

Whitewashed Power: How Judgment and Control Replace the Gospel

Executive Summary

This report addresses the destructive ways in which power—especially spiritual or religious power—is often misused to judge, shame, and control others. Drawing from Jesus’ harsh rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and examining modern parallels, this piece argues that weaponizing Scripture to condemn people based on appearance, gender, behavior, or status contradicts the message of the gospel. While Paul’s epistles, like 1 Corinthians 11, are often cited to justify cultural rules around hair or clothing, their original purpose was to encourage order, not exclusion. Ultimately, Jesus offered a radically different vision of leadership—one rooted in humility, mercy, and transformation from within. When religious institutions prioritize conformity and fear over love and spiritual freedom, they become the very system Jesus came to dismantle.

1. The Real Target of Jesus’ Anger: Abusive Authority

In Matthew 23, Jesus delivers a scathing critique—not of ordinary sinners or struggling believers—but of the religious elite who had elevated themselves above others. His language is pointed and unapologetic: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites.” These men were experts in Scripture, admired in public, and seen as spiritual authorities. Yet Jesus saw through their pious exteriors and called out the core problem: they were using religion not to liberate, but to control.

These leaders were not simply misguided; they were actively creating burdens for others while refusing to lift a finger themselves. They demanded ceremonial purity, exact observance of rules, and adherence to superficial customs. At the same time, they neglected the very heart of God’s law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus accused them of being like whitewashed tombs: beautiful on the outside, but inwardly filled with rot. His words were not gentle correction but righteous fury. He was exposing a system where power and pride had replaced compassion and truth.

This confrontation reminds us that spiritual authority, when unchecked, becomes a weapon. When leaders use their position to dictate behavior, shame difference, and enforce conformity, they become gatekeepers to God—something no human being has the right to be. Jesus was not attacking faith; He was attacking false righteousness built on appearances and control.

2. Modern Examples: Legalism and the New Pharisees

The pattern Jesus condemned did not end in the first century. Today, similar forms of spiritual control persist in churches, religious schools, ministries, and cultural movements. Often, this

control is cloaked in the language of tradition, morality, or “biblical values.” Yet when these values are applied with judgment rather than love, they cease to reflect the gospel.

One common modern expression of this is legalism—where people are judged based on clothing, grooming, gender expression, sexual orientation, or social status. Men are told they must appear a certain way to be respectable. Women are told they must dress modestly to be worthy. Those who don’t conform are not just corrected—they are often excluded, publicly shamed, or silently rejected. Leaders defend these standards as righteous, but in doing so, they echo the Pharisees’ obsession with the outside of the cup, while the inside—kindness, empathy, humility—remains untouched.

Social media and televangelism have only amplified this dynamic. Influencers and preachers with vast audiences now declare who is “in” and who is “out” of God’s favor based on appearance, speech, or political views. Some even claim divine authority to make these judgments. But in doing so, they reduce faith to performance and obedience to fear.

Such practices do not reflect the heart of Christ. They reflect a system where the powerful control the narrative and marginalize those who do not fit. These are the new Pharisees—those who preach purity but practice pride, who demand reverence but offer no grace.

3. The Psychology of Control in Religious Spaces

The use of fear and shame as tools of control is not limited to religious settings, but within spiritual communities, these tools can be especially devastating. At the heart of this dynamic is a psychological cycle that begins with fear. Individuals are taught to fear divine punishment, social rejection, or eternal damnation. This fear is often instilled early, reinforced weekly, and rarely questioned. Once the fear is in place, the next step is conformity. People are taught that to be accepted by God—and by their church community—they must behave, dress, and speak in specific ways.

This conformity is rarely about holiness and often about uniformity. Leaders use tradition, Scripture, and social pressure to dictate everything from hairstyle to family roles to political beliefs. Those who question or deviate from these expectations are seen as rebellious or spiritually lost. This allows the power structure to reinforce itself. The more fear and conformity are embedded, the more difficult it becomes to challenge the system. Over time, leaders become the final authority—interpreting Scripture, controlling membership, and deciding who is worthy of grace.

