Whitewashed Tombs - Part 2

# (James 3:14-18)

Today we’re in part two of our series Whitewashed Tombs as we’ve looked at Jesus response to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23. When we began last week, we saw Jesus confronting the religious establishment saying,

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Using the illustration of a grave Jesus tells us it is possible to be clean on the outside and at the same time be defiled, stained and corrupt on the inside. The religious leaders were careful to keep the outside clean, because that was the part that others could see and they wanted the praise of men. But the Lord doesn’t look at the things man looks at, the Bible says,

“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

And so, when Jesus looked within, he saw that “inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). This illustration was a graphic picture of the hypocrite, white on the outside, but with the stench of death on the inside. This was the teachers of the law and Pharisees and yet in some ways it’s many of us today.

In fact, I think that most of us would agree that social media is a breeding ground for hypocrisy. Now I love social media, I think it’s a great tool, and we’ve always tried to leverage technology to make a difference in this world, but while we can embrace the benefits, we also have to recognize that there can be some negative consequences to social media and technology. You see, hypocrisy is simply creating a false identity or presenting oneself on social media in a way that doesn’t reflect the true character of oneself and within their context this is what angered Jesus so much about the scribes and Pharisees.

Today, knowledge is increasing at a profound rate, our minds are bombarded with information 24 /7 and this technology is changing all of our relationships. In other words, if I’m feeling lonely there’s the temptation to go to social media for immediate affirmation. In fact, I could take a selfie, I could post something, I could upload something, and I could get some immediate feedback. The problem is that we become dependent upon this immediate affirmation, pacified by this cheap substitute, while ignoring a much deeper need for love.

In addition to that, as you are scrolling through someone’s pictures or what they post on their Instagram page, their Facebook, or their twitter, the reality is that most of what you see is presented in its best light, with the right filter, caption, and hashtag. And so, as you’re scrolling through a page, you see what you want to be like, what you want to look like, what you want to have or where you want to go and suddenly you find yourself filled with bitter envy. But the problem is that we’re no longer comparing our lives in our context, we’re comparing our lives in the context of what other people want us to think that their life is like and it breeds discontent and envy.

Suddenly, who I am is not enough, what I have is not enough, and unintentionally my self-image begins to shrink. As I’m being bombarded by messages and pictures, I easily become overwhelmed, losing sight of my self-worth and my identity in Christ. And it’s amplified, it’s immediate, it’s so much faster than any other time in our history, and we begin comparing ourselves in this game where there are no winners and it just brings out our own insecurities.

In fact, you can see this very early on in our development. I’ve got six kids and I can testify that each child can be perfectly happy with a toy until they see someone else with a different one. Suddenly, even in a young child’s life, they envy that one thing that they don’t have. And you may think it’s not that big of a deal, but listen to what the Word of God says, in James chapter 3, verse 14 and following, James says,

“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (James 3:14-16).

And so, according to the Word of God, envy is a really big deal. It’s a sin that affects us all at one level or another, permeating our relationships with others and with God. You see, envy is resenting the goodness of God in someone else’s life, while ignoring his blessings in yours. Envy says, “They’ve got it and I want it, so they shouldn’t have it.” In fact, when God gave his commandments to the people of Israel, the 10th commandment dealt specifically with envying what’s not ours. In Exodus chapter 20, verse 17, the Bible says,

"You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor" (Ex 20:17, NLT).

In other words, referring back to James chapter 3, wherever you harbor bitter envy, it’s simply a distraction, an attempt to detour you or bypass God’s will, tempting you to satisfy yourself with cheap substitutes.

For some of us it might be a little physical envy, you know, maybe she’s got a cuter figure than yours, a little firmer here or there. Or for some of you guys, maybe you see some other guy and you wish you had hair like that.

Or it could be relational envy. For example, there could be two teenage girls that are best friends, they’ve grown up together, they are enjoying life together, when all of a sudden one girl meets the guy of her dreams. All of a sudden, she’s got a boyfriend, she is engaged, and there’s this bitter envy that creeps in.

We can even see it in different stages of life. You know, when you are young you are always looking forward to that next mile marker. When I turned 16, when I go to college, when I get out of college, when I get a real job, and yet before long you begin to reverse things. You know, if I could just be back in school again, life is so easy, and so you envy the things that you don’t have.

