

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO OPEN DOORS, CLOSED HEARTS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

I had a phone conversation recently with a woman who had been praying for for several years that her mother come to know the Lord. Knowing her mother, I recalled that many times in the past when we talked of spiritual things her heart would harden. Yet this loving daughter saw the "open door," as it were, and lovingly walked through it to share the gospel until the Lord softened her mother's heart to accept the good news of Jesus Christ.

A few weeks ago a Christian friend of mine asked me to pray for he and his wife as they visited with his family. They were looking for an open door to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On Monday I was invited by a daughter to share the message of salvation at the memorial service of her beloved Christian father. She saw his death as an open door for her immediate family as well as their many friends to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, many for the first time. I was able to walk right into that open door to share the word of God.

How many of you as Christians have looked for open doors to share the good news of Jesus Christ with your family and friends? When presented with a possible open door, how many of you were tempted not to share your faith because they knew what you were like before you became a Christian? For many of us, the hardest open door to walk through has to do with those people who knew us in the past. I experienced that 10 years ago when I was asked to preach the gospel to people who knew me in my youth. I was frightened that they would reject me and Jesus Christ because they remembered too much of who I was before I became a Christian and not enough about how much they needed Jesus.

Yet the scriptures, and especially the book of Acts, encourage us to share with those who knew us best before we became Christians. We can see how God delights in whole families coming to him once the door of their hearts are open. Therefore, if he gives us an open door to share with them, we should step right in to share the gospel until they reject the Lord and his good news. When that rejection comes, then we should step right out. In Luke 4, the scripture will speak to this issue: How should we respond to open doors?

I. Step Right In, Luke 4:14-22

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about Him spread though all the surrounding district and he began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and as was his custom, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. And he opened the book, and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

When studying Jesus' life, it is important to use a "Harmony of the Gospels," a study book which lines up all four gospels in a chronological order of events. Unlike Matthew and John, who wrote to the Jews, Luke moves quickly from the temptation of our Lord into the Galilean ministry because he was writing with Gentiles in mind. In doing so he passed over almost the first full year of our Lord's ministry with the Jews in Judea and the Samaritans in Samaria. That year is covered in the first four chapters of John's gospel.

While John the Baptist was baptizing at Bethany beyond the Jordan he told the priests of Israel that he was not the Christ, but identified his cousin Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." After Jesus was baptized by John, he was then led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Shortly after the temptation the Lord began his public ministry. John pointed Jesus out to his two disciples, one was John, the other Andrew, who immediately found his brother Simon (Peter). The next day Jesus called Philip to follow him, and Philip found Nathaniel. These five became the first disciples to minister with the Lord in Judea.

Jesus then traveled north some 80 miles to the small village of Cana, about 10 miles northeast of his home town of Nazareth. While at the wedding of a family friend, he accomplished his first miracle by the power of the Spirit, turning water into wine. Shortly after the wedding, Jesus, his mother Mary, his four brothers and sisters (John 2:12, Matt.13:55), and the five disciples walked 20 miles northeast to visit Capernaum, home of Peter's mother-in-law. Capernaum was a Roman garrison city located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

In the late spring of 29 A.D. the Lord and his followers went south to Jerusalem to attend the first Passover of his three-year public ministry. At that time he cleansed the temple from the merchants who were turning his Father's house into a "den of thieves." Shortly after this first cleansing he was visited by a Pharisee named Nicodemus. At that point, Luke recorded, "And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (4:14).

In the winter of 29 A.D. the gospel of John tells us that Jesus went from Judea through Samaria on his way to Cana of Galilee. It was in Sychar that Jesus had a conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4). As a result of her witness and the evangelism that took place in the city, many people believed in him. Jesus also received the word that Herod Antipas had arrested John the Baptist (Mark 1:14). In John 4:43-45 we read, "And after the two days [in Sychar] he went forth from there [north] to Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans received him, having seen all the things that he did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves also went to the feast." Matthew 4:17 says, "And news about him spread throughout all the surrounding district. From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

Luke continues in verse 15: "And he began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all." It was during this time that our Lord visited Cana for the second time. On his first visit our Lord changed water to wine, to give the first sign that he was the Messiah. The second sign occurred almost a year later when he healed the nobleman's ailing son down the road in Capernaum by his words, "Your son is healed."

