



Breaking Barriers – Religion

(Credit: Some content borrowed from Mark Driscoll)

INTRODUCTION

Today we continue in our series called “**breaking barriers**,”... and today’s barrier is a biggy... It is one of the reason’s that many people give for being closed to Christianity... It is also the reason some people give for leaving church... And... it’s also one... that any one of us can easily slide into... without realizing it... It is the barrier of “**religion**.”

(Find the box – turn it around)

Religion... I’m not sure if you remember the well known song by REM?

*That's me in the corner...
That's me in the spotlight...
Losing my religion...*

Losing my religion... I always wondered how that could happen to someone... But then I began to learn, that if your religion is just a bunch of rules... and religious trappings... and it’s not a heart thing... a core thing... if it’s not a relationship with God... then it actually is quite easy to lose it... because it was never something that truly gripped you from the inside out.

When we take a look at the life of Jesus... He was certainly critical of the organised religion of the day... and He had some really serious things to say about it. Now this is a really important barrier for us to tackle... because it’s actually a barrier that Jesus often faced in his ministry.

The first passage I want to look at is in **Luke 13**... It is an interesting story about Jesus bumping into the barrier of religion... Let's take a look at it. **Luke 13:10**;

- **On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."**
- **¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. ¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."**
- **¹⁵ The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"**
- **¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.**

Here we see Jesus bumping into the spirit of religion... and dealing with it head on. And it's important that we don't get misunderstand why Jesus is getting so strict with them here... because we often think that as Christians we've always got to be kind, and nice, and merciful... but sometimes you've got to confront stuff in a harsh manner. Especially wolves. I think it was Martin Luther who said, *"you've got to be very gentle with sheep, but you've got to deal harshly with wolves!"*

So, how do we break the barrier of religion... let me share a few points, here is the first;

1. ENCOURAGEMENT OVER CRITICISM

When you read through this story... it's just so unexpected when you see the synagogue leaders response to what has just happened. A lady, who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years was completely healed, and the first response of the spiritual leader... was not to say, "Praise God!" This is wonderful!" But rather, I don't like this! I'm going to find fault with this in some way!!! I mean, it's just crazy. I don't know what planet he was living on, but after something like this, he should have been joyful, happy for this lady, glad that God was moving in his synagogue!

Friends, when you slide into religiosity, you develop a over-critical spirit. Rather than seeing the good, you can only see the bad. I don't want this for you, I don't want this for me, I don't want this in our church community. So here's my plea to you... God is also moving in our midst, remember to encourage! Remember to celebrate what God is doing in people's lives, and be careful of a critical spirit. Encouragement over criticism. Here's the next thing we must remember...

2. PEOPLE OVER RULES

You see... to the religious leaders... following the rules... was more important than helping this lady. They probably argued... *“Well, she has been crippled for 18 years... what harm can one more day do! She should wait until the sabbath is over.”* They counted healing as ‘work.’ They forgot, that God had given a day’s rest... as a blessing... instead... they turned it into a ‘restrictive day of rules.’

For Jesus though... He could not wait another day to heal this lady – He cared more about people than rules.... He knew the Father’s heart about the sabbath... the day’s rest... and He knew that the leaders would be offended... but this lady was more important to him than worrying about their silly rules.

You see friends... the religious spirit just loves to come up with rules... There are already a bunch of rules in scripture, but religious people love to come up with even more! I’m sure you’ve faced some of them... particularly those of you who have been around the block a bit longer than others... Maybe you got told you weren’t allowed to go watch movies at the cinema! Maybe you got told you can’t wear jeans to church! Or the ladies needed to wear a hat! You know, there’s all this stuff. You can’t have drums in the church! Because that rock and roll music is evil! Wow. Religious people can actually be very creative in coming up with all these things that are wrong!

