

## John 2:12-22 – Cleansing the Temple

Let's Pray:

Our good God and Father, since all fullness of wisdom and light is found in you, mercifully to enlighten us by your Holy Spirit to truly understand your word. Give us grace to receive it in true fear and humility. May we be taught by your word to place our trust in you only. To serve and honour you as we were created to, so that we may glorify your holy name in all our living. Giving to you the love and obedience which faithful servants owe their masters, and children their parents, since it has pleased you graciously to receive us among the number of your servants and children. Amen.

We are getting back to our study of John's Gospel this morning, looking at Jesus' cleansing the temple. A couple weeks ago, I mentioned that the story of the wedding at Cana is only mentioned John. The story of the temple cleansing, however, is mentioned in every gospel. Every gospel writer agrees, we cannot understand Jesus' ministry if we do not include this event.

This begs the question, when we think about Jesus' life, does this event have that same importance to us? As I read the text, ask, what is so important about what is going on here to warrant Jesus' drastic actions? And, if this was so important to Jesus then, what are we going to do about it now?

Let's look at God's Word together: John 2:12-22

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. <sup>15</sup>So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

<sup>18</sup>The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

<sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

<sup>20</sup>They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" <sup>21</sup>But the temple he had spoken of was his body. <sup>22</sup>After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

This is the Word of the Lord.

This story is really jarring for most people, as it really calls into question the typical picture they have of Jesus as a gentle hippie-like figure. Here we see Jesus really being aggressive. So much for “gentle Jesus, meek and mild!” We might be used to Jesus giving stark rebukes to many people obstinate in their sin, and he gets irritated with the religious leaders’ hypocrisy, but this is the only time we really see Jesus visibly angry and even violent in the gospels.

In our Catechism class last week Isaac asked how Jesus didn’t sin when he was flipping tables and whipping people and animals with chords. I think the root of our problem in thinking about Jesus in this way is that we have divorced him from the way God is described in the Old Testament. Jesus has the same wrath for sin as we see God having all over Scripture. Jesus flooded the earth in the days of Noah. Jesus commanded the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites. Yes, Jesus gives us the clearest picture of God, he says himself, “whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn.14:9), but if we don’t understand Jesus in light of the Old Testament, we are bound to misunderstand him.

God has wrath for sin because he is holy and righteous. He would be morally deficient if he didn’t. His love and his wrath are two sides of the same coin. It is because he loves his creation that he cares when horrible things happen to it, and it just so happens that we are the ones responsible for these things.

While we know that Jesus did not sin in this action of cleansing the temple, and having wrath for sin is what we should expect from God, there is at the very least an incongruence between the way Jesus acts here and the rest of the gospel. We see Jesus interacting with lots of sin in his ministry, and we never again see him act like this. This discrepancy should cause us to question what’s going on. What is so important about what Jesus sees in the temple to make him act so aggressively?

### **Slide 6**

In this story, like the one before it, we see Jesus performing a sign. The first sign is a miracle of turning water into wine. It signifies the way in which the law purified sin is going to be transformed into Christ’s purifying blood. Jesus cleansing the temple signifies a similar thing, except in a different kind of way.

We should say, it is not that there isn’t anything miraculous going on here. It is quite something to take a whip and drive out an entire temple. The church father Origen says that this is a more impressive miracle than changing water into wine, as the water was only

inanimate matter, whereas all the people and animals had wills of their own.<sup>1</sup> Jesus could have easily been overtaken in this struggle, and yet he clears out the whole temple. I even stumbled upon an atheist website that said that this couldn't have happened because of that! These atheists are constantly forgetting who they're dealing with...

Jesus is not simply cleansing the temple because he is mad at what he sees. Of course, he is mad at what he sees, it is sinful to desecrate the worship of God. Just like he was happy to help the hosts of the wedding in the previous story to avoid being shamed when they ran out of wine, but that wasn't his primary objective. This act is another sign. Like the prophets who came before him, Jesus is here using a dramatic gesture to teach something important. Something about the nature of the temple, and how he will fulfill it. Remember, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Mt.5:17).

