

Open: Open Heart-Open Doors
Glen - Mar 11, 2018

Series Big Idea: The very best life possible, this side of heaven, is found through a key characteristic - generosity. Generosity is a matter of our character. It is also tied to our actions and practice. Jesus said that if you want to experience the blessings of God, you'll only experience them to the degree you learn to be generous. His exact words were: "It is more blessed to give than receive." This more blessed life surprisingly leads us to the heart of God (grace) and protects us from devil's scheme to rob us of the most blessed life (greed).

Message Big Idea: When God wants to make a difference, he will use a person with an open heart. This openness to God allows God to work through them. God used a man named Cornelius who had an open heart to bring forgiveness, salvation and eternal life to all the non-Jewish people. He used Cornelius to open the heart of a man named Peter! Cornelius was a devout and godly man who consistently was generous and prayed to God. These are keys to a life open to God. The open heart of Cornelius opened the door for God's love to spread to the nations.

Main Idea: God uses an open heart to open doors.

Main Text: Acts 10:1-8 (1-48)

Supporting Text: Ephesians 3:20

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. When you think about someone in general having an open heart and open life, what does that mean and what does it look like? Can you think of a good examples of someone who is very open?
2. More specifically, what does it mean and look like when someone is open to God? You might be able to respond to this by also thinking about the opposite and think of what it means to be closed to God.
3. In the story in Acts 10, we discover a man named Cornelius who is very open to God but not following Jesus (yet). In what ways can someone today be open to God but not yet following Jesus? How should followers of Jesus respond to people who are open to God?
4. One key way a person can be open to God is through prayer. How do you experience prayer? Are you satisfied with your prayer life - why or why not? Do you find yourself open to God in how you pray?
5. Another way to live openly is to be generous with your different resources (time, effort, service, money, possessions, etc.). In what ways to you experiencing being generous now?
6. In what one way would you like to grow in your generosity?

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Message: If you were God (You aren't - just to remind you) what kind of person would you look for to use to bring about an important change? I love this question! We see over and over in the Bible that God chooses the most unlikely people to do amazing things. He chose uneducated fishermen who were on the fringe of society to change the world - they were the first disciples. He chose people who had difficulty speaking and who had committed murder like Moses and Paul to do huge things and write some of the most important parts of our Bible. In modern times he used a simple, single woman named Agnes to teach the world how to practice compassion. We know her as Mother Teresa. So what's clear to me as I read the Bible and observe how God works is that God isn't looking primarily for people with well developed skills or a certain level of education. So what's he looking for in people whom he'll use to make a difference?

He's looking for people who are open to him. God will use humble people to rise above those who are proud. God will use those who trust him, put him first and take on the character of Jesus to change people and situations for the good. God can, has, does and will use people who have a heart wide open to him to make a difference. That's one of the most important of all character qualities - to have a heart wide open to God. That's what I personally want, even more than wisdom, skills, recognition or money. A heart open to our God who is bigger than we can even imagine, is a heart open to the God of the impossible.

Today we are going to finish a series we call *Open*. We've been looking at what it means to be open to God and open to others. Last week we specifically looked at how openness expresses itself in generosity. Last week we looked at the words of Jesus when he said "**It is more blessed to give than receive.**" The best life is an open life that gives away whatever good we have. An open heart allows us to generously give away our words of encouragement. An open heart allows us to give of our time and energy to serve others. An open heart opens our homes to be places of hospitality. An open heart allows us to share our financial resources. And Jesus nailed it when he said the best life, the blessed life, is found in an open life of giving.

Today I want to look at a person with an open heart whom God used to make a real difference in our world. His name is Cornelius. His story is found in Acts chapters 10. But before we read part of the story let me give you some background. There was a huge spiritual seismic shift that was about to happen. In that day, the religious Jews hated a group of people they considered ungodly and unclean called the Gentiles. A good Jew would do everything he could to avoid a Gentile. Jews believed that Gentiles (which was any ethnic group that was not Jewish) were not to be included in God's family.

God always planned the church would be made up of men and women from every race, nation, and economic and social situations. But the very first church was made up of Jews in Jerusalem who decided to follow Jesus. Peter, the leader of that church then,

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was born a Jew. He was called by Jesus to follow him, heard Jesus' teachings and followed him, but was still heavily influenced by his Jewish cultural heritage. All his life Peter had avoided any Gentile and his heart was closed to God about this matter of including the Gentiles in the church.