And we can see bitter envy because of position, fame or recognition. Like last week when we looked at Jesus healing of a man with a shriveled hand. Now, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were watching him intently to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. They were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus of doing wrong, but when he healed the man, they recognized that there was nothing wrong with doing good on the Sabbath. And so, when he had healed the man right in front of everyone, they couldn’t say what they really thought or they would have revealed themselves as hypocrites. So they didn’t say anything.

Jesus just looked at them and I imagine they would never forget his angry gaze because it penetrated to their souls. And so, they had nothing to say, you know what could they say, “We’re just wicked hypocrites, we don’t want to do good to anybody, and all we really want to do is kill you.” That was the truth, but they couldn’t say it, and they certainly don’t want to affirm Jesus and so they said nothing. Well, the Bible adds this comment in Luke chapter 6, verse 11,

“They were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:11).

Another translation says they were “wild with rage” and another they were “filled with madness” and this word translated here “furious” means to be devoid of understanding. In other words, they had lost their minds, they were at their wits end, and so they flipped out. This was the kind of rage where they lost control of any decency or civility and Luke says “they began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

This rage that consumed them was motivated by envy and deeply rooted in fear because Jesus had been tearing down their whole system of religion. He was striking blows at their power, their prestige, their position, and their credibility and so they were afraid of him. They broke out in an outburst of psychopathic rage, literally out of their minds with the desire to kill him almost 2 years before they’re able to bring their plot to its fulfillment. We find their wicked sinful envy running its full course in Mark chapter 15 where Jesus is on trial, Barabbas was in prison, and the crowd asked Pilate to release a prisoner as was his custom. In verse nine Pilate asked,

"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted” (Mark 15:6-13).

And so, envy is a big deal, it’s unspiritual and it is of the devil. In fact, the Bible tells us in Proverbs chapter 14,

“A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones” (Proverbs 14:30).

Maybe you found yourself in that place where you have wanted something that someone else has? In fact, you become so consumed with that longing that it’s all you can think about. Google dictionary defines envy as a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else’s possessions, qualities, or luck. Harold Coffin said,

“Envy is the art of counting our neighbors’ blessings instead of our own.”

Socrates who was considered the father of Western philosophy was credited with saying, “Envy is the daughter of pride, the author of murder and revenge, the perpetual tormenter of virtue. Envy is the filthy slime of the soul, a venom, a poison which consumes the flesh and dries up the bones. It rots us like cancer from the inside” And that’s why James says that such supposed wisdom doesn’t come down from heaven but it’s earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil (James 3:15).

This envy and selfish ambition kills contentment and leaves us prideful and jealous resenting God’s goodness in others’ lives while we ignore God’s blessing in our own. And so, in the remainder of our time together I want to discuss how to avoid this cancerous envy that rots the bones. And there are three different ways that I want to share with you to keep from falling into this trap, we want to rejoice with those who rejoice, number two, recognizing what we have, and always giving thanks to God. And so, first we want to rejoice, celebrating God’s goodness to others.

## 1. Rejoicing With Those Who Rejoice

Now, this is a complete contrast, polar opposite of where many of us can unintentionally find ourselves. Now, some of us handle it better than others, but in our culture today we can easily find ourselves immersed in technology and social media. We can prerecord all the games, we can watch our favorite show on demand, even keeping up with all our “friends” until every waking hour becomes this all-consuming, self-formed, self-focused world in which we find our hearts filled with selfish ambition and bitter envy. And yet, as Pastor Steven Furtick said,

“We’re comparing our behind-the-scenes with everyone else’s highlight reel.”

We’re comparing ourselves with someone else’s pictures, presented in the best light, with the right filter, and the right caption and suddenly we find ourselves becoming

resentful of those who have it better or do it better, who maybe threaten our feelings of accomplishment or our status. And yet, James tells us that

“Such “wisdom” doesn’t come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil” (James 3:15).

And so, instead of boasting about it or denying the truth, instead of resenting God’s goodness to someone else like Cain who envied his brother Abel, Rachel who envied Leah, Jacob sons who envied their brother Joseph, or King Saul who envied David. Instead of being like those Pharisees who were hovering around Jesus in the synagogue 2000 years ago just watching to see if he would do something wrong; if he would break their rules; and instead of becoming furious when Jesus healed this man’s shriveled hand, we want to do as the apostle Paul advises us in Romans chapter 12, and we want to,

“Rejoice with those who rejoice…” (Romans 12:15).

Instead of harboring bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, becoming self-centered and consumed with personal gratification, we need to remember that this is exactly what led Cain to murder his brother, Joseph’s brothers to sell him into the slavery, and the religious leaders to murder Jesus.

