

open your heart

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12 Weeks of *Daily Devotions*

Martin Shannon

with Carol Showalter

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Week One The Transparent Heart



Day 1 Hide and Seek

READ | Genesis 3:1–13

“[Adam] said, ‘I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’” (v. 10)

“Amidst all of the instructions about obedience, the exhortations to persevere, and the admonitions against being unfaithful, it might be possible to forget that the way of discipleship is, first and foremost, about a *relationship*. All the methods and teachings and disciplines we can possibly follow are really of no value whatsoever unless, first, like branches attached to the vine, our lives are attached to Jesus Christ. That relationship is the only credible beginning and the only worthy end of the disciple’s life.”

These words, from the final day’s reading of Session 1, make a fitting introduction to the twelve weeks of reflections for Session 2. We ended the daily readings of *Your Whole Life* with this essential reminder: the wholeness of our lives is dependent upon the wholeness of our relationship with God—with the One whose power made us, whose grace redeemed us, and whose love always intends the things that make for our wholeness and well-being. Our relationship with God is the North Star from which we take all the other bearings on our spiritual journey, and without which we are consigned to aimless searching and wandering.

What the Bible makes clear is that our relationship with God was dealt a severe wounding, a *breaking*, from almost the very beginning. In fact, all relationships suffered at the hands of Adam and Eve’s rebellious choices. When the writer of Genesis tells us that, at first, the Man and the Woman were

“both naked, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25), he is describing so very much more than their physical condition. He is describing the condition of their hearts. Before God and before one another they stood entirely vulnerable and fearlessly transparent. But the joyful fellowship, even intimacy, that God intended for them—and us—to share with him and with one another was sacrificed for the sake of their own self-will and proud independence. Freedom of spirit and openness of heart were replaced with the burden of guilt and the hiddenness of fear.

You are probably reading these words because you already know something about freedom and openness, and you also know something about guilt and hiddenness. And you know which of these makes for a more joyful and whole life. It’s just that getting from one to the other is not as easy as we would like. Thankfully, the Genesis story does not end with Adam and Eve’s decision to hide from one another and from their Maker. God came to find them. “Where are you?” he kindly (and probably, persistently) calls out to those whom he loves (Genesis 3:8). The only sensible option is to answer. Perhaps reaching a hand out of the bushes, just far enough for it to be seen, is one way we begin to *open our hearts* and find our way back to God and to one another.

REFLECT | *Describe as best you can “where you are” in your relationship with God. How would you describe the level of openness you have with others, with those who are closest to you, and with those in your 3D group?*



Day 2 Open Your Hearts

READ | 2 Corinthians 6:1–13

Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. . . . In return—I speak as to children—widen your hearts also. (vv. 11, 13)

One thing that can certainly be said of the apostle Paul is that he was entirely honest and forthright in his relationship with his fellow Christians. His letters reveal a man whose passion for love and for truthfulness inspired every sentence he wrote, and this was never more apparent than when he had something difficult or even unwelcome to say.

There is a sense of estrangement between Paul and the Christians at Corinth as he writes this letter. We do not know all of the details, but of this much we are sure: the problem is severe and divisive, and, unless it is pulled up from the roots, it threatens to choke the very life out of this young church. So, Paul confronts the problem with characteristic directness—lovingly and truthfully.

What an example of wise diplomacy this entire letter is! There are allusions to the trouble, but always they are couched in a framework of positive, loving concern that Paul had toward these, his spiritual children. He knows that a necessary rebuke he has given has caused some of his readers to grow cold and resentful toward him. In their anger, some have questioned his motives and maligned his integrity. Even so, he writes with a sense of confidence that they are all still related to one another in Christ, and that the Holy Spirit of truth will eventually bring insight out of misunderstanding, and reconciliation out of discord. He opens his heart to his readers in the hope that they, in turn,

will open their hearts to him and to one another: “our heart is wide—widen your hearts also.”

The apostle Paul’s approach is an example, and a great encouragement, to those who are looking for something deeper than superficially pleasant and polite relationships. Remember yesterday’s reading. Adam and Eve were “designed” by God to live transparently with one another. This means, of course, that there are just as likely to be moments of conflict as moments of concord, just as likely to be moments of anger as moments of affection. But all of these “moments” can be steps toward a deeper, lasting, trusting, open relationship in Christ. Anyone who has once tasted the richness of this kind of fellowship rarely can be satisfied with anything less loving and honest.

