Whitewashed Tombs – Part 4

# (Matthew 23:13)

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church. This morning we’re in week number four of a series called “Whitewashed Tombs” and we’ve been looking at hypocrisy. We’ve seen Jesus confronting the Pharisees, those who were the religious folks of his day, who presented themselves as the true essence of holiness. But we’ve been learning from the life and teachings of Jesus that who we really are is best seen in the way we treat other people. And we’ve discovered over the past few weeks that anger, envy, and pride can silently creep into our hearts and betraying who we really are.

And that’s why Jesus was so strong in his rebuke of the Pharisees, because they were hypocrites, they were acting, they were pretending like they had it all together, keeping all the religious laws down to the most minute detail but they didn’t have any love. In fact, in Matthew chapter 23, Jesus spoke the harshest words of his entire ministry, not to the immoral, the drunkards or swindlers, but to the Pharisees. It was to these religious guys that the most fearful words ever spoken by Jesus on earth came across his lips. You see, it was these spiritual leaders who made a mockery of religion; it was these Pharisees who saw themselves as guides to the blind, but who lacked the integrity, mercy, and humility that the Law required; it was to them that these words flew from the lips of Jesus like claps of thunder or streaks of lightning.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees”, he said in verse 13, "You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to” (Matthew 23:13).

This sizzling rebuke from the son of God is a saddening declaration of judgment upon these spiritual phonies, these whitewashed tombs. William Barclay commented on this verse saying,

“When a person who is characteristically gentle and loving suddenly erupts into blazing wrath, even the most thoughtless person is shocked into taking thought” (The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, William Barclay, page 281).

And we should, today you and I need to let the words of Jesus shock us into taking thought of our lives, our actions, and our attitudes so that we can avoid making the same mistake that the Pharisees did.

Now, I’m sure that we’d all agree that none of us would want to fall into that trap, becoming religious hypocrites who wanted to control everything, living under the impression that we alone know the truth, that we’re the law keepers, heaven’s gatekeepers, the light in the darkness and guides to the blind. But that was exactly where the Pharisees were, they saw themselves as custodians of the kingdom of God, they thought they had it all, they thought they were letting people in, but Jesus told them they were actually keeping people out; that they were playing God, they were shutting the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces not letting those enter who were trying to.

And so, you could imagine the frustration of Jesus, having come into the world to bring salvation and people were repenting, they were moving toward the kingdom, they were starting to make steps towards the kingdom when the Pharisees came and slammed the door in their faces. In other words, because of their obsessive need to control other people they were shutting the door to the place where those who belong to God entered by grace through faith.

I wonder how many of you this morning struggle with an obsessive need to control other people or situations? Or maybe you know someone who can be a bit of a control freak? In fact, it may be that person sitting next to you, because I believe that deep down each one of us deals with this issue of control. You see, the root cause of this desire to control people or situations is fear. You may be fearful that you’re going to be found out, fearful of going to the doctor, fearful that your marriage isn’t going to make it, fearful that your kids aren’t headed in the right direction, and it’s that fear that causes you to attempt to control everything.

Now, this is really interesting because fear is really opposed to everything that we say that we believe. In fact, the Bible says,

“God has not given us a spirit of fear…” (2 Timothy 1:7, NLT).

And instead, we know that God is love and that his perfect love drives out fear, and yet there are some of you here right now who are paralyzed by fear. In fact, we’re even afraid we’re going to lose control.

But then, on the other hand, some of you have been hurt by people who controlled you, maybe someone who was an authority figure, someone you trusted that was abusive and hurt you. But honestly, most of the time the people trying to control us don’t do it maliciously, they’re just hurting, needy, and insecure themselves. And so, they may be manipulating and controlling us to get us to do what they think we should be doing and if you don’t you know that they are going to pout, stomp, whine and complain. They may give you the silent treatment, but no matter how they respond we would all do well to avoid that situation because it’s unhealthy spiritually.

And so, no matter who you are or how control manifests itself in our lives, we want to break free and overcome it. We want to go in the opposite direction, because I believe God teaches us very clearly not control the people or situations in our lives but to let go, to trust him, and to surrender.

## 1. Letting Go of Our Need to Control

The first thing I want to talk about is letting go of our need to control. In fact, you may not even think about it, but you try to control people’s opinions of you. Others of you are scared to death of failing financially, or you’re afraid of being single for the rest of your life, or afraid of failing as a parent, and so you manipulate and control the people around you. Just like the Pharisees, you want to control every decision that they make, the places they go, what time they have to be in, who they’re going to be with, what they’re going to do and you’re attempting to do something that you’re not equipped to do. Controlling your life or anyone else’s life is not what God has equipped you to do and so it’s time to let go of that fear.

What’s absolutely amazing is the number of times that the Bible says “Do not fear.” Over 100 times the Bible says “do not fear,” “do not be afraid,” or “be not afraid,” and I believe that God wanted us to get the point that we don’t need to fear. In fact, I love the way God phrased it to the prophet Isaiah, it’s given as a command, and so it’s non-negotiable. Isaiah recorded in chapter 41, verse 10,

“So do not fear…” (Isaiah 41:10).

Now, I know that we have all kinds of excuses but if we would allow the Spirit of God to speak into our lives; instead of thinking, “But my boss wanted…” Or “My wife, or my kids, or worrying about your financial condition, your job security, or whatever, you make the choice not to fear. You claim this promise from the Word of God, you grab hold of it, you let it settle in your heart because God says,

“For I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

And so, we’ve got to let this change our lives; we’ve got to let it go, we’ve got to lose control, because when we asked Jesus to come into our lives something supernatural happened. The Spirit of God invaded our lives, we were transformed, we were born again, the old is gone and the new has come. And yet, you may be thinking “That’s just the way I am, that’s the way I’m wired,” but no, you’ve been changed, you’ve been born again, and so you just let it go.

