

Open Doors

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[0 : 0 0] It was one of those talks that I've never forgotten. I was a student in my second year of college, I think, so I must have been, what, 19 or 20. Our college Christian union had invited this internationally renowned, super heavyweight academic theologian to come and speak.

I was expecting him to spend his time unpacking profound, complex, sophisticated theological ideas. But what he said was in fact just plain and simple and yet so deeply, deeply challenging.

His talk finished with a challenge that stayed with me for my entire adult life and it was simply this. He said, I want each of you to think of one person who played an important part in leading you to Jesus Christ.

Now the chances are you can think of several people, but for now I just want you to focus your thoughts on one person who was a key influence in your journey to becoming a Christian.

Now I want you to imagine yourself putting the same question to them, who led them to Jesus or influenced them in that direction. And then imagine that the person they named was also asked the same question.

[1 : 1 7] Now imagine continuing that process, going back generation after generation. Eventually you will be taken right the way back to the early church, the first disciples and Jesus himself.

You have a spiritual pedigree there of some 2,000 years. Now I want you to imagine that one day someone else who you know is asked the same question.

And the person that they name is you. What's stopping you from making that happen? Now that challenge was put to me nearly 30 years ago and I've tried to hold it close ever since.

But one of the things about it that I've particularly wrestled with and still do wrestle with is this. How on earth can we realistically build relationships with people and seek to help and influence other people's lives when there are only so many hours in the day?

Is there a sense in which we need to be selective in our approach? And is it alright to be selective? We're currently following a series based on a book called The Art of Neighbouring.

[2 : 3 4] And what I love about the book is the way it helps us to understand that Jesus himself modelled a thoroughly practical and realistic approach to building relationships.

This week's title is Open Doors. And in the book it's pointed out that as we seek to open up our homes and our lives to others, we need to be aware of the need for boundaries.

Or we risk burning ourselves out and being no use to anyone. Now Jesus himself modelled this. He didn't always help everyone in the way they wanted to be helped.

He cured some but he didn't cure others. He stopped and talked to some but not all. What's particularly interesting, I think, is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Remember Jesus told that story when someone asked him, Who is my neighbour? Now in the story, a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho gets attacked by thieves.

[3 : 41] They leave him for dead. Two religious people pass by but don't want to get involved. And finally a Samaritan stops and helps the man.

He bandages him up, loads him on his donkey and he takes him to an inn where he can recover. But then, get this, he continues on his trip.

That Samaritan could have done more. He could have stayed with the man. He could have taken him back to his home. He could have cancelled all his plans and totally rearranged his schedule.

But that's not what he does. He does some amazing things. But he doesn't do everything. He made some big sacrifices and he acted selflessly.

But the event didn't change his entire life. You see, it's okay to draw boundaries. In fact, it's essential that we draw boundaries for two reasons.

[4 : 41] First, without boundaries, we get consumed. We'll never be satisfied that we've done enough because there will always be more that we can do.

And as such, we'll be drained from being able to help anyone at all. We'll just crash and burn. But second, without boundaries, we don't actually help the other person anyway.

See, boundaries set the difference between being responsible to others and being responsible for others. We're called to be responsible to others, but not responsible for others.

When we take responsibility for others, we make them dependent on us. It makes them the passive recipient. Now, that might make us feel a bit special for a while, but it doesn't empower them at all.

The very opposite, in fact. Whereas when we're responsible to others, it means we're responding to their needs. It means we're giving them a hand up rather than a hand out.

[5 : 47] It's about helping people get back in charge of their own lives. And this is what we see modelled in the life of Jesus. Jesus empowered others. And he was selective.

From the multitudes, he selected 72 and he sent them out. From the 72, he chose 12 apostles. And from the 12, he was even more intentional with three in particular.

And that's what we see going on in today's reading from Matthew chapter 17. Jesus chose to focus on Peter, James and John. They left the others and they went up the mountain where they witness Jesus' transfiguration.

The glory of God shining around and from him. Jesus chose to invest his time in these three in particular. Indeed, according to both Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, Jesus later took these three with him to Gethsemane to pray with him on the night before he died.

He focused on them and he empowered them. And there's one thing in particular that strikes me about what happened up on that mountain. Jesus is transfigured.

[6 : 59] Peter, James and John fall to the ground in fear. And then Jesus touches them and says, Get up and do not be afraid.

See, it's when they're touched by Jesus that they are empowered to get up and not be afraid. Interestingly, that phrase comes up time and time again.

When Mary was visited by an angel and told that she was going to give birth to Jesus, the angel said, Do not be afraid. When the angel broke the same news to Joseph, he was told the same thing.

Don't be afraid. When Zechariah saw the angel in the temple, he too was told, Do not be afraid. When shepherds in the field met with angels in the skies announcing the birth of Jesus, they were told, Do not be afraid.

Now, there seems to be a clear pattern when it comes to experiencing the supernatural presence of God. He always empowers.

[8 : 01] And so as Jesus touched Peter, James and John, they were empowered. They were simply told, Get up. Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. And so they were able to go back down into the valley and live out what God was calling them to do. And that's precisely what God's Holy Spirit does in our lives today.

He touches us. He empowers us. And he says, Get up and don't be afraid. So let's go back to that question that I was talking about right at the start.

Who? Who might God be calling you to connect with? It won't be anyone and it won't be everyone.

It's important to understand that. But it will be someone. Mother Teresa said, Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time. And always start with the person nearest to you.

[8 : 59] So who is God calling you to open your doors to? Pray with me.

Lord God, thank you that you open the door for us. And that you invite each and every one of us to know you and to love you. You call us into relationship with you.

Not just as neighbours or even as friends, but as your children. Help us to understand who you are calling us to reach out to and to grow relationships with.

And give us the wisdom and the courage to set boundaries. Help us to focus our time and our energy in caring for those who you are calling us to be alongside.

And help us like Peter, James and John to know your presence and to hear your voice which says, Get up and don't be afraid.

[10 : 01] And so now may we all go in peace. And may the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

Amen.