

5 BARRIERS TO FREEDOM

**REMOVING OBSTACLES
THAT BLOCK YOUR PEACE**

RICHARD PARRISH

CONTENTS

[5 Barriers to Freedom](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1: The Fear Barrier](#)

[Chapter 2: The Negativity Barrier](#)

[Chapter 3: The Approval Barrier](#)

[Chapter 4: The Prejudice Barrier](#)

[Chapter 5: The Tolerance Barrier](#)

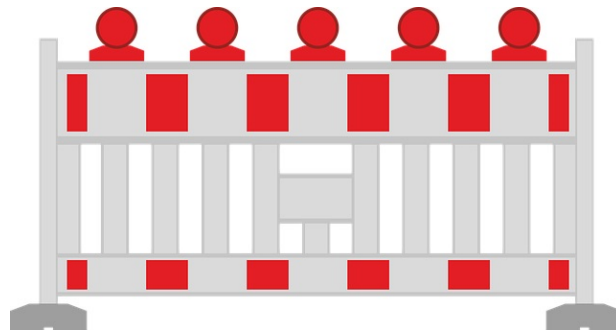
[About the Author](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Endnotes](#)

5 BARRIERS TO FREEDOM

Removing Obstacles that Block Your Peace



Richard Parrish

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PREFACE

Imagine this. You are driving down the highway when you approach barriers warning that your lane will soon come to an end. Workers strategically placed them in your path, ensuring you would see them in plenty of time. Because of their due diligence, you are able to merge safely into another lane, avoiding a potential accident. Of course, not everyone heeds these important measures.

There are always a few impatient drivers who insist on ignoring the warnings. I'm confident I'm not the only one who has experienced some annoyance by these drivers who believe they must be first!

Some refuse to merge safely. They go as long and fast as they can to get ahead of the traffic, and at the last second, quickly "cut" in front of the person who has patiently waited the warning signs. Often, they put themselves and others at risk.

"These barriers are not placed in our way to annoy us but to protect us."

These barriers are not placed in our way to annoy us but to protect us. Someone at the Department of Safety did not wake up one morning and wonder: *How can I irritate commuters today?*

Hard to believe, I know! When I feel restricted, I have to release that image from my mind—the picture in my head of the unknown person from the Department of Safety who I see smirking at me.

Every week, I remind myself of this when traveling on freeways that are continually under construction. I have to remember, reducing my speed—and at times—taking a detour is for my protection. These barriers slow me down and redirect me, so I arrive safely.

External barriers, however annoying, are for our protection.

We are all familiar with external “protecting barriers.” But what about internal blockades that restrict our freedom? These are not as easy to see as the “glow-in-the-dark” warning cones on the highway.

In this e-book, I want to make you aware of five barriers that hinder our freedom. These internal blockades are not as easy to see, but no less important than highway warnings. Without purposeful attention to these areas, we will not fully experience the freedom God desires for us.

"Without purposeful attention to these areas, we will not fully experience the freedom God desires for us."

5 Barriers to Freedom explores why fear and negative thinking bring us to a standstill. You will learn how the need for approval and prejudices prevent the freedom we seek. You will see how the false (but popular) definition of tolerance can enslave us. We will also examine positive steps to assist us in experiencing the freedom God intends for each of us.

One does not journey through life without encountering barriers—external and internal. Some guard us against danger. Others hinder our progress. Failure to notice, and *heed* these warning obstacles, puts us in a direct path to disaster.

My prayer is that you will not only observe—and pay attention to—these internal barriers, but that you will discover practical ways to remove them, so you will enter the freedom God desires for you.

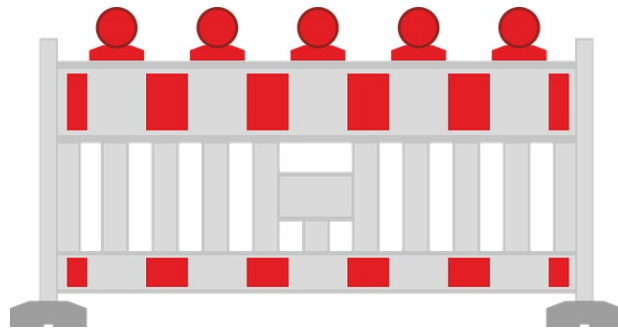
CAUTION! CAUTION! CAUTION!

Although you may be tempted to accelerate and get ahead of the traffic, it's to your advantage to ponder and process the warning signs you discover while reading. Exercise patience, allowing God to establish the safe speed and route in which you are to travel safely.

Enjoy a personal and amazing trip with God.

CHAPTER 1

The Fear Barrier



Chapter One: The Fear Barrier

You will never escape it. At times, it seems unbearable and overpowering. Even the mightiest of men and women have dropped to their knees by its force.

This menace thwarts many dreams. It can prove an intimidating enemy that limits our potential and crushes our aspirations. If we allow it to dominate us, we will remain (in the words of William Shakespeare) "... bound in shallows and in miseries."^[1]

I'm talking about fear.

Not all fear is unhealthy. At times it's our friend—warning us of danger. For instance, living in the desert area of Phoenix, it's not uncommon to see rattlesnakes. As I learned, fear can save you.

I was playing a round of golf. Unlike professionals who accurately place their shots in fairways, I often find mine slicing into the rough. On this day, I tried to locate my poorly hit ball amidst the coarse landscape.