What makes this so insidious is that it often masquerades as love or protection. “We’re just trying to help people live right,” some may say. But true love does not demand performance for acceptance. It does not coerce; it invites. It does not punish questions; it embraces them. When churches become spaces of fear, hierarchy, and behavioral policing, they cease to reflect the church that Christ founded.

4. Jesus’s Gospel Is the Opposite of Control

At the core of Jesus's ministry was a radical invitation to freedom. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." That was His call—not "clean yourself up first" or "look the part." Jesus invited the broken, the poor, the outcast, the impure, and the misunderstood to draw near, not based on their righteousness, but based on His grace.

Jesus never used His authority to dominate others. He washed His disciples' feet. He welcomed sinners into His presence. He touched the unclean. His rebukes were always aimed at those in power who misrepresented God. To those on the margins, He offered dignity. To those enslaved by shame, He offered freedom.

The gospel is not a system of behavioral management; it is a call to inner transformation. The Holy Spirit convicts hearts—not to shame them, but to awaken them to love. The goal is not control but wholeness. The way of Christ does not look like top-down hierarchy, but like a shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. Any spiritual system that thrives on control and outward conformity is fundamentally opposed to the way of Jesus.

5. When the Church Becomes the Pharisee

Sadly, many modern religious communities have drifted far from the example of Christ and have become echoes of the very system He condemned. When churches elevate leaders beyond accountability, create barriers to belonging, or define righteousness by superficial standards, they step into the role of the Pharisee. When sermons are more concerned with skirts and tattoos than with injustice and mercy, something has gone deeply wrong.

The danger of becoming a Pharisee is that it often happens in the name of faith. Leaders genuinely believe they are protecting truth or defending holiness, but in reality, they are enforcing their own comfort, culture, or authority. When people are driven away from God by judgment, when youth are silenced by shame, when difference is punished instead of understood, the church becomes a gatekeeper instead of a bridge.

Jesus warned that those who use religious authority to shut the door of heaven in people's faces would face severe judgment. The church should be a place of refuge and healing, not performance and fear. Until churches reclaim the humility and mercy of Christ, they risk becoming well-dressed tombs—beautiful on the outside, but spiritually dead within.

6. A Call to Believers: Reject the Whitewashed Tomb

Every believer has a choice to make: will we mirror the Pharisees, or will we reflect Jesus? Will we use our knowledge and convictions to uplift others—or to judge them? The call of Christ is not to act as moral police, but to live as agents of reconciliation. The world is not looking for a performance of holiness. It is looking for people who live with compassion, humility, and authenticity.

God is not impressed by outward appearances. He sees the heart. He sees the pain behind the rebellion, the trauma behind the questions, and the dignity in every person—even those the world

calls unclean. Our job is not to fix people, control them, or label them. Our job is to love them and point them to a Savior who already did the work of redemption.

The whitewashed tomb represents everything Jesus came to destroy—religion without love, righteousness without humility, purity without mercy. Let us not rebuild what Christ tore down. Let us live the gospel—not as a weapon of control, but as a promise of freedom.

Conclusion: Stop Weaponizing the Word

When the Word of God is used to shame, silence, or dominate, it is no longer the Word being preached—it is ego, culture, and fear disguised as theology. The misuse of Scripture to control people's appearance, identity, or personal journey is a betrayal of the gospel itself. Jesus died to set us free from condemnation, not to create a religious system where human leaders decide who is acceptable.

We must ask ourselves: are we following Christ—or defending a system He would have overturned? Are we building bridges—or fortresses? Are we welcoming the weary—or burdening them further? The gospel of Jesus is not about grooming rules, political power, or performance. It is about love that transforms from the inside out.

Let us reject the whitewashed tomb. Let us speak truth with love, lead with humility, and allow grace to do what shame never can: bring people home.