

Open Wide Your Hearts

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:16

Key Verse: 6:13

“As a fair exchange - I speak as to my children - open wide your hearts also.”

Today's passage is a continuation of the ministry of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors who carry the message, "Be reconciled to God." That is really beautiful to hear. We enjoy it very much. However, it is not easy to reconcile with someone. To break a relationship is easy. But to reconcile can be very costly. Paul had to make a great effort to reconcile with the Corinthians. In doing so, Paul revealed his great shepherd's heart. Today let's learn from Paul and reconcile with one another in Christ.

I. Paul appeals for reconciliation (6:3-7:1)

In this part, Paul commends himself as a servant of God to distinguish himself from false apostles. Then he pleads with the Corinthians to open their hearts to him. His goal is reconciliation in Christ, which requires anyone to deal with the hindrance of ungodly relationships.

First, Paul commends himself as God's servant (6:3-10). Look at verse 3. "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited." As ministers of reconciliation, we should avoid doing anything that would discredit our ministry. People not only listen to our message of reconciliation, but they also watch our practical lives very closely. So we must demonstrate a Christian lifestyle that gives good influence to others. Our family lives must be wholesome and exemplary. As students, we must study hard and get good grades, and also help fellow students who are struggling. Professionals and employees must work hard and achieve success, and be a blessing to others. We are Christ's ambassadors at home, at school, and at work. If we are lazy, selfish and rebellious, we put a stumbling block in others' way; our ministry is discredited. So Paul was very sensitive about being a good influence as a minister of reconciliation.

To be effective ministers, we can learn from Paul. In verses 4-8 Paul shares his testimonial example. Look at verse 4. "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses...." Paul first mentioned "great endurance." Endurance is a crucial quality for God's servant. The dictionary defines endurance as "the ability or power to bear

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prolonged exertion, pain or hardship." God's servants must have ability and power to go through pain and hardship. We need great endurance, not just ordinary endurance, in order to be ministers of reconciliation. Paul had a lot of distress in serving the Corinthian believers, who criticized him in ignorance. Sometimes it was unbearable, but he endured. Paul also endured physical pain and trauma from beatings, imprisonment and riots. For example, when Paul was in Philippi, he was beaten and imprisoned unjustly. But he endured with joy and sang hymns of praise to God. Then a miracle happened. God's power moved a jailer to repentance; a new house church was born (Ac 16:25-26).

Look at verse 5b. "...in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger..." As a tentmaker, Paul supported himself and his companions (Ac 18:3; 20:34). Sometimes he worked all day at his job, and stayed up all night to prepare his message and write letters. He fasted, intentionally and unintentionally. While enduring hardship, his inner life was not one of grumbling and complaints. Rather, he had the image of Christ. Look at verse 6. "...in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love..." Paul's source of strength was the Holy Spirit, the power of God (7). Paul always used truthful speech, sharing the word of God with others. Paul had the image of a victorious general with weapons of righteousness in his right hand--the sword of the Spirit, and in his left hand--the shield of faith. Though Paul lived an exemplary life as a man of God, he was not always honored. There were times of dishonor as well as glory; times of bad reports, perhaps through anti-Paul websites, as well as good reports (8). Regardless of the response, Paul followed Jesus with great endurance.

Paul goes on to describe the paradoxical nature of his life of faith (9-10). Even though Paul was a great man of God, he was ignored; sometimes people despised him. Yet he was known to God. Sometimes Paul felt that he was dying. Yet he lived on because of his resurrection faith (2 Cor 4:14). One time in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city and continued preaching the gospel (Ac 14:19-21). Paul often experienced heartbreaking sorrow while serving God's flock. Still, he was always joyful in the Lord. He rejoiced in trials and even in prison. He said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, rejoice" (Php 4:4). Outwardly, Paul looked poor as a self-supporting lay missionary. However, inwardly he was rich in the knowledge of Christ, and he made many people rich by sharing the good news of eternal life with them. Paul could sacrifice his life to make others rich in Christ.