Suddenly, a loud sound made me freeze. The rapid buzzing of a rattlesnake's tail alerted me to danger. My heart beat fast. I scoured the ground until my eyes located the snake. Afraid to move, I stood still and stared.

It took several seconds, but the snake finally slithered away--slowly. Very slowly. It took even longer for my pulse to normalize.

As nerve-wracking as that encounter was, I was grateful for the healthy fear that protected me from danger. But not all fear is healthy.

"Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world."

Though no one can confirm who originally said it, several important philosophers have been credited with the saying, "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world."^[2] Regardless of who originated it, I can personally confirm this statement is true.

One phone call, years ago, was all it took to unleash a fury of fear in me. Between pastoring churches, I started a small consulting business. Soon, my firm enjoyed an upswing and things were looking good. I added staff, took out a loan to purchase the necessary equipment to expand, and then moved our company into new office space.

At the height of our momentum, I was not ready for the sudden—and unexpected—economic slump. Nor was I prepared for our largest client to terminate their contract.

Suddenly, without seeing it coming, one phone call unleashed paralyzing emotions from inside me. *What am I going to do? How will I manage the loan, rent, and overhead? What will I say? And how will I break the news to my staff?*

The situation so overwhelmed me that I finally reached the point where I laid in a fetal position. My fear debilitated me and prevented me from moving. I certainly wasn't capable of taking action. For three days and nights, all I could do between moments of exhausted sleep, was cling to my Bible and cry out to God for help. I found the comfort I sought.

Paul writes to young Timothy, a minister called by God who served under challenging surroundings and who faced fear, daily.

*“For this reason, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; **for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.**”^{3} [Emphasis mine]*

I was young when I entered the ministry. It wasn't my calling I questioned, but my perceived lack of aptitude. My confidence quickly vanished when confronted by older, wiser, and seasoned Christians. When unexpected problems arose, I felt as if I was baptized with fear, rather than faith. Today, there are moments when I still feel that way.

Some theologians think Timothy's struggle had something to do with people who questioned his authority as a minister, called by God. After all, he was young and lacked experience.

It's not clear as to what Timothy's fear was truly based on. But regardless of its source, Paul feels the necessity to remind him—and us—how important it is to overcome unhealthy fear.

As a follower of Christ, we have a “spirit of confidence, not cowardice.” The word Paul uses as “cowardice” (in the Greek “δειλία”), conveys a meaning of fear. This type of anxiety leads to timidity or faint-heartedness—a failure of spirit, caused by fear.

Fear is active and alive!

According to a “Survey on American Fears” by Chapman University^[4], the dominating concerns of many Americans in 2019 were:

- Corrupt Government Officials
- American Healthcare Act/Trumpcare
- Pollution of Oceans, Rivers, and Lakes
- Pollution of Drinking Water
- Not having enough money for the future
- High Medical Bills
- The US will be involved in another World War
- Global Warming and Climate Change
- North Korea using weapons
- Air Pollution

It appears there is an abundance of anxieties that trouble Americans today, not to mention the common phobias of spiders, snakes, and fear of public speaking. Even church leaders are not immune to this sometimes, debilitating emotion.

A non-scientific survey conducted by Thom S. Rainer^[5] revealed that pastors and church leaders are concerned with issues such as: apathy and internal focus, staff issues, leading and keeping volunteers, generational challenges, and finances.

Pick your fear. If one or more of the concerns listed above doesn't match your anxiety, I'm confident you can add to the list. Metaphorical rattlesnakes can come in all kinds of packages.

"Metaphorical rattlesnakes can come in all kinds of packages."

While our environment may differ from young Timothy's surroundings during biblical times, we have one thing in common: an on-going need to *rekindle*, *re-connect*, and *receive*.

As a young boy, one of my chores was to rekindle the flames in our fireplace. Each morning, the ashes were still warm though the embers often looked dead. However, slivers of new wood called kindling, carefully placed on the heated coals, infused with a slow and steady blowing of air, caused the kindling to ignite.

This image reminds me that my fear can cause me to believe the fire has gone out—that there's no possible way I can accomplish my dreams, desires, and callings. My childhood memory also helps me understand that it's my responsibility to consistently rekindle and re-ignite those dreams, desires, and callings.

1 John 4:18 reminds us:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

Since God is perfect love, God casts out our fear. When I become more consumed with fear than God, it is a sure sign I need to *re-ignite* and *re-connect* with God.

As I re-connect, I become open to receiving from God. Paul assures Timothy—and us—that we *receive* a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.

"The power needed to relinquish fear is beyond me."

The power needed to relinquish fear is beyond me. When I was in my direful position on my bed, paralyzed by fear after my business failing, God heard my plea. Slowly and gently, a light of hope became brighter than the darkness of my despair. As I reconnected with God, courage displaced my cowardice.

Why and how was this possible? Because unhealthy fear cannot remain in the presence of God's love. God is perfect, and His love casts out all doubt.

God knows, when left to ourselves, we lack the kind of love required to reflect His love to others. The re-kindling process provides the self-discipline required to re-ignite God's flame of love within us. As we re-connect with God's love, hope is once again rediscovered.

What's your fear? Does it keep you awake at night? Do you recognize how debilitating it is? Is your dream fading? Perhaps, it's time to re-ignite, re-connect, and receive God's gifts that remove the barrier of fear.

