Whitewashed Tombs - Part 3

# (Luke 18:9-14)

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church. We’ve been in a series called Whitewashed Tombs and if you haven’t been with us, in the first week we looked at anger, in the second week we looked at envy, and today we’re going to look at pride and the effect that it has on our relationship with God. This is such an important series; we don’t want to find ourselves on the receiving end of Jesus accusation to the religious people of his day because in Matthew chapter 23 he called them:

“Hypocrites! You’re like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean” (Matt 23:27).

And so, as we begin this morning, we’re going to look at a story that Jesus told about two men who came to the temple to worship and pray. Two guys who go to the same place for the same purpose, but one man leaves the temple that day right with God and one of them doesn’t. One of them, Jesus tells us is a Pharisee, a religious guy, and the other a tax collector, a man who is despised by all the people.

As we look at this story, we’re going to discover essential principles about the way that we approach God and I wonder how many of you would be honest enough to admit that you struggle with your pride? You know, maybe for you it’s a religious or spiritual pride; maybe it’s a national pride or intellectual, economic, or financial; maybe it’s a pride in your artistic or athletic abilities, but would you just raise your hand for a moment if you struggle with pride?

Okay, a few of you. And so, for those of you who were too proud to raise your hand, let me just admit for you that all of us deal with pride in some way or another. And today we’re going to deal with this very difficult subject of pride because it’s hard to see in ourselves. It’s pride that says whatever you’re talking about doesn’t apply to me. It’s pride that says, “I’m better than you, I don’t need your advice, and I can handle this by myself.” And so, I wonder if we could all just be honest enough to admit that we all deal with pride?

As I was thinking about these two men who came to the temple to worship and pray, I wonder if this same story isn’t played out every Sunday in churches all around the world? And what I mean is this, that right now there’s someone here who’s convinced that they are without a doubt the worst person in this room. In fact, they’re looking around and everyone else seems to have it all together; but they know deep down inside that they don’t have it all together. And so, maybe this morning, you’re here and you know that you don’t have it all together, that you’re not who you should be, and that you’re not who you want to be, but I want to encourage you to hold on, to hang in there because I’ve got good news for you.

Now, on the other hand, there’s also someone here who’s convinced that they’re the best person in the room. In fact, they’re certain that they’re the most qualified, most knowledgeable, most enlightened, holiest, most committed and hardest working believer here. As a matter of fact, for some of you, as you look around this room, you’re seeing all of our faults and defects and deep inside you’re rejoicing that you’re far above all of that. Now, of course, you know that you’re not perfect, but you know that as far as Christians go, you’re ranking right there at the top. And so, I’ve got good news for you as well, no matter how you see yourself, Jesus won’t leave you in that condition.

In fact, when he told this story about these two men, these two types of people that we’ve been talking about, people just like us, this story was addressed to those whom he called “Whitewashed Tombs.” These were those who trusted in themselves, in their own godly character, and their good deeds, and so, it was to them that Jesus said in verse nine,

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector” (Luke 18:9-10).

Now, the Pharisee was a public figure, a respected religious leader, and he knew all of the rules of godly conduct. In fact, historians tell us that there were 613 to be exact, and this Pharisee had memorized all of them and followed them down to the most minute detail. And so, this guy was like a Bible scholar going to church, he was a teacher of the Word of God, and so he was well respected in the community.

But then on the other hand, you’ve got a tax collector, but he didn’t just collect taxes for the local government, he collected taxes for the Romans that had invaded his country and oppressed his people. And so, he had betrayed his own people and was taking their money to fund this what you could call a Roman terror network. He was a traitor and even worse than that he was corrupt and had become wealthy because he was lining his own pockets and therefore this tax collector was despised by all the people.

Jesus tells us that both of these men went up to the temple to pray, we’ve got the good guy and the bad guy, and verse 11 says,

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11).