In this part, we can find a principle in Paul's life and ministry. It is endurance through trials with a Christ-like character. In times of hardship and distress, Paul

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did not react according to his emotions. He did not become frustrated or angry, and he did not give up. He endured patiently, defending himself with wisdom, loving the Corinthians to the end. How could he do so? Paul fixed his eyes on Jesus who endured the cross, scorning it shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2). Here we learn that the trademark of a servant of God is endurance through trials with a Christ-like character. It is not eloquent speech, superior education or popularity among men. We must have right criteria to recognize a true servant of God. Sometimes it is necessary to commend our ministry for the sake of protecting young Christians. Of course, we must share a sound doctrinal statement, and how we have associated with other Christian ministries. But we should also commend the godly lives of UBF leaders such as Dr. Samuel Lee, Mother Barry, Dr. John Jun, Dr. Joseph Schafer, Elder Jim Rarick, and others. They reveal Christ. In addition, each of us must set an example of enduring sufferings with the character of Christ.

Second, "Open wide your hearts" (6:11-13). In this part Paul shares the reason why he commended himself as God's servant. It was to make a heart to heart relationship with the Corinthians. Look at verse 11. "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you." It is hard for anyone to open their hearts to those who have been critical and harsh. Yet Paul spoke freely of what was on his heart to the Corinthians. He took the initiative in this. There are some Bible teachers who have been hurt by critical comments or disappointed by their Bible students. It is natural to close our hearts, hold a kind of grudge, and become very superficial. However, for the sake of reconciliation, we must learn to open our hearts first. Our Father God, who created the heavens and the earth, was deeply grieved over the terrible sin of mankind. Yet, God came to us first, again and again, and finally sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sins. Jesus reached out to those who offended him. On the cross, Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). Though Peter had denied him three times on the night of his arrest, the Risen Christ visited him at the seashore of Galilee and cooked a delicious breakfast for him (Jn 21). In the same way, let's open our hearts to God's dear children under our care.

In verse 12 Paul pointed out the Corinthians' problem. He said, "We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us." We can understand the Corinthians. There are some who have been loved one-sidedly by their Bible teachers for many years. But because of a rumor, a misunderstanding, or a problem, they have closed their hearts. No matter how much they are loved, they never respond. Withholding affection from our

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shepherds is not right. In verse 13 Paul pleaded, "As a fair exchange--I speak as to my children--open wide your hearts also." Only when the Corinthians opened their hearts to Paul could there be true reconciliation and a heart to heart relationship. This is what Paul wanted. He would not settle for less. In truth, opening their hearts to Paul was welcoming Christ's love through him (Mt 10:40). Christ's love could fill their hearts with new life, joy, and peace. They could have deep fellowship with Christ and one another and experience the kingdom of God as a community.

Here we learn that there are two kinds of hearts: open wide hearts and narrow closed hearts. A narrow closed heart is self-centered and hard, like the heart of Mr. Grinch before he was changed. This kind of person sees everything from their own point of view, and judges everything by their own standard. So they easily misunderstand others and condemn them. Their hearts are always troubled and they trouble others as well. However, those whose hearts are open wide are different. They are God-centered and other-centered. They always try to understand and embrace people, making friends. They respect others from their hearts and serve them humbly. Their hearts are like the Pacific Ocean, in which many different creatures, including giant whales and tiny shrimp, can freely swim around. People gather around those whose hearts are open wide. But people scatter when the narrow hearted appear. Our hearts must grow until they are open wide to God and to others. At one time, Paul's heart was narrow and closed. But as he followed Jesus, his heart opened wide to God and others. When we follow Jesus, we can grow until our hearts are open wide. Jesus accepted, loved and served all kinds of people: lepers, paralytics, tax collectors, wayward women, fishermen, Pharisees, demoniacs, and so on. On the cross, Jesus embraced a repentant criminal and took him to paradise (Lk 23:43). Let's pray to learn the heart of Jesus, as St. Paul did.

Third, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (6:14-7:1). In this part Paul seems to abruptly introduce a new subject. But when we read carefully, we find that in order to open our hearts wide to God and his people we must avoid ungodly relationships. Look at verse 14a. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." In ancient times, two oxen were yoked together to move in the same direction, working together to pull a load. For human beings, it means two people working together to accomplish a common goal. It implies a shared value system and direction. Paul strongly warns believers not to be yoked together with unbelievers. We are going in opposite directions, and we have opposing value systems. While believers are characterized by righteousness, light, Christ, and God's temple, unbelievers are characterized by wickedness, darkness, Belial (Satan), and idolatry.