In order to experience that kind of fellowship, we really have to open our hearts—“widen” our hearts, as Paul says—to one another. Think of your heart as the doorway into your life. Does it remain closed, or so small and narrow that no one can gain full access to the real you? Or, with a growing confidence in the power of God’s love and truth, will you unfasten the bolts and open the way for others to find welcome?

REFLECT | *Does the idea of “opening your heart” appeal to you or frighten you? Why? Think for a moment about the various relationships that you have: which ones are superficial; which ones are deep and meaningful? What makes them so?*

Day 3 One Heart and Soul

READ | Acts 4:32–37

*Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul.
... (v. 32)*

The book of the Acts of the Apostles records the life of the first-generation church, its missionary work, its values, its sufferings, and its growth. But by no means does it present some kind of utopian dream. Those early Christians knew a fair share about conflict and dissent, as a complete reading of this book reveals.

Still, there was no mistaking that something new and different was taking place in the lives of these new believers, and that the strongest evidence of their conversion was, in fact, their relationships with one another. The newborn church of Jerusalem exemplified the truth of Jesus' words, spoken to his disciples on the night before he died: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The writer's description of this oneness of heart and soul is intended to give us a taste, to whet our appetite for the kind of Christianity experienced by those first believers. Through the centuries, the church has referred to this as a model of Christian community, one that has formed the inspiration for Christian communities in every generation. Don't you find it fascinating that among the very first signs of the power of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is the depth of communion shared by his followers? If the Fall resulted in our hiding from one another, then the Cross is meant to bring us back together.

This is the promise, of course, but its fulfillment is not without difficulty. Today's Christian is just as apt to find him or herself living in isolation as did Adam and Eve. Individualism has so permeated the thinking of our time that none of us is exempt from its influence. For example, most of us are uncomfortable with, or even resistant to, any kind of authority over us, especially in spiritual matters. For all intents and purposes, we make ourselves the final court of appeal in all questions of dispute. Allowing others access into our lives, even by simply listening to the way that they see things (or see *us*), is still one of the most difficult tests we face.

The church has traditionally understood that when the writer of Acts says that no one claimed full ownership over his or her possessions, he was writing about more than just material goods. Giving to one another for the sake of the common good—for the sake of love—includes giving our thoughts and our wills, our opinions and our desires, as much as our time and our money. The fact that those first-century Christians were willing to open their hearts to one another in such a radical way is a testimony to the power of the gospel, and a challenge to the Christians of our own generation. You and I are descendants of this early community—we are its inheritors. So, how are we handling what has been passed on to us?

REFLECT | *Examine your own heart as honestly as you can. What do you find attractive about this image of Christian community? What do you find intimidating? Why?*



Day 4 A Simple Yes or No

READ | Matthew 5:33–38, 6:1

Jesus said, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’—anything more than this comes from evil.” (v. 37)

In light of our reflections on what it means to have a transparent heart, here is a text worth pondering again and again. Some have interpreted Jesus’ words as an instruction against the making of promises or vows of any kind. But this misses the point. It is not the *making* of promises that Jesus criticizes, but the *breaking* of them. Jesus is drawing a picture of a new kind of righteousness, one that “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (v. 20). This new righteousness is not the legalistic, hard kind of “rightness” that religious people sometimes display. It is an inner attitude that is without guile, without the desire to conceal or deceive. It is a righteousness that says what it means and means what it says. To the man or woman of integrity, nothing more is needed beyond a simple “yes” or “no.” That, it seems, is the point being made here.

Our communication with each other should be so unreserved, so uncalculated, that all we need is a forthright and uncomplicated “yes or no” to express the truth of what we are saying. The problem, of course, is that our words are connected directly with our hearts—“for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks,” said Jesus (Matthew 12:34)—and, there, things are not nearly so simple. We cautiously measure our words because we are not so certain about what they will reveal or where they will lead us. We are afraid that we will be misunderstood; we do not

entirely understand our own mixed feelings and motives; we do not want to commit to something without leaving ourselves a way out; we might say something that we really do not mean; or, we might say something that we really did mean, but did not mean to say. You see how complicated it all gets.