When you are ready, God's love transforms despair into hope!



Breaking Barriers

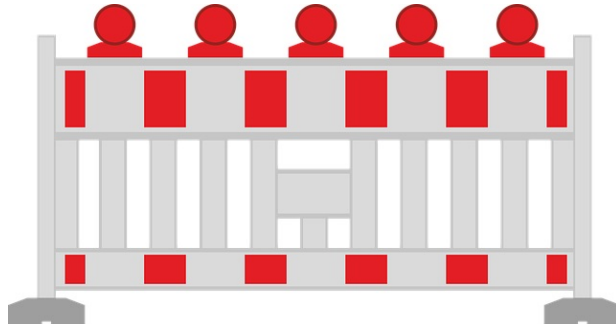
During an average day, how many times would you say fear threatens to undermine you?

When has healthy fear saved you from a dire situation?

How can you connect to God's love and allow it to smother overwhelming fear?

CHAPTER 2

The Negativity Barrier



Chapter Two: The Negativity Barrier

How you think is critical. One common barrier that prevents people from experiencing freedom is negative thinking. As W. Clement Stone wrote: *“Bondage is subjection to external influences and internal negative thoughts and attitudes.”*^[6]

It’s not easy, but I work hard to turn my negative thinking into a positive outlook. I’ve had to develop this practice through years of exercise. Messages I received as a child encouraged me to see the glass as half-empty, rather than half-full. Some of those impressionable messages delivered by people in my life were intentional—others were not.

“Messaging carries power. ‘How you think’ matters, because your thinking shapes much of who you are!”

Despite the motives, words and thoughts influence our way of thinking. Messaging carries power. “How you think” matters, because your thinking shapes much of who you are!

In the Bible, Solomon teaches: *Be careful what you think because your thoughts run your life* (Proverbs 4:23, NCV). This sage advice alerts us to how our thoughts directly influence the heart—our source of life. If the wellspring becomes polluted, its substance is unsafe.

Jesus reminds us that if the treasure of our heart is pure, then we will produce good things. If it’s evil, then that which comes out of our life will be unholy. He helps us remember that even our speech is directly affected by what’s in our heart:

“...for, it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”^[7]

“If the treasure of our heart is pure, then we will produce good things.”

Our heart is more than our mental or emotional capacity; it also encompasses our values. Jesus reminds us, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also.”^[8]

How we think and what we esteem, determine the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Thoughts sown in the soil of pessimism grow into mental weeds negatively affecting our emotions, feelings, mental and spiritual health. They yield a harvest of anxiety and spiritual disorders.

“Thoughts sown in the soil of pessimism grow into mental weeds negatively affecting our emotions, feelings, mental and spiritual health.”

If you're inclined to negative thinking, here are some things that help me.

1. Ask yourself this question: *What am I thinking?*

When was the last time you consciously considered your thoughts? We're inclined to let them run through our minds without even thinking about what we're thinking. Let me repeat that a little differently, so it can sink in. We don't stop to think about what we're thinking.

When I'm in deep contemplation, my wife, Vicki, will ask, "What are you thinking?"

Her question causes me to stop and pay attention to the messages bouncing around inside my brain. Like a numbness that dulls my focus, it's easy for me to "drift" unaware of my thoughts.

The mind is always active, creating various thoughts. We can't stop them. If you doubt this, just tell yourself to quit thinking about something. Like a magnet, your brain becomes attracted to that which you have willed yourself to stop considering.

However, it is possible to learn how to think about what we're thinking!

"Awareness is the first step."

The first step is to notice the messages playing in your mind. Without an intentional, conscious act on our part to identify our thoughts, they can quickly become an irritating loop, creating angst. Awareness is the first step.

"What am I thinking?" is an essential question for each of us to ask ourselves—frequently.

2. Remember, thoughts are just thoughts.

Self-disparaging messages are not the only impressions that surface in our minds. I can assure you, not every thought I have is wholesome. Shocking isn't it? But it's true.

It's difficult for some to believe that ministers are also susceptible to impure, unholy, and unhealthy thoughts. Yet, we are human beings and are not immune to unrighteous notions.

The instigator of wicked thoughts does not discriminate. Nor is the evil one intimidated by sacred spaces. Let me show you what I mean.

I had accepted an invitation to speak at a conference. As we were singing and worshipping, just before I was to talk, a vile, impure thought surfaced in my brain. *Where did that come from?* I wondered. I felt alarmed, and very thankful no one in the room could read my mind.

Thoughts—vile or virtuous, corrupt or pure, evil or selfless—can surface anytime, anyplace, and to anyone. As shocking as that fleeting, unwholesome intrusion was to me at that moment, I reminded myself that it was only a thought, and I had the ability to tame it.

Now, if you have never had an un-healthy or perverted impression, you can stop reading now. For the rest of us, it will be helpful to continue on.

"As shocking as that fleeting, unwholesome intrusion was to me at that moment, I reminded myself that it was only a thought, and I had the ability to tame it."

Not every thought you have is noble, accurate, or deserving of your time and energy. But an impure or deprecating image does not make you unholy or unworthy. No matter how corrupt the mental message, it is void of any power to establish your identity or worth.

Although we may have no control over what thoughts emerge in our minds, we can know the source, allowing us to take jurisdiction over the messaging. Thoughts do not have to control us.

