

“Barriers to Eternal Life”

Matthew 23:13-26 (New International Version)

13"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.^[a]

15"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

16"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' 19You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

23"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Introduction:

A person once wrote, “You can be sure that when someone says, “I hope you won’t mind me saying this. . . or, they say, “I don’t mean this to bother you ...“ **you are going to mind – you’re going to be bothered.” Amen! Have you ever had that happen to you?**

For most people Criticism is difficult to take.

You see - We would rather people congratulate us on what we are doing right than point out what we are doing wrong.

Have you ever got hot under the collar anticipating what the person is going to say to you?

How many of you get excited when people tell you things you really don’t want to hear?

Some people seem to relish pointing out the faults of others. Some people actually have their professional degrees in fault-finding.

However, on the other hand - there are others who admonish us because they love us.

You can just tell in their heart and their approach to you that they are trying to be a friend.

They aren’t trying to feel superior.

They’re not trying to manipulate us to do what they want . . . **they simply want to help us grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ.**

These are among our most cherished friends.

They are the kind of people you can count on being there when you need them.

Now listen to me – folks – this is important: **The rebuke of a friend can turn us from danger.**

Soloman wrote in Proverbs 9:8-9 “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.”

A very pointed observation can help turn us from a time of spiritual stagnation to a time of spiritual growth.

In Matthew 23:13-26 Jesus has some pointed criticism of the religious leaders of that day.

Jesus is telling the truth to these religious leaders in the hope that the truth might awaken some of the one's He is criticizing and warn those who are listening.

Remember, Jesus always has a reason for saying what He's going to say.

He's not frivolous here!

It's not a casual conversation.

This has great impact upon his listeners.

There are at least **Seven different indictments** in this passage.

Jesus begins each with the word “**Woe**”.

- ❖ The word “**Woe**” is an expression of extreme horror and grief.
- ❖ “**Woe**” I mean it's like “**Wait a minute – something is definitely wrong here!**”
- ❖ It is a statement of condemnation.
- ❖ It could be said that it is just the opposite of when Jesus says, “**Blessed are you . . .**”

In six of the seven “woes” Jesus begins by calling the Pharisees and Teachers of the law, a word which we are very sensitive to, I mentioned it last in last weeks sermon, it's the word, “**Hypocrites**”.

The one exception is in verse 16 where he calls them **“blind guides.”**

A Hypocrite was a **play actor . . . he’s a pretender.**

This morning we look at verse 13,

¹³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites (you pretenders, you play-actors)! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. [Mt. 23:13]

The teachers of the law and Pharisees were people who believed they were leading people to God.

But catch this - Jesus said they were actually keeping people FROM God.

They were slamming the door in the face of those who wished to know God.

They were leading people to Hell, not Heaven.

It is a devastating thought isn’t it?

Those who think they are serving the advancement of the Kingdom might actually be hindering its’ advancement.

Consequently we need to study these words carefully.

I. HOW BARRIERS ARE ERECTED

1st - By Opposing Jesus.

The primary way the Pharisees shut the door of Heaven was by speaking against Jesus.

They told people He was working for the Devil.

They said His miracles were sinful.

They attacked Him personally and rejected His message fully.

In doing so, they were turning people away from the only source of their salvation.

As I preached to you last week - Apart from Jesus Christ, no one can be forgiven or know eternal life.

“Jesus said, I am the way the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except by Me.” John 14:6

There are those today who do the same thing.

There are those in the so-called “Jesus Seminar” who tell us not to trust the words of Jesus in the Bible.

They twist His words and try to re-make Him into their image.

They explain away the plain teaching of our Lord.

When they do so, they are shutting the door of the gospel in men’s faces.

The 2nd Barrier Erected is - By Our Neglect.

We hinder people in their desire to know life with God by not telling them about Jesus.

Deep within each person is a yearning for significance, to find the purpose of their life.

There is a desire to know if there is “something more” to life than what we can see and touch.

People are searching for a connection with something beyond this life.

We have the key that unlocks the door to this deeper life.

- ❖ We know where to find peace with God.
- ❖ When we don't share the message of Christ with others we are like a person who watches someone frantically looking for something while all the time we holding the sought item behind his back.
- ❖ We are like a Doctor who withholds an antidote to a deadly poison or the treatment for a deadly disease.
- ❖ We are like those who refuse to throw a life preserver to one who is drowning.
- ❖ Our passive indifference has the same result as the active opposition of the Pharisees.

The 3rd Barrier we erect is – By a Bad Example.

Jesus told us in verse 3 not to do what the Pharisees do because they do not practice what they preach.

There are many people who are turned off from the gospel because of the hypocrisy in the lives of people who call themselves Christians.

This was in my sermon last week, for those of you who were not here. I would suggest that you get a copy of that sermon.

