

Scripture: Matthew 23:27-28

Sermon: "Whitewashed Tombs"

Text: Matthew 23:27b --- "...you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautifully, but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness"

Proposition: Jesus' warning about ~~xxx~~ whitewashed tombs being similar to the scribes and Pharisees warns us to put human and spiritual values first, rather than to emphasize pride, greed and the material aspects of life.

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Introduction:

1. A lady was trying on hats in a shop, and the saleslady gushed over one particularly expensive one, "That hat is YOU ! It's simply marvelous on you."

"Yes, I like it too," answered the woman with less enthusiasm.

"Why, Ma'am," purred the clerk, "It makes you look fifteen years younger."

"Then I don't want it," said the customer. "I can't afford to put on fifteen years every time I take the hat off."

(from Quote, Feb. 28, 1971)

2. Some things that they couldn't afford, and that we can't afford, were told of by Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees of his time, as recorded in the 23rd chapter of Matthew, of which our Scripture of today is a part. Jesus emphasized the unhealthy aspects of some of their ways of doing by starting each of seven sayings with the word "Woe," meaning "trouble is coming to you because of this if you don't change your ways." The "Woe" saying from this 23rd chapter of Matthew which we (have read and) use today is the 6th of the seven sayings, and is the

27 & 28th verses of the chapter.

I. A brief study of the Scripture immediately shows it to be one of the most striking and stinging of the harsh things Jesus said to the Jewish leaders.

1. Outside the walls of the present day city of Jerusalem are thousands of graves. In many areas they go right up to the walls, and then ~~are~~ solidly down the slope below to the valley and up the other side. Quite often beautiful buildings of historic interest to one, two or all of the major faiths of the land will be completely surrounded by these tombs. The land is rocky, and ^{MOST OF} the tombs are either in caves in the hillside or are rectangular mausoleums of boxlike shape big enough to hold a body. ^{SOME ARE IN THE GROUND WITH ROCK SLABS.} Many of them are whitewashed. ^{VARIOUS TYPES OF TOMBS}

2. That's pretty much the way it was in Jesus' day, evidently. The Jews then and now considered a dead body an unclean and unhealthy object. They have (and had) a rule that when a person died during daylight hours ^{THE BODY MUST} ~~he had to~~ be buried before nightfall.

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Burial/~~could~~^{can} not be in the city, but must be outside of it. Once the body is properly wrapped and entombed, it should be avoided. On special holy days, anyone even touching a tomb is considered unclean, and must go thro special cleansing ceremonies before he can be accepted in the worshipping congregation.

3. Probably these rules or traditions grew out of the realistic situation that existed when many people died of plague, smallpox, and other highly-infectious diseases. The sensible and necessary thing then was to get the body away from people as soon as possible, so that nobody would touch it and contract the disease. Giving loved ones complied with this, but their love made them entomb the body in as beautiful a place as they could afford, even as we do today a great deal. But no matter how the tomb looks, the body within it gradually deteriorates back to bones and corruption, as Jesus put it, and finally to dust.

4. Jesus compared the Pharisees ~~and~~

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scribes to such tombs: ^{IMPOSING} ~~beautiful~~ to look at, but dead, corrupt, and dangerous ~~to the touch~~. That was very harsh. It is easy to read about it and still feel smug, but not so easy if we are forced to understand Jesus as saying these words to us, to you and to me. Yet, ~~in some ways~~, he was ^{ALSO} telling us that

II. We can become like whitewashed tombs unless we are very self-discerning and careful.

1. Public speakers like to feel confident that they can hold the attention of those to whom they speak. To find that they can't is a cause for much self-doubt and loss of confidence. One minister was really shaken up by an experience he had, causing him to revamp his methods and content of preaching.

He was eager to improve his sermons, and bought a tape recorder to record the Sunday morning services. After supper the first day he used it, he set the recorder, seated himself in an easy chair, and awaited the playback. The opening prayer, scripture reading, and music all

came forth just as he would have wished them. Then came the sermon. When he awoke some time later, the choir and congregation were starting the last hymn !