We will never entirely escape unholy or discrediting notions. However, by reminding ourselves they are powerless to establish our character and cannot control us (unless we allow them to), we can stop the endless loop of condemning or corrupting messages that play over and over. *We are not obligated to become negative thinkers.* And we are not powerless!

3. Understand—you are not the only one who plays inside your mind.

Growing up, my mother often reminded me, “Richard, your mind is the devil’s playground.” She was right.

Cartoons typically picture the devil as a red-horned being with a long tail and pitchfork. Paul, the apostle, finds no humor in the enemy of our souls, nor does he take Satan’s opposition against us lightly. He (Paul) recognizes that we are in a war:

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”^[9]

Our enemy desires to tempt and deceive us. His strategy of warfare takes place in our minds. The apostle Paul reminds us we have weapons to combat our enemy:

*“... the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments, and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, **and we take every thought captive to obey Christ**”^[10] [Emphasis mine].*

It's up to each of us to take every message that enters our brains and submit them to the purpose of Christ.

4. Choose ideas worth entertaining.

Our thoughts have no power to control us unless we permit them to do so. Just because a feeling presents itself, does not require me to give it attention.

So, how do we know which thoughts to entertain and which ones to reject? Paul writes:

*"...whatever is **true**, whatever is **honorable**, whatever is **just**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **lovely**, whatever is **commendable**, if there is any **excellence**, if there is anything **worthy of praise**, think about these things."*^[11]

[Emphasis mine]

***Our thoughts have no power to control us
unless we permit them to do so.***

What are you thinking? Awareness of your thoughts requires you to ask yourself that question. Refusing to entertain impure or deprecating thoughts, which encourage negative and unhealthy thinking, frees us to discover the quality of life God desires for us.

What inappropriate thoughts try to dominate and control your life? How quick are you to ask yourself: *is this true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of my time and attention?*

How you think about what you're thinking (feeling) is essential to removing the barrier of negativity from your life.



Breaking Barriers

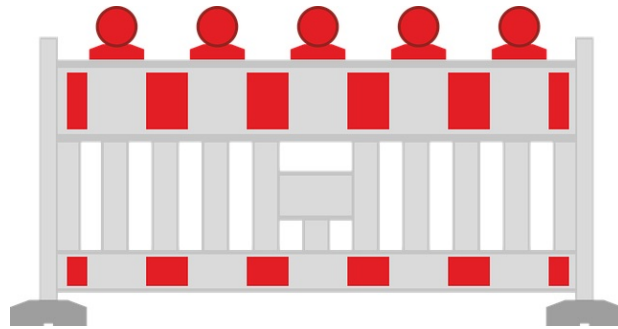
What is it about negative thinking that makes it a danger to your freedom?

When you evaluate your daily thoughts, are yours more negative or positive?

How does practicing scripture reading help you break habits of mindless negative thoughts?

CHAPTER 3

The Approval Barrier



Chapter Three: The Approval Barrier

“**Y**ou can’t do it right! You will never amount to anything!” These messages repeatedly played in my mind. Unwelcomed and uninvited, they played non-stop—for years. I still hear them.

As the youngest sibling in my family, my older brothers had better things to do than to hang out with me. Our age difference was too significant. Daily, I heard, “Leave me alone. Get out of here. Go bother somebody else.”

“I always felt unwanted.”

I always felt unwanted. At the age of 8, I was asked to perform a solo piece in our band’s performance. The night of my big recital, I scanned the crowd for a familiar face--but not one person from my family attended.

Early on, I received the (unintentionally and unwarranted) signaled message that I was an intrusion, wasn’t capable, and was in the way. I still recall how my father’s impatience felt, as it prevented him from teaching me the ways of carpentry. “It’s faster if I do this myself,” he said. Words like that—intended or not—have a lingering impact.

Several years ago, my wife and I were adding a room to our home. We had decided to close in an open patio to create an office in our house. I mentioned to her, “I’ve always been interested in learning how to wire a room for electricity.”

I called a friend who was a licensed electrician and he agreed to let me to do the work under his inspection, ensuring everything was to

code—and safe. What would have taken him a day to accomplish required me the better part of two weeks. Thankfully, there was not an urgent timeframe. I saw it as an opportunity to read books on electrical wiring, took my time, double-checked everything, and then rechecked it.

One morning as I was stringing the rough-in wire to the outlets, my wife looked over my shoulder. “I don’t think that’s right,” she said. Five words was all it took. It wasn’t what she said, but how those words pressed my old trigger button, releasing a lifetime of insecurity.

"It wasn't what she said, but how those words pressed my old trigger button, releasing a lifetime of insecurity."

I overreacted.

Five words brought back images of my father’s impatience with me. I instantly heard his voice in my mind, telling me I could do nothing right. Like a dam that burst, tears flowed down my face. I lashed out and spoke bitterly to my wife, punishing her for my family’s wrongs.

In the aftermath, I realized my response had not only hurt my wife, but it had also shocked me. Later, embarrassed and humbled, I knew what I had to do. I went to her and said, **“Please forgive me. I need to tell you why I reacted like that.”**

When I was a young and impressionable boy, I longed to be accepted by my family and father. Opposing messages made it difficult to develop a healthy sense of esteem. And so, my struggle to gain acceptance began.