Cornelius, a Gentile, is a perfect example of a man with an open heart and open hand. We encounter him in chapter 10 of Acts where God, for the first time, is trying to open the heart of Peter and the church to include Gentiles who they considered "outsiders." God will use the open heart of Cornelius to open Peter's heart that was closed to God about including the Gentiles. And that's my main point today - **God uses an open heart to open doors.**

So let's look at what helped Cornelius have a wide open heart to God. Let's read Acts 10:1-8 (pg. 751 - NIV) - ***At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" ⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."***

⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

So here's what we know about Cornelius. He was a Roman and a Gentile. He was an outsider. He was a high ranking officer who commanded a hundred soldiers who were forcefully occupying Palestine. Verse 2 also says that he and his family worshipped God and were devout and God-fearing. What that means is that while he was a Gentile and a Roman, he was very sympathetic to the Jews and their faith. He was likely attracted to their ethics, worship and maybe even the idea that they worshipped one God, not many gods. But he wasn't a Jew.

There are two actions that the introduction says about him and which the angel recognizes that God was aware of. Wow! These two things were significant. Cornelius gave generously to those in need and he prayed regularly. Not bad! Cornelius is engaged in doing the two things that are important to Jesus and he probably didn't even know it. He was trying to love God and he tried to love people in how he best understood. Not bad at all!

What is being described is a man who is open to God. He is seeking God to the best of his ability. He wanted to connect with God and regularly talked to God. He is living a generous life and that, like I talked about last week, is critical and vital to opening our

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heart to God. We won't fully discover God's goodness, power and promise until we practice generosity. Cornelius has an open heart. And... **God uses an open heart to open doors.**

Two practices moved a man who was once far from God have a heart wide open to God. Maybe that's you! Maybe you have an open heart toward God. The next step is to actually cross the line of faith and follow Jesus. Jesus will lead you into a full relationship with the living God. In Jesus God actually comes to live in your life like Cornelius experienced when the Holy Spirit came to them. God used Peter to introduce Cornelius and his family to Jesus.

Cornelius was seeking God. And he did that by praying regularly. He wanted to connect with God. I don't know how much Cornelius understood about prayer. But we know that his prayers went to the very throne of God. And that was confirmed when God sent an angel to him and the angel said his prayers had gone before God. Our prayers go before God and affect the present and the future. Our prayers have no expiration date. Our prayers move the God of the universe! Our prayers open God to do amazing things. I'm reminded of what the Apostle Paul says in a benediction found in Ephesians 3:20 - ***Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*** Too often we put our limits on God by our own thoughts and ideas. He is able to do so much more than we can even imagine. Remember **Ephesians 3:20 - God is able to do more than all we ask or imagine.** Our prayers open us to a generous and kind Heavenly Father.

Our regular conversations with God open our hearts. Here's what I want you to focus on about prayer. It isn't complicated. It isn't about being religious. It isn't about having the right words. The most simple and basic way to understand prayer is that it is opening our heart to God through a conversation. It is being fully vulnerable with God. We talk about whatever is on our hearts to God. If you feel like God is distant - talk to him about that. If you feel like God isn't listening - talk to him about that. If you feel like God is punishing you - talk to him about that. If you need guidance or help, talk to him about that. If you are anxious and worried, talk to him about that. Open up to God. That's the heart of prayer! **Prayer is opening our heart to God.**

The second practice of Cornelius was that he was generous even though he wasn't yet a follower of Jesus. He expressed his generosity to those in need and the poor, likely in providing money and food. But generosity includes sharing what we have - our possessions, our time, our abilities or knowledge and our words. Whatever we have to give for the good of others - that becomes our opportunity to be generous. And Jesus says there is nothing better in life than the experience of giving both to God and others.

Last week I made a strong challenge that our generosity has to begin with God. I talked about the principle of the tithe, not as a law and obligation, but as the principle of giving to God first, giving generously and giving consistently. Here's a summary of what I shared: **The tithe principle - give generously to God 1st with consistency.** This is

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one key way we learn how to open our heart and we start with God! There are lots of way to practice this principle. But one of the best ways to insure that we give to God first with consistency is to give automatically and electronically. To help you do that, you can give online. Go to pantano.church/give.

But an open heart shouldn't be static. We don't want a life that is just a little open. We want a life, the best life, that is wide open! An open heart to God and others is one that grows to become more and more open and generous. Some of us need to just get started and the sooner you do the sooner you'll begin to experience an open life.