Luke 1:1-4:13 reveals Jesus in a time of preparation from his birth until his temptation in the wilderness. Now in Luke 4:14-9:50 we will be studying our Lord's Galilean ministry. We will discover many spiritual principles that can be applied to our daily lives as we watch Jesus interact with a variety of people from every walk of life. "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (19:10). A key factor is Satan's direct antagonism to Jesus as he looks for "an opportune time" to defeat the king of Israel within the next two years of ministry. We will see the spiritual warfare that bombards the Lord in his ministry, the same way that it happens in our lives.

Luke's account thus far has shown us that our Lord's ministry was Spirit-led and empowered, widely known, well received, and synagogue-centered. After preaching and teaching in many synagogues in Galilee Jesus finally returned to his home town. The door was open to teach the Word of God, and Jesus walked through it.

"And he came to Nazareth, where he was brought up, and as was his custom he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath..." Jesus ministered in the power of Holy Spirit and was available to be led throughout the Holy Land by the same Spirit. After leaving Cana he was led to his home town Nazareth, in his second year of ministry. He had become quite popular as the "news about him spread." People were familiar with his ministry of healing in Cana and the message of hope that he preached: "The kingdom of God is at hand." The Pharisees had not yet begun to question his authority; it was a time when he was "praised by all."

The Lord waited until Saturday to step into an open door of spiritual opportunity by going to the synagogue. The temple in Jerusalem was designed for special feast days such as Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement. One would go there to worship God and make sacrifices to him. The synagogue, however, was

like our local church, meeting the spiritual needs of a local community on a weekly basis. Someone would read from a scroll, out of Deuteronomy, the She-ma: "Hear O Israel, the Lord God is one." Then there would be a time of prayer. Someone would then take the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, and read a passage from there. Everyone would praise the Lord, have prayer again, and then thank God for the Pentateuch. Following that, another attendant would invite an older man or visitor to read from the prophets. The scroll was read, and then followed a time for the reader to comment on the text. Finally, there was a time of praising the Lord for what was spoken out of the prophets, prayer, and lunch.

On this particular day, Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled it to chapter 61, and read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." He rolled the scroll up, and the audience sat there waiting for him to make a comment about Isaiah. Jesus did not say a thing about Isaiah, however. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

For generations these people had been hoping for the coming of Messiah. They were suffering under the Roman heel. They wanted a king, a deliverer, a great warrior to destroy Rome and put Israel back in its proper place as the light of the nations. They were primed to hear Jesus proclaim himself to be the fulfillment of that hope.

The response to the Lord's proclamation was favorable: "And all were speaking well of him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from his lips." Unfortunately, their reaction was based on their perception of his voice, his mannerisms, his presentation. They never understood the meaning of his words because they got caught up in the wrong issues. At times, we preachers grieve when our presentation has become the focal point of our message. Our desire is that you hear the voice of God, and as a result, move towards righteousness. We are simply vessels, mouthpieces to communicate the truth. Our prayer is that your lives will never be the same when you hear the word of God. Likewise, Jesus did not want to be known as gracious; he wanted the people to know that he was Messiah.

Jesus told the people he was there, and "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me." It is the Holy Spirit who empowered him to be the spiritual king of Israel, to invade the kingdom of darkness, and rescue the victims of the devil who were slaves of sin. "If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Jesus said that the whole world is caught in a net, a prison of evil and death from which they cannot escape. But he had now come and would release them from their helplessness.

"Because he anointed me to preach the good news to the poor." Christ was the "anointed servant of the Lord," preaching the good news to free the poor, those who are spiritually bankrupt. This includes all humanity born in Adam. Jesus' goal was to change their hearts so they could see him as Lord and Savior. He could then give them his life in the Spirit, a brand new creation from the inside-out, not the outside-in.

Isaiah 61 outlined the good news as a message of hope and deliverance from the people's present condition. First, the Messiah would "proclaim release to the captives," setting them free from their sin, shame, and guilt. Israel knew what it meant to be held captive by an enemy; its history was filled with lost wars, the Assyrian captivity, harassment by the Persians, living in exile, and the present Roman captivity. All of that tragic captivity had taken place because Israel had spiritually forsaken Jehovah God for idols.

Second, there would be "recovery of sight to the blind . . ." Jesus certainly healed the blind physically (John 9), but there was deeper significance to this truth. As Paul said to King Agrippa, he came as a minister of Jesus Christ, that his ministry was ". . . to open their eyes [the Jews and Gentiles] so that they may turn from darkness to light and from dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). The issue was spiritual.