Some consider that what Jesus was really upset about was the way some people in the temple were taking advantage of travellers by giving them unfair value for their sacrifices. In the way that the other gospel writers present the story, this is especially highlighted.<sup>2</sup> Jesus there says, "It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers."

John, however, focuses on something else. John doesn't mention any robbery, only that it is a marketplace. The biggest fault of those selling in the temple is that they are not honouring God's wishes with their worship. God is the rightful Lord of all creation, and this should be most evident in his worship. In the Law God was very specific about how Israel ought to worship him, and to break this, or add to it, is a very deadly sin, causing furious wrath.

### **Slide 7**

Jesus' cleansing of the temple teaches us that the way we worship God matters a lot to him, and that's because it points to God's grace being the central aspect of our worship.

Remember the first table of the law, that is, the first four commandments of the ten, are all about proper worship of God. It is exceedingly important to him how he is worshipped. Jesus is our great high priest, and one of his roles as such is to guard our worship against falsehood, and worship that is not fitting to God's glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Origen, Commentary on the Gospel According to John, 10.150, 290.

<sup>2</sup> There is a big discussion on the relation of John's account and the rest of the gospels. Even in the early church, many noted the differences. One of the main differences is that this event happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John, whereas it is the event that begins Jesus' road to the cross in the other gospels. Some commentators plausibly allow for two temple cleansings, each with different emphases. Others say that the gospel stories are not chronologically ordered, but ordered to teach a certain message. There is likely truth to both of these. It is important to John to begin Jesus' ministry with this story, as it emphasizes the centrality of Jesus' sacrifice to his life, it is not simply some afterthought or mistake.

**Slide 8**

We have a tradition in our house, I'm sure you have the same, when it is someone's birthday, we allow them to choose what they want for dinner. Even if that means everyone must eat mac and cheese, because that is what the six-year-old wants, that is what happens. We respect the wishes of the person of honour, even if that person is six years old. How much more so should we respect the wishes of God in his place of worship?

**Slide 9**

There is no mention in John's telling of this story that these people are doing anything underhanded in selling in the temple, only that they are selling in a place that is inappropriate. Jesus says, "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" God's house is not a place to be selling things, causing a commotion like a shopping mall, but a place for contrition, to look at your sin and recognize the need for sacrifice because of it.

**Slide 10-11**

Prophecy Jesus' action, Zechariah 14:21 says, "And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." Similarly, in Hosea 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Jesus here is pointing to a purer worship that is coming.

**Slide 12**

This is why Jesus gets so mad, the people are not focusing on the worship of God through their sacrifice, as they should, but are treating their worship like a transaction. "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" In this way, the sacrifices will fail to point them to Jesus. It is essential that they follow the sacrificial laws carefully, so that they will be able to see Jesus through their sacrifice when he comes.

The marketplace in the temple distracted from the way that God's Law was foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice. The Jewish leaders put that marketplace in the temple for their ease, God did not tell them to do so. But in doing so, they were saying with their actions that they understood a sacrifice to be a transaction, I offer this goat, you give me forgiveness, deal! They misunderstood the sacrificial system to be a transaction, not an act of grace from God.

But that's not what the sacrificial system was supposed to do. The sacrificial system is a part of what we call the covenant of grace. It is the same grace of God that forgave sins in the old covenant that forgives sins now. It is by grace that God allowed a goat or lamb to

take the sin of the person away. As if the blood of a goat could account for all our rebellion! God says, in your sin you deserve death, but I will allow the goat to take your punishment knowing that one day a sacrifice will come that will actually make atonement.

The whole sacrificial system is intended to show us our need for a sacrifice that will one day actually be able to cover our sins. The book of Hebrews makes this point clear, the blood of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant only made one outwardly clean, not inwardly (Heb.9:13). They needed to be redone each year, constantly reminding the Jewish people that they needed sacrifice to present themselves before God, but now in Christ we have a sacrifice once and for all (Heb.10:1-10). The old covenant sacrificial system was a placeholder for the true sacrifice to come in Christ.

This is why Jesus says, “destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” What Jesus says is dumbfounding to everyone. John says that the disciples had to look back to this event after Jesus had died and rose again to understand what is going on.