And so, on the other hand, when someone else gets what we want, something that we were hoping for, we can choose to celebrate and rejoice with those who rejoice. Because James tells us in verse 17,

“The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17-18).

And so, if someone else gets the promotion, wins the game or competition, you congratulate them and you celebrate with them.

Maybe you’re praying for something that you desperately want, maybe it’s a promotion, a child, a new house, someone to share life with, and whatever it is God hasn’t answered that prayer yet. But then someone else gets what you wanted, and so with all sincerity you praise God with them, rejoicing with those who rejoice; and instead of resenting their blessings, you celebrate with them. And then secondly, we want to recognize what we have.

## 2. Recognizing What We Have

You see, that bitter envy steals our joy and kills our contentment and so we need to recognize what we have. So many times, we find ourselves distracted and preoccupied with all the things that we don’t have so that we ignore what we already have. The bottom line is that we don’t want to compare ourselves to others, in fact the apostle Paul said this,

“We wouldn't dare say that we’re as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, using themselves as the standard of measurement. How ignorant” (2 Cor 10:12, NLT).

In other words, he says “they’re without understanding.” And yet, when we allow envy to get down into our soul, to actually fester in our hearts, we begin to entertain thoughts like “I shouldn’t be here, I should be doing something else, I could be doing bigger things.” And so, we get caught up in this, locked in this prison of discontent and bitterness wondering what I could’ve missed out on?

But when you recognize what you have, acknowledging that you may have missed closing that big deal at work, your grass may be too long, you may have put on a few extra pounds, the house needs to be painted and your career just isn’t quite as far along as you’d hoped it would be; but you were there at every game for your kid, your house may look neglected on the outside, but on the inside its full of faith, hope, and love. You may have stepped off the ladder as you were climbing to success, but you regained everything that you were losing in your marriage.

And so, maybe you’re busy, you’re distracted making that perfect post, and you know everybody’s going to like it, but would you just pause for a moment? Would you look around and consider the blessings that surround you, recognizing what you have, and acknowledging what’s right in front of you, so that you can say with the apostle Paul,

“I’ve learned how to be content with whatever I have” (Philippians 4:11, NLT).

You see, when you learn this skill, this spiritual discipline, your joy will come back, you’ll find your affirmation in him who gives you strength, because you’ve excepted who you are and what you have. This is what James calls “the wisdom that comes from heaven” and I pray that as you hear this that you would begin to understand what you have, the gifts, the talents, the resources, and the experiences, because when you know what you have, number three you’ll always be thankful for God’s goodness to you.

## 3. Always Giving Thanks to God

You see, it’s that simple attitude of gratitude that changes everything, because you recognize what God has put right in front of you and you thank him for it. You’re not always comparing, you’re not always looking at someone else’s greener grass, because you’re content and you know that there’s always something newer, bigger, or better. There’s always going to be, and so if you find yourself noticing that the grass is greener somewhere else, maybe it’s just time for you to look at what God has given you, to water your own yard, and as the Bible says,

“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20).

Be thankful for what you have, who you are, and that you’re loved and uniquely created in Christ Jesus to do good works. In fact, the apostle Paul talks about the uniqueness of each different part of the body of Christ. He says, there are many different parts, but there’s only one body, and so,

“The eye can’t say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head can’t say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” (1 Corinthians 12:20-23).

So, Paul reminds us of our value as individual members of the body of Christ and each one of us with different expressions of uniqueness. And so, you can celebrate who you are, being thankful for what you have, because in knowing who you are, you know who you don’t have to be. In fact, you can be exactly who God created you to be, and so you’re not living for likes, you’re not getting your approval from their likes, but you’re getting it from God’s love and you’re living from his approval.

Suddenly, our eyes are opened, the Bible says the veil is taken away, and we realize that he’s all that we ever needed. We don’t need to get approval from someone else because we’ve got approval from our Heavenly Father. And so, our identity is not in how many followers we have but it’s in who we’re following and the Bible tells us,

“Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:16-17).

There’s freedom, because suddenly the veil has been lifted and we recognize that it’s not about you or I, but we’ve been called to die to self and follow Jesus giving him the glory in all that we do. And so, we’re thankful because we’re free, we’re satisfied, and we’re fulfilled because we’re no longer harboring bitter envy. Instead, we’re pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Not whitewashed tombs, but peacemakers who sow in peace raising a harvest of righteousness (James 3:17-18). I pray that each of you recognize that envy is earthly, it’s unspiritual, but Jesus is enough.

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