In other words, the Pharisee said, “God I thank you that I’m better than everyone else. I always come to the temple to pray, I spend time in your Word and I do the right things.” In verse 12 he said,

“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:12).

And so, he had some good things going for him, but instead of seeing God as his source, and himself being the vehicle. Instead of seeing the good things as gifts from God, he began to see himself as the gift to God. But before we begin pointing fingers and putting down the Pharisee, we’d be wise to recognize the Pharisee that lives inside of each of us. You see, we all have a tendency at times to be self-sufficient and so self-righteous that we feel worthy of self-exultation.

In other words, instead of thanking God that we get to be part of his church, we look for a pat on the back because we showed up today, and suddenly we find ourselves so full of ourselves that there’s no room for God. And so, as we continue the story, let’s pick up in verse 13. Jesus said,

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'” (Luke 18:13).

He cried out for mercy because he recognized the holiness of God, he knew that he’d sinned, that he’d fallen short of the glory and goodness of God, and so he recognized that if God didn’t intervene in his story that he was in a hopeless situation. You see, if he was to be made right with God according to the law, he’d have to pay back every penny that he’d ever stolen plus add 20 percent to it. He recognized that even in his lifetime, restitution would be impossible, and so knowing what he deserved, he asked for mercy hoping that God would be merciful. In verse 14, Jesus continued saying,

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

As we consider this story, we want to look at it closely so that we can be confident that we’re approaching God the right way and not the wrong way. And so, if you’re here or if you’re listening and you’ve ever thought “I’ve messed up too much, there’s no hope for me” I’ve got good news for you. No matter who you are, what you’ve done, or what you’ve experienced, you can leave today in a right relationship with God. Even if you’ve got doubts about yourself, doubts about God, and even if you’ve been doing the wrong things all your life, today you can settle this and know that you are justified before God.

## 1. The Wrong Way to Approach God

And so, number one, let’s consider the wrong way to approach God. This would be the error of the Pharisee and those others whom Jesus called “Whitewashed tombs” and the first mistake was that his prayer was a me-centered prayer. He came to the temple to pray to God, but as he stood up in front of everyone, he made himself the object of his prayers. In verse 11 Jesus described it this way,

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself” (Luke 18:11).

In other words, he wasn’t losing himself in the worship of God, he wasn’t really even thinking about God, but his prayer was all about himself. You could say his main concern was establishing his place in the kingdom because he was focused only on himself. And we can find ourselves in the same place when we get in the habit of praying with declarations of who we are in Christ, even quoting Scripture, but forgetting to…

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:4).

You see, it’s easy to unintentionally become the center of our prayers. And so, we need to remember to rejoice in what God has done in our lives. We want to praise him and give him thanks, and as we do, he invites us to lift up our prayers and concerns; but there’s a big difference between making our requests known to him and making our prayers about nothing more than ourselves.

The second mistake the Pharisee made was comparing himself to others and it’s an approach that religious people often use, but it’s also an approach that we use. Comparison is simply a tool to build ourselves up, to emphasize our good deeds or our abilities, focusing on our strong points, so that others faults and weaknesses become more conspicuous than our own. It’s just a smokescreen. In fact, if you’ve got children you may have heard them say, “Well, I may have done this, but at least I didn’t do that.” And that’s kind of how the Pharisee prayed in verse 11, he said,

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11).

And so, even though his prayer began with the phrase, “God, I thank you…” it was really just a self-exalting pat on the back.

Today, you and I need to get past the idea that God grades on a curve, because if our best defense is “at least I never” then we’re on shaky ground spiritually. We don’t want to get in the habit of comparing ourselves with others saying, “Well, maybe I did this, but at least I never did that.” Instead we need to recognize that we’re all on level ground. Now, maybe some of their sins are more obvious than yours, but that doesn’t mean that they’re worse. The reality is that we’re actually more alike than we’re different.