But let me speak to some of us who have been at least somewhat open and generous. Maybe we've given our time in serving others. Some of you are amazing at the amount of hours you give in serving - thank you! Maybe you've practiced tithing and have been generous in giving to special needs. That huge! But what we'll discover, if we keep our heart open, is that we'll keep discovering more ways to become open and generous.

Three years ago my one word was Generous. I wanted to grow my generosity in all the areas of my life. I love how God works! It was that very year that Jim Weisert, one of our elders, invited my wife and I to attend an event called the **Journey of Generosity**. I couldn't say no if that was my one word for the year! I really did want to explore how I could grow my generosity and I was intrigued with the Journey of Generosity event because I was promised that I wouldn't be asked to give anything to something or someone. What did I have to lose!?

God used the few hours my wife and I spent at Journey of Generosity to open our hearts even more. It helped me to be intentional to look for ways to be generous. It was that event that helped me respond to help a family in ministry fix their vehicle. We made decisions to give generously to several ministries that we think are making a difference. It opened my heart to how God wanted me to use my time generously to make a difference. The hardest thing for me to be generous with is not my money, but my time. So I made a commitment and have made the effort since then to try and slow down and be intentionally more generous with my attention to people. I practice this every week in different settings.

Jim and Beth Weisert brought the Journey of Generosity event to Tucson. I want to introduce them to you. I've had the joy of watching them enjoy being generous not just with their finances, but they've been super generous with their time and abilities. They are making a difference here in Tucson and around the world and they live out the principle we are talking about today - **God uses an open heart to open doors.**

Jim and Beth are going to host a Journey of Generosity event on May 11 & 12. Thanks for sharing with us and thanks for leading and hosting the Journey of Generosity events. Tell us...

1) Why did you both decide to attend a Journey Of Generosity event? What did you hope to get out of it?

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- 2) Some people will think that a Journey Of Generosity event is only about money? Beyond financial giving, how did your generosity grow?
- 3) What happens at a Journey Of Generosity event?

Thank you Jim and Beth for living open lives and for helping us to grow our generosity. The Weiserts will be at the tent in the courtyard if you want to learn more about the **Journey of Generosity - May 11 & 12**. I strongly encourage you to check it out. It helped open my heart even wider. It helped push back more of the lingering greed inside me that kept wanting to get a grip on my heart. Check out the Journey of Generosity event on May 11 and 12. You'll hear some amazing stories of how folks have discovered new and different ways to be generous. You will not be asked to give or support anything or anyone. And there is no cost - the whole event is underwritten by some generous people. The Weiserts will be at the tent in the courtyard. Also at the tent are folks who can talk to you about Financial Peace University. FPU is a great class that can help you get your finances in order to allow you to be more generous. Check both out!

There is no better life than one where our heart is wide open to God. That means we will surrender to him and allow him to have his way with us. Most of us don't even begin to imagine how God wants to use us. We might even be afraid of how he might use us. But the fear is there because we've closed our hearts to God. When we are truly open to God, the fear subsides and is replaced with trust. When our hearts are open, it is then that we begin to discover and live the best life or the blessed life. And what we were reminded of today in Cornelius is that our heart and life is opened as we open up to God in regular prayer and consistent generosity to God and others. **God uses an open heart to open doors.**

Here's my last observations from the story we looked at today. God used an outsider like Cornelius to open the church to other outsiders. I want our church to be a place where folks who are outside of faith, who are or were involved in things we don't like or agree with, who are different; BUT whose heart is open to God can come and discover who God is. I want us, God's church, whether it is here on our campus or out in our daily lives to look for and welcome people who have an open heart to God. They just don't know how to really find him or connect with him. They don't know who Jesus is yet. But their hearts are open! There are always people like Cornelius all around us.

And Easter is coming. That is one of the very best times of the year to invite folks whose hearts might be open to God to join you. We have invitation cards out on tables in the lobby. Please take them and use them to invite people to join you for Easter. Most people come to Pantano because people like you invited them. This is one of the best Sundays of the year to invite people. They get it and many actually want to be in church that day.

We'll have **4 Easter services: 7, 9, 11, 1**. Please, if possible, come to the 7 or 1 to make more room at 9 & 11 which will be the most crowded. However, we won't have

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children's ministry at the 7, but we will at 9, 11, and 1pm. We'll have food between the services - free breakfast, then lunch. And Easter Sunday will also be a baptism Sunday. What a great day to be baptized if you have been thinking about it.

And don't forget about our New Life Celebration on the Saturday before Easter - from 9-3. There's going to be lots for families to do and this is another great event to invite others to join you. And if you can, sign up at mypantano.church to serve at one of two sessions.