You see it's vitally important for us to understand why some people don't come to Christ today is because of "Hypocrisy" in the lives of the believers.

People on the outside of the Church see church people devouring each other.

They see people who profess to be Christians

- ❖ stealing from the job,
- ❖ cheating customers,
- ❖ participating in adulterous relationships,
- ❖ filled with the hatred of prejudice,
- ❖ abusing their families,
- ❖ indulging in drunkenness,

- ❖ consumed with an indulgent materialistic lifestyle,
- ❖ tearing down other churches,
- ❖ and other sinful practices.

When others see this they conclude that there is nothing to the message of new life in Christ.

You see folks, I want to warn us that people outside the church are listening and watching you and me.

It is true that not everyone who calls himself a believer is a believer.

In every church there are “Hypocrites”.

It is also true that growth in the Christian life takes time.

But for some Christians, their spiritual growth has been stymied too long.

However, we must not sidestep the truth that **when we profess Christ and live like the Devil we are hindering others from coming to Christ.**

The 4th barrier we erect is - By Preaching a False Gospel.

The Pharisees told people that the law would save them.

They told them that if they worked harder they had a better chance of earning God's grace.

They pushed religion rather than a relationship with God.

They pushed people to EARN salvation rather than teaching them to trust Christ for their salvation.

That same message continues to be preached from pulpits around our country today.

There are other false gospels being taught.

There are others who call themselves Christians and proclaim that everyone will go to Heaven in the end.

These people neglect the clear words of Jesus about Hell.

They give people a false security that keeps them from running to the cross of Jesus for forgiveness and new life.

They teach people that you can just continue to go on in sinning and you'll make it to heaven.

Folks, the Bible I hold in my hands this morning does not teach that we sin in thought, word and deed every day.

There are pseudo Christian groups that lead people astray.

These groups have Christian in their name **(Like the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints or Christian Science, or even Jehovah's Witnesses)** but they do not proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

- ❖ They have added to it,
- ❖ They've subtracted from it, and
- ❖ They have distorted the message of Scripture and are subsequently leading people astray.

There are those who preach a diminished gospel.

A diminished gospel is one where we only tell part of the truth.

In other words, we preach only that which is popular to our culture.

Paul warned Timothy in 2 Timothy 4,

"The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

Paul knew there would be people who would preach what is popular rather than what is true.

They will omit subjects about sin, repentance, and judgment.

They will preach what will please their listeners.

They will become market driven rather than Scripture-driven.

A Pastor of one of the largest churches in America said, "I don't talk about controversial things. I just want to talk about the love of Jesus."

This man doesn't talk about sin. All I've ever heard him talk about is the positive and the Bible says, "***The Word of God is as sharp as a two-edged sword ...***" and the definition of this means the Word is **Positive Message and yet Negative Message.**

He doesn't talk about repentance (or turning away from sinful pursuits).

He even refused to say that Jesus was the only way to Heaven.

Yet, this man is considered to be one of the chief voices of the church today!

This man gave up the truth so he could have a bigger crowd.

Illustration:

Suppose you went to see the Doctor because you weren't feeling well.

Suppose the Doctor read the test results with the nurse and discovered that you had early stages of cancer and needed surgery followed by radiation and perhaps chemotherapy.

Next suppose the Doctor came to see you and said, "We got the test results back and I don't think it is really anything to worry about. Let me give you some pain medication and you should start feeling better."

As soon as you left the office, the nurse turns to the Doctor and says, "Why didn't you tell him that he had cancer? If he doesn't get treatment it will be too late and he will die!"

The Doctor says, "Well, I knew the idea of having cancer and needing these treatments might upset him. He's my friend. I want him to be happy. If I tell him he needs surgery and chemotherapy he might be upset with me and I might lose him as a patient."

Would you consider that Doctor to be competent?

Would you consider him to be your friend?

Of course not!

Sometimes we have to hear difficult things before we can take corrective action.

Folks, that's where the true Man of God has to stand on the complete of Word of God.

You see - In the long run such behavior is only going to make things worse.

When Preachers do not preach the entire message of the gospel, when we refuse to talk about sin, repentance, and Hell, we are just like that Doctor.

Churches today are filled with thousands of people who enjoy moral pep talks but who never hear the truth of the Bible.

They listen to a popularized gospel that is really no gospel at all.

This distorted gospel is simply serving to make people feel comfortable as they slide toward Hell.

It is not opening the door to Heaven it is closing it.

When we proclaim any of these false gospels we are actually hindering people from following Christ rather than encouraging them.

II. BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

So, what do we do?

How do we make sure we aren't hindering people as they look for eternal life?

Let me draw some quick principles.

1st - We must enter into the Kingdom of God ourselves.

Jesus said the Pharisees were not entering the Kingdom themselves.

