

## A Life that Opens Hearts

2 Corinthians 6:3-13

June 3, 2007

I want to start by reading the section of Scripture today, from 2 Corinthians 6:3-13:

*3We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. 4Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; 6in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; 7in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; 8through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; 9known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; 10sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

*11We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. 12We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. 13As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.*

Does it seem that it's all politics all the time, already? Didn't we just have an election last fall? Politics is all about influencing people. Two opposing county chairman were sharing a rare moment together. The Republican chairman said, "I never pass up a chance to promote the party. For example, whenever I take a cab, I give the driver a sizable tip and say, 'Vote Republican.'"

His opponent said, "I have a better scheme, and it doesn't cost me a nickel. I don't give any tip at all. And when I leave, I also say, 'Vote Republican.'"

Now that should influence someone!

**What kind of life influences people to draw near to God?** Paul's passion is that the Corinthians believers draw near to God. In this passage, he describes his life, and the lives of other servants of Jesus Christ, and lays open their life experiences in such a way to demonstrate their whole-hearted genuine devotion to Jesus as the basis for their work among them. It comes close at times to bragging, but it never crosses the line. It's just the way it is. And Paul can say sincerely, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path."

In other words, Paul says, "We're not perfect, but we never had a **scandal**." When I was serving in Ohio, the pastor two pastors before me ran off with the church secretary. That **scandal** put a huge stumbling block in the path. So many times I would be meeting someone and they would say, "Oh, yes, that the church where the pastor ran off..." That was a life that damaged the reputation of Jesus and hindered the ministry of the church. That was a life that put a stumbling block down that many people tripped over.

Jesus is good, but the way Jesus looks to the watching world will largely be determined by the lifestyle of the people who call themselves His followers.

I was at a Chamber of Commerce meeting last fall. Everyone was invited to get up and say something about their business. So one person talked about their auto shop, and the next about their insurance agency and the next about their services as a realtor. I wanted to

say something that would stick with the group, so I stood up and said, "My job is to make Jesus look as good as He actually is." My job isn't preaching sermons and running programs. My job, my ambition, is to make sure Jesus looks really good.

And that won't be determined by neatly polished sermons and good music and sound programming as much as it is by the life I live. And that same goes for all of us. As soon as the people in your world identify you as a Christian, they will be looking at your life for the proof of what Jesus is all about. And they will either find in your life compelling evidence of His goodness and greatness or they will find the excuse that many seek for dismissing Him as irrelevant.

**What kind of life opens hearts?** Paul describes that kind of life in this passage in terms of four dimensions:

1. Hardships (6:4b-5)
2. Marks of godly character (6:6-7a)
3. Changing circumstances (7b-8a)
4. God's acts of deliverance (8b-10)

### **Hardships**

Look at 2 Corinthians 6:3-5:

*3We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.  
4Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:*

*in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger...*

If you want to know the sincerity of a person, consider what they have endured for what they

believe. Following Christ has been hard for Paul. He's known more than his share of identifying with the cross of Jesus.

There is a cost to following Jesus. He Himself was emphatic on this point. He says, in Luke 14:27-28:

*27"And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

*28"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?"*

Paul had paid the cost in terms of beatings, finding himself in jail or in the middle of a riot. He'd paid for it in terms of toil, sleeplessness and hunger. This is passionate Jesus-following. And no one can argue against it.

An English bishop once quipped, "Wherever I go we have tea; wherever Paul went, they had riots." However you count it, reckless Jesus-following shakes things up.

If you want to follow Jesus today, prepare to pay a price. Your world will be turned upside down. While it's never without joy, it will often be without comfort. You will feel the scrape of the heavy cross on your shoulder. But it's worth it. If you pay this price, it's a price that opens hearts. God's people will listen and those outside the family of God will listen. That's worth it.

### **Marks of Godly Character**

A second dimension of the life that opens hearts is found in verses 6-7a:

*6in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;*  
*7in truthful speech and in the power of God;*

If the first aspect of a person's life that opens hearts is the willingness to lay down that life and suffer with Christ, the second is the character of the living Jesus showing through that person's life.

The way Paul describes it here naturally falls three units. The **first** is **godly character as we relate to others:**

*...in purity, understanding, patience and kindness...*

This is a "scandal-free" character. Doesn't this just sound like Jesus? **Purity:** this is no hint of dirt, hidden or otherwise, in this person's life. **Understanding:** there is a genuine effort to hear and to listen, not just to words, but also to a person's heart. **Patience:** there is an unhurriedness, a willingness to spend that most precious possession, our time, on behalf of another. **Kindness:** there is tenderness in dealing with others and an unwillingness to cut down or discourage another.

Oh, how inadequate I feel in even describing these things! How often I've fallen flat here! How good of God to pick me back up here, to pick us all back up.

The **second way** he describes this godly character is in terms of

*...the Holy Spirit and in sincere love...*

And what he means by that, I'm sure, is that our lives show that we are **living empowered by the Holy Spirit**, "in step with the Spirit" as Paul says in Galatians 5:25, and as a result, there is an obvious, sincere love showing forth in our lives.