The answer is not to close our mouths and say nothing at all. The psalmist reveals a better way when he prays: “Search me, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24). We do not always know if the “yes or no” of our lips reflects all that is in our hearts, for the heart that we know least is our own. Together with the psalmist, therefore, we depend upon the light of the Holy Spirit to acquaint us with the hidden depths of our mixed-up thoughts and motives.

Opening our hearts to God and to one another requires that we take a certain risk by opening our mouths. We do our best to simply express what we believe to be true, and then God uses—even blesses—our imperfect efforts and adds the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit to our human words and thoughts. He may confirm or correct the courses we are choosing, but in either case, the result is something of a miracle: increased self-understanding and deepened fellowship in Christ. Do not be afraid to seek this simplicity and openness of heart!

REFLECT | *Describe an experience when the words you spoke revealed (perhaps more than you wanted) the hidden thoughts of your heart. What is most difficult for you about making a straightforward commitment to do or not to do something?*

Day 5 The Healing Power of Confession

READ | James 5:13–20

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (v. 16)

James is making a very powerful and a very hopeful connection here. Without claiming to understand exactly how, he is saying that sin and sickness have some kind of association. In some languages, the words for salvation and health actually come from the same root. Theologians have argued about this relationship for centuries, and we are not about to solve this mystery today. But of this much we can be certain—sin that is kept hidden in the dark eventually produces dis-ease and affliction, while sin that is confessed and forgiven eventually leads to peace and wholeness.

Think of a nasty cut caused by a sharp and dirty piece of metal. The temptation may be to quickly stem the bleeding, cover the wound, and get on with the business at hand—whatever leads to the quickest and most painless return to the normal living of the day. But by day's end, the sore is red and tender. Things are anything but normal. A closer examination reveals a dark metal filing, embedded inside the cut. No amount of first-aid cream or bandaging can bring relief. As long as that dirty particle of metal is there, the wound will fester and throb.

Confession for the soul is like the tweezers that reach into the body—sometimes by our own hand, but just as often by the hand of another, take hold of the offending fragment, and remove it from the messy wound. Now, free of infection, and with ever-lessening pain, the body finds that full healing can take place.

This analogy is not perfect, but you can see the similarities. Yes, a good deal of confession can take place directly between the soul and God. The tax collector who prayed in the temple, “God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13), had no need of witnesses in order to know heaven’s grace. But, just as often, we need to seek out the presence of Christ in a brother or sister who will listen to our confession and audibly express to us the loving forgiveness of the Great Physician. In certain cases, when sin is particularly grave or sensitive (such as sins of a sexual or very personal nature), we need to seek out the wise and private counsel of a pastor or priest. More often, we can bring our self-inflicted wounds to the fellowship of our sisters and brothers, and there find all the forgiveness and help and healing that we need.

Healing comes in many ways, not the least of which is the relaxation and inner peace that grow out of a clear conscience. A great many of us unnecessarily endure distress and carry burdens that can be relieved through the simple admission to another person that we have done, said, or thought wrongly. Isn’t it usually our pride—preserving our good image or fearing what others might think—that keeps us from humbling ourselves to confess before another human being the sin that is crippling us?

REFLECT | *Describe a time when admitting your wrongness to another person brought a sense of relief and joy. What had you “lost” by keeping the sin to yourself; what did you “gain” by confessing it? In what areas of your life do you know you are trying to protect yourself from humbly exposing your sin and need?*

Day 6 The Healing Balm of Forgiveness

READ | Psalm 32

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven. . . . (v. 1)

Yesterday we considered the image of an infected wound as one way of describing the effect of sin that goes untreated in the human soul. The first step toward wholeness is to open our hearts to the probing work of the Holy Spirit as God endeavors to pinpoint the source of the problem. If confession is like the sometimes unpleasant tool that reaches in and plucks our sin from the dark recesses of our souls, then forgiveness is the soothing balm that brings relief, comfort, and restoration to the wound it has left.

There are a number of psalms, including Psalm 32, that have traditionally been considered as “penitential” in nature (some others are Psalms 6, 38, 51, and 102). These are essentially prayers of confession, and the crux of their message is that opening our hearts to God includes honestly and humbly acknowledging our offenses. After all, God knows us even better than we know ourselves, and there is nothing about our lives that remains hidden from his sight. The idea that God *sees* everything about us is not meant to force us into fearful hiding (as Adam and Eve attempted to do). Quite to the contrary. God’s all-knowing vision of our hearts is meant to bring us back to his side when we have strayed, back to our feet when we have fallen, back to wholeness when we are broken.

