

Good Intentions, Wrong Direction

Summary

In this sermon drawn from Matthew 23, the pastor explores Jesus's confrontation with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, focusing on the first two of the seven woes. Jesus rebukes these religious leaders not simply because they were evil, but because they had become hypocrites who placed heavy burdens on others while failing to practice what they preached. Their pride, love of status, and rigid legalism made them gatekeepers who shut people out of the kingdom of heaven rather than welcoming them in. The pastor draws a parallel to moments in Adventist history when the church itself leaned too heavily on law and rules rather than on a relationship with Jesus. The sermon calls believers to examine their own hearts and ask honestly whether they have become barriers to the gospel. Using the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from Luke 18, the pastor highlights that genuine faith begins with humility, not a polished religious resume. The tax collector's simple, honest prayer, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner,' reflects the posture God honors. The challenge to the congregation is to open doors rather than close them, to walk alongside people with love and kindness, and to lead others toward Jesus through authentic relationships rather than judgment or unrealistic expectations.

Key Verses

- Matthew 23:1-4
- Matthew 23:11-12
- Matthew 23:13
- Matthew 23:15
- Luke 18:9-13

Questions

- Jesus describes the Pharisees as people who 'do not practice what they preach' (Matthew 23:3, NIV). In what areas of life do you think the gap between belief and behavior is hardest to close, and why?
- The sermon points out that faith begins with humility. What does humility in faith actually look like in everyday life, and how is it different from simply being passive or unsure of what you believe?
- Jesus says in Matthew 23:13 (NIV), 'You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.' In what ways, even unintentionally, can believers today act as gatekeepers who make it harder for

others to draw near to God?

- Pastor mentioned that Adventism has at times been more focused on the law than on Jesus, and that a meaningful shift began around 1888. How does an overemphasis on rules and standards affect the way a church community feels to someone who is new or struggling?
- In the parable from Luke 18, the Pharisee had an impressive religious resume but lacked love, while the tax collector offered only a simple, humble prayer. What does this contrast teach us about what God actually values in our relationship with Him?
- Pastor asked the congregation to reflect honestly on this question: 'Am I a barrier to the gospel?' How would you answer that question for yourself, and what specific attitudes or habits might be getting in the way?
- The sermon emphasizes that relationships are essential to leading people to Jesus. What does it look like practically to walk alongside someone in faith without pressuring them or placing unfair expectations on them?
- Pastor encouraged the group to meet people where they are spiritually, using the image of feeding a baby before offering solid food. How do we balance sharing the full truth of the gospel with being patient and sensitive to where someone is in their spiritual journey?

Life Application

This week, identify one person in your life who may feel distant from God or from the church. Rather than offering advice or correction, simply reach out with a note of encouragement, a genuine question about how they are doing, or an offer to pray for them. Let your goal be to open a door, not to deliver a lesson. Ask God each morning to give you eyes to see the people around you who need to feel welcomed rather than judged.

Key Takeaways

- Faith begins with humility. The Pharisees' pride and love of status blinded them to who Jesus truly was, and the same pride can blind us today to our own blind spots and the needs of those around us.
- Gatekeeping keeps people from God. When believers place heavy expectations on others, focus more on rules than on relationships, or make people feel they never measure up, they become barriers to the very gospel they claim to represent.
- Authentic faith requires personal engagement with Scripture. The pastor challenged the congregation not to outsource their faith but to wrestle with God's Word, ask honest questions, and remain open to growth and change.

- The posture God honors is humble dependence, not religious achievement. The tax collector's simple prayer in Luke 18:13 (NIV), 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner,' reflects the kind of heart that God lifts up.
- We are called to open doors, not close them. Following Jesus means walking alongside people with love and kindness, meeting them where they are, and pointing them toward Him through genuine relationship.