I think that’s why the religious people could never figure Jesus out... because he was always going against the status quo... and doing stuff like hanging out with “sinners.” He would spend time with ‘those’ kinds of people, and it just got the religious people so worked up! And they would say, *“Jesus! What are you doing with those people???”* And Jesus would say, *“These are my friends. I don’t approve of their sin, I don’t participate in their sin, but I love them, and I want to help them.”*

It would be like you and I looking at a Doctor and saying, *“What’s wrong with that Doctor... why is he always hanging out with sick people?! I mean... come on!!!”* Well, because he is a Doctor... and he is trying to help them, and he is the only one who can.

You see, Jesus loves people. And He came into this world to reach everyone, and he has a special heart for those who the world has written off.

But here’s the cool thing... Jesus also hung out with religious people. Because he loves everybody! But just like he never held back in challenging overt sinners, he never held back in challenging the inside sin of religious people.

Jesus, just before this incident in fact... had given a warning to the religious leaders that had not gone down well at all... the bible translators call it the “Woes”... there are about seven of them... and I know this is not exactly a pleasant passage to tackle, but I know that as a church we don’t shy away from these, because we want to grow! Amen?!

This weekend I found myself trying to find something else to preach on... I said; “Lord, can’t I preach on something nice! Something encouraging. That’s what I think we need! And I felt the Lord saying, “No Neil, this is my message to the church this morning.”

So today, this is me being obedient... and me being challenged as well. Here's the next point...

3. INSIDE OVER OUTSIDE.

Let's check out Luke chapter 11. In this passage, Jesus got invited to have a meal with some Pharisees. Which is really nice! I mean, who doesn't like to be invited out for lunch. Well, we pick up the story in **Luke 11:37**;

- **When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. ³⁸ But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.**
- **³⁹ Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?"**
- **⁴¹ But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.**

Jesus got really annoyed at these guys – He got invited for a meal, that's nice, but then they got upset with him for not following their rules. Basically, He got into trouble for not washing His hands before a meal! Now if you remember back to the miracle we looked at a few weeks ago... when Jesus turned the water into wine... you will remember that before meals... the Jews of the day washed their hands in ceremonial water. It was a religious thing for them, plus, it is also good hygiene 😊

But seriously... these religious leaders were reading too much into it – they began making it a major big deal, instead of just a good idea.

And one of the rules they had made was this. You have to wash your hands before dinner. Now the Bible never says, "*Thou must washeth thine hands!*" It never says that. But the religious guys got together and said, "Well, you need to wash your hands before dinner... and they decided... that's what the Lord says, thus saith the Lord! It's equal to the Bible. And so we will enforce it as such! Mmmmmmm.

So... when Jesus did not first wash... There's a serious theological point behind this... What he's saying is this: "I don't acknowledge your rules. Your rules are religious.

They may have had clean hands, but Jesus pointed out they didn't have clean hearts. It was all about appearance to them... and what others may say, not what was really inside.

And so God says; "People look at the outside. I look at the heart. I get to know who somebody really is and where they're really at." Religion can't judge the heart. It can only judge the external appearances. And as a result, it often judges wrongly.

I want to encourage you friends. Don't get caught up in all the outward trappings of religion. Don't forget that God looks at the heart. He looks at the inside. Remember to

put the inside stuff over the outside. How is your relationship with God? How's it going in your heart today? You see, it's no good looking all clean on the outside, when our hearts are dirty, and far from God. Here's the next thing...

4. IMPORTANT OVER PETTY

Take a look at **verse 42**;

- **“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.**

Jesus really gave them a hard time here, but for good reason – imagine going to the effort of tithing your mint in your herb garden! Sometimes the devil is in the details! I mean, imagine this, if you are harvesting a little bit of herbs from your veggie patch... would tithing your mint, and herbs even pop into your head? No – these guys were obsessed with little details... but in doing so... they missed out on what really matters to God – loving Him and dealing with injustice – not just a pinch of mint!

