



Roanoke, Virginia

June 30, 2024

## ***“Open Wide Your Hearts”***

*2 Corinthians 6:1-13*

**Rev. Benjamin Shaw Brannan**

Our reading is from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian Church. And with Paul having to write a second letter, you know there were some issues that came up between his first letter and when he wrote this one. The overall scope of 2nd Corinthians is Paul defending his apostolic ministry, urging Christians in Corinth to express their repentance through unity and contributing to the welfare of others, and to seek reconciliation to each other. Our selection comes from the latter portion of Paul defending his ministry. Through it all, the letter seeks to illuminate the relationship between suffering and power, and how his suffering may seem like the lack of God’s favor, yet it is through Paul’s suffering that God is revealed.

Let us listen to Paul defend his ministry, urge repentance, and encourages reconciliation... and let us listen for God’s word.

*6 As we work together with [God], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>For he [Paul is quoting the prophet Isaiah here] For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity,*



*knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

*<sup>11</sup>We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. <sup>12</sup>There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. <sup>13</sup>In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.*

I have to be honest—when I was reading this passage, especially the end, I couldn't help but sing "With Arms Wide Open." Some of you may know the song by the post-grunge rock band Creed—*WITH ARMS WIDE OPEN*.

After a short guitar riff, the lyrics kick off with "Well, I just heard, the news today. It seems my life is going to change. I closed my eyes, begin to pray. Then tears of joy, stream down my face, with arms wide open."

(I practiced that A LOT to make sure I didn't unconsciously begin to sing it in that unforgettable tone)

Lead singer Scott Strapp wrote this song after finding out he was going to be a father. He was overcome with joy, yet at the same time he was determined he didn't want his child to face the same problems he faced growing up. Strapp was raised in a very strict, very devout Christian household and he didn't want his child to grow up questioning himself or his faith like he did.

The chorus of the song goes like this: "With arms wide open, under the sunlight. Welcome to this place, I'll show you everything, with arms wide open." There is hope expressed in a warm welcome and embrace, an hope to teach and guide his child through all of life's beautiful complexities.

When the song reaches its heartfelt bridge, Strapp expresses that "If I had just one wish, only one demand. I hope he's not like me, I hope he understands, that he can take this life and hold it by the hand; And he can greet the world, with arms wide open." Knowing his own flaws and limitations and the world's challenges, Strapp hopes that his child will experience life intimately and genuinely, through the good and bad, with an open heart.

The final chorus concludes with "I'll show you love. I'll show you everything, with arms wide open, with arms wide open."

I understand Creed is not for everyone. But this song captures the spectrum of the raw human emotions—fear, joy, hope, and love—that are experienced when something new is before



us, something new that urges us to be our best selves, not for our sake but for the sake of someone else. It is a powerful ode to the transformative power of love and the beauty of embracing life's unpredictable journey with optimism and an open heart.

And I can't help but find connections between our passage and Creed's song. Paul hopes the Corinthian church, much like Stapp hopes his child, will have a life better than his, a life rid of scorn, afflictions, and pain. But if Paul was the lead singer of Creed, the song would probably be titled "With Hearts Wide Open." Directed specifically at the Corinthian church, it may go something like this...

Well, I just heard, the news today  
It seems your lives, they better change.  
I close my eyes, begin to pray  
O God help them, receive your grace  
With hearts wide open,  
Under the Christ-light.  
Welcome to this place  
Turn back to God and me  
With hearts wide open.  
With hearts wide open.

And then the bridge would come in like this:

If I have just one wish,  
Only one demand,  
I hope they see my love,  
I hope they understand,  
That through all the pain,  
We have endured in life,  
We are saved through Christ,  
With hearts wide open.  
We are made new in Christ  
With hearts wide open.

*Doug Settles, in the back... I think we have a bit!*



It might be a stretch, but I think there is something here, some connection between Paul and Creed. I mean, Paul closes this section of his letter by referring to his readers as children—not to belittle them, but rather to illustrate their relationship and his unwavering love. Paul’s hope for the Corinthian church, much like Strapp’s hope for his child, is that they open themselves up to embrace the love and grace being offered and offer that love and grace in return.

Paul deeply loves and cares for the Corinthian church, as a parent loves a child. Parents love their children with unwavering commitment, and yet those same children often rebel. They resist a parent’s steadfast love and seek to find love for themselves, which oftentimes is the fickle love in the world. If you have raised a teenager, or even know a teenager, you get what I am saying, right!?

