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“You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter”
(Matt 23:14).

Towards the end of Matthew’s Gospel before Jesus begins his passion and death, the evangelist shows us a side of Jesus that reveals his frustration with religious leaders who should have opened the way to God for others but did not.

Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for official teachers and so-called models of righteousness for making it impossible for ordinary people to find the merciful God he had preached. He unleashes his frustration in a torrent of criticism directed at men learned in the Law yet totally devoid of humility and compassion, concerned only with control and preserving their privileged status.

An angry Jesus may jar our normal image of him as kind and patient even with his enemies, and it is important to see that his indignation is motivated by deep love for the victims of this distortion of God, people being blocked by gatekeepers blinded by legalism and an inflated sense of their own importance and authority. Instead of helping believers, they lord it over them and put stumbling blocks in their way—the meaning of the word “to scandalize.”

In Matthew’s Gospel it is not hard to see that the official leaders were eager to silence Jesus, whose popular ministry had become a counter movement to their narrow idea of religion based on fear and all rules and rituals without the freedom and joy of encountering a loving God. Jesus was rejected not for preaching love but

for exposing those who claimed to represent God but were self-serving hypocrites protecting the status quo and their own power.

These difficult passages were preserved in the Gospels as a corrective within the early church to the abuse of authority. These texts serve as an examination of conscience for all religious leaders and teachers, reminding all of us that if our message is not Good News, it is probably not the Gospel. If our example and attitudes do not make it easier for others to draw close to God, we need to lighten up and take some time to renew our own need for a loving and forgiving God.

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