The psalmist describes the dismal condition of both his soul and his body when he vainly attempts to cover up his sin and hide his iniquity: I am wasting away; it is as if an

unbearably heavy weight clings to my shoulders; my strength has evaporated like the sweat of my brow under the burning sun; all I can do is sigh with discomfort. A dramatic picture, to be sure, but anyone who has experienced even a portion of what he is describing knows full well of what the psalmist is speaking—*guilt*. To the untended soul, the poisonous power of this insidious dis-ease is debilitating and eventually lethal. There is only one antidote, and it comes from heaven itself: “Blessed is he whose transgression is *forgiven!*”

It is as if the psalmist wakes up to his dreadful condition and says, “Why am I living this way? As destructive and inexcusable as my actions (my attitudes, my words, my omissions) have been, there is nothing I have done that has surprised my Maker. So, there is no point in my trying to act as if nothing at all has happened. I will face up to my sin, I will admit it to myself, and I will confess it openly.”

No wonder the psalmist begins his song with the word “blessed.” He is giving testimony to the joy and freedom that he himself has experienced. The medicine of forgiveness is a guaranteed cure to the sin-sick soul, for its limitless source is the very heart of God himself. The only cost to us is to humble ourselves enough to ask for it.

REFLECT | *Administering the remedy of forgiveness goes both ways—sometimes we must receive it, and sometimes we must give it. Recall an example of both in your life and describe what took place. To whom is it most difficult for you to say, “I am wrong; please forgive me”? Why?*

Day 7 Bearing One Another's Burdens

READ | Galatians 6:1–10

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (v. 2)

Today we come back to one of the sweetest and most fulfilling fruits of living with a transparent heart—love. Certainly, learning to trust and to open our hearts to one another is not without risk. The story of Adam and Eve reminds us that hiding is “second nature” to us. But it also reminds us that we were made for intimate fellowship with God and one another, and that we will never be fully satisfied, we will never be whole, until we know once again the bond of love that unites us. Can there be any greater sense of fulfillment than what is found in the deep and genuine sharing of pain and joy, the mutual acceptance of one another with all our flaws and failings, the confidence that we can know and be known without any fear of judgment or rejection? Surely, this sense of communion is one of the great gifts God has given the Christian family.

Paul elevates this aspect of our life in Christ to the highest possible value when he writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” We hear an echo of the words of Jesus, teaching us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This is the first and great commandment, he said, and the second is just like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. To bear one another’s burdens—to take into our own heart the weight of another’s heart—is to become like our Lord himself. To treat another’s needs as if they were our own; to be mindful of his or her interests and dreams, as if they were our own; to enjoy another’s

success as if it were our own—this is the kind of self-sacrificial investment that Jesus made in the lives of his disciples. At its most generous, it was an investment that led him to the most extravagant love of all: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Sometimes this is exactly what opening our heart to others feels like—like laying down our lives. It can be sacrificial and costly. But it can also be rich and rewarding.

Much has been said about the wonders of rapid communication and instant message sending. Computers and cell phones have put us at one another’s immediate beck and call. But has all this technology made us any more personally committed to one another? Some have argued that modern technology has actually gotten in the way of genuine contact and personal investment, and that the world has grown increasingly impersonal even though advanced communication has made it ever smaller. In any case, one thing remains certain in every generation: the human heart longs for fellowship . . . genuine, deep, and abiding. Meeting with friends in a weekly group may seem artificial and contrived, but only if we fail to see beneath it the potential for opening our hearts to one another, for reaching out and connecting with someone else’s life in a meaningful and life-changing way. There is certainly nothing artificial about that. In fact, ever since Adam and Eve lost that fellowship in the Garden of Eden, God has been about the business of planting new gardens wherever his people gather together. There he intends to grow fruit that will endure forever.

REFLECT | *What does it take for you to be invested in—to be sensitive and responsive to—the lives of others? What does it take for you to allow others to be invested in your life? In what specific way(s) is God asking you to lay down your life this week?*

Week Two Sometimes the Hardest
Person to Forgive is Myself

