

People and Pastor: Open-Hearted

2 Corinthians 6:11-13; 7:2-4

Not long ago I got an email from a colleague that rubbed me wrong. It felt a little pushy. A little like intimidation. This was a very senior colleague, who in many ways I admired.

I read her email over and over. I started sensing that she was being ice cold toward me in the hallways. I thought I saw a frown on her face every time she glanced at me. I became convinced that this colleague was not for me, but against me.

My heart closed, and closed, and closed some more until I had no room in it for her whatsoever. My heart had no room for the possibility that this colleague, a Christian and a fellow missionary teacher with me, might care for me at all.

Know what happened? This colleague dropped into my study one morning. She said she realized that they'd been a little slow--slow to answer my emails, slow to say hello in the halls, slow to smile.

She told me she didn't mean anything by it, and that she was a little preoccupied with her workload and the demands of her graduate school course. She said that she just wanted to make sure that I knew she appreciated me.

I had been stewing about this colleague for a month. My wife had told me to let it go, not to stew about it. I had been resisting the Lord's call to repentance---To repent of my assumptions about her.

And now here she was, telling me exactly how it actually was, exactly where her heart *really* was. How stupid I felt.

It's Home Group Sunday here at IPC. Our last message in the series "People and Pastor" is especially relevant to the life of our congregation in small settings like home groups. Because, after all, home groups offer the opportunity to have heart-to-heart fellowship with others in our church. And because home group fellowships can be so rich, warm, and heartfelt, they are precisely the place where we need to be vigilant against closed-heartedness.

Let's hear Paul and hear the Holy Spirit, as we're called to 4 things in this passage: To resist, to repent, to repeat, and to return.

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RESIST the temptation to close your heart.

What is it that we see beginning in Genesis 3, and on through the narratives of the Old Testament, in people's commercial and political exchanges, in people's families, in relationship after relationship?

What is it that the people of Corinth saw day in and day out, in their places of work, in their families, in the marketplace, in relationship after relationship?

What is it that we see here in our twenty-first century lives, day in and day out, in our places of work, in our families, in our commercial exchanges, and in relationship after relationships?

We see suspicion. It's the easiest thing to do: to suspect people of being your enemies.

Adam and Eve fell into sin when they began to suspect that God might not be so good and loving after all. They started to distrust one another's intentions, too.

Their boy Cain grew so suspicious of his brother Abel that he killed him. Joseph's brothers were suspicious of his motivations, and so hated that their father loved him so much, that they plotted to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery instead.

Over and over in the Old Testament, suspicion makes people slam the doors of their hearts against those they are called to love.

And in Corinth, it was happening too. As one commentator puts it, Paul had "unbosomed his heart" to this church. But this same church was growing suspicious that Paul was closed-hearted toward them.

"This Paul is always meddling in our personal business. We can't have Preacher Paul knowing about everything we're up to. It's not safe to share our feelings, our lives, our hearts, with him."

What's the cost of the Corinthians' closed-heartedness? They were meant to be a church --- that is, to be the one place in town where suspicion is stopped, where paranoia is paused, where cynicism can't keep people from caring for one another.

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The very witness of their congregation to their city is at stake. If they're closed-hearted and cagey and self-protective, then they end up being just like the society around them, except that the society around them isn't proclaiming the open-hearted love of Jesus! Their witness breaks down, because their life together as a congregation contradicts their mission and message as a congregation.

If you're in a home group, you've got to resist the impulse to close your heart out of self-protection. If you're not in a home group because you've already closed your heart out of self-protection, you've got to pry it open again. The very witness of the church depends on it, as it did at Corinth.

And so Paul boldly counters their suspicions. They think it's Paul who doesn't love them. But he says instead: (6:12) "You are restricted in your own affections." It's not we who have stopped loving. It's actually the opposite. Your hearts have closed. Mine remains open.

Actually the word here for heart is "bowels." Many of the times in the NT that we read "heart," the word is actually "bowels." Kind of weird, huh? So when Paul says that this church is constrained in their guts, in their bowels, he's literally saying that they have love-constipation. Sorry. I wouldn't say that in church unless it was in the Bible.

Don't close your heart, Paul says. It's the closing of your heart that suffocates our relationship, and that will suffocate the very life of your fellowship as a church. If only you'd resist this temptation to slam the doors of your hearts closed against me!

Now, please tell me that I'm not the only one who struggles to resist this temptation! I struggle mightily.

So many of us often assume that the words and actions of other Christians toward us are laced with malicious intent. That a rebuke is really a rancid personal attack. That those who don't say just the kind of things we want to hear, and say them just the way we want them to say them, are attacking us with their words. Especially here in a multi-cultural church, we've got to work overtime not to assume the worst about people's hearts when their cultural expressions and temperaments are different than ours.

And so, to fend off the inevitable attack, we fortify our hearts with a love-resistant, impenetrable wall. Home groups are a great place to learn about diverse cultural

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expressions. And they're an even better place to learn the art of open-heartedness within a diverse context.

You know what an old veteran pastor once told me? He said "Andy, you have to guard your heart, and keep from showing church people any sign of vulnerability, and keep from speaking about any of your sin and frailty. You know why? Because everything you say can and will be used against you by an angry, malicious church member."

I thought that was absurd when I heard it, and I think it's absurd today. But, you know what? I have been tempted to heed this cold-hearted warning from this cynical, grumpy old pastor. Because every now and then, people *have* used my vulnerability against me.

But for our community to be *Christian*, for our church to be *Christian*, we must resist the temptation to always be the first to slam shut the doors of our hearts against potential dangers.

CS Lewis says that we can take our heart and "lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." Friends, Jesus Christ did not redeem his dear church in order for her to be full of dark, motionless, airless, impenetrable, irredeemable hearts!