Over many years, my desperation for approval burned intensely in my soul. My unending desire for acceptance from others inspired

erratic actions. What must have been apparent to others was not as visible to me. My misdirected behavior was so ingrained in my psyche that I couldn't see how it affected my choices and decisions.

Looking back, I can now see many behavioral traits that were influenced by my lack of self-esteem:

- ✓ Fear of criticism
- ✓ The need to apologize even when there was no disapproval
- ✓ Avoiding confrontation
- ✓ My tendency to agree with someone outwardly when I didn't agree inwardly
- ✓ Afraid to say no for fear of being disliked
- ✓ Exaggeration
- ✓ Taking disagreement personally, etc.

Thankfully, with God's help, I've grown in my acceptance of myself. Today, many of those traits are less prominent than they once were. But my esteem wasn't the only self-assessment I needed help to work through.

Aside from my psychological conditioning, my religious upbringing caused me to focus on my sinfulness over God's grace. My awareness of my inability to conquer wrongdoing (combined with messages that highlighted my weaknesses), only reinforced my sense of inadequacy, undermining what little esteem I had.

If I am to prove myself worthy of recognition, respect, and love, I will have to try harder, I thought.

Confessing my sins became a weekly occurrence. I always started with a re-commitment to try harder. However, achieving sinless behavior, getting better grades, excelling in sports, or making myself clean my room every day, did not bolster my self-esteem. Something was still missing.

"A lack of effort wasn't my problem. However, a distorted belief that my worth was dependent upon how others—and God—valued me, was."

How could these accomplishments affirm my value if they were solely to gain the approval of others—including God?

A lack of effort wasn't my problem. However, a distorted belief that my worth was dependent upon how others—and God—valued me, was.

It's nice to have the approval of others. There's something within us that desires admiration and accolades, which inspire us to move toward success, and hopefully to receive the acceptance of people. There's nothing wrong with this in healthy measures.

It's lovely to imagine that one day, our effort to please God will eventually gain His approval. But sooner or later, despite our accomplishments or endeavors, we discover that the best we can be, and the most that we can fulfill, does not guarantee acceptance.

That's why the gospel (God's Good News) is so liberating!

His story reminds us:

"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."^[12]

It appears that my sinful condition and propensity to sin is not a barrier that blocks God's love for me! What a relief. It seems that striving to earn favor does not encourage God to love me more than He already does. That's great news!

Over the years, I've discovered—and continue to learn—receiving God's unconditional love requires me to let go of seeking the approval of others. However, until I am willing to wholly accept my true identity as God's child, I will always first seek acceptance from others, inappropriately. It helps to know where to turn for truth when old triggers tell us emotional lies.

"It helps to know where to turn for truth when old triggers tell us emotional lies."

As a follower of Jesus, we are:

- ✓ God's special possession (1 Peter 2:9-10),
- ✓ Handpicked and treasured by God (Jeremiah 1.5; Ephesians 3-4; Deuteronomy 26:18)
- ✓ Chosen by God (1 Thessalonians 1:4)
- ✓ Loved beyond comparison (1 John 3:16, 4:10, 16; Romans 5:8, 8:35-39)
- ✓ Worth dying for (1 John 3:16; Romans 5:7-9)
- ✓ Precious to God (Isaiah 43:4)
- ✓ Forgiven (Ephesians 1:7; 1 John 1:9; Romans 8:1, 33-39)
- ✓ Secure for all eternity (2 Corinthians 1:22; John 10:28-29)
- ✓ God's child (1 John 3:1; Galatians 3:26)

If like me, you long to remove the barrier of seeking unhealthy approval, a regular review of your true identity as God's child is necessary.

I've come to realize that I'm not the only one who struggles with self-esteem. Maybe you understand this common battle. The good news is, we are God's children, dearly loved, entirely accepted, and empowered to receive His love without the need for the approval of others.

Because God first loved us, we no longer have to try harder or do more to gain love and acceptance. The barrier of approval can be removed, so we are free to receive God's love and acceptance—just as we are!

"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." ^[13]

"Because God first loved us, we no longer have to try harder or do more to gain love and acceptance."



Breaking Barriers

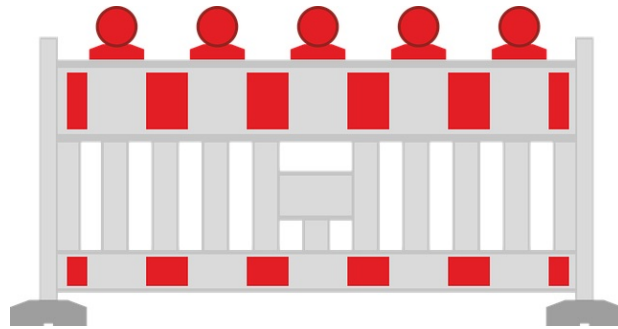
Do you notice many negative messages that play in your mind? How do they affect you? Are you willing to release them, eliminating their power over you?

What hot button statements trigger you to react in frustration, anger, or rage?

Is there a particular person from your past or present that you subconsciously and chronically seek approval from?

CHAPTER 4

The Prejudice Barrier



Chapter Four: The Prejudice Barrier

It happened at a conference I was attending. The attendees were reminded of how easy it is for Anglo Christians to disconnect from our sisters and brothers of color.

As I heard one of the speakers say, “It’s time we put a stop to racism,” I found myself mentally transported back to my childhood in the ’50s, specifically to the time when my family lived in Mississippi.