No matter how far the Corinthian church has fallen, no matter how many times they have turned to false teachers and have lost confidence in Paul and in the Christian movement, Paul assures them hope is not lost, love is not lost. Love is still waiting for them. He longs for them to turn back, to stop living a life that draws them further from himself and ultimately from God. Paul longs for their relationship to be restored, not for his sake but for their sake.

Paul opens this section of his letter with a plea to “not accept the grace of God in vain.” What he is saying to the Corinthian church is that if God’s grace has truly taken root in your hearts and you know how God’s salvation really works, then you better start living like it! And one way to show this is to open your hearts toward us again and stop believing the people who have talked smack about me and the gospel I preach. Those are pretty harsh words from their founder and pastor. I sure am glad I don’t have to stand here and preach a sermon encouraging this congregation to open their hearts and be reconciled to their pastor.

Yet there is always space for reconciliation in this world because reconciliation is the work of grace. Paul proclaims with urgency that the reconciling grace of God is still theirs to claim. And because of God’s reconciling grace, it is time for the Corinthians to turn back with an open heart and step into the promise of new life in Christ. We have been reconciled to God by God in Jesus Christ! So be reconciled to each other. The time is now!

If they don’t respond to the good news of the gospel by being reconciled to each other, they have received God’s grace in vain. If we don’t respond to the good news of the gospel by being reconciled to each other, we have received God’s grace in vain. An urgent message that echoes through the ages; now is the Day of Reconciliation, now is the day of salvation!

Responding to the reconciling grace and love of God made known in Jesus Christ is an act of courage. It takes courage to pursue the “good life” being offered through grace because it will be a life that is misunderstood by the world: you will be unknown to the world, and yet fully known by God; seen as dying, yet alive; seen as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich;



as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. The spiritual riches of the new community, that is the church, far exceed the best of what the world can offer. Reconciliation is transformation.

I witnessed the transformation that is ours in the “good life” just last week during our Youth Mission Trip to the DR. I am sure each one of the other 7 on our team could have chosen to do something else. But they choose to take a week of their summer, a week of vacation from work, a week away from family, to travel to a new place, stay in an un-air-conditioned guesthouse with bugs and critters the size of my fist, and step into something new. That takes courage. Echoing Paul’s words, we did not put an obstacle in anyone’s way, but as servants of God we commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, in short layovers as we ran through the Miami airport to make our connecting flight, in hardships, in missing bags that didn’t make that same flight, in labors as we stuffed over 300 VBS kits, in beatings through countless piggy-back rides and dog piles, in sleepless nights as we had to stay an extra night in Miami on our return, in hardships as our bus didn’t start in Greensboro when we finally landed; yet by patience, kindness, joy, genuine love, and the power of God... The spiritual riches we received far exceeded those of anything we could have ever imagined.

I witnessed the “good life!” Life that really is life!

I witnessed the grace and love of God as our youth beamed with joy as they let go of who they thought they had to be for the world, and truly live into the person God created them to be. I witnessed a small group of 8 from Roanoke, join a small group of Dominican ministry assistance, and share life in a way that was real, authentic, and holy. I witnessed the small interactions and little moments that made big impacts, not only for the local kids in the barrios but for our own youth. I witnessed moments of laughter and tears as souls found their missing piece in another. I witnessed teenagers put down their phones to live life through the eyes God gave them, the same eyes that saw everyone as beloved children of God. I witnessed transformation, as language barriers and cultural differences were washed away by the universal language of a smile, a hug, or a high-five. I witnessed grown adults dancing like a frog swimming in a cold river. I witnessed the promise of new life, and the reality of life in the here and now!

Our hearts were broken open by the wide-open hearts of those little children we served!

The Apostle Paul, in the simplest of terms, is a humble servant of Christ. And he has nothing to offer the Corinthian church but the truth of the gospel, his love for Jesus, and his love for them. Is it not the same for us?

Beloved, open wide your hearts to the reconciling love and grace of God, for now is the time, today is the day; open wide your hearts so that having been reconciled by God you may be reconciled to one another. Whether rich or poor, honor or dishonor, known or unknown, in need



or in plenty, in sorrow or in joy, whether black, white, or brown, whether republican, democrat, or independent, whether Dominican, American, or any other nationality, open wide your hearts, receive the grace and love of God, and receive the new life in Christ, a life that is shared, a life that is abundant and eternal, and experience a life that really is life.

En el nombre de Jesus—Amen.

