Don’t be surprised by that, and do not allow

your soul to grow weary in well-doing because of it. Jesus died of an open heart; dying to self is what having an open heart means. Prepare your heart for endurance.

Finally, open your heart by showing the love that you feel, or by acting like it until you feel it. Sometimes, your heart will lead your hands into action, but sometimes your hands will have to disciple your heart. Even if you don't feel like reaching out, let engaging in acts of love push open the door of your heart. There are all sorts of actions an open heart takes, but it starts simply: when you hear of a need, decide to help. Even in those times when you aren't *able* to help, an open heart at least has the *desire* to help.

Before you will become the kind of person who walks through an open door, you need to cultivate an open heart. If your heart isn't open, then when the door opens, it won't be the right time, or you won't be the right person, or you won't know what to do or say or how to help. The closed heart produces a million excuses, but the open heart overcomes a million obstacles, because the love of Christ controls us. The heart of God is wide open to you in Christ. So in return, widen your hearts also.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*