The division between whites and blacks was apparent. Segregation was the norm. Because my family was poor, we lived (on what white folks called) *“the-other-side-of-the-tracks.”*

Racial integration was still a dream during that period. Segregation laws required me to attend the “white” school, even though it was further away and separated me from my neighborhood friends.

Each day I faced the taunts. “You’re nothing but white trash,” my classmates jeered. They regularly called me names unworthy of repeating, all because I lived and played with people of color.

“The bullies I encountered didn’t care about me as a human being, they only measured me by where I came from.”

As a young child, I could not define prejudice—but I felt it! And yet, I’m sure what I “felt” was nothing compared to the degree of what my friends of color experienced daily. The biased behavior I encountered happened because we lived in a black community, were

poor, and were perceived as inferior. The bullies I encountered didn't care about me as a human being, they only measured me by where I came from. Sadly, some are still stuck in that narrow mindset today.

As much as I want to believe we've made progress in eliminating bigotry, intolerance, and unfairness, I'm frequently aware of how the barrier of partiality prevents us from experiencing freedom. Also, I'm aware that racism is only one arm of bigotry—there are many ways people measure others as inferior.

Bigotry doesn't die quickly—or easily!

Citizens of this world have struggled with issues of intolerance since Adam and Eve. Examples of one-sidedness are abundant in the Bible:

- Fear encouraged Abraham's bias toward the Egyptians (Gen.12:11-13).
- Jealousy fed Saul's disdain toward David (1 Samuel 18:9).
- Jonah's despise of the Ninevites was so strong he resented God's mercy toward them. (Jonah 4:2).
- A misconceived belief shaped Nathaniel's bias against Nazareth. He believed that nothing of substance could come from such an insignificant place (John 1:46).
- Pharisees had a jaundiced eye concerning Jesus' view of the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11).
- Sadducees resented Jesus' teaching on the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33).
- Threatened by Jesus' authority, the Chief Priests held tightly to their prejudices until the end (Matthew 21:23-27).

Although discrimination is nothing new, it's not okay. It has never been and never will be.

"As much as I want to believe we've made progress in eliminating bigotry, intolerance, and unfairness, I'm frequently aware of how the barrier of partiality prevents us from experiencing freedom."

Pre-judgments encourage the false belief of superiority. Racism always denies the dignity God gives to each person—every person is created in God's image. And God loves each of us, dearly.

I realized a long time ago, refusal to accept God's love toward those different from me encourages a false sense of superiority.

Xenophobia has been, is, and always will be a barrier that prevents our freedom to experience unity, collaboration, and harmony. God's love is mercifully distributed to each of us, regardless of race.

But removing the barrier of prejudice requires us to face our fear of something or someone different from what we know.

When we allow fear, pride, jealousy, or unwarranted beliefs to encourage discriminatory action against others, we are in direct opposition to God.

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Going back to that conference where I was reminded not to disconnect from my brothers and sisters of color, the speakers admonished us to be honest with ourselves. While I listened, I found myself thinking, *I'm not a racist!* However, further self-reflection revealed that racism is not always a conscious expression, nor always a matter of “color.”

Within the Church community, differences of non-essential beliefs (i.e. mode of baptism, egalitarian views, meaning the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities, liturgical preferences, etc.) can create unhealthy walls keeping us apart, and prevent brotherhood and freedom. Thankfully, I've experienced the beauty when walls are broken down.

God has graciously allowed my ministry to cross denominational lines. My life has been enriched by the beauty of the church as one. Yes, there are differences. However, despite those distinctions, I'm able to see the many facets, colors, and richness of individual diversity—woven together in a glorious tapestry. Yes, we are different— but we are also united in the essentials of our faith.

If I focus only on our differences, I miss seeing that which unifies us.

I was leading a pastor's retreat when I was asked, “How can you minister in different denominational settings? Aren't you compromising your beliefs?” Recognizing a sincere concern (and bias), I showed a Power Point slide that displayed the Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there, he will come to

judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic^[14] church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.^[15]*

“What is there in this statement of faith do you not agree with?” I asked.

Allowing time for murmured conversations and questions among my audience proved beneficial. Everyone in the room, pastors and church leaders from various denominational backgrounds, acknowledged that they affirmed the essentials of our faith expressed in this creed. There were various “doctrinal differences” and “liturgical preferences” represented in the room. However, the common bond of unity was, and is, found in the essentials, not the non-essentials of our faith.

"Honesty with ourselves is the essential first step to free us from prejudice."

Without our awareness of our biases—racial, denominational, or political— we are often an unconscious act motivated by misconceptions and preconceived notions. And we are always at risk of ignoring the dignity of others.

We may want to deny it, but partiality lies within each of us. Honesty with ourselves is the essential first step to free us from prejudice.

If I ignore the God-given dignity of others and fail to promote their welfare, I become imprisoned by prejudice. And, living in my own discriminatory bubble only encourages me to ignore my own biases, while missing the freedom the Gospel provides for everyone—including and especially myself.

The good news of the Gospel message is this: Jesus died to liberate *everyone*. Removing the prejudice barrier means relinquishing judgment of others based on ethnicity or non-essential theological preferences. When we do, it releases us to celebrate the unity of humanity, where we can walk with our brothers and sisters in true freedom and peace.

"If I ignore the God-given dignity of others and fail to promote their welfare, I become imprisoned by prejudice."



