

Open Heart / Open Series
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We are in a series called Open. Today I am speaking on “Open Heart.” I want to begin by opening my heart to you with a story from my life. I shared this at the women’s breakfast last week, so some of you have already heard it. But it’s so good I know you want to hear it again.

In the early 90’s, Pastor Joe and I experienced some of the worst years of our lives. It seemed like everything was going wrong: we were struggling financially, our children were rebelling, and our first church plant (which was our dream) failed miserably. I had a falling out with my best friend of ten years. I hated my job and I hated the house we lived in.

Prior to this I would say I had a very close relationship with God. I felt His presence in my life, I loved His word, I loved to worship, and I loved going to church.

However, when unrelenting trials came:
I began to question God.
I became angry with God.
I didn’t really want to go to church.
And, I replaced worship with listening to secular music.

I basically began to close my heart toward God and started going my own way. Then, I met some people at work who weren’t Christians. Their influence in my life wasn’t good. I really started drifting in my relationship with God.

I’ll never forget one time when I was driving in my car and I sensed God as though He was in the seat next to me. But instead of acknowledging His presence I just closed my heart a little more.

I do want to say right here that as this was happening God never left me. I always sensed Him right there, waiting for me to open my heart. His love and patience towards me were as real as it’s ever been.

One day I realized what was happening. So, I tried to open my heart to God again, but even though I sought Him I just couldn’t find Him. My heart was like a closed door that was locked and bolted, and someone threw away the key.

It took the loving intervention of three of my Christian friends to pray over me and bind the enemy on my behalf. It was after that, that I was able to slowly open my heart to God again.

Also, let me add that during this time, as I was closing my heart to God, I also began closing my heart to Joe. We had always had a great marriage. We were the envy of our friends. But I began to push him away. Some of you might be thinking how could you close your heart to Pastor Joe? He's one of the greatest guys we know. And, I would agree with you. But here's the reason why...

When we close our hearts to God it usually results in closing our hearts to others. When we open our hearts to God it usually results in opening our hearts to others. Also, when we close our hearts to others it usually results in closing our hearts to God. When we open our hearts to others it usually results in opening our hearts to God. You see its not either/or. It's both. Opening your heart to God and to others go hand in hand.

But here's the thing...many of us have lost touch with our hearts. From childhood we have been taught to ignore or mistrust the deepest longings of our hearts. We've learned how to perform, to pretend, to fake it, and to wear a mask.

We say things like:

I'm fine, just fine... even though we're not fine.

Or, No, you didn't hurt me, even though our heart is breaking.

Or, I don't care if others reject me, when we care more than we can say.

Or I don't need you, when we're longing for someone to care.

We don't want to open our heart and let others in because we're afraid we'll get hurt...and we're right...but in the end it's better to open our heart and get hurt than to close our heart and get hard.

Still, we sacrifice our true authentic self to gain what we think is approval. But since we're not really being ourselves, we never really feel approval. We're haunted with the thought "If they really knew me, they wouldn't accept me."

In his book *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldridge says this:

"We have learned from parents and peers... and even our spiritual mentors that something else is wanted from us other than our heart, which is to say, that which is most deeply us. Very seldom are we ever invited to live out of our heart. If we are wanted, we are often wanted for what we can offer functionally. If rich, we are honored for our wealth, if beautiful, for our looks, if intelligent, for our brains. So, we learn to offer only those parts of us that are approved... We divorce ourselves from our heart and begin to live a double life."

The problem with this is we never really feel connected. So, we close our hearts. But that's not the way God intended it to be. God's plan is that we open our hearts to Him and to one another.

Let's see how this worked in the New Testament church. Acts 2:42 says:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Notice here they were devoted to four things. In the Strong's Concordance, the original meaning for devote is "to be earnest toward, to persevere, be constantly diligent to a person, to adhere closely to, give yourself continually, to wait on continually." One commentary says they received it, retained it, and ACTED on its principles. And then here's what happened in Acts 2:43-47:

Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This passage shows us why the church in Acts made such an impact!
 They fellowshiped together.
 They were devoted to one another.
 They broke bread together.
 All the believers were together and had everything in common.
 They met each other's needs.
 Every day they met together in the temple and in their homes.
 They ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

Remember that the early church is our example. It sounds to me like their hearts were open to God and to one another.

There are three characteristics that the early church modeled for us:

1. They opened their hands

Acts 2:44 says:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

These people were not tight-fisted when it came to giving. Their hands were open so that they could give to those in need. They sold their possessions to give to those in need. Because of that, every person's needs were met!

Do you know that if every Christian tithed, there would be more than enough money to meet every person's needs, to support missions around the world and there would be money left over!

Our hands are powerful tools to bless others and we need to open them! So, what are some ways we can we open our hands? We can meet someone's practical or physical needs. This may mean helping them out financially or giving of our time.

We need to be aware of times in people's lives when they are in need: Times of sorrow like an illness, financial difficulty, loss of a loved one, divorce, separation, loss of a job, broken relationship, a severe attack of the enemy, emotional or mental confusion or stress.