And then, the third mistake the Pharisee made in approaching God was his self-confidence. Basically, he came to God in prayer, arrogantly boasting about all the good things that he does. And so, in verse 12 he said, not only am I better than other people, but he said, please note that,

“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:12).

And he mistakenly thought that he was good enough to approach God on the basis of his works. That was the error of the scribes and Pharisees and that’s why Jesus called them Whitewashed tombs; and honestly, as far as resumes go, his was actually a pretty short one. You know, what about all the other commandments and the requirements of the law? In fact, he knew the Word of God and that the prophet Micah had said,

“God has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Yet, the Pharisee missed out on the heart of the law thinking that he could impress God with this short list of accomplishments.

Now of course, we all long to stand before Jesus on that last day and hear him say,

“Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matthew 25:21)

And so, what you accomplish in life does make a difference, your love matters, obedience matters, holiness matters, and faithfulness matters, but you can never earn your place in the kingdom of God based on the good things that you do. In fact, if salvation was based on what we deserved, none of us would make it.

And so, as the Pharisee was busy congratulating himself for his success in fasting and giving, he neglected to heed the word of the prophet Isaiah, words that he supposedly lived by and professed to believe in Isaiah chapter 64, verse six,

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6).

And that’s the difference, the great chasm between sinful man and a holy God; our very best is not much better than a dirty rag. And so, we all need to understand that we’re never able to approach God on the basis of anything other than his mercy and his grace. And so, we’ve seen the wrong way to approach God, now let’s look at the right way to approach God, number two.

## 2. The Right Way to Approach God

In our remaining time together, I want to look at the prayer of the tax collector, because he shows us the right way to approach God. The Pharisee did three things wrong, but the tax collector did one thing right, and that one thing was all that really mattered. He simply called upon the mercy of God and when it comes to getting right with God this is our only hope; that the God of all grace in his infinite goodness would choose by his mercy to wipe away your sin.

You see, unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector came before God without any pretense, without any self-importance or any sense of entitlement. In fact, he made no defense for himself at all, he made no excuses, but simply stood at a distance, not even daring to raise his eyes to look upon heaven and he said,

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

You see, he wasn’t kidding himself, he wasn’t putting on a show for others to see, because he knew who he was. The tax collector knew that his standing with God wasn’t based upon comparing himself to anyone else, it wasn’t about where he might fit on the curve, but it was simply a matter between him and a holy God. And so, he knew where he stood and Jesus said,

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

You see, it’s when we humble ourselves before God that we position ourselves to receive his grace. And that’s good news because some of you walked into church today and you’re already feeling humbled. For you it may be your life situation has humbled you, maybe it’s a teenage child, maybe a financial situation, maybe the relationship that you’re in, and you’ve done the best you can but you don’t know how to fix it. For others of you, it’s some of the choices that you’ve made, but whatever it is you’ve lost hope and you need God to intervene.

And so, you could approach God like the Pharisee, with a posture of arrogance, boasting in your accomplishments, comparing yourself with others, but you’re not going to find what you’re looking for. Or, you can choose the better way, the right way to approach God, like the tax collector and humble yourself. You see, it’s recognizing that God has done more than you deserve, more than you could ever earn, and without him your situation is hopeless. And so, it’s when you humble yourself like the tax collector that you put yourself in the position to receive God’s grace. And that’s good news because God is watching and waiting to intervene in your life, he wants to deliver you from whatever you’re facing and bring you hope, mercy, and forgiveness. He’s just waiting for you to humble yourself, believing and coming to him in prayer, so that you’re in position to receive his favor.

That’s exactly what Jesus said. He said, “He who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). And the problem with pride is that when we're so full of ourselves, there's no room for God, and so he has to humble you. Therefore, as we close, we want to empty ourselves, we’re going to humble ourselves like the tax collector, and we're going to put ourselves in position to receive God’s favor. And so, let’s get serious with God and enter into his presence. Let’s pray together.

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