Breaking Barriers

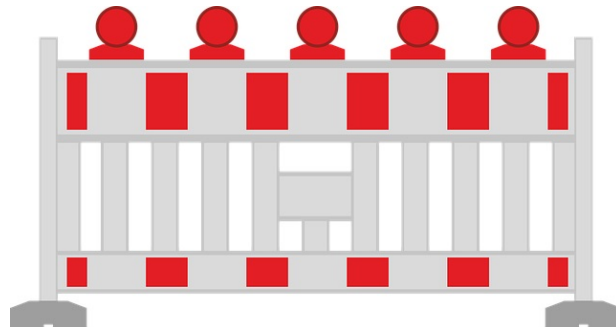
What childhood influences continue to shape your opinions, assumptions, prejudices, and projections today? Do they affect your thinking negatively or positively? How?

Are there any partiality barriers you need to destroy in order to set yourself free from patterned consequences?

Why does digging deep to the most honest parts of ourselves liberate us?

CHAPTER 5

The Tolerance Barrier



Chapter Five: The Tolerance Barrier

“**W**hy can't people get along?”

“What prevents us from caring for each other—despite our disagreements?”

“Must opposing opinions and beliefs undermine friendship?”

These are questions I hear often. Perhaps you do, too.

Ideological, moral, and religious differences can encourage polarization. Racism separates us. And today's opposing political views seem to restrict unity. If you question this, look at the unfortunate barriers still existing between black and white, Democrats and Republicans, religious denominations, LGBTQ and straight communities.

Different opinions and beliefs are real. People have gone to war over arguments surrounding ideology, race, morality, and religion. Unfortunately, they still do.

Is it possible we're too tolerant?

Society encourages tolerance. But what does it mean to be “unbiased?”

A text-book definition reveals an open-minded person as “showing a willingness to allow the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with.”

“Is it possible we're too tolerant?”

Does this mean that if you are not in agreement with someone's beliefs or behavior, you are intolerant, or a "close-minded" person? Are there times when "intolerance" is needed? Billy Graham wrote:

"... In the realm of Christian experience, there is a need for intolerance. In some things, Christ was the most tolerant, broad-minded Man who ever lived, but in other things, He was one of the most intolerant."^[16]

Some suggest that tolerance must reflect respect and love for those who think or act differently than we do—people who are not like us. But due to the influence of societal preference—and persuasion—this has gradually morphed the text-book definition to mean: *Unless you agree with my view, accept my behavior as it is, you do not love or respect me.*

Today, to be culturally tolerant seems to emphasize the need to fully accept and include without any room for differences. But is it possible to respect and love—and not agree or condone?

"Today, to be culturally tolerant seems to emphasize the need to fully accept and include without any room for differences."

Disciples of Jesus believe that everyone is created in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27; 5:1-2; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-11)

Indeed, each person deserves respect, love, kindness, and humanness. Jesus consistently models this in his relationships with people. So, must we.

As a follower of Christ, we do not have a free pass to disregard or demean one's inherent value as God's child. There is no place for

unkindness. To do so places us in direct opposition to Jesus' words and example.

Must we surrender our faith for fear of being labeled "intolerant?"

G. Willow Wilson wrote:

"Real tolerance means respecting other people even when they baffle you, and you have no idea why they think what they think."^[17]

It's not popular today to question anyone's religious beliefs. If tolerance is the willingness to allow the existence of opinions or behavior that you do not agree with, those unwilling to allow you the same courtesy undermine their interpretation of tolerance. They are intolerant.

A friend of mine shares a radical view that (in my opinion) contradicts Scripture. He asked me, "What do you think?" in reference to a particular hot-topic belief.

At his invitation, I shared my conviction, based on my view of the historical teaching of the church. Despite the affirmation of early church fathers and the consistency of the church's instruction through the years on the subject, he did not agree.

But the topic itself wasn't the greater issue, what troubled me was his response. He said, "Unless you agree with me, I don't see how we can remain friends."

His insistence for me to be tolerant based on his perspective, prevented him from seeing his own intolerance. And the cost he was willing to pay came at the expense of our relationship.

As a follower of Christ, I personally believe it is possible to love and respect people who have different beliefs and behavior. These two virtues (love and respect) do not demand that we surrender our faith, for fear of appearing intolerant.

"But the topic itself wasn't the greater issue, what troubled me was his response. He said, 'Unless you agree with me, I don't see how we can remain friends.' "

There is a place for convictions. G.K. Chesterton reminds us: "Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions."^[18] His point is this--tolerance for the sake of broad-mindedness lacks credence.

If tolerance means, "stay to yourself, be afraid to speak up, be shameful of your thoughts, never rock-the-boat by expressing your belief—and heaven forbid—never judge," then tolerance lacks conviction.

That's not the kind of world where I want to live. I need to have others challenge me—while loving and respecting me.

Martin Luther valued peace. He also understood that to compromise truth for the sake of peace is not wise. He likely had this in mind when he wrote: "*Peace if possible, truth at all costs.*"^[19]

Conflicting beliefs and contrasting behavior do not prevent us from showing respect and love. Nor does disagreeing make us intolerant.

"Conflicting beliefs and contrasting behavior do not prevent us from showing respect and love. Nor does disagreeing make us intolerant."

