

Matthew 23:27

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

Analysis

Whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward (τάφοις κεκοιμημένοις οἵτινες ἔξωθεν μὲν φαίνονται ὡραῖοι)—Jews whitewashed tombs with lime before Passover so pilgrims wouldn't accidentally touch them and become ceremonially unclean (Numbers 19:16). The whitewashing made them conspicuous and attractive, but within remained **dead men's bones and all uncleanness** (νεκρῶν ὀστέων καὶ πάσης ἀκαθαρσίας). Contact with corpses brought seven-day defilement—the highest level of ritual impurity.

The irony is devastating: those obsessed with avoiding ritual defilement were themselves walking tombs, defiling everyone they touched. Akatharsias (uncleanness) encompasses moral corruption, not just ceremonial impurity. Beautiful exterior, rotting interior—this describes unregenerate religion perfectly.

Historical Context

According to Mishnah Shekalim 1:1, Jews whitewashed graves on Adar 15 (month before Passover) to warn pilgrims. The whitewash created attractive monuments—some wealthy families elaborately decorated tombs. But Jewish law considered corpse-contact the most severe defilement, requiring sprinkling with red heifer

ashes (Numbers 19). Jesus spoke this during Passover week when these whitewashed tombs were most visible and pilgrims most concerned about purity.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What "whitewashing" do you apply to your life to appear spiritually attractive while harboring inner corruption?
2. How can religious activity itself become a form of defilement when divorced from heart transformation?
3. In what ways does concern for external respectability make you more dangerous spiritually—defiling others while convinced of your own purity?

Interlinear Text

Οὐαὶ	ὕμῖν	γραμματεῖς	καὶ	Φαρισαῖοι	ὑποκριταί	ὅτι
Woe	unto you	scribes	and	Pharisees	hypocrites	! for
G3759	G5213	G1122	G2532	G5330	G5273	G3754
παρομοιάζετε	τάφοις	κεκονιαμένοις	οἵτινες	ἔξωθεν	μὲν	
ye are like	sepulchres	unto whited	which	outward	indeed	
G3945	G5028	G2867	G3748	G1855	G3303	
φαίνονται	ὠραῖοι	ἔσωθεν	δὲ	γέμουσιν	ὀστέων	νεκρῶν
appear	beautiful	are within	but	full	men's bones	of dead
G5316	G5611	G2081	G1161	G1073	G3747	G3498
καὶ	πάσης	ἀκαθαρσίας				
and	of all	uncleanness				
G2532	G3956	G167				

Additional Cross-References

Acts 23:3 (Parallel theme): Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?

Luke 11:44 (Resurrection): Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them.

Numbers 19:16 (Parallel theme): And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.