Whitewashed Tombs – Part 1

# (Matthew 23:27)

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church. It’s so good to be back with all of you again and teaching from the Word of God. I’ve been looking forward to sharing this brand-new message series entitled Whitewashed Tombs with you, and so, if you could turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 23, we’re going to begin reading there as we lay the foundation for this series.

As you’re finding your place, I want you to consider what it is that makes you angry? You know, what is it that causes your blood pressure to rise and that makes you really angry? Well, today we’re going to talk about anger and look at a situation and a group of people that really angered Jesus. And over the next few weeks, we’re going to look at envy, pride, control, and bitterness; exploring various ways that Jesus confronted hypocrisy.

This is where the title of this series came from, it’s actually the name that Jesus called the religious people of his day. Did everyone find their place in Matthew chapter 23? Let’s begin reading in verse 27, as Jesus confronts the teachers of the law and Pharisees saying,

“You hypocrites! You’re like whitewashed tombs (in other words, you’re like a burial vault, a mausoleum or grave), which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside… (What do you find on the inside of a tomb? Jesus said they’re) full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

And so, these were very harsh words, but we’re going to see that the teachers of the law and Pharisees were deserving of this title.

You see, the problem was that they were so influenced by comfort, by the way things had always been done, that they were resistant to a move of God. They put God in a box, choking hope and promise in people’s lives, grieving the Holy Spirit; and so, the Pharisees were stifling what God was wanting to do. Because of their stubbornness, because of their insensitivity to what the Spirit was doing, they really angered, they frustrated Jesus and so he called them out.

In fact, turn back to verse one of Matthew chapter 23, because here we find Jesus warning the crowds and his disciples to be careful of the Pharisee’s influence. In verse two, Jesus said,

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. "Everything they do is done for men to see…” (Matthew 23:2-5).

In other words, he said it was all a show, their faith was a performance, it was a religious act, but it wasn’t born out a relationship with God. And so, one characteristic of being a “whitewashed tomb” was to be more concerned about the outward appearance them with the true character on the inside. And it was that hypocrisy that angered Jesus so much causing him to confront them, calling them “whitewashed tombs” because they didn’t practice what they preached (Isaiah 29:13).

In fact, turn with me to Mark chapter 3, because here we find this demonstrated so well. Mark tells us that another time Jesus went into the synagogue, the Pharisees were just kind of hovering around, and verse one says,

“A man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

“Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts…” (Mark 3:1-5).

Now, for us looking at this from the outside almost 2000 years later, it seems so unbelievable that they could prioritize a man-made religious rule over life. But that’s what we discover, they’re just watching and waiting for Jesus to slip up because of their limited understanding of the kingdom of God. And it was this attitude of the religious leaders that caused Jesus to become so angry, it was this exact thing that angered him so deeply, causing him to say,

“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” (Matthew 23:27).

And so, I wonder what is it that makes you angry? You know, maybe for you it’s when someone cuts you off in traffic and almost causes an accident? Maybe it’s poverty, or homelessness, or child abuse? Maybe for others of you, it’s not quite that big, but it’s when they squeeze the toothpaste from the middle of the tube. Or others of you, it’s when he leaves his underwear on the floor. You know, maybe it’s the little things that make you angry, that maybe cause you to blow up, and so, maybe a more important question is this: number one, where are you giving anger a foothold in your life?

## 1. Giving Anger a Foothold

Having laid the foundation for this series by introduction, what I really want to do is to look on the inside of our hearts, digging out those dead things and everything unclean; because Jesus said that it’s those things that come from the heart that make a man or a woman unclean (Matthew 15:18). And the Word of God has a lot to say about our anger, in fact, if you would turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4, the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostle Paul encourages us to put off falsehood, speaking truthfully to our brother or sister in Christ, because he says we’re all members of one body. And then in verse 26, he tells us,

"In your anger do not sin." Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

What is it that really makes you angry? I’ll tell you, for me it’s often the little things that trip me up. You know, there are some big things that make me really angry, like the murder of babies, people who abuse others, you know bullies, but its most often the little things that catch me off guard. You know, like sitting down at the end of the day to watch a movie with someone who doesn’t understand proper movie protocol. And here’s what I mean, you sit down to watch the movie, and there’s that person that insists on talking through the whole introduction. Not only that, but they never stop talking, they’re like, “Did you just see that? Or “What did he just do?” Or they think they know everything that’s going to happen, and so they give you a play-by-play rundown. “He’s going to do it, he’s the one, just watch this” and they just talk and talk.

