

How to Open Your Heart
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Last week Pastor Deb preached an amazing sermon called Open Heart. She showed us that God’s plan is for us to open our hearts to Him and to one another. She gave us some biblical keys to opening our hearts: the prayers and intervention of friends, spiritual warfare, devotion to God and people, opening your hands to give to God and people in need, meaningful touch, submitting your feelings and your will to the Lordship of Christ, thinking right thoughts toward God and others.

That sermon really touched the hearts of many people who struggle with opening their hearts to God and people. I was preparing to preach a different message – but Deb and I talked about it and we felt that I should preach a follow-up message to hers. So, I’m preaching on How to Open your Heart.

As a pastor, I’ve noticed a phenomenon in church over the years. Many church-going Christians live lives that are not much different from non-Christians. These people have been exposed to the truths of the Bible, but their lives have not been changed by it. They began well in the Christian life but for some reason their hearts are not open to mature in the faith and their growth was stunted. It’s a phenomenon to me because every Sunday, we preach the same word to everyone in the congregation – yet it has different results in different people.

- Some people sit through the message and don’t really hear the Word.
- Some hear the Word – walk out saying “Great word, Pastor Joe” – then once they’re out the door, they never think about it again.
- Some hear the Word and walk out with good intentions, but after a little while, they give up.
- Some hear the Word, take it to heart and then they go out and do what the Word says to do. And those are the people who experience spiritual growth and maturity and blessing.

Jesus talked about these 4 kinds of people in Matthew 13:3-23. He said:

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.

The disciples asked Him to explain the parable. And Jesus said:

Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

This parable shows us that there are three keys to growing in the Lord: seed, a sower, and soil.

The seed is the word of God.

The sower is the person who sows the seed.

The soil is the heart of those who hear the word.

The seed was exactly the same for each person in this parable. What was different was the soil. My job is to sow the seed every week. To preach the word of God. The seed is not my words, but God's Word. The seed is not my truth, but God's truth.

My words won't do much for you, but His word will set you free!
His word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.
His word gives wisdom, direction, comfort, healing and strength.

My job is to sow the seed of God's Word. Your job is to prepare your soil to receive the seed of God's word. This parable shows us that ¾'s of the seeds do not grow. There's no problem with the seed – the problem is with the soil. The exact same seed can produce no crop, some crop or a huge crop.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus compares our hearts to various types of soil in which seed is sowed. From this parable we learn that the condition of our hearts must be right for God's Word to produce a harvest in our lives.

Only an open heart can receive the Word of God. Now – I don't know about you – but I want to be good soil! I always want to have an open heart to receive from God in worship and though the sermon.

Listen – I don't like every worship style – but I worship no matter what! Not every preacher preaches in the style I like. But I always try to listen with an open heart!

I have been in church my whole life! I probably heard over 10,000 sermons in every style of preaching. So, I rarely hear something I haven't preached on or

heard someone else preach on – but I still make sure I listen with open ears and an open heart! Proverbs 27:7 says:

One who is full despises honey, but to one who is hungry, even bitter food tastes sweet.

In other words, if you are physically hungry, you will receive bread and water with gratefulness, but if you are not hungry, you will think the greatest steak meal with an awesome dessert is not edible.

Likewise, when you are hungry for God and His Word, you will not let style or delivery or any thing else harden your heart from receiving what God wants to say. Keep your heart soft!

So, what are the characteristics of a hard heart? I don't have time to teach on all of them today, but here's a list:

A Hard Heart Toward God:

- Does Not Obey God
- Does Not Experience the Presence of God
- Does Not Hear God or Receive Truth from a Sermon
- Does Not Believe God
- Is Usually Discontent, Hopeless and has no Passion for Anything

A Hard Heart Toward People:

- Is Insensitive to the Needs of Others
- Cannot Celebrate with Others or Mourn with Others
- Does Not Communicate Anything Meaningful to Anyone
- Is Proudful and Cannot Receive Correction
- Cannot be Vulnerable to Others
- Will Not Forgive Others

I can give a lot of causes of a hard heart – but it mainly boils down to sin. For example, Hebrews 13:12-15 says:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness... As has just been said: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

Sin causes hearts to grow hard, especially continual unrepentant sin. If we don't confess our sins, they have a cumulative and desensitizing effect on us, eventually making it difficult to even distinguish right from wrong.

A big reason that people harden their hearts towards people is for self-protection. Maybe they were abused in the past and felt they had to put up walls and harden themselves to keep from getting hurt again. That's a sad thing, but it happens a lot.

Maybe you trusted someone, and they let you down.
 Maybe someone made a promise they didn't keep.
 Maybe someone abused you or betrayed you or hurt you some other way.
 That's a part of life for all of us and how we respond is very important.

It's easy to stop trusting and stop loving in order to shield yourself. But the result is that it kills your heart! God warns us against the hardening of the heart because it causes us to become insensitive to God and unable to show compassion to others. That's why God says in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.

So, how do we open our hearts to receive the seed of God's Word?

1- We must plow up the fallow ground of a hard heart

Matthew 13:19 says:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

A hard-hearted person cannot understand the truths of God's word. An enemy named Satan snatches any little truth that is sown in a hard heart before it can even begin to grow and bear fruit. The enemy wants to steal the Word from you too by keeping you from understanding the Bible or the ways of God. That's why Ephesians 4:18 warns us not to live like unbelievers because:

They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

If we are going to grow spiritually, we must constantly plow up the fallow ground of our hard hearts. Fallow ground is ground that has been left uncultivated. It's been packed down from people walking on it and nothing can grow on it.