There are also times of joy like: getting married, having a baby, birthdays, times of promotion or advancement, answers to prayer, victory over the enemy, a dream coming true or salvation of a loved one.

Other ways we open our hands are with a simple hug or a handshake.

Touching can impact people in many ways.

When we're sad, it can bring happiness.

When we're hurting, it can comfort.

When we're afraid, it can protect.

A study done at UCLA found that just to maintain emotional and physical health, men and women need eight to ten meaningful touches a day. The same study estimated that if husbands would hug their wives several times each day, it would increase their life span by two years.

Wow! We need to do what I John 3:18 says:

Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

2. They opened their homes

Acts 2:46 says:

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

Something about eating together deepens our relationship. Some of the most important Biblical encounters occurred between Jesus and the disciples at the table.

We really want to encourage opening your home to each other. Inviting people over for a meal.

Romans 12:13 says: *Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

As we open our homes to others, we will have opportunities to open our hands to meet practical needs and open our hearts to meet spiritual needs.

When we do, we will be like the early church, praising God, having favor with the people, and God will add to our church daily those who are being saved!

So, the early church opened their hands and their homes – but here’s the key - They were able to do this because:

3. They opened their hearts

The Christian life is above all else a love affair of the heart. It cannot be lived by following a set of rules or principles or programs. If we ignore the heart and try to live by doctrine alone, it doesn’t work. Our heart is the key to the Christian life. In both the Old and New Testaments, the heart is God’s greatest concern.

When the children of Israel fell into a strict observance of rules and rituals, this is what God said in Isaiah 29:13:

These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

Listen to what Jesus says in Matt. 23:27-28 to the Pharisees who neglected the heart and based their righteousness on following the law.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

No wonder God tells us in Proverbs 4:23:

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

God help us to open our hearts to Him and to one another. Our mission at Grace is to love God and love people. There’s a reason we put loving God first. Because Jesus said to. Also, because before we can love others, we must first love God. Although they are both intertwined, loving God is first. So, first we must open our hearts love to God. In Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus said:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

What does it mean to love with all your heart?

If someone does not love, we call them heartless. We say, “Have a heart.”

If someone is courageous, we call them brave hearts.

If they are hurt, we say they have a heartache.

If they have lost a loved one, we say they have a broken heart.

Good people have hearts of gold.

When someone gives up, we say they have lost heart.

We can talk heart to heart.

When we really want someone to listen, we say "Take this to heart."

When we feel understood we say, "They really heard my heart."

What does it mean to have a big heart? A hard heart – a soft heart– a cold heart – or a warm heart - a selfish heart – or a giving heart, a servant's heart – or a closed or open heart?

It means we are motivated to act a certain way by something deep inside us. It means we give ourselves completely to something. Matthew 6:21 says:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So, what does it mean to open our heart so we can love with all our heart?

Let me ask it this way: Have you ever done anything half-heartedly? What does that mean? It means your heart's not in it. It means you have no motivation. You see, your heart is what motivates you from within. When I love something with all my heart, I give myself to it – whether it's my career, my family or my God.

Physically, the heart is the most important organ in the body. The heart has come to mean the middle, central or inmost part. It is the center of all physical and spiritual life. It is the fountain of our conscience, thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, and purposes. Scripture considers the heart as the place of Divine influence.

So, to love God with all our heart is to love Him out of our innermost being where He is the center of life. It is to open my heart to Him, to give myself to Him in total devotion, and to be motivated by passion for Him.

How do I know if I'm loving God with all my heart?

How do I know if my heart is truly into this relationship with God?

To love God with your soul is to submit your feelings and your will to the Lordship of Christ. To love God with all your mind is to think right thoughts toward Him. To love God with all your strength is to love Him with all your ability, energy, and intensity. This boils down to loving God with our entire being – spirit, soul and body.

God wants us to love Him out of the center of our beings with a whole heart, not half-heartedly. You cannot get by saying "I love God in my heart" and leave out soul, mind and strength.

If you never ever do anything loving toward your spouse, but you say I love you in my heart, will that fly?

2 Corinthians 6:11-13 says:

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange — I speak as to my children — open wide your hearts also.

It's only when we open our hearts to God that we can truly open our hearts to people. If we don't love God how can we love others because God is love and love comes from God. Romans 5:5 says:

The love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us.

The key is loving God and people, but you must love God first...then you can love people.

The only way we can keep loving people during tough times is if we first love God. Why is that? It's because people will not always love unconditionally. They won't always show appreciation for what you do for them.

You see:

People will hurt you, but God will never hurt you.

In fact, He will heal you!

People will let you down, but God will never let you down.

In fact, He will lift you up!

People will reject you, but God will never reject you.

In fact, you are always accepted in the beloved – Jesus Christ!

People will curse you, but God will never curse you.

In fact, He will bless you with every blessing in heavenly places!

People will turn on you, but God will never turn on you.

In fact, nothing can separate you from God's love!

The love of others will always fall short, but God's love never fails.

If you're doing it for people, it won't last.

But when you're doing it for God is it everlasting.

So, I encourage you today: open your hearts to love God and receive God's love.

When you do, you can then open your hearts to others.