God is like – thank you for that tithe of mint, well done for being so correct with that, but there are actually bigger, more important things here that you are neglecting, like injustice, and the love of God. You got the tithing of your herbs right, but you're so focussed on that, that you've missed far more important things!

You see friends, religious people are really just committed to the wrong things. And I tell you this because some of us are still young Christians, and it's easy to get impressed by very religious people. “Wow! Look at how passionate they are! They get up early! They stay up late! They memorize stuff! They've got all kinds of things to do. They get down on their knees. They do all kinds of seemingly holy, important things.

And Jesus says, “No, let's unpack it. Actually... often they're prideful and they want you to see what they are doing... they want you to know what they tithe even their mint.” See... what we don't do... is we don't tell everybody what everybody else tithes. Tithing's where you give your finances generously to God and his people and purposes.

The problem with religious rules... is that religious people have preferences that they raise to the level of God's laws. Is it a sin to have preferences? No. It's not a sin at all. And what the religious people do, they like to move their preferences up to the level of God's law.

But the big idea is that we can't make rules for God. God makes the rules and those are sufficient. And you can have your preferences. But don't confuse God's principles and your methods.

Well, after speaking to them about this. They don't respond well. And Jesus now says... that the real heart of the issue, is that religious people want praise. They don't want God to be praised, they want praise. So church, I want to remind us all, that we are meant to have the same attitude as Jesus Christ, we need to be willing to humble

ourselves. And that's the next thing that break's through the barrier of religion. Humility.

5. HUMILITY OVER PRIDE

Jesus says in **verse 43**;

- **“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴ “Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.”**

Their pride comes out in that they love the most important seats. **They love the good seats.”**

Jesus also intimates that pride manifests itself with titles. Religious people love their titles! **“We're the Pharisees.”**

Now Jesus says this, and it's an amazing statement, **“Woe to you, for you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.”** That's a big statement.

And at first glance it might not make much sense to you and I, but in the Bible, in Numbers 19:16, it gives us an account where, when a body is buried, we're to honor that person who is deceased and you're not supposed to walk on their grave. It's a respect thing. And if you do, there was this whole ritually unclean thing that resulted in you having to go about cleansing yourself.

So they would put markers over the tombs and they would wash them white so you could see where the tombs were. And once in a while, people wouldn't do that, and by accident you would step on a grave, and you didn't know it and then all of a sudden you're unclean and had to go through a cleansing thing. Now that what a Old Testament thing, so don't stress about it, here's the point I want you to see though...

Here's what Jesus is saying. Number one, religious people are spiritually dead. Now, that's a very big statement. They are spiritually dead. You say, **“But they look alive! Look at all the things they're saying and doing and giving.”** But inwardly—see, externally they're alive physically, but inwardly they're dead spiritually. They don't know Jesus. They don't love Jesus. They don't enjoy Jesus.

And he says, in addition to that, **“Not only are you dead, you're defiling other people. You think you're making them clean? You're making them unclean. You think you're making them holy? You're making them unholy. You think you're liberating them? You're enslaving them. You think you're bringing them to God? You're bringing them to hell.”** I need you believe that about religion.

See, some people see religion and Jesus as almost synonymous. But they're so different. Humility over pride. And religion brings death and defiles people. Let's look at the next one...

6. HELPING OVER BURDENING

Verse 45;

- **One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.”⁴⁶ Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.**

In these verses we see that these guys are now starting to get offended... and they start to get defensive. And it points to another truth, that when you start to expose religious stuff... religious people get angry! And they begin to defend the things they worship.

I've heard about some churches battling to move to new buildings... because the people are so attached to the old church building, that they refuse to leave. Even though the church is growing and needs more space for new people. Makes you wonder. Perhaps for some, it's the idol of religion. It's not about a relationship with Jesus.

