Good morning, I’m Teresa Gruber and I have a confession. I spend more time on Facebook then I probably should, but I really enjoy seeing all the pictures and posts from my family and friends located all around the country. Facebook gives me a way to connect with them like I couldn’t otherwise. Amongst all their posts, and the news articles, and the ads – I also see a lot of posts from religious organizations or nationally recognized religious leaders. And sometimes I can’t help but wonder what witness we are giving as Christians? Last month I had the opportunity to participate on one of the panel discussions during the Rejected sermon series. Colleen Kargel, Andrea Hendrickson, and I along with Pastor David, spent time working through the end of Luke chapter 11. In this passage Jesus sat down for a meal with some pharisees and scribes, and he doesn’t hold back in expressing his frustration with them. He calls the pharisees out for their focus on rituals and appearance, how others view them and how they view others. He calls out the scribes for interpreting and teaching the law in a way that it’s too much of a burden for the people to adhere to.

During our discussion Andrea shared how tempting it is to think this doesn’t apply to us – I’m not a pharisee – I’m not a scribe. But then each of us acknowledged – we are. When we looked at applying these passages to our lives we recognized places where we as individuals and as organized churches, have acted as the pharisees and scribes in this chapter. The discussions we had really got me thinking on how we too at times lose focus or place our focus on the wrong thing, and the obstacles that places in the way of others coming to faith. Today I want us to consider four specific obstacles.

The photos I post or see posted on Facebook, obviously there is a thought to appearances and how others will view us. Before I take a picture of a pretty flower in my garden, I pull the weeds nearby. Before posting a picture of my cats doing something cute, I check the background for signs of a messy house. I don’t want people to see me as a poor housekeeper. Then consider for a moment all the rituals, all the ceremony that surrounds church life. There are the major items – like baptism, marriage, funerals. There are times that fill our calendar, Ad-vent, Christmas, Lent, Easter. And there are the more frequent events – like Sunday worship, communion. We put a lot of effort into planning for these things, How do we respond when these rituals, these ceremonies, do not go as we expect, or as we have planned? Are we focused on the appearance of the ritual or purpose?

The first obstacle I’d like us to consider is lack of authenticity. A few years ago our church went through the Healthy Church Initiative and had to consider ways we needed to change. During the early consultations we were asked if there is anything we are not willing to give up. I remember acknowledging the one thing for me was Christmas Eve, singing Silent Night at midnight by candlelight. The first Christmas during the pandemic, our church, like most, were not meeting in person. No candlelight service. No encircling the sanctuary while we all pass the flame and raise our voices, singing acapella. And while I missed it I found other ways that year to worship and to spend some quiet time just filled with the awe and wonder – in private. Previously my focus was on the ritual action, I am thankful that the pandemic forced me to shift my focus back to what really mattered in that scenario.

During our panel discussion Colleen asked Are you in worship to get closer to Christ, or are you there just as part of the ritual and looking for the theater? It’s an interesting question to consider as a church body. Mega churches often fall prey to criticism that they are too focused on putting on a show. How about us, at a relatively small church? Our generational bridge and sermon messages are presented with a certain amount of showmanship with some attention to the delivery and the quality of our graphics. We have the musicians, sharing their talent and leading us in singing. When they work out the arrangement there is a fine line between using their talents for praise and providing entertainment. There are even times I don’t sing along, I’m just not feeling it.

We need to constantly consider the why for all these rituals we perform, are they reflecting our hearts and motivation, or do we do them so we can appear to be doing what is expected of us or so people view us a certain way. As a church, are we focused on worshipping God, or are we focused on the response and reaction of people in the congregation? As participants in the congregation are you focused on worship or on what others around you may be thinking of you in those moments. Those times I don’t sing along. I can’t help but consider. If I sing along then, is it because I’m conforming to the ritual requirement, worried that others may look at me and think I’m not worshiping as I should? OR If I don’t sing along, is it because I’m not personally entertained by it? How about you? Do you ever go along with an activity at church because of what others may think if you don’t? Or find yourself mentally checking out on a sermon message you’re not quite tuned in to.

The pharisees had a problem with being overly concerned with appearances. They wanted others to see them as being holy, they wanted others to see how good and righteous they were. We need to be sure we are not performing in church out of concern for how others may view us but rather driven by our love for God.

When we consider all these scenarios, it comes down to authenticity. Are we authentically worshipping, or are we performing a ritual to be seen as holy or to entertain? It’s expected that the personal pictures I share with others shows things intentionally at their best. But when I share religious message on Facebook, is it because I found it meaningful and want to share with others – or because I want them to think I’m a good Christian. Just like people know a lot of pictures you share have been staged, they can often tell if your actions are genuine.

The second obstacle is really closely related, hypocrisy. Authenticity has to do with the heart, how you feel, your motivation. Hypocrisy takes it a step further where you act in a way that contradicts what you have stated. Titus 1 verse 6a, They claim to know God, but they deny God by the things that they do. In other words, actions speak louder than words. This is one that Christians are frequently labeled with. I bet all of us have at some point expressed an opinion about the actions of someone else – whether it’s someone we know personally, or someone in the news like an entertainer or a politician. And after expressing our opinion someone else has said – “The Bible says not to judge. You’re judging.” I looked through multiple articles about Christian hypocrisy and one thing I found mentioned in almost every one – we’re all human, and we’re all guilty of some level of hypocrisy. The key is to acknowledge it, to own it, and to extend grace to others when we witness their hypocrisy.