The ground of your heart might be fallow because you've not plowed it or planted seed. Or it might be because people have walked all over you. Whatever the reason, you must plow up the ground to prepare your soil. How do you do that? There are two ways.

The first is through repentance, which is more than just confessing sin. James 4:8-10 says:

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be mourning instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Too many people don't understand deep repentance. How do you know if have truly repented? By the godly changes in your life.

2 Corinthians 7:10-12 tells us what those are:

For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death. Just see what this godly sorrow produced in you! Such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such deep longing, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right.

Don't deceive yourself into thinking you've repented because you confessed your sin. Godly sorrow leads to true repentance which results in life change. You don't repent and stay the same! Don't deceive yourself into thinking superficial confession will open your heart and change your life!

Another way we break up fallow ground is probably not what you think. Hosea 10:12 says:

Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, till He comes and rains righteousness on you.

Okay – but how do we break up that fallow ground? The answer is in verse 11 which says: *Judah shall plow.* The name Judah means praise.

One of the ways to break up the fallow ground of a hard heart is to put the plow of Judah to work by praising God. You cannot praise the Lord with your heart and not be changed. You cannot praise God and stay mad at God. You cannot simultaneously praise God and blame God. Oh – you might be able to go through some motions and say some words, but when you really praise in spirit and in truth – that will break up your fallow ground.

It might be hard at first. It might sound like this: “God, I praise you – but LIFE IS HARD RIGHT NOW & I DON'T UNDERSTAND! But Lord I praise you. STILL don't understand, but I choose to praise you. Yes, it might be hard, but I'm gonna praise You anyway!”

If you keep going – Judah will plow!

Praise will start breaking up your fallow ground and eventually it will sound like this: “God, I praise you no matter what. You are good all the time. It doesn’t matter what I’m going through, I’m gonna praise you anyway. It doesn’t even matter if I understand. Your word is true and Your ways are right and You are good all the time. So, I will praise you no matter what!”

Now your heart’s plowed up to receive God’s Word. So, plant it. If you want to prepare your soil for the seed of God’s word, plow up your fallow ground. Let repentance and praise open your heart for God’s Word.

2- We must put down roots to overcome a shallow heart

Matthew 13:20-21 says:

The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

The shallow-hearted person doesn’t have any staying power. They are quick to believe, receive and rejoice, but they don’t stay with it. This impacts every area of life!

They start a diet, but then quit it when they get hungry.

They start exercising, but quit when they get sore.

They start a budget, but quit when they want to buy something.

They start a relationship, but bolt at the first disagreement.

People do the same thing with the things of God. They only follow Jesus when it’s easy and they get everything they want. But as soon as the Christian life gets tough and they have to discipline themselves or die to themselves, they’re gone. The shallow-hearted will not remain faithful. When the going gets tough, they get going in the wrong direction.

But if we are going to grow in faith, we must put down roots. In the word and in the church and in relationships. This takes time, commitment and effort! Especially for those whose hearts are hard due to self-protection. You tend to stay shallow in relationships. You talk about news, sports and weather, but nothing deep. If you are ever going to be free, you will need to develop intimacy with God and people.

In our society, the meaning of the word intimacy is often distorted because many people think it refers only to sexual encounters. But intimacy has a much deeper meaning. It is primarily about knowing and being known. It means to have deep awareness and understanding of another.

If you are going to open your heart to people, you must risk going deeper. You will need to be vulnerable.

That requires confession to God and opening up our hearts to Him. That also requires communication with people where we share personal things like our hopes, feelings, dreams, fears, regrets, and losses.

To open your heart, you must let your roots go deeper in relationship with God and people.

3- We must pull the weeds from our cluttered hearts

Matthew 13:22 says:

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

Too many Christians have cluttered up their lives with the things of this world. You might not think you are cluttered – but do you hear yourself say often, “I’m too busy. I don’t have time for family or church or Bible reading or prayer.” Really, what you are saying is that the things of God are not a priority.

Some people are caught up in the world of entertainment which keeps them from being captured by the Lord. This includes TV, movies, sports, hobbies, video games, you name it. There’s nothing wrong with those things... until... You have time to go to a movie, but not to go to church. You have time for work, but not for your family! You have time for Facebook, but never get your face in God’s book!

If we are going to reap a harvest, we must pull out the weeds of everything that distracts us from the things of God. We must seek first the Kingdom of God. That’s our priority. Then...

4- We must plant the seed of God’s word in our open hearts

Matthew 13:23 says:

But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Good soil represents the heart that has plowed up the fallow ground. It is a softened heart – an open heart! It has put down roots. It has pulled out the weeds. And it is ready for the seed of God’s word. And when it hears the word, it obeys. But, don’t just prepare your soil, go ahead and plant the seed of God’s word in your life and watch what happens! That’s what bears fruit and keeps you growing in the things of God.

What kind of soil are you?

If your soil is shallow, put down roots!
If your soil is cluttered, pull out the weeds!
If your soil is fallow and packed down – plow it up through repentance and praise.
Begin to thank God for what He’s done.
Begin to praise God for who He is.
Let the praises of God plow up your fallow ground.

If your heart is hard, you won’t want to praise Him.
But this is how you open your heart! Let Judah plow!

“Lord, I praise you because Your plans are good not evil.
I praise you because You work all things together for my good.
I praise you because what the enemy means for harm, you work for my good. I praise you, I bless You, I worship you, I rejoice in you. Hallelujah!”

When you open your heart’s soil and plant God’s seed in it, you will be like a tree planted by living water.
Your roots will go deep and you will be full of life, even in dry times.
Your leaf will not wither! Your faith will not fail!
You will bring forth fruit in its season and whatever you do will prosper!!