Do not close your hearts.

REPENT when you're tempted to slam your heart shut.

The second thing Paul would teach us today is that we need to repent when the impulse to close our hearts in bitter enmity overtakes us.

You may have heard before that repentance begins with a change of mind---when we awaken to the reality of who God is and who we are, in a fresh way. When some dimension of our attitudes, words, and actions are seen for what they really are. This is precisely what Paul is after in the Corinthians and what the Spirit is after in us with respect to our hearts.

Paul knew what it was like to have a heart that was stingy, to have a heart that remained closed. He knew what it was like to panic when someone like Stephen in Acts 7, had a heart on fire and fearless in devotion to his open-hearted Savior, was

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calling for open-hearted repentance. Before he met Jesus personally, Paul was accustomed to slamming the door of his heart shut whenever he saw someone with a wide-open heart.

And now he was seeing this happen in the church at Corinth.

Don't let what happened to my heart with my Christian colleague happen to your heart.

And when you see it starting to happen to you, repent. Admit that your retrenchment into closed-heartedness is *not* the way of Paul and it's *not* the way of Christ. Many of us need to repent from segregating our hearts from the hearts of others. Many of us need the fellowship of a Home Group in order to give our hearts a chance to get used to being open again.

REPEAT

This leads us to the next thing Paul teaches us: that when others act closed-hearted toward you, that is precisely the time **not** to hold your cards closer to your chest, but to wear your heart more fully on your sleeve. We need to repeat our open-hearted commitment to people whose hearts are fast-closing.

My colleague noticed my closed-heartedness. And she took the initiative to tell me how it *actually* was--what was *actually* going on in her heart. Paul does the same with the Corinthians.

For Paul, there aren't any minced words---no matter how suspicious the Corinthians are that he is talking out of both sides of his mouth.

In fact it's kind of funny. Our English translations avoid giving us the wrong idea in 6:11. English says "we have spoken freely to you." Greek says "Our mouths are wide open to you." But it's not, of course, that Paul and his colleagues are running their mouths and don't know when to shut up; they're not being bossy and domineering. But rather they are speaking the truth in love. They're telling the truth, and they're telling of their love. Freely. Without constraint.

In all Paul's words to the Corinthians, he has (7:2) not been malicious, has not been taking advantage of anyone. In all his letters and words in-person, (7:3) he's saying what he's saying not to condemn them, but, as it were, to save them---save them from unnecessary heartache and bitterness.

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In fact, if we were to do a statistical analysis on our passages today, we would notice that for each thing he tells the Corinthian church that they must do, there are perhaps 5 things he says to exhibit that his own heart beats not with bitterness toward them, but with love.

(6:11) “Our heart is wide open.” (7:3) “You are in our hearts;” we will live and die together. (7:4) “I have great pride in you.” When I think of you, I’m not filled with fear but with comfort. When I suffer afflictions, I think of you, and I’m filled not with bitterness but with *joy!*”

As Christians we would do well to imitate Paul’s effusive heart-expressiveness.

I double-dog dare you, in the name of Christ Jesus, to confront a fearful, irritable, bitter person who has begun to push you away with a fast-closing heart---to confront them not with condemnation for their closed-heartedness, but with the goodness of Christ Jesus lived out in words of love and commitment and grace!

Repeat your love to those who are tempted to repeat bitterness. Repeat the sounding joy of the good news---“In Christ, I am for you, not against you!”---as far as the curse is found.

RETURN

So Paul would have us resist the temptation to close our hearts, to repent of our adversarial mindsets, and to repeat our love and commitment to those who are caught in bitterness.

But, finally, Paul would have us come back to the source of true Christian open-heartedness: to Christ Jesus himself.

Where do you think Paul gets the idea that the Christian life is a life of open-heartedness, even toward potential enemies? Where do you think he gets the energy again and again, when rumors spread about him, when people make assumptions about him, when many people misunderstand him, to open his heart? Where do you think he gets the ability to pry his heart wide open when the hearts of people in his churches are slamming shut?

Isn’t it the Lord Jesus himself, who, before any of us, and before Paul himself, said to those who opposed him: “You are not restricted by my heavenly Father, or by the Holy Spirit, or by me: but you are restricted in your own affections.”

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Isn't it the Lord Jesus who first said to Jerusalem, the city, the people of God, that he held in his heart: "how **often** I have **longed to gather** your children together, as a hen **gathers** her chicks under her wings, and **you** were not willing?"

Isn't it the Lord Jesus who faced much affliction and still had plenty of room in his heart for joy, even pride, over both the simplest poor believers as well as those who were stumbling but true disciples?

And in the end, we can love with the affection of Christ because in the end, this whole business is about Christ anyway.

When we approach bitter people with the open-heartedness of Christ, we have to remember that it IS, actually, the heart of Christ, and not just our own, not even primarily our own, that is moving toward them in love. If they block our movement of love toward them, they are rejecting not our open-heartedness but the open heart of Jesus Christ.

We can only move toward tough people in love if we ourselves are captivated by the love of Christ, secure in his great affection toward us.

J. Oswald Sanders says that Christian "Maturity is moving from a thin skin and a hard heart to a thick skin and a soft heart." We've got to get thicker skin and softer hearts!

But to get them, and to keep them, we must sink ourselves deeper into the soft-heartedness of the Lord Jesus, toward *us*. Without him we would be bitter, paranoid, insecure, unloving, closed-hearted.

In the end, doesn't it all come down to this: let us love as Jesus first loved us, and let us do so out of his present, bottomless love for us?

May Jesus himself be honored and glorified as we make our way toward one another in love, in celebration of his saving love for us. Amen.