Third, he would "set free those who are downtrodden." Jesus looked back to Isaiah 58:6, where it refers to the deliverance of those so crushed and oppressed that they no longer have the ability to help themselves. The problems of the homeless in our country, for example, are that 60% of the homeless are "downtrodden;" they cannot help themselves anymore. In our arrogance we must not say, "Just get a job!" We don't understand the

situation-they can't. There is nothing left. Their spirit is killed. The joy of living is gone, and they cannot even get up. Jesus was proclaiming that he came to pick them up by starting with their spirit.

Fourth, Messiah came "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." For 40 years the prophet Isaiah (740-700 B.C.) had warned the 10 northern tribes to turn away from idolatry and return to Jehovah God, but they would not listen. As a result, they were carried into the Assyrian captivity (721 B.C.). Isaiah therefore boldly declared that through a small godly remnant, world-wide redemption would come through the Messiah at his first coming (Isaiah 53:1-12).

Using Isaiah's words, the Lord Jesus now said that this favorable year of the Lord was not a year like the Year of Jubilee (Lev.25:8-16), which took place every 50 years to proclaim liberty throughout all the land (Lev.25:10). The favorable year of the Lord was a symbol of the beginning of the messianic age, the period when God would grant salvation to all his people and the Gentile nations. During this period of time all who placed their faith in Christ would experience true freedom; no longer would they need to live in constant fear of Satan and his demons, the world, the flesh, sin, and death.

The Lord stopped reading Isaiah 61:2 in mid-sentence: "To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. . . ." He looked up so as to catch their attention, and said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He never read the last phrase, "And the day of vengeance of our God." Why? Because this was the day of salvation. The opportunity for spiritual healing was available for all in that synagogue as well as those in the nation of Israel who would place their faith in Jesus as their long awaited Messiah. Redemption, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins was available. Now was the time to be saved. The day of vengeance would come one day on all who rejected Jesus as Lord and Savior.

John the Baptist and many of his baptized converts were hoping the Messiah would come to forgive their sins and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He would come with judgment upon the evil Roman Empire, bringing in the kingdom of God on earth through Israel as in the days of David. In his book, "According to Luke," David Gooding says, "It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of the point which Christ was so dramatically making; he was the Messiah, his coming had instituted the Lord's favorable year; but it had not begun the day of vengeance; he had no intention of executing the wrath of God upon evil men or evil societies and institutions at this stage in history."

It is difficult to step through an open door of spiritual opportunity when that door leads back to your home town, your immediate family and old friends. I encourage you to walk through that door as long as they keep it open.

As I was driving with my wife to a conference recently, we listened to an inspiring tape of Christian music. This was not a slick recording star, but a woman with one eye and a debilitating kidney problem. I knew she was one of five children from a broken home who had become a Christian through much suffering. Since she had been privileged to lead her father to the Lord, it gave her the courage to step into her mother's life, who was not a Christian. Without any musical training, she began singing and had recorded her songs on this tape. The tape began, "Dear Mom, Thank you for the opportunity to give you the gift of these songs. You asked for them so I'm here to sing these songs for you." The most beautiful Spirit-filled singing came from that tape! I was certain that this woman's mother would receive Jesus Christ-how else could she respond? A loving Christian daughter had walked through the open door in faith when her unbelieving mother had asked her to send the tape.

When I saw her mother later, she said, "I love my daughter, don't you?" I said, "What a wonderful tape!" She responded, "Yes, I love the music." The story isn't over. But thank the Lord the daughter was willing to walk through that open door, which is still open.

How should we respond to open doors? Step right in! How should we respond to closed hearts?

II. Step Right Out, Luke 4:22-30

And all were speaking well of him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling

from his lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well.'" And he said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." And all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they rose up and cast him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went his way.

The truth finally began to sink into the hearts of the Jewish audience. They understood that Jesus was proclaiming himself as the Messiah of Israel at that moment. Their response reminds us of Luke's words at the end of our Lord's temptation a year earlier: "And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time" (4:13). Now we know that Satan seeks to mount a direct attack, such as the temptations in the wilderness, or an indirect attack through people like the Pharisees. In this case, Satan moved indirectly, using his spiritually blind and downtrodden captives to reject the king of Israel. The more they thought about what Jesus said, the more they felt the slow burn of pride, envy and jealousy. It would eventually break into a full flame of hatred, driving them to attempt murder on "the anointed servant of the Lord God."

"And they were saying, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'" Initially, the people loved the message about the Messianic Age, a time when Israel would once again be ruled by one from the house of David. They believed that all the nations of the world, including the present Roman government, would be in subjection to the people of Jehovah, God's Israel. At the same time, however, they heard Jesus, their own home-grown boy, apply this Isaiah passage to himself. How could he be saying he was the Messiah, when they all knew him as Mary and Joseph's son? His brothers James, Joses, Jude, and Simon, as well as his sisters, were still living there in Nazareth. How could this son of a carpenter, he himself a former carpenter turned preacher, say he was the Messiah?