I wonder what it is that makes you angry? Where are you giving anger a foothold in your life? Whatever it is, wherever it is, you’ve got lots a company, because there are all sorts of examples of people who’ve allowed this in the Bible. One of the first stories is that of Cain and Abel if you want to turn to Genesis chapter 4. If you’re not familiar with the story, they both brought their offerings to the Lord, they both came to worship, but God accepted Abel’s offering and not Cain’s. Now, this caused Cain to become angry and he gave the devil a foothold, but not before God came to him and urged him not to allow the devil to master him. God said in Genesis chapter 4, verse six,

"Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:6-7).

Unfortunately, Cain did not heed the warning, he gave the devil a foothold, and through that open door of anger, sin entered into Cain’s heart, and he ended up murdering his brother. You see, Cain didn’t control his anger and instead it mastered him. His heart wasn’t right with God and when his offering was rejected the Hebrew word implies that he was burning with anger. He wasn’t outwardly angry, it wasn’t visible, it was just beneath the surface like a fierce beast crouching at the door of his life. This is what Paul meant when he said, “do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:27).

And so, what is the proper response, number two, how do we want to respond to anger?

## 2. Responding Appropriately to Anger

 Unfortunately, many of us don’t respond appropriately and there are basically two ways that we deal with our anger. We either stuff it down and hold it in or we just blow up and get it over with. And I think for a lot of us, as we begin following Christ we become stuffers because we know that our anger doesn’t bring about the righteous life that God desires. And so, we stuff it down, holding it deep inside, instead of expressing our anger properly and diffusing it, we suppress it and bottle it up.

We find David doing this in the Old Testament, Psalm chapter 32 tells us about a time when he was really upset, but instead of dealing with it he stuffed it and in verse three he moaned, crying out to God,

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Psalms 32:3).

And so, David bottled it up like so many of us do. Rather than slowly releasing our anger and talking it out in a healthy way, we hold it in and its smoldering just below the surface. But the painful reality is that it could burst into flame at any minute and yet many of us do this. You know, couples get upset, they both stuff it, they suppress it, bottling up, and they go to bed angry with their backs to each other refusing to talk about it. And the problem is that it’s just a ticking timebomb waiting for the appointed time when the devil takes advantage of that foothold.

On the other hand, there are those of us who have a short fuse and when you get angry everyone knows it. You’ve got a temper, you just blow up, and you just spew all over the place. You don’t stuff it, but you’re more like a shotgun, you just blow up leaving a whole lot of wounded people in your path. And the Bible talks about people like that, Proverbs chapter 29 tells us that,

“A fool gives full vent to his anger…” (Proverbs 29:11).

You see, you may feel like everything’s okay afterwards, after you’ve settled down, but there are wounded people all around you and that’s not okay. In fact, the Holy Spirit tells us in Proverbs chapter 14,

“A quick-tempered man does foolish things...” (Proverbs 14:17).

And I’ll tell you, I’m one of those people who just keep stuffing it down calling it anger management. The problem with keeping all of this anger and frustration inside is that the silliest little thing can cause me to blow up. And I still struggle with the tendency to stuff my anger, my frustrations, and my feeling but now I know that’s not anger management. Looking back on my life I am ashamed of all foolish things that I’ve done.

In fact, I’ve got to tell you this one really stupid story. When I was about 18 or 19, I was driving down the interstate heading home from work when I got pulled over by a state trooper. I reached over to grab my registration and no sooner had I straightened up in my seat, then did the trooper take off down the road. Well, you could imagine, I just popped, I blew up, and so you’ll never guess what I did. I took off in pursuit, flashing my lights and honking my horn until the trooper pulled over. I hopped out and told him what I thought about the whole situation to which he responded by giving me my first speeding ticket.