The **third way** he describes this godly character is in the way we communicate:

*7in truthful speech and in the power of God;*

We say what we mean and mean what we say. There's no contradiction between our message and our lives. And there's nothing unclear about what we say.

But there's more: this truthful speech comes "in the power of God." There's something more than what some guy saying what he thinks. There's the element of "thus saith the Lord." From a life that dwells deep with God there comes the authority to speak God's truth with God's authority. It isn't gained by raising your voice; it gained by raising your life up, higher and higher into the grace and power and love of God. A life like that gains authority from God, to speak God's word with anointed power.

Godly character more than anything else opens lives. Listen, if you teach a Sunday school class or if you lead a home Bible study or if you mentor someone, this more than anything else, even your teaching skills, will determine whether your teaching opens hearts or just tickles ears.

This next area is found in 2 Corinthians 6:7b-8a, and it's about...

### **Changing circumstances**

*...with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; 8through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report...*

You have to remind yourself how this passage begins to get Paul's meaning: vs. 4a says, "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way..." and among the ways that the genuine servant of Jesus commends himself on a daily basis is the way he or she handles changing circumstances. You have to

be ready for things coming from all directions (as Paul says here, from the left and the right). Some days it's glory; you're on top of the world. Some days you get slandered. Some days you get bad news; some days you get good news. As the saying goes, some days you eat the bear; some days the bear eats you!

Someone described one British writer as "being at his best when all things were going well." Well, that's hardly anything to celebrate. Anybody can do that. It's being at your best when the bear eats you that's the trick.

A life that changes hearts will be steady despite the circumstances. Life changes, but God doesn't change. That's why the Bible so often describes God as our "rock." Psalm 62 is a good example of that. In vs. 1-8, David calls God his "rock" three times, as in vs. 2:

*He alone is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress, I will never be shaken.*

If you want a life that will open hearts, you will find your strength in God, and in God alone. "He **alone** is my rock and my salvation."

The last area Paul speaks of in a life that opens hearts is

### **God's acts of deliverance** (8b-10)

*...genuine, yet regarded as impostors; 9known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; 10sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

If this sounds kind of familiar, there's a reason. This is a lot like the "treasure in jars of clay" passage from 2 Corinthians 4 that we studied back in April. In rapid succession, Paul lays

down seven contrasts that are like night and day. The first two go from positive to negative while the last two go from negative to positive. In them all, we see either how God sees things or the things God does that show His work in our lives—lives that open up hearts.

1. *Genuine, yet regarded as impostors.* The real deal, true to God and true to others, but seen as imposters to an unbelieving world.
2. *Known, yet regarded as unknown.* Known to God, that is, but unknown to world. In the long run, which is more important?
3. *Dying, and yet we live on.* Like the Lord Jesus Himself, we're seen as weak and dying, but the resurrection day is coming. Because of that, we stand faithful.
4. *Beaten, and yet not killed.* Paul was an expert in this area! In chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, he will let slip his record: five times the 39 lashes, three times beaten with rods, and once stoned! There is something very Christlike in this; there is something very much death-and-resurrection like in this.
5. *Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.* Sorrowful when the world rejects Jesus, sorrowful when the church lives below God's desire, but always rejoicing in the love of God, rejoicing in serving God, rejoicing in the worship of God.
6. *Poor, yet making many rich.* Paul and the others barely had two nickels to rub together, but the message they shared was making people rich in God. Maybe Paul had what Jesus said about "treasure in heaven" (Matthew 6:20).
7. *Having nothing, and yet possessing everything.* That is, even when Paul's wallet was empty, God supplied all his needs, and he was content in God's provision.

All these, all seven comparisons Paul makes, speak of his reliance on God, despite circumstances, and speak of the concrete ways that God showed Himself real and mighty and loving in Paul's life. I mentioned Psalm 62, and I love the way it ends, and it really expresses Paul's testimony of God's provision. Psalm 62:11-12a says,

*11 One thing God has spoken,  
two things have I heard:  
that you, O God, are strong,*

*12 and that you, O Lord, are loving.*

When we see God at work in a person's life like this, we open our hearts to that person. He's earned our hearing. When we see this kind of endurance, godliness, faithfulness and when we see God at work in a person's life, when we see Him delivering and giving a demonstration of Jesus' resurrection life among us, we can't help but to look.

And Paul's desire was that this testimony of God at work in his life would cause the Corinthians to open their hearts to him:

*11 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. 12 We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. 13 As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also. (2 Corinthians 6:11-13)*

Ever heard of Clarence Jordan? He was author of the "Cotton Patch" New Testament translation and founder of the interracial Koinonia farm in Americus, Georgia. Anyway, this man, who lived such a godly and humble life, was getting a red-carpet tour of another minister's church, a big city church in Atlanta. With pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decoration. As

they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. "That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars," the minister said with a satisfied smile. "You got cheated," said Jordan with a smile. "Times were when Christians could get them for free."

A life that opens hearts isn't defined by how flashy it is or how much it has. It's defined by the cross of Jesus gladly carried. Tell me, **do you have a life that opens hearts?**

**PRAYER**

**END**