Jesus demonstrates his acceptance of others who do not agree with him. But He was certainly narrow-minded when in loving, compassionate intolerance, He insisted that salvation requires us to enter through the narrow gate:

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”^[20]

Christ was inflexible toward hypocrisy. Listen in on his conversations with the Pharisees, who were inclined to outward piety, but inwardly they were unscrupulous:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.”^[21]

“Christ was inflexible toward hypocrisy.”

More than once, I have heard someone quote Matthew 7:1. They’ll reprimand another by saying, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

Jesus’ command is not that we should never judge. It’s that we will not judge hypocritically!

The Pharisees were judging Jesus when they saw him as heretical. The kingdom Jesus offered was not the kind of nation the Pharisees anticipated or desired. Their unwillingness to see the “plank” in their eye, while focusing on a speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye, made them hypocritical (Matthew 7:5).

There are times when judging is needed. To judge means: “to distinguish” so that we “can decide.” Each of us makes judgments. The question is, “Are we making the *right* judgments?”

And what about selfishness? Can you believe how emphatic Jesus was when commanding us to deny ourselves? “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”^[22]

Jesus is consistently respectful and loving. He’s also ever ardent and non-negotiable.

We are reminded that if we want to discover life, we must lose our life (Matthew 16:25). The life we lose is a selfish one, dominated by the old nature of sin. The life we discover is free from barriers.

And speaking of sin, how was it possible for Jesus to be tolerant of sinners—while intolerant of their sins? Notice, Jesus doesn’t condemn the adulteress, but he admonishes her “to sin no more” (John 8:11).

***“Jesus is consistently respectful and loving.
He’s also ever ardent and non-negotiable.”***

It’s not popular today to confront sin. The world asks, “Who are you to judge? Why can’t you be more accepting?”

But God has always been intolerant toward sin, while compassionately tolerant of us. His Word says, “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,*”^[23]

Paul, the apostle, writes, “*Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more*”^[24]

Jesus was so intolerant toward sin He willingly chose to die on the cross to free us from the power of sin (John 3:16).

To be tolerant of sin does not help us. Most of society's problems stem from sin. In reality, sin separates us from God—and others.

***"Whether I agree or not,
Jesus is LORD, not me."***

Tolerance is overrated!

To prohibit or discourage anyone from questioning beliefs—political, moral, or religious—is in and of itself an absolute moral position. What harm is there in challenging an idea? And, if we do question one's belief or behavior, are we acting immorally?

My faith is not blind! I have not reached my convictions without deep (and at times painful) questioning. I have wrestled with the teachings of Christ—many that are difficult for me.

Yet, it is in "the struggle" where I learn the value of submission. Whether I agree or not, Jesus is LORD, not me. Throughout the Bible, we are commanded to question religious beliefs.

"If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other gods" (whom you have not known) "and let us serve them," you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him, you shall hold fast."^[25]

Does that sound very tolerant? But, is it as intolerant as some would have us believe?

As a follower of Christ, I am to question and test false spirits, because not everyone who claims to be a prophet of God, is. (1 John 4:1). My faith foundation is established—not by popular opinion or preference—but by the Bible (both Old and New Testaments).

I admit, the teachings of the Bible frequently place me in conflict with cultural preference. It would be more convenient for me to become more “tolerant.” However, as a follower of Jesus, I must be willing to have society view me at times as “intolerant,” while always demonstrating love and respect for those who see differently than me. When I break down the tolerance barrier, while staying true to who I am as God’s child, I find freedom on the other side—you will, too.

Removing the obstacles that block our peace is not always easy, but ultimately, we’ll be glad we did. There’s no feeling like listening to God and knowing we are moving in His desired direction. Anything else will bring us to an unwanted standstill.

***"My faith foundation is established—
not by popular opinion or preference—
but by the Bible."***



Breaking Barriers

Why do you think tolerance is such a hot topic in today's culture?

Would you ever sacrifice a friendship just because someone held different beliefs from you?

How does biblical tolerance and intolerance help us see more clearly and set us free?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you ask Richard Parrish what he does, he responds enthusiastically, “I help others discover hope.”

Familiar with adversity and challenges, Richard’s strength and resilience is a result of HOPE found through submission to God’s purpose. Richard dispenses contagious hope through his deep confidence that God is active and present in all areas of our lives.

Others call Richard humorous, honest, pastor, shepherd, accepting, a great listener, non-judgmental, trustworthy, and encouraging.

As an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church, Richard speaks in numerous cross-denominational settings. A seasoned, empowering and compassionate leader, he devotes his life to assisting people who need HOPE through writing, speaking and offering spiritual care to pastors and ministry leaders. Richard is the Director of Discover Hope, an outreach of MSW Ministries.

Richard resides in sunny Glendale, Arizona with his wife, Vicki. He’s always up for a round of golf and enjoys staying caffeinated with a hot cup of coffee for the benefit of others!

“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” – Vaclav Havel

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this sample of writing,
and we'd like to invite
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ENDNOTES

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[4] <https://www.inc.com/eric-mack/forget-dying-public-speaking-heres-47-things-americans-fear-more-in-2017.html>

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[14] The historical definition of “catholic” is understood as “universal.”

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[17] <https://www.wisefamousquotes.com/quotes-about-real-g/>

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[21] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Mt 23:25–26.

[22] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Lk 9:23.

[23] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Is 1:16.

[24] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 1 Co 15:34.

[25] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Dt 13:1–4.