MAKE ROOM FOR US IN YOUR HEARTS

2 Corinthians 6:11–7:4

Key Verse: 7:2a

“Make room for us in your hearts…”

Have you ever been frustrated in a relationship? You want the relationship to be better, closer, deeper, but the other person doesn’t seem so interested? It hurts, doesn’t it? In today’s passage the Apostle Paul shares this same frustration with the Corinthians. He addresses their relationship at the beginning and at the end of today’s passage. But in the middle, he gives them a strong warning about being too close with people who are unfaithful to God. So, although it seems to be about living a holy life, the main point of the passage is relationships. In this study we want to think about the kind of relationships we should have with God and with his people, how we can have them, and why it’s so important. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In this letter Paul has been defending himself to the Corinthians. In the preceding verses he described the beautiful ministry of reconciliation God had given him (5:11–6:2). He described all the hardships he’d gone through for the sake of this ministry, the quality of his character, and his amazing perseverance, to show that he was somebody who could be trusted (6:3–10). Now he turns to what he really wants to say. Read 6:11–13. Paul shares his own heart with them. He’s been completely open and honest, and very frank (7:4a). He didn’t withhold his affection from them, but loved them as dearly as his own children. But he could tell they were not reciprocating. They were withholding their affections. They were not being really open or honest with him.

What was the problem? In chapter 1 Paul referred to his change in travel plans (1:15–17,23). It seems to have been a big disappointment to the Corinthians; they may’ve been hurt, thinking Paul didn’t really care about them, and that was why he didn’t come right away. In chapter 10 he mentions how people were saying he was bold when away but timid when he was with them (10:1), that his letters were weighty and forceful, but that in person he was unimpressive and that his speaking amounted to nothing (10:10). In chapters 11 and 12 he knows he’s being compared to some “super-apostles” (11:5; 12:11). Whether they were the original 12 apostles of Jesus or some other seemingly super-spiritual people, Paul made it clear he was in no way inferior to them. In chapter 13 he even says the Corinthians were demanding proof that Christ was speaking through him (13:5). It must’ve been painful that these people Paul had loved so much and done so much to help didn’t fully understand him (1:14). So after explaining so much about his integrity and his spiritual life and ministry, now he shares his main point and wants to repair their relationship.

What kind of relationship does Paul want with the Corinthians? In verse 11 he says we have “spoken freely to you,” which literally means, “our mouth is open to you.” Twice more he refers to hearts that are “opened wide” (11,13). So basically he wants a relationship that’s “open.” What does he mean? “Open” means “with nothing to hide,” or totally honest. Actually, honest words can be painful (Job6:25a). So we can be afraid to be honest. But Proverbs 27:5 says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” Real friends are those who tell us the truth, even though it may wound us at first (Pr27:6). In fact, Proverbs 24:26 teaches us, “An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.” Open honesty is one of the great privileges of real friendship. But the Bible warns us to be totally open and honest only with people we know we can trust (Pr11:13; 12:26; 17:27).

In verse 12 Paul also uses the word “affection.” In Greek it’s the same root as the word commonly used in the Bible for “compassion.” It means to feel deeply, as if being moved in one’s bowels or intestines. Paul uses this same word when he writes the Philippians: “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Php1:8). Paul already had such a deep love and affection for the Corinthians. He writes in 2:4 that he wanted them to know “the depth of my love for you.” He tells them in 11:11, “God knows I love you!” He says in 12:15, “So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?” So here in verses 12,13 he’s asking the Corinthians to open their hearts and have this same affection and love for him in return. He says it’s a “fair exchange.” A love relationship is a two-way street, with openness and affection. It’s not about the head but the heart.

For us, it’s easy to get hurt by those we try to love, especially when they don’t love us back. But Paul wasn’t like that. Though the Corinthians were mistrusting, suspicious, and even despising him in some ways, he kept on initiating. He kept on trying to restore and deepen their love relationship. He wouldn’t give it up. Why not? It was because Paul knew these people had become “the church of God” sanctified through the work of the Spirit (1Co1:2; 2Co1:1). Because of God’s work in them, he wouldn’t give up on the relationship. He knew God wanted them to grow in a deep love relationship in Christ; only such a relationship between them would be pleasing to God. Also, it was for the sake of the gospel. Only if the Corinthians fully understood, trusted and loved Paul, who lived for the gospel, could they fully accept the gospel itself (cf. Mt10:40; Lk10:16; Jn13:20). This is the ministry of reconciliation in practical application—to persevere in restoring an open, honest, willing, affectionate relationship with God’s people, and really, with anyone, insofar as it is possible.

Now let’s look at 6:14a: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” And in verses 14–18 Paul develops this further. At first it seems abrupt and rather random. Why is Paul suddenly switching from talking about their relationship with him to talking about their relationship with unbelievers? It’s because in Paul’s mind, this might be at the core of the problem. Paul sensed that the Corinthian Christians were closer to unbelievers than they were to him.

Some people misunderstand Paul’s teaching in these verses to mean that we should totally cut off all relationships with non-Christians. But if that were true, how could we possibly be Jesus’ witnesses to them? In 1 Corinthians 5:9,10 Paul reminds the Corinthians of how he told them not to associate with sexually immoral people, which also included the greedy, swindlers and idolaters. But then he says that if they really did that, they’d have to leave this world. In 1 Corinthians 7 he told believers who happened to be married to unbelievers to stay in the marriage if the spouse is willing (7:12,13). In 1 Corinthians 10 he said to go ahead and accept an invitation to an unbeliever’s house and not ask questions about the food (10:27). Clearly Paul is not teaching us to break off all association with unbelievers. We need to make friends and get close to people in order to give them the chance to come to know the good news in Jesus.

