

Open Wide Your Hearts
II Corinthians 6:11-13, 7:2-4

INTRODUCTION

Unreturned love can be a painful experience. Paul reflects on this pain in our text. He had made room in his heart for the believers at Corinth. They were as dear to him as children to a parent. He cites his openness with them as an evidence of his affection toward them. But he senses that they have shut him out of their affections. He senses barriers in the way. They will not receive his ministry or return any ministry to him. This is a condition that needs to be corrected.

After making his accusation, Paul makes an appeal. "As a fair exchange speak as to my children --- open wide your hearts also." Then there is an extended parenthesis in which he makes clear that this does not include opening your heart to everyone without discrimination but is rather limited to those who are in the family of God. Those who are committed to other gods are to be loved and served in a different way, Then he comes back to the appeal again, "Make room for us in your hearts."

Are there ministers of God, true ministers, that you have shut out of your heart
Are there children of God that you do not have room for in your heart? Consider this appeal of Paul, and its implications for our conduct in the family of God.

I. THE NEED TO OPEN OUR HEARTS

The need to be open hearted toward each other basically grows out of the fact that we are family. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that to shut him out of their hearts is like shutting a father out of their lives. In Christ Jesus they are part of a family relationship. At least each believer is a brother or a sister. We share the same spiritual heritage before the Lord. What will we do about it? Will we not make room in our hearts for those who are truly and eternally related to us in Christ?-

However, this appeal recognizes an inclination that is in us to limit the number of people we will let into our hearts. It is a holdover of the sinful inclination that is in us. Sometimes we make conscious decisions about limiting who we will let in, but usually it is something we do thoughtlessly. To help us become sensitive to how we do this, let's consider some things.

Our temperament may incline us to shut some people out. Some of us are by temperament inclined to be more private than others. Some of us just have a temperament bent toward fencing ourselves in and others out. If you are going to be a growing Christian, you need to become sensitive to who you are temperamentally, and be careful not to allow your temperament to gain control of your life. The will of our Lord, not our natural temperament, must determine who we make room for in our hearts.

Personality differences may incline us to shut some people out of our lives. This is a major cause of a restricted heart. Most of us will just prefer people with certain personality traits. We have natural tendencies to make room for those we like, and to shut out those that we do not like. Our preferences at this point will differ according to our own personalities. But we must not allow something as external and temporary as personality traits to determine who we will let into our hearts. It must be obvious that God does not decide on this basis who he will welcome into his affection. Should we not be guided by His behavior at this point? Be honest with yourself! That person you have refused to have anything to do with, how much of it is based on your dislike of their personality? Is it really that important?

Jealousy will definitely incline us to shut others out of our hearts. When they have something that we want, or they can do something that we cannot do, or they have achieved something that we desire, we can shut them out in resentment. "This can be true in the church. Jealousy over an honor that has come to a certain member can be harmful, as well as jealousy over a position that has been given to a certain person. Why was he made chairman of that committee? Why was he made a deacon? Why was she allowed to sing that solo? If we are not careful, we will shut them out of our lives simply because we are jealous of them.

Differences in methods can also be a problem. This can be especially true of those leaders in God's church that we might shut out of our hearts. Many of the differences in spiritual leaders are simply differences in methods. The goals and motivations of the two leaders may be the same, but they go about the work in a different way. If we are not careful we will make decisions about who we will let into our hearts on the basis of these kind of things. Do you really think this is a valid reason to shut up your heart against a person?

One of the primary reasons that we shut others out of our hearts is over wrongs that we think they have done to us. The wrong may be real or imaginary, but we shut them out anyway. We just refuse to have affection for a person who would treat us in this way. They may have criticized, us; or the wrong may have been even of a more serious nature. Evidently this was the basis on which the Corinthians were shutting Paul out of their lives. "They had decided that Paul had slighted them, and they resented it. They felt he had dealt with them unfairly, so they would not have room for him in their love. Paul's purpose in writing this is to assure them that he has nothing but love for them in his heart, and to appeal that they reciprocate, and make room for him in their lives. Does this strike a responsive note in your heart?"

