

“Ash Sunday--Breaking Down the Barriers”

So, by now you've probably got some ideas already of what some barriers might be that exist between you and God. But I want to name three kinds, or groups of barriers between us and God and the first one is sin. **Barriers to God—Sin.** A police officer pulled a car over in a city in Southern Texas. The officer walked up to the driver's window and said, "Don't worry, I'm not pulling you over for breaking the law. We're actually pulling people over and giving them a reward for wearing their seatbelts, and since you are the 100th person you have won \$5,000!"

The driver of the car was ecstatic! He was so excited and said, "That's great! Now I can pay all my fines and get my driver's license back!" The officer got a puzzled look on his face and then the person in the passenger seat leaned over toward the officer and said, "Oh, officer don't listen to him! He says all kinds of crazy things when he's been drinking." About that time the passenger in the back seat who was sleeping woke up startled and said, "I told you we wouldn't get very far in a stolen car!" And about that same time there was a thumping sound coming from the trunk and voice said, "are we over the border yet?"

The Bible says this, **"You may be sure that your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23)**. In other words, you can be sure that at some point, in some way our sins will be exposed. That's not always a bad thing. Naming our sins can be painful, but sometimes we've got to go through that pain in order to clear the way.

In Galatians 5 we see a list of things that Paul calls the acts of the sinful nature. It's a good place to start when it comes to sin. Paul writes, **"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21)**

We can look at a list like this and say, "Those are some old sins, they don't really relate to us today. I didn't think that some of them were sins anymore? Is that really still a sin?" Well, yes it is! And sin is always going to affect our relationship to God, and it's going to put distance between us, and keep us feeling ashamed, and keep us outside of God's plan, keep us from feeling God's presence like we should.

Paul talks about sins that relate to our bodies. One of them is sexual immorality—It may be hard to believe in the 21st century, but what you do with your genitals matters to God. God's not trying to spoil our fun, he wants us to live rich full lives and knows that when we are sexually immoral, having sex outside of marriage, using pornography, sexting, using sex to manipulate people, or just plain old idolizing the orgasm. Doing any of this hurts us and hurts others. I stopped counting the number of people who have told me the sadness, the sorrow, the grief, the heart break they've carried because they slept around, they were promiscuous. Not to mention the abortions, the diseases. There's a reason God tells us to be sexually pure.

Paul lists debauchery and drunkenness and orgies which are all about letting the pursuit of pleasure take control of you, letting desire take control of you, to the point that you no longer care what anyone thinks, or what the costs are.

Paul talks about sins of the body and sins of the soul. Like Idolatry. Idolatry is worshipping created things rather than the creator. We do this all the time. We worship money and what money can buy. We worship our homes, our cars, our boats, our stuff. We can worship our families, our spouses, our kids. We can worship our work or our hobbies. We can worship success, however we define it, whether we have attained it, or just want it really bad and don't care who we use, or what we do to get it. For lots of us, we worship comfort. We spend huge amounts of time and money on not being too cold or too hot, or too hungry or too full. We don't want to do anything that takes us outside our comfort zones—the little bubbles that we live in. We think being comfortable is what life is all about. We worship the god of comfort. That is idolatry; it's a sin and it will keep you from God. Anything that becomes the number one priority in our lives besides God, that has become an idol and idolatry is big heavy barrier.

Paul also lists some relational sins. Hatred. This is having a hostile attitude toward people—your family, co-workers, neighbors. It's the exact opposite characteristic of Christian love. Then there's discord.

This means seeing everybody as a rival to the point where you're always in cutthroat competition with others. Then there's jealousy. This is not being content with what you have. It's like telling God, "You ripped me off. You haven't done enough for me, I want what he has." Then there's fits of rage. When this sin takes hold, people around you always walk on eggshells because one minute you're fine, but all it takes is one little thing and you explode. This is telling us that this is not a character trait, it's a sin. You can't excuse by saying, "It's just the way I'm wired."

Then there's dissension. This is having the chronic tendency to pull away from people, instead of be in community with them. To always find an excuse to keep from being in authentic relationships. It's always finding the faults in people so you can keep your distance. Then there's factions. This is focusing on your differences with other people to the point that you no longer can communicate with them. It's an unwillingness to look for common ground with someone. The last one in this list is **envy**. This goes beyond jealousy and wanting what someone else has. Envy is seeing what someone else has and wishing that it was taken from them—that could be a material thing, or a talent, or even their faith. Does anything on this list hit home with anybody? It does for me. Sin just destroys our relationship with God.