So it’s important how we understand Paul’s term “unbelievers.” In Greek it not only means those who just don’t believe yet, but also those who are unfaithful to God—in other words, those who’ve turned away from God and persistently refuse to believe him. In verse 14 Paul uses the words “yoked together.” It refers to two animals bound together by a piece of wood. It means to work together. Of course as Christians we’re going to have to work alongside unbelievers; we can’t always choose a Christian employer and demand to have only Christian coworkers around us all the time. But this term “yoked” especially focuses on the commitment involved, and it suggests becoming entangled. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:7 not to be “partners” with those who choose to live in the darkness. In 1 Timothy 5:22 Paul writes not to “share in the sins of others.” We should be committed to people, but not necessarily to their choices, behavior or worldview. James 4:4 puts it very bluntly: “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” It means going so far as to choose the wrong side, the side of people who stand against God.

In verses 14b–16a Paul uses contrasts to show how incompatible believers and unbelievers actually are. It’s like trying to mix righteousness with wickedness, light with darkness, Christ with Satan, or God’s holy temple with idols. They are like polar opposites, inherently, intrinsically completely different. Paul also uses the words “in common,” “fellowship,” “harmony” and “agreement.” He’s saying such partnerships are just not going to work. When we accept God’s great love for us in Jesus, we have to take a stand on his side, and people are going to reject us for that, hate and be against us (Jn15:18,19; cf. Mt5:11; 10:22).

Paul goes on to quote from the Old Testament to emphasize how important making a commitment to God is. Read verses 16b–18. The main emphasis here is in verse 17: “Therefore, ‘Come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’” Paul is quoting from Isaiah 52:11, repeated in Ezekiel 20:34,41. At that time God was inviting his people living in idolatrous Babylon to come back to him in full commitment. It tells us that God is holy. He really wants a relationship with us, but he doesn’t want our sins to come with us. Of course, only God himself can make us holy, and that happens when we repent, believe in the blood of Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. But we also have to make a conscious, daily choice. We have to “come out from them and be separate.” It means making a real commitment to living a holy life practically. What is a holy life? God says here, “Touch no unclean thing.” In the Old Testament God gave his people many holiness laws. He told them what he considered clean or unclean. He was very specific. Without God’s word to enlighten and guide them, the people would’ve had no idea what was clean or unclean. Though all those food laws and ritual laws no longer apply to us as Christians, God still tells us what he considers sinful behavior and what he considers pure. To come to God, to be “separate” from this sinful world, we’ve got to really listen to God and accept what he calls pure or sinful. Ultimately, our pursuit of holiness needs to be for the sake of getting closer to God.

Many people have taken this command “be separate” to mean to try to live behind a Christian wall and never venture out. But the Bible tells us to go into all the world and share the good news with all creation (Mk16:15). How can we do that if we’re always hiding from the world, if all our relationships are only with other Christians? Some have also used these words to separate from churches they considered impure or unclean, doctrinally or otherwise. But Paul is talking here about being separate from people who stubbornly refuse to believe in God and insist on living in sin—not separating from our fellow believers with whom we may disagree on some point. Basically, God wants our full commitment to be to him first, above everyone and everything else. No other idols of any kind. And as we live in this fallen world, he wants us as his people to have healthy boundaries we refuse to cross, both morally and ethically, in order to stay faithful to him.

When we have such a commitment to God, he makes many promises to us. He says, “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people” (16b). He promises to have intimate fellowship with us. He says, “I will receive you.” He promises to welcome us to himself. He says, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters.” He promises to have a deep love relationship with us, as a father to his children. We need to believe these promises personally. So what should we do? Read 7:1. God’s promises should inspire us to strive to live a holy life. Frankly, we’re all living in a world that’s really sick with sin. There’s bad influence all around us. Many things can contaminate our bodies and spirits. Especially the media has a godless and morally corrupt influence. We need to struggle against it. We need to make spiritually healthy choices. Why do we always need to be working on personal holiness? Paul says here “out of reverence for God.” He means the deepest, utmost respect. Being aware of God each day, aware that he’s watching, should inspire us to do our best to please him. So why is Paul writing these things to the Corinthians? Later he writes that he’s jealous for them with a godly jealousy; he’s concerned that their minds are being led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ (11:2,3). If they’re not wholeheartedly devoted to Christ, they won’t be very close to Paul, either. The same is true for us.

Read 7:2a. Paul is repeating here what he wrote earlier (6:11–13). It’s his main point. But what does he mean by “Make room for us in your hearts”? In verse 3 he shares his own example: “…you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.” He’s saying it’s an intense commitment. Usually our strongest commitments are to our family members, our parents, our siblings, our children. But here we’re taught that our closest commitment needs to be to God’s people. It’s how our Lord Jesus also taught us to live (Mt12:49,50; Mk3:35; Lk8:21). We need to be closer to God’s people than to anyone else.

In verse 2b Paul reminds them of his record of not ever harming anyone, to reinforce how they can trust him. Read verse 4. Paul is so happy about them because he’s already received news from Titus about their repentance (7:6,7). Now he wants to make sure that all the residual problems they had lingering in their hearts towards him get completely and fully resolved.

Today we learned how important our relationship with God and with his people is. We can have a genuine, two-way relationship when we’re open and honest, when we repent of the idols in our hearts, when we love God first, stand on his side and live a holy life. May God grant us a real and deep love relationship with him, and deep affection, love and open hearts towards his people. May God help us learn from Apostle Paul how to engage in the ministry of reconciliation practically, by doing our best to have an open, heart-to-heart relationship with his people.