This need to enlarge our hearts grows out of this inclination to do just the opposite. Unless you become sensitive to this inclination, it can make your life very narrow. The number of people you actually let into your heart will be very small.

There is another point to be made. We desperately need what God could do for us through others, if we would let them have a place in our hearts. Can you imagine how much the church at Corinth will miss if they shut a Paul out of their lives? Could anything be more tragic than shutting yourself off from God's provision? This makes this command a very serious matter to be considered. Let me suggest to you a very practical test to see if you need to do some enlarging of your heart. I believe if you will ask yourself just two questions of any person, you will be able to determine whether or not they have found a place in your heart. First, are you ready to minister to that person in love in any way that might be needed? If you feel yourself inclined to withhold from them ministry that you might be able to give, you can be pretty sure that they do not have 1 place in our affections. We instinctively reach out to help those that we love. It is just the nature of love. If you know in your deepest heart that everything being equal, you would not minister to them, you know the truth about yourself. You have restricted your heart.

The second question may be even more revealing. Are you ready to be ministered to by them? Are you ready to allow God to work through them in such a way that your life would be enriched? This was the true sign of need in Corinth. They were refusing to receive what God wanted to do for them through the ministry of Paul. They did not have room for him in their hearts. Would you let this person be your Sunday School teacher. Would you want the Lord to meet a financial need in your life through this person? Or would it just be more than you could take? If it would be too much for you, you do not have them in your heart. The thing you need to honestly seek an answer to is why you do not have them in your heart. Do you dare dig down to the real reason? The truth can be so humiliating and revealing.

II. THE WAY TO OPEN YOUR HEART

Paul does not suggest the way in our text, but rather presses upon us the urgency of it. I want to be as practical as I know how and suggest some things that will help. It is not always that easy, and may be attended by a severe struggle.

First, seek God's forgiveness for having shut them out of your heart. Until the sin of little heartedness has been forgiven, there is no hope of improvement. Until you recognize that shutting out of your heart is a sin against them and a sin against God; you are probably not going to seek to do anything about it. Do we dare tolerate a heart that is shutting out people that God has included in His heart? Surely we must seek to be as loving and as generous as our God.

Second, begin to develop an appreciation for what God is doing through their lives. We have focused our attention on things which would justify our keeping the barrier up, but we must change the focus. We must begin to focus on some things that might justify our taking the barriers down. God is doing something beautiful in every life that we might face that belongs to him. We should rejoice in what God is doing and benefit from it any way that we can. We should indeed

be offering thanksgiving to God for what He is doing in that life. We have been acting as though God was a work only in us.

Third, we need to begin seeking the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to develop the fruit of the Spirit. The very first fruit of the Holy Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22). He has the power to develop in us the openness to others that God desires. To begin to reach out in prayer and faith for the ministry of the Holy Spirit at this point is an acknowledgement that we cannot do it on our own. We do need the power of the indwelling Spirit to do this. Do you want Him to make you more open and loving? He will! This is the very ministry He has come to perform in us.

Fourth, begin to pray for those you have not included in your heart. This could become a special prayer list for you. Put at the top of the list, "People I Have Excluded From My Heart." Begin to lift them up to God on a regular basis. As you pray for them, you will find some changes taking place in you and in them. God has given us prayer for this very purpose.

Conclusion:

This text speaks to some very real needs in the life of our church. I have sensed among us an inclination to group ourselves into little cliques. I want to state a conviction. If God has placed you in First Baptist Church, then it is a tragic mistake on your part to shut any member of this body out of your life. God may have brought you here so that that very person could be used in your life in a special way. You may be making the same mistake Corinth was making. You may be shutting God's minister out of your life. I encourage you in the name of the Lord to enlarge your life, to make room for every believer in your heart.