Now, it was so stupid that I can laugh about it today but it just goes to prove that “A quick-tempered man does foolish things...” (Proverbs 14:17). The reality is that giving full vent to our anger is never a laughing matter. And there are some of you listening who I would hope would recognize that your anger management skills are destroying your most important relationships. And so, what is an appropriate response to anger?

Well, in Proverbs chapter 29, the Bible tells us,

“A wise man keeps himself under control” (Proverbs 29:11).

And so, we need the presence of the Holy Spirit, we need to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The apostle Paul describes this in Galatians chapter 5, he says,

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Again, what’s that last one? Self-control! And so, we get more fruit by spending more time with the giver of the fruit, by spending more time with the Holy Spirit. And so, number three, we need to be spending more time with the Holy Spirit seeking the righteous life God desires.

## 3. Seeking The Righteous Life God Desires

We talked about this last weekend, spending time with the Holy Spirit, and being sensitive to the Holy Spirit. And this is so important, because as believers we’re not filled with the Holy Spirit to be some treasure that we would bury in the ground, but we’re to live by the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, because God promised,

"I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

And so, we’re to walk with the Holy Spirit, to live with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will empower us to get our lives under control.

That’s what Jesus promised, he said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” power to be witnesses both in word and deed (Acts 1:8). And so, we need to be clothed with power from on high, because as the apostle Paul said, when you live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:16). And verse 19 tells us that these are obvious,

“…fits of rage” (Galatians 5:19-20).

And so, we need more of the Holy Spirit, we need to know him better, so that we can be more fruitful. That’s the key to walking in victory in the Christian life, to being overcomers, because it’s the Holy Spirit that gives us wisdom, discernment, and self-control. As you live by the Spirit, you’re able to respond appropriately and do what the Bible says in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 26,

"In your anger do not sin… and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

With the mind of Christ we’re able to recognize sources of irritation, frustration, and exasperation. And so, we need to have godly discernment to appropriately evaluate our emotions and feelings so they we’re able to do as the Bible advises in Proverbs chapter 17,

“Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out” (Proverbs 17:14).

And so, after we identify it and process it, we can ask the Holy Spirit to quench it, to help us communicate properly, to help us respond appropriately, and you can drop the matter before a dispute breaks out or refuse to get angry over things that don’t really matter.

I know for me, it’s often the little things, and there are so many times when I could’ve gotten angry about something but I choose not to because it doesn’t really matter. You know, so what if they didn’t load the dishwasher right. You know, so what if they put the forks in with the spoons. And so, you just drop it because it doesn’t really matter. And you praise God that they tried realizing that there are some things are just not worth getting angry about.

This is the principle behind what James tells us to do in chapter 1, verse 19, he says,

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19-20).

And what is the righteous life that God desires? It’s becoming more like him by spending time with the Holy Spirit. You see, God desires to make us more like himself. In fact, five times the Bible describes the character that God desires to see in us. Moses said it in Exodus chapter 34 telling us that God is,

“Slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

Nehemiah said it, David said it, Joel said it, and Jonah said it. Each one of them describing this characteristic of being slow to anger. And so, we need to recognize that if it doesn’t really matter, to just drop it and let God deal with it according to his righteousness.

We saw earlier how Jesus handled his anger in Mark chapter 3 where there was this guy with a shriveled-up hand but if you remember the Pharisees were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus of breaking the law, and so they were looking to see if he would heal this man on the Sabbath. Jesus, seeing how they were so hardhearted, so stubborn, got angry and said to the man,

"Stretch out your hand” (Mark 3:5).

Now you or I, we might’ve lost it, we might’ve blown our top, we might’ve said or done things that we would have regretted later. But not Jesus, instead of allowing his anger to cause him to sin, his anger caused him to do something good. The man…

"Stretched it out and his hand was completely restored” (Mark 3:5).

As we close, I wonder what are those things that you’re getting angry about?

Today if your marriage is struggling you should get angry, not at your spouse, but at the devil who’s gotten a foothold and who’s attempting to divide what God has made one. Or, maybe you’re sick of seeing that same group of people on the streets, burdened by sin, making bad decisions, and a righteous anger would rise up in you causing you to do something about it. My prayer is that we will become a church who would be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry; but if we do, I pray that we would get angry like Jesus, getting angry about the things that anger the heart of God. Let’s pray together.

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