A zookeeper felt it was imperative to warn his friend, Julie, that the wild raccoon she had made a pet could turn dangerous. When raccoons are about 24 months old they go through a hormonal change and can get vicious. Julie told him, "It will be different for me...Bandit would never hurt me." Three months later Julie underwent plastic surgery on her face because her adult raccoon attacked her for no apparent reason.

Way too often, sin comes to us as something that looks adorable, cute, cuddly. We play with it and say, "It will be different for me." The results are predictable.

So what do we do about the barriers of sin? We've got internalize that Jesus is ready to forgive us. That's what the cross is all about. His forgiveness is a gift, but, like all gifts, it's up to us to accept it. How do we do that? Two words, confession and repentance. Confessing means we stop hiding and get honest with God about our sin. Will you do it? Will you stop hiding behind excuses and get honest? Will you invite God to show you the illusions that you've bought into, that cloud your vision? Confess.

Repentance literally means to have a new mind. A new way of thinking. It means to have new thoughts. Paul said it this way, "**Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**" (Romans 12:2).

To repent also means to turn from one thing and toward another. It means to turn from sin, from temptation, from the stuff that makes us look away from God, and turn toward Jesus and his example and his teachings. Repentance is about making a change, a positive change in moving toward God. Confession and Repentance.

Another kind of barrier for me, between me and God, is my but. **Barriers to God—Excuses.** I want my faith to be authentic, I want to follow where God leads me, I want to serve with God in the world. I want to do all that, but my but gets in the way. Maybe your but is a barrier to. But I have to work. But my favorite TV program is on. But my kids have practice. But it's such beautiful day. But it's such a gloomy day. But I'm not in the mood. But I don't feel very smart. But somebody else should that. But we've never done it that way before. Whatever God asks us to do, we've got a but for it.

In Luke 14 Jesus tells a story about a banquet. A man puts on a huge banquet, a really big party and sends out invitations for people to come and join the party. "**But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'** Another said, '**I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'** Still another said, '**I just got married, so I can't come.'**" (Luke 14:18-20).

Jesus invites us to experience something amazing. Choosing to follow him changes our lives radically. Instead of making excuses, let's be the kind of people who say "yes." A few well-placed yes's can change your life. Don't let your but, your excuses, be a barrier.

One final kind of barrier and that's feelings of unworthiness. **Barriers to God—Feeling Unworthy.** This is one I've struggled with my whole life. I have this committee inside my head made up of about 10

people, and one or two of them have these really big mouths and they're constantly telling me that I'm failure, that I'm a disappointment to God and everybody, that I am unworthy of anything good. And at times I believe them.

Sigmund Freud once wrote: *"I have found little that is good about human beings; in my experience most of them are trash"* (Cited by Robert Wolff in *About Philosophy*, 5th edition (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1992), p. 284). Way too many people believe that. And if you think you're worthless then you treat yourself that way. It doesn't matter what you do to yourself, what temptations you give into, what evil you pursue, your life doesn't have meaning.

Jesus said, "I call you my friends." He said, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17).** God knows you by name, and he loves you more than you could imagine or believe. Yes, he's got some high expectations for your life, but he's telling right now, and over and over again, that he will help you and walk with you always. The challenge here is to let him love you.

So we've got the barriers between us and God. Because of them, we don't feel God's warmth, his closeness, his direction. Now the barriers we set up between us and God, we need to know this, they don't keep God's love from us. Paul tells us in Romans 8, **"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).**

Even if we have put up some serious barriers between us and God that God still loves us. God's love can push through any barrier. It's just that because of the barriers, we have a growing difficulty in experiencing God, in feeling close to God, in hearing from God when we want and need direction.

Here's what I say. I say that you're looking at barrier or two between you and God right now. No matter what he loves you. You can keep those barriers there, God will still feel distant. Or you can do your part and start the demolition work. Start dismantling the barricades. Give them to God, let him do the heavy lifting with you. He's ready, don't wait another day. So are you ready to knock down the barriers? Now is your time to let God love you. Please let him.

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.