In fact, the Bible says in Proverbs chapter 29 that, “Fear of man …” (The fear of what people think, the fear rejection, or whatever) “will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (Proverbs 29:25).

In other words, fear is just a trap, and so, number two, we want to trust the Lord with all the details.

## 2. Trusting the Lord with All The Details

If you want to let go of the need to control in your life, you’ve got to trust the Lord, surrendering your understanding, your need for details, so that you can say with all honesty and integrity, “God, I will live for you and you alone.” You see, it’s that fear of man, the fear of rejection, the fear of approval that is opposite, it’s contradictory to faith because “whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (Proverbs 29:25).

The apostle Paul illustrates this in his letter to the church in Galatia. He says,

“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

In other words, we need to be asking ourselves, “Am I trying to please others or am I trying to please God?” Because if we’re trying to please others, if we’re trying to win the approval of others, we can’t be following Christ. You see, it’s the fear of man that would prove to be a snare; and so, our goal is to be pleasing to God, to live for God, to live for an audience of one, because he’s the only one whose opinion really matters. That’s why Jesus said this in John chapter 5:

“For I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:30).

When you truly understand that, when you recognize that, it doesn’t matter what other people think or say, because you know that God loves you and says you are perfect in Christ. Even in your weaknesses you are acceptable to him, because his strength is made perfect in you. And so you can trust him, you can trust in his plan to bless you, to prosper you, to give you hope and a future. You can lean on him as the Bible tells us in Proverbs chapter 3,

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

We just need to trust the Lord with the details. He is the object of our trust. He is the object of our faith. It’s not if the doctors report comes out okay, it’s not if the kids end up okay, but it simply trusting God because he is God. As we rely upon him, losing control of your life, trusting God with the details, the Bible tells us in Psalm chapter 91,

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalms 91:1).

I believe there are some of you here today who are looking for that rest. Well, that rest is found in the shadow of the Almighty and this word “Almighty” means sovereign God. In other words, he is the God who is in control. He is absolutely in control of everything and so we can trust him with all of the details.

He is the Almighty, he is the most high God, and so he’s in control of your marriage, he’s in control of your finances, he’s in control of your kids, and he’s in control of your tomorrow. In fact, he is already there, he’s working out all things for good, and he said it this way to the prophet Jeremiah, he said,

“I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

And so, if we can trust him, understanding that he’s in control of the things today and that he’s already in our tomorrow, doesn’t that make it easier to let go of control and to trust him with all the details? You see, we don’t have to understand everything because our understanding is not what happens to us, our understanding is that it is he who is in control. And so, we just need to trust him and the third thing we need to learn is to surrender completely to God.

## 3. Surrendering Completely to Him

We need to remember this as we look at the Pharisees, these guys whom Jesus called whitewashed tombs. They were guilty of self-exultation and they were fearful of losing control because Jesus threatened their respected position of authority and status in the community. In the same way, we can find ourselves threatened because every relationship that we have whether in the home, at work, or in the community is a combination of what you’ve purposefully created or passively allowed.

And so, I would suggest that each one of us in some manner or another are either in an unhealthy relationship of controlling others or of being controlled. You know, maybe it’s that person that drives you crazy, a mother-in-law that’s always in your business, or spouse that continues in unhealthy patterns. And so, if you don’t like what you have, change what you expect and what you accept. You draw a line in the sand like Jesus did with the Pharisees and you refuse to tolerate that behavior because you want to change that relationship into something that’s healthy.

Now, it’s really easy to talk about those other people, but how many of you recognize that you like to play God, you like to be in control, you like to call the shots. You know, every once in a while, I recognize that the reason I want them to do what I want them to do is because I like to play God. The problem is that I don’t make a very good God and neither do you. In fact, it doesn’t matter what tactics you use to try to control somebody you do not have the power to change someone. None of us have the ability to change our spouse or control our child’s future.

Only God has the power and ability to open and close doors to direct your children’s life. Only God has the power to change a spouse’s behavior and help someone overcome an addiction. Only God, through the power of Christ, has the ability to make someone new and to set them free from the power of darkness. And so, when we recognize that we don’t have the power to control our spouse, sibling, our parents, boss, coworkers or friends, we can stop trying to be God and surrender to him.

We can see this illustrated when Jesus explained to his disciples in Matthew chapter 16 that he had to suffer and die, that he was going to give his life and on the third day God would raise him from the dead. If you remember, Peter with the best intentions, tried to do what he thinks is right, and he literally tries to take control of Jesus destiny and detour him from God’s will. And so, doing what controllers and manipulators often do, Peter took Jesus aside, he isolated him so that he could attempts to impose his will upon Jesus. In verse 22 he said,

"Never, Lord!" "This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22).

Jesus immediately rebuke him, and then turned away from Peter and looking to his disciples he says,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

In other words, you’ve got to surrender, you’ve got to let go, because just like I’m going to give my life, just like God’s going to raise me up, Jesus says, “you too must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” And so, basically what he was saying is that if you want to follow me, you can’t be in control and you will never be in control again because it’s no longer about your will it’s all about my will.

And that’s why Jesus taught us to pray,

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

This morning as we close, we need to recognize that anytime we let someone else wrongly control us, we are enabling their dysfunctional behavior. And any time we try to control someone else were trying to be like God. And so, the only way that we can truly follow him is to surrender our will to his will, no longer trying to control someone else, but entrusting them to him, praying for them, and loving them without entering into a dysfunctional relationship. But it needs to begin in us, we’ve got to trust that the Spirit of God can handle it and we just need to die to ourselves surrendering our desires to the will of God.

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