In our story, do not fail to notice, Jesus is the only sacrifice left in the temple after he whips out all the money changers, sheep, cattle, and doves. In the new temple, we do not buy, but are bought. In the new temple, we do not offer a sacrifice, but our great high priest offers it for us.

### **Slide 13**

Augustine says, “They treat everything as being up for sale, because they do not want to be redeemed. They do not want to be bought, and they want to sell. For it is good for them to be redeemed by the blood of Christ, that they might get to the peace of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> These people were in the temple doing things that God had commanded them not to for the purpose of gaining off of the worship of God. They are treating the worship of God as a means for their own benefit.

### **Slide 14**

Likewise, it is very easy to think of our worship as a transaction. How do we become sellers in worship rather than those that are bought by God’s grace? I think of two ways, using our worship to sell to God, and using our worship to sell to each other or ourselves.

So first, how do we use our worship to sell to God? Maybe we think that if we come to church, we gain favour with God. Or, if we tithe adequately, giving 10% of our earnings, we gain favour with God. Or if we say the right prayers, fast for a long enough time, or have heartfelt emotional singing, then we gain favour with God. But this makes us sellers in the

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 202.

temple, we are treating our worship as a transaction. We gain favour with God because of the sacrifice of Christ alone. All those things are good, but we do them out of gratitude for the only thing that gives us favour with God. We aren't selling anything to God in our worship, we only have to offer him what he has already given us.

The worship of God is given to us, we do not sell it. Our salvation is given to us, we do not sell it. We are those who are bought. We are bought with the precious blood of our Lord, as the Catechism says. That's what makes us 'not our own'. But many of us treat our faith as something that is our own. We think that our worship can be anything, that it doesn't need to be given to us by God.

### **Slide 16**

Second, we can also use our worship to sell to ourselves or each other. Theologian Micheal Horton says, "It was once the conviction of most churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, that the church was a mother who cared for her children. Now, it is increasingly the case that churches across the denominational landscape regard themselves as department stores in a shopping mall that must sell a product to choice-obsessed consumers."<sup>4</sup> With this consumer mindset, those in the churches look an awful lot like marketplace salesmen rather than preachers of the gospel. Isn't this the same thing as having vendors in the temple? Trying to suit our worship to our needs rather than God's desire?

How many worship songs are all about what they make us feel rather than giving worship to God? Are we focusing on ourselves, or are we giving glory to God? How many of us complain about a church service because it doesn't suit our taste, rather than holding it up against what God desires?

### **Slide 17**

Sadly, we see this all over the church today. How many churches have me-centred worship to appeal to more people. I'm sure I don't need to warn you about Televangelists selling salvation through their false gospel. Or health and wealth preachers selling their false gospel. But we might fall prey to thinking that our worship here is more about us than about giving glory to God. Pastors can often fall into the trap of trying to emulate whatever is popular. Rather than seeking faithfulness to God's word they look to what will quickly bring in more people.

So what does God desire from our worship now? How can we avoid selling

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<sup>4</sup> Micheal Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centred Worship*, 16.

**Slide 18-20**

Acts 2:42 says, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

1Timothy 4:13 says, “...devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

There are several other such places that speak to what our worship should look like, and in fact the whole Bible speaks to how we should worship in a way as it is a book intended to be read in a worship service. All these have in common the centrality of God, his word in our worship, and glorifying and giving him thanks in all circumstances.

**Slide 21**

It is said that it was out of zeal for God's house that Jesus did this. Here is a quote from Psalm 69. The Psalm is all about how David is mocked for worshipping the true God. Because of his true worship is mocked and scorned, he is treated like dirt, even by his own family. Nevertheless, David maintains his true worship, because his salvation comes from the Lord and him alone. David worships God like one who has been bought by God's grace, not like one who is selling in the temple.

What does zeal for God's house look like for us? We too should show the same zeal as Christ in guarding his worship against falsehood. If Christ was willing to tie a whip of chords to guard his worship, then we should too. I pray that we would have the same zeal as our Lord to promote true worship, that we would not let his temple be turned into a marketplace but a place where he is honoured according to his holy Word.

Let's Pray.