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There is no harmony or agreement between the two. There is no way for them to cwork together. Rather, they will tear each other apart. This is especially true in marriage. Believers must marry other believers. The first question to ask about a possible marriage candidate is "Do they believe in Jesus?" Dating unbelievers is an invitation to spiritual destruction. Paul challenged the Corinthians not to enter ungodly relationships. It was a necessary step to make a heart to heart relationship with God and his people.

What blessing is given to those who are not yoked with unbelievers? Look at verse 18. "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." We may think that we will be empty and lonely without worldly idols and unbelieving friends. But this is not true. God becomes our Father. God's Spirit fills our hearts with his love and grace. We become God's temple. We have true peace in God's protection and provision. Our souls are satisfied and we enjoy life with God every day.

Look at 7:1. "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." We can purify ourselves by claiming the blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7). The blood of Jesus has great power to cleanse any kind of contamination from unbelieving influences and sin. The blood of Jesus makes us holy, holy enough for God to dwell with us. Then we can enjoy fellowship with God and with his people.

II. Paul rejoices over the church's repentance (7:2-16)

Chapter 7, verses 2-4 are a continuation of 6:13. Paul earnestly prayed that he might restore his love and trust relationship with the Corinthians. Verses 5-13a show Paul's joy over the church's repentance. In verses 13b-16 Paul talks about Titus who cworked with him as a minister of reconciliation.

Look at 7:2. "Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one." Paul had never harmed the Corinthians, nor would he do so. Rather, he loved them enough to live or die with them (3). They could trust Paul. Paul trusted them. Look at verse 4. "I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." Though they were troublemakers in many ways, Paul trusted them with great confidence. Paul never gave up hope for them. Paul never condemned them. Paul only built them up in faith in Christ.

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We find the beginning of their reconciliation in verses 5-7. When Paul's company came into Macedonia they had a hard time. They were weary and tired. They had conflicts on the outside and fears within. At this moment, God comforted Paul through Titus. Titus brought good news that the Corinthians had repented and were longing for him: "Oh, our shepherd Paul. We have grieved God and him by our sins. I long to be restored to my shepherd Paul!" This was the fruit of Paul's great endurance in reconciliation and he was full of joy. Galatians 6:9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

We learn further how reconciliation was possible in verses 8-13. Paul had written a severe letter to the Corinthians, rebuking their sin. After that, he was very anxious, not knowing how they would respond. At first they were sorry because their pride was hurt. Yet, when they read Paul's letter carefully, they discovered Paul's holy love for them. He challenged them with the word of God to repent of their sins. This was for their good. They experienced deep sorrow, but it was godly sorrow. Look at verse 10. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." When we are rebuked by the word of God, we feel sorrow in our hearts. This is why it is difficult to write Bible testimonies. But this godly sorrow leads us to repent and restore our love relationship with God. Godly sorrow leads to salvation. However, worldly sorrow, that is the grief we experience because of our sins, leads to death.

Look at verses 13-16. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to help the believers to reconcile with God and with him. Titus was a very faithful coworker of Paul. He was sincere, trustworthy, affectionate, and humble. Titus was very happy when the Corinthian believers repented. When Titus was full of joy, Paul was delighted and greatly encouraged. In this way, Paul and Titus worked together in the ministry of reconciliation. At last, Paul could have complete confidence in the Corinthians (16).

In today's passage we learn how Paul made a great effort in order to reconcile with the Corinthian believers. He didn't compromise with their sins. Rather, even though it was so painful, he challenged them to repent of their sins. But he didn't rebuke them one-sidedly. He opened his heart to them and shared how much he struggled, how much he loved them, and how he had been anxious over them. Then he appealed to them to open their hearts to him as a fair exchange. Paul endured to the end for reconciliation. Paul bore the pain of suffering until they were reconciled. Then Paul was full of joy. Let's learn from Paul how to reconcile

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the strained or broken relationships in our Christian community. May God bless us to have many heart to heart relationships in Christ and overflowing joy.