While working on this sermon, I really wanted to provide a personal example. Funny thing is though, it is really hard to identify and acknowledge our own hypocrisies, but very easy to identify them in others. In fact, those of you who are connected with me on Facebook, I bet you could have helped me out here. One reason it’s hard for us to identify is because when it comes to our own hypocrisies, we have a tendency to defend or justify ourselves. So one way we can identify our own hypocrisies is to consider any values you strongly assert, and measure your actions against those values – consider if you find yourself justifying where your actions diverge from your stated value.

This is actually something our church did after going through the Healthy Church Initiative. We looked at all our ministries through the lens of our mission statement. For an organization, our mission statement is a key way to identify our priorities, what we care about, what we value, and everything else should flow from supporting that mission. We made sure our focus as a church matched what was stated as our mission.

I mentioned how Christians are often called out as hypocrites for judging others. Yet we are called to discern right and wrong, we are called to accountability. Without those we would live in a world where anything goes. There is a fine line between discernment and judging. The third obstacle I’d like to call out is judging others. How do we walk that fine line between discernment and judgment? One way to consider it, is that judgement is typically concrete and condemning. This is right, that is wrong. However discernment is more tempered. It’s comparing the situation to your established boundaries and deciding whether it fits within those boundaries or not, for example a behavior that is not compatible with your beliefs. It also helps to separate the action or belief from the person. Instead of indicating that person is wrong, indicate that behavior is not compatible with your belief.

Most of the time judgement is directed more at significant behaviors, beliefs, or actions. But sometimes our judgement is more about conforming to societal expectations. Back when I was in confirmation, many years ago, we had a retreat weekend where we visited other places of worship. Some were other faiths, like a Jewish temple, but most were other Christian denominations. Most of us dressed the same as we did for church weekly. As teenagers, that means our outfits were similar to what we wore to school – you know, our cool clothes. I recall walking in to one place where the people gave us a wide berth. They appeared to be really dressed up. Ladies and girls in dresses. Men and boys in either suits or at least long sleeve shirt and tie. The look on most faces clearly showed they did not think we belonged there. Some looked at us like we were something to be scrapped off their shoes. A few of their teenagers snickered and said “thanks for dressing up”. We put up obstacles to others when we expect them to conform to our societal expectations on things that are relatively unimportant, and that is especially true when we let them know that we expect them to conform. How we dress, style our hair, personal hygiene, how we talk, our mannerisms, bringing drinks into the sanctuary, wearing a hat inside, using a physical Bible or an app, do you stand when we sing, do you fold your hands when you pray. Try to recognize your biases on these items and set them aside.

Romans chapter 14 is a great place to spend time to address the issue of bias and judgment. It starts out right away in verse 1 – Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. Then again in verse 5 it says One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. We are going to have differences over these disputable matters, yet we need to set them aside and be in unity. Keep our focus on the main things, reserve our disagreements for the key tenets of our faith.

The fourth obstacle is our tendency to overcomplicate things. I mentioned Jesus was frustrated with the scribes because they interpreted the laws in a way that is overly burdensome. During the panel discussion Colleen shared that she thinks we spend too much time on the shoulds and oughts, the what is right and wrong, and we’re overcomplicating it – making being a Christian something unapproachable. Andrea exclaimed Do not hinder others from seeking and finding God! And she asked: Do we create barriers for other Christians and non-Christians? Do we have a litmus test for being Christian enough? We often overcomplicate the message when we list the do’s and don’ts for believers.

The Bible tells us in Romans 10 verse 9: If you confess Jesus as Lord, and believe, you are saved. Notably it does not say if you attend church regularly. It does not say if you tithe 10% from your earnings. It does not say if you pray every day. And I could go on about the things that are not in that very short and sweet verse. And if you start to think it’s not really that simple, consider the passage at the end of Luke 23, when Jesus is on the cross with criminals beside him. Even in those last final moments of life, one of the criminals acknowledged Jesus who responded “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

To be clear. There are passages about forming churches, giving generously, praying, other things that we should or should not do. But those are things we do in response to the gift of salvation. Those are things we do when we long for a closer relationship with Christ. It is through faith and not works that we are saved.

We even at times over complicate reading of the Bible. I see Christians comment on Facebook regularly indicating that everything we need to know to live right we can learn by reading the Bible. But then I also see people using verses out of context or complaining about someone else using verses out of context. Or needing to consider other passages in the Bible. Or which translation to use. Or needing to consider the nuances of the words used in the original text. Jesus called out the scribes for interpreting and teaching the law in a way that it’s too much of a burden for the people to adhere to. We need to be careful that we don’t do the same to interpreting and teaching the Bible. The Bible is for everyone, not just those with advanced studies. Who wants to read a book they’ve been told is so complicated to understand? This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t go deeper – It is absolutely a good thing to desire to get deeper into the word. But know your audience. The place to get deeper isn’t on social media or some other public setting in a discussion with unbelievers. While it’s true that iron sharpens iron, it’s harmful to softer materials.

Give some thought in the coming week to how you as an individual or our church as an organization, inadvertently puts up obstacles keeping others from faith. Consider ways to remove those obstacles. Think about your motivations, refocus your purpose. Think twice – or more – before saying something disparaging, are you condemning or just setting boundaries? And give yourself some grace, after all – We’re human!

I think Colleen summarized it well when we went through our panel discussion: It comes down to love God and love others. This is what all of Jesus’ teachings come down to. Put everything through this filter of loving God and others, and the rest–what’s not important–will fall away.