

Whitewashed Tombs

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“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matthew 23:25). The word *“hypocrite”* is so very appropriate to the context. *“Hypokrites primarily denotes one who answers; then, a stage actor; it was a custom for Greek and Roman actors to speak in large masks with mechanical devices for augmenting the force of the voice; hence the word became used metaphorically of a dissembler, a hypocrite”* (Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words, 242). The accusation made by Jesus, then, would be that the Pharisees are more like actors than anything else. They wear a mask around other people, but that mask only serves to keep hidden the truth about their motives, desires, and priorities.

“For you clean the outside of the cup, and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.” No matter what kind of front the Pharisees put up, God could always see right through them to their innermost thoughts. In the same way, it does not matter how clean the outside of a cup is if the inside is filthy. Does one drink liquid on the outside? Although having a clean exterior may seem like a productive means to an end, it really accomplishes very little in the practical sense. A shiny, clean car with a coat of wax is worthless to the driver if he has not changed the oil in fifteen thousand miles. So why do any of us think that exterior religious seemliness means anything to God? What an abomination it is before the Lord to come before Him with sin in one’s heart, as is exemplified by Matthew 5:23-24.

“You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also” (Matthew 23:26). It is interesting to see the connection that Christ makes between the blindness of the Pharisees and the fullness of their sin. When we blind ourselves to the truth of the Gospel, everything else in life will be spoiled. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:22-23 that it is the eye that helps determine how pure the rest of the body is. If the eye is closed to the good things in the Bible, then what will be the result? Surely, every other aspects of life will be adversely affected. Of course, if we close our eyes to the filth within our souls, then we may never come to the realization that there even is a problem. Furthermore, a life without self-examination will never be improved. We must always strive to look deep within ourselves to see if there is filth. Sometimes we spend so much time worrying about the outside, the external aspects of our Christianity – church attendance, manners, communications skills, the image of dignity and self-control – that we do not even stop to consider what is inside. Christ makes it very clear in Matthew 15:11 that it is what is found deep within the man that defiles him, and brings about his spiritual ruin. Why do so many choose to ignore their innermost parts? Why, of all the things that can be neglected, do people like the Pharisees let their souls go into disorder? Perhaps it is because we do not always like what we find on the inside, and are ashamed. Self-examination requires a person to dig deep into the recesses of his mind and conscience, and when light is shed on those places it is not always pretty – some, in fact, find that the deeper they go into the soul the more they find that is rotten.

Rottenness must be rooted out, though, if it to be abolished. If we do not clean out the inside of the cup and dish, we will always find ourselves condemned by Christ as *“hypocrites.”* *“...So that the outside may become clean also.”* If we do take decisive steps to keep the inside, the heart and the mind, clean, then the outside will naturally take on the appearance of cleanliness as well. A person with a pure heart will always

want to make good moral decisions, and his or her appearance will reflect that – wearing appropriate clothes, saying godly things, showing self-control in all areas of life.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27). Just because a tomb is aesthetically pleasing does not mean it is any less a tomb. No matter how one may decorate such a dwelling, its primary function is to house death – can the same be said of our souls? Similar to the previous analogy, this verse should encourage us to examine our lives carefully to see if we have only adorned ourselves with the outside appearance of Christianity. But underneath all of the nice ties and good singing, is there only dead men’s bones in our souls? *“Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”* There is no lie that can be told to deceive God, and no matter how much you may be deceiving the person sitting next to you at church, God knows what is in your heart. He knows the person within.