(from Sunshine Magazine, 11-70).

Like this minister, many of us have experiences which startle us into realizing that we are not as good as we think we are.

2. We sometimes pride ourselves as being good because we don't do certain things, such as use alcoholic beverages or drugs, practice prostitution, intentionally cheat or rob others, and so on. ~~Certainly~~ we should not do these things, for they are not good for us or for others. But we need to realize that while we refrain from some of these practices we can condition ourselves so that we are doing worse things without even knowing it; or if we know it, we justify it with false reasons.

3. Jesus never condoned sins of passion, but he had sharper warnings for sins of pride and greed. He said plainly that a harlot would enter heaven more easily than a "righteous"

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man who is greedy for reputation but indifferent to the injustices of his age. Read Matthew 21:28-32 if you don't think this is the type of thing Jesus said and meant.

4. We of today ^{OFTEN} condemn and snub those who practice what we might call "gross sins," but at the same time regard a money-shrewd "respectable" person as a reputable citizen. Respectable sinners, uncharitable and self-righteous, always looking for the main chance to get something for themselves, for ourselves, are really dead. This is the force and meaning of the 6th woe saying of Jesus.

5. There is danger that we may try to imprison this saying in the past, and so draw its sting. But look at our civilization. We have marvelous machines, fine buildings, and thousands of things which we call "progress." But within we are restless, strife exists between men and nations, we still have wretchedly poor people right among us, and wholesale wars are being fought. Among all this, many of us still seek safety among pile bathrooms, gleaming kitchens, color TV,

showy handiwork, flashy cars, mod clothing, etc.. We are, in the terms of the Scripture, calcimining or whitewashing the tomb. We make things look good on the outside, while yet on the inside we are unhappy, restless, resentful, and generally miserable. While in such ~~real~~ moods, we can fool few people, and, even if we do, we probably will do them harm.

6. We might be as Luke speaks of the tombs, "unsuspected tombs," that people stumble on without knowing it, and having touched death unknowingly become unclean. That was one reason tombs were whitewashed, so people would see them, particularly the below-ground ones, and not walk on or touch them and become unclean. But a person's inside is not so easily identifiable as being unclean and defiling ~~if~~ ^{WHEN} we mingle ^{KNOW AND SEE AN} with the attractive-looking and pleasant person ~~we see on the outside.~~ However, ~~it~~ is true that you really cannot tell what a person is inside by how he seems to be outside. We can become like whitewashed tombs, and some of us are.

III. The way to avoid being such a whitewashed tomb is to follow Jesus.

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1. Jesus doesn't say this in any of these seven woe sayings, although in other parts of the gospels he is quoted as inviting all people to follow him. But if we accept his warnings as reasonable ^{and} valid, then we should be somewhat conditioned to examine carefully and then accept his positive teachings, of which there are plenty.

2. Further, of course, his atoning death and his resurrection are, when accepted on faith as being for you, the clinching argument, the compelling reasons for committing ~~your~~ ^{your}self to Jesus.

Conclusion:

1. We have today looked at Jesus sayings about whitewashed tombs. The words of our text are the last words of the 27th verse of Matthew 23: "you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." We have recognized that such words speak to us as forcefully as they did to church people of his day and his faith.

2. Jesus' warning about whitewashed

Conclusion:

I have only looked at these
and the about 1000 other
words of our text and the last
of the 2300 words of Matthew 23: "You
the like whistles of dogs which out-
wardly appear as if they are
full of holiness, but within are
full of hypocrisy and all un-
cleanness." I have provided that
you were asked to us as forcefully as
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2. Jesus' words in Matt 23:23-28

tombs warns us to put human and spiritual values first, rather than to emphasize pride, greed, showmanship, and the material aspects of life.

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