They felt godly, spiritual, and superior, but they would not follow Jesus.

They didn't like the idea that they were as sinful and lost as the next guy.

They wanted to earn their own way.

They wanted to, in effect, save themselves by their good deeds.

There are hundreds of people just like the Pharisees.

- ❖ They sit in the church.
- ❖ They believe they are God's people.
- ❖ But they have not entered the Kingdom.

So the first thing we need to do is a personal inventory.

Are you a true believer? Let me ask you some very pointed questions that only you can answer:

1. Do you recognize that you are a sinful person?
2. Do you see the rebellious character in your own heart?
3. Do you see the way you make excuses for your sin?
4. Have you repented (or turned away from) all notions that you can earn your way into Heaven?
5. Do you understand you are headed towards Hell?
6. Do you recognize Jesus as the only One who can save you?
7. Do you understand that His death was for your sin?

8. Do you believe His promise that those who put their trust in Him will have eternal life?
9. Have you surrendered your life to Christ?
10. Have you put all your confidence in His ability rather than your own?
11. Are you willing to turn from your sinful ways and begin to trust His guidance for your life?

If you cannot answer yes to all of these questions, then it is likely that you have not entered in to the Kingdom of Heaven.

I encourage you to confess the things that are hidden in your heart and ask God to cleanse you and to make you new.

Run to the cross of Jesus and take hold of the life He offers.

Second, We need to Cut out the Middleman.

We are susceptible to false teaching because we rely on other people to tell us what God is saying.

It is time for Christians to get back to the Bible.

It is time that we learn to pray and have a vital relationship with God.

We must seek God ourselves.

Our job is to proclaim the truth of God's Word.

We can't do that and we can't recognize error, unless we know the truth ourselves.

I encourage you to develop a personal knowledge and understanding of God and the Bible.

Third - We need to stick to the Biblical Essentials.

It is easy to confuse personal preference with Biblical essentials. We need to beware of making baptism, our interpretation of the events of the second coming, our style of worship, our

denominational affiliation, our practice of communion, or interpretation on debated theological issues a test of faith.

These items are secondary issues and not essential for salvation.

I was amused by this story from Max Lucado,

A bishop was traveling by ship to visit a church across the ocean. While en route, the ship stopped at an island for a day. He went for a walk on a beach. He came upon three fishermen mending their nets.

Curious about their trade he asked them some questions. Curious about his ecclesiastical robes, they asked him some questions. When they found out he was a Christian leader, they got excited. "We Christians!" they said, proudly pointing to one another.

The bishop was impressed but cautious. Did they know the Lord's Prayer? They had never heard of it.

"What do you say, then, when you pray?"

"We pray, 'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.' "

The bishop was appalled at the primitive nature of the prayer. "That will not do." So he spent the day teaching them the Lord's Prayer. The fishermen were poor but willing learners. And before the bishop sailed away the next day, they could recite the prayer with no mistakes.

The bishop was proud.

On the return trip the bishop's ship drew near the island again. When the island came into view the bishop came to the deck and recalled with pleasure the men he had taught and resolved to go see them again. As he was thinking a light appeared on the horizon near the island. It seemed to be getting nearer. As the bishop gazed in wonder he realized the three fishermen were walking toward him on the water. Soon all the passengers and crew were on the deck to see the sight.

When they were within speaking distance, the fisherman cried out, "Bishop, we come hurry to meet you."

"What is it you want?" asked the stunned bishop.

“We are so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name ...’ and then we forget. Please tell us prayer again.”

The bishop was humbled. “Go back to your homes, my friends, and when you pray say, ‘We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.’ ”^{[1][1]}

Our job is not to make other people look and talk like we do. Our job is to introduce people to one who can change them forever.

CONCLUSIONS

It is always easier to see the fault in another than it is to see it in the mirror.

As we look at the woes of Jesus directed at the Scribes and Pharisees we need to remember that we can fall into the same patterns and the same mistakes that they were guilty of committing.

So let’s take this text personally.

Look at your own life.

Are you opening the door of the Kingdom of God to others or are you closing the door?

Are you discouraging others from faith by your inconsistency, your emphasis on superficial things, or your embracing of false teachers?

Are you a person “of the book”?

Do you make time to read and study the Scriptures for yourself?

Do you check what others teach by asking, “but is this biblical?”

Take a good look at your life.

Repent where needed and return to the wonderful truth of the gospel of God's grace.

The message of the gospel is the most wonderful news we could ever share:

- ❖ God in His wonderful and marvelous grace has provided a way for us to know forgiveness from our sin and a life of fulfillment and purpose.
- ❖ He has done this through His Son, Jesus.
- ❖ It is a message we have the privilege of sharing with others.

We need to make sure that we pass it on correctly.