Resentment grew in their hearts. After all, the Messiah would perform signs and wonders. All they had for proof were some rumors that he had done miracles in Judea and Galilee. However, nothing of that sort had happened in his own home town with his own kinfolk, many whom were sick with various diseases.

The Lord responded by giving three sermons in one to the Jewish synagogue. He said, "no prophet is welcome in his home town." The Lord saw the look of unbelief on their faces and was reminded of a popular, ancient proverb, "Physician heal yourself." Jesus was calling himself the "spiritual physician" who could bring spiritual healing to the nation as well as the individual. The Jews were saying, "If you are the long-awaited Messiah of Isaiah 61, make good your claim and do the miracles you did in Capernaum and the other districts." In Cana, for example, he had turned water into wine, and had healed the official's son who was sick 10 miles away in Capernaum. Later, some of the leaders of Israel saw and believed the miracles, but not the fact that Jesus was the Messiah.

It is interesting that Mark 6:5-6 records: "And he could do no miracle there except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he wondered at their unbelief." Jesus was there to offer life to all, and he wondered at what was preventing them from accepting it. Unfortunately, it is the same thing which keeps us from accepting the fullness of life. It is pride, pride that says, "I can do it by myself. I can control my own destiny." The age-old philosophies that deceived people in the past prevail today.

As the Prophet of Deuteronomy, the Lord identified with the prophets of old to illustrate two other points. At times these prophets were not accepted in Israel because the people wanted to participate in idolatry. Jesus used Elijah and Elisha to illustrate that when the Jews rejected his prophets the Lord God mercifully sent them to the Gentiles to bring spiritual and physical healing.

In the second part of his message, Jesus directed their minds back 800 years to I Kings 17 and 18. God instructed his prophet Elijah to deliver a message of judgment to the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who were ruling the northern kingdom and leading the people of God into Baal worship. Elijah told the king that there would be no rain for three and a half years. Although there were many widows in the country who were starving during the drought, God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow in Sidon who was willing to share what little she had with the prophet despite her circumstances. Miraculously, he provided her with flour and oil until the drought ended, and raised her son from the dead as well. Jesus used this story to show the Jews in Nazareth that God's plan of redemption and mercy is bigger than the immediate group of Jews in their local synagogue. Redemption is offered to all, Jew and Gentile, who place their faith in Jesus.

The third part to Jesus' message illustrated the same principle: redemption is offered to all who place their faith in God the Father and his Son, whether Jew or Gentile (II Kings 5:1-14). While the Jews remained in unbelief the Lord used Elisha to heal the leper Naaman, a Syrian who was the commander of the whole Syrian army. A slave girl told Naaman of a prophet who could heal him if he placed his faith in Yahweh. After a bit of arguing, he followed Elisha's instructions to dip himself in the river seven times. He came up clean and worshiped the living God. Just as God told Elijah and Elisha to leave the unbelieving Israelites to offer the message of redemption to the Gentiles, Jesus was warning the people that if they rejected his message he would do likewise. Some 25 years later the apostle Paul would experience this unbelief in a Jewish synagogue in Antioch, Turkey. Paul responded, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life. Behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46).

Meanwhile, Satan was in the background fanning the flames of hatred and murder: "And all the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things," and they tried to murder Jesus. But he slipped away for two more years of ministry, and went down to Galilee and into Jerusalem.

I know a man in this fellowship who has come to know the Lord and is praying for the open door to share his faith with his adult sons. I know of a Christian woman who is praying for her non-believing husband, but she has been forced to step right out of the relationship because his heart is closed at this time, and he wants nothing to do with her or "her Jesus."

How should we respond to open doors, especially when they involve an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ with family and friends in our home town? We must step right in. How are we to respond to closed hearts? Step right out for a time, and let the Spirit of the Lord give us wisdom as to when to step in and out. The issues are critical. Jesus Christ says, "I can bring salvation to anyone who will place their faith in me." The apostle Peter said, "For there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Salvation is the issue in our lives. Men and women are held in the captivity of blindness as prisoners of the evil one. They need to hear the good news that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and he wants those of us who know him as Lord and Savior to deliver the message. We must start with our families and friends. By the Spirit of God we must ask to say the right word at the right time and the right place. Be faithful and watch what God will do among us.

"These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens, no one can shut; and what he shuts, no one can open." (Rev.3:7)

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