And Jesus here, in love, is giving the religious people a choice. He is saying, “You can have me... or religion. Which do you want?” Here's how they respond. ‘Teacher, in saying these things you insult us! This is fascinating. These religious people have been intimidating people, bullying people, making rules, enslaving people, discouraging people, insulting people themselves. And Jesus comes around and he breaks their rules and he tells them they're wrong and one of them walks out and says, “Jesus, you've insulted us!

But Jesus keeps at it... and He got to the crux of the issue – what they were doing... was just burdening people... it was not helping people. I think many of the rules and traditions that are associated with religion were well meaning and put in place to try to help people. But they became too much... and the focus shifted towards the rules rather than helping the person – people became overloaded and weighed down instead of helped. And so Jesus did not hold back... because He could see the results of their heavy rule books.

Friends, we are here to help one another grow in our faith. We're not here to overburden one another with more and more rules. Don't get sucked into that way of thinking or behaviour. We don't want to load people down with burdens they can't handle, we want to help one another. Helping over burdening. Just two more, here we go...

7. SPIRIT OVER TRADITION

Jesus says in Verse 47;

- **“Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them.⁴⁸ So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs.**
- **⁴⁹ Because of this, God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.’⁵⁰ Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world,**

- **⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.**

This is heavy stuff. Jesus is saying, this is a long-standing problem. It has been one generation after another of religion, tradition, and legalism, and control, and ultimately, it has to stop. You've held to your traditions, generation after generation, but you've quenched my spirit, and you've silenced my voice through the prophets.

He says, "All day you can pretend that you acknowledge the sin of the past, but if you're still the same in your heart, you're just going to manifest the same fruit in your life. You're going to do the same thing that was done in the past."

They memorialised prophets, but they also did not let them speak. This is a problem in religiosity – so many rules and traditions that God does get a word in. We become so comfortable in our rituals and traditions...that when God wants to bring challenge or correct something ... or let His spirit move... we freak out and don't know what to do. Are you too comfortable, set in your ways? Spirit over tradition... And lastly,

8. REDEMPTION OVER RELIGION

Verse 54;

- **"Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."**
- **⁵³ When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, ⁵⁴ waiting to catch him in something he might say.**

The final part of the barrier of these religious elite... is that they were actually stopping people from finding God rather than helping them. They seem like they have the knowledge... They know the stuff... but they've missed the key to it all, what this verse describes as "the key to knowledge" – because they themselves have not entered in themselves - but they have not implemented their faith. And so Jesus says they have become stumbling blocks to others, they have hindered others – because of their behaviour and their rules.

And so Jesus is saying, "I need to get the religious people out of the way so that the sinners can come to me." You see friends, Religion gets in the way of redemption. Religion gets in the way of redemption. But it is meant to be redemption over religion!

CONCLUSION

And so it must have been tough for these guys to listen to Jesus. We often paint these Pharisees as bad guys, but I realize many of them were probably well meaning. Yet they were just focused on the wrong things.

So what about you my friend? I've sat with these verses this weekend. Picturing myself having a meal with Jesus. Investigating my own life. Where I have criticised, when I should have encouraged. Where I have placed my rules over people. Where I have judged people by looking at the outside, and not seeing the inside. Where I have maybe become proud. Where I have burdened, instead of helped. Where I have stuck to my traditions, and what I know, over blazing new trails with the Holy Spirit. Where I have played church, and forgotten about redemption. Having lunch with Jesus is not as easy as it first sounds!

What about you? Has religion tripped you up? Has it become a barrier in your life? And are you a barrier builder, or a barrier breaker? I'm trusting that you will be a barrier breaker! And that our church will be a barrier breaking church, that encourages people before it criticises them! That it sees people as more important than all our religious man made rules. That we will look at the heart of people, and not focus on outside appearance. That we will focus on the right things, not petty things! But the bog important things. That we will remain humble, that we will help and not burden people... That we follow the spirit and not our traditions.. and that we will remember it's about redemption... people coming to know Jesus! Amen!

Let's pray together.