

How to Have an Open Door

Text:

Revelation 3:7-13

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie--behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Introduction:

Philadelphia, the sixth of the seven churches, is the second of the seven for whom Christ has no condemnation only commendation. It is worth observing at the beginning the difference in the way Christ presents himself to these two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, and to the other five. In the case of these two churches Christ presents himself as having the same qualities as the churches. For Philadelphia he is first of all the true one and the church is then described as having "kept my word about patient endurance". He is then described as the one who has the key of David, "who opens and no one will shut, and shuts and no one will open" (Isa. 22:22), while the church is described as having an open door "which no one can shut. If you remember the letter to Smyrna; there he is described as the one "who was dead and lived" and then encourages them to be "faithful unto death".

This is not the case for the other five churches that receive warnings. "In addressing Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira the writer speaks as holding that position and authority and power that they are by their conduct losing. In the letter to Sardis Christ represents the honorable position which the church has lost beyond hope of recovery. And we will see when we come to

Laodicea that Christ addresses them as the one who is “faithful and true while they lack resolve and sincerity”. (William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 404).

This indicates that Christ himself is always the standard. We are called to be like him. To the degree that we are, He commends us; when we fall short he stands before us as the standard by which we must correct ourselves, but the only thing that ever makes any church commendable is its faithfulness and conformity to Jesus Christ. If we judge by any other standard we will be misled.

A second initial observation about Smyrna and Philadelphia is that in both cases the entire church is commended. None of the seven churches are devoid of faithful members, but in the case of the other five there is always a majority and a minority, a church within the church. Historically this has often been the case. Rarely has true faith in Christ been completely eclipsed, but it has often been the minority in the church that kept it alive. The desire of Christ, however, is for entire churches to walk in faithful obedience. While we often unconsciously accept two levels of discipleship, Christ and his apostles never speak of it. Throughout the New Testament all followers of Jesus Christ are called to full obedience to Jesus Christ.

What stands out about the church of Philadelphia is that Christ has given them an open door. There can be no doubt what this means. It is a metaphor that seems to have been introduced first by the Apostle Paul; then came into universal usage in the early church, and bears the same meaning to the present. The open door represents missionary opportunity. From Ephesus Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “A great and effectual door is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries” (I Corinthians 16:9). At Troas also “a door was opened” for him (II Corinthians 2:12), and he asked the Colossians to pray “that God may open us a door for me to speak the mystery of Christ (Colossians 4:3). The opened door is the opportunity that Christ gives us to serve him to share his good news.

For a church or an individual there is no greater privilege that to be given an open door by the Lord himself, to be counted worthy of representing him. But of the seven churches Philadelphia is the only one to whom Christ has given this open door. They would have understood what he meant. The city of Philadelphia was the doorway to the interior of the Province of Asia and the east. It had been planted there in the 2nd century B.C. to be a missionary of Greek language and culture to the tribes of the Anatolian Plateau. Now they were to be the means through whom the good news of Christ would reach them. This would happen in two ways. Being located on the major Roman road leading onto the Anatolian Plateau and into the eastern provinces many people from distant places would pass through Philadelphia. Christ would bring the nations to them. But they would also go to the nations. Christ had set an open door before them and no man could close it. As we learn from this

church, the question I want to ask is why did they receive this open door when others did not? We have already discussed the geographical reason, but there is a much deeper reason.

As we examine this question, I want us to first look at what they didn't have, and then at what they did have that caused Christ to give them an open door.

I. What they did not have.

What they did not have were great resources. Christ says to them "I know that you have but a little power." It is necessary to point out that of these seven churches the two that receive the highest commendations both appear to be small and weak in human resources. We already noted the description of Smyrna –"I know your poverty (but you are rich). Both Smyrna and Philadelphia stand in contrast to Laodicea of whom Christ says: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). It is far more than a cliché to say that God works through our weakness and poverty. It is a principle that runs through the Bible. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

For us this means at least two things. First, we should not covet human power and greatness. We should never seek to be great in the terms that the world judges greatness. To seek that sort of power will always lead us astray. We might build a great organization that receives attention and acclaim, but it will not be of God. Christ himself, when he came into the world came in weakness. He never sought human renown, position or power. He "had no form, nor comeliness that we should desire him", and he has called us to the same kind of humility and weakness. Our strength is in the Lord, never in ourselves. God gives open doors to churches and individuals that understand this.

Secondly, this teaches us that we should never use our smallness or our weakness as an excuse. We must like David be willing to attack giants with a slingshot, and like the lad with his five loaves and two fishes be willing to make the little we have available to Christ. What Christ wants is not our greatness, but our willingness. It is he who gives the power; who multiplies the little that we have. Doors are opened to those who don't make excuses, but who willingly offer the little they have.

II. What they did have

What made Philadelphia great in a word is “faithfulness”. Christ says to them: “you have kept my word of endurance.” They had not just been faithful when it was easy, but also when it was not. Christ could count on them, therefore he gave them responsibility. All who have been in positions of leadership understand this. When you have a tough job, you don’t give it to someone who is untried or unstable; you don’t look for the smartest, or the most talented, you call on the most reliable. Christ is looking for people who “keep his word.” This is the one quality he always stressed in discipleship. Several times over during his earthly ministry he said: “blessed are those who hear my words and do them.”

This kind of faithfulness requires two essential qualities: hearing ears, and obedient hearts. Each of these letters ends with the same statement: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Such ears do not come naturally, they must be cultivated. We cultivate them by a disciplined habit of listening to the Word. To do this we must lay our own prejudice aside as we come to the Word. We must understand that as sinners and inhabitants of a world in rebellion against God and his Word we have an inclination to filter what we hear to make it conform to what we already believe to be true rather than allowing the Holy Spirit to teach us what Christ is really saying to us. We must also listen regularly. It is for this reason that faithful Christians throughout the ages have always understood the importance of setting aside regular times for this. They have done it in different ways, but the end is always the same: to hear God’s Word and do it.

Our enemy knows the power that comes from consistent disciplined listening to the Word of God and will go to great lengths to impede it. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer became the leader of the Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde in 1934 he emphasized disciplined listening to the Scriptures as a part of his preparation of theological students for ordination. Among other things they would read a passage together at breakfast every morning and then they would be dismissed to their rooms to meditate on the passage for a half hour. Although the students loved Bonhoeffer and appreciated his leadership, some rebelled at this practice, and on one occasion when he was away for a few days he learned to his dismay upon returning that it had been discontinued. What he understood was that with all the propaganda being generated by the Nazis the Christian’s only security against the Devil’s lies was intent and disciplined listening to Jesus Christ.

If we want Christ to open a door that no one can close, not only must we have listening ears, but we must also have obedient hearts. The purpose of hearing the word is to do it. Our prayer is that we might walk in the ways of Christ however opposite those ways may be to the ways of the world in which we live. This means being willing to go where others won’t. We

must see our security in Christ and nowhere else. There is an interesting image in the promise that Christ gives to the Philadelphian Church when he says: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out". Philadelphia, like Sardis, had been destroyed by an earthquake in 17 A. D. The difference between Philadelphia and Sardis was that the aftershocks had continued for years. In 20 A. D. Strabo had called it a city "full of earthquakes". The result of this was that people were afraid to live in the city and for years they lived in huts outside the city, so when Jesus says: "you will go out no more", they would understand what he is saying. Our security is in Christ. He who looks for it elsewhere will never see nor enter the door Christ's opens to him, because as Paul says where there is a door of opportunity, there is also adversity. That adversity will only be affronted and overcome by faithful obedience.