

# Jesus and the Temple

**Scripture: John 2:13-22**

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People of God: The scene that is painted before us in our text is not one that fits with the typical portrayal of Jesus as someone meek and mild. After all, here we have Jesus coming upon something that infuriates him. In the temple courts, he finds animals being sold and money being exchanged and this so upsets him that he grabs some rope to make a whip and starts using it to drive out the animals from the temple courts. And as he does so, he deliberately overturns the tables of the moneychangers, causing the coins to scatter everywhere. Meanwhile, he's yelling at others: Get these out of here!

If someone would do this at the Byward Market, the police would soon be called. The person arrested. And the onlookers questioning the sanity of the person creating such a ruckus.

Not your typical portrayal of Jesus, who's often pictured as being meek and mild. Someone whose gentle spirit wouldn't hurt a fly. Someone so kind that parents would get him to bless their children. Not someone with a whip in his hands, yelling at people.

But maybe, we have domesticated Jesus, as we have God. In our society, a loving God is acceptable, but not one who is angry with sin. The same is true with Jesus. Our society doesn't mind singing about the baby Jesus, meek and mild. But this scene where Jesus appears to be mean and wild doesn't fit into that picture.

Now it is true that we should not exaggerate what took place. Jesus didn't use the whips on anyone, just the animals—and how else were you going to get them out of the area? Nor was he leading a peasant revolution—otherwise the Roman troops would have been called out. Still, we can't ignore the radical actions of Jesus. And more importantly, we can't overlook the radical claim Jesus makes about himself in this passage. The actions of Jesus point to a greater truth about his mission on earth.

But before we get too much further, I'd probably should deal with a question that seasoned readers of the gospels will raise: Don't the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, put the cleansing of the temple in the week that leads to Jesus' death on the cross, while John here puts it at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry? Yes, that's true. So what's going on? How can we explain this big difference? Well, there are two options.

First, it is possible that John moves the story to the beginning of his gospel in order to make a point. John's not trying to mislead anyone when he does this. It just suits his gospel better if he tells this event at this time. Even today, some biographers will do this. For example, I've begun a biography of Nelson Mandela that I will read on my vacation. It starts by describing the day he left prison as a free man. That's an event that occurs quite late in his life, but the author wanted to use that decisive story as the entrance to telling the story of Mandela. John could be doing the same thing here.

Or it is possible that Jesus cleanses the temple twice: once at the beginning of his ministry and then three years later. The first time, Jesus gets away with this action, with the leaders only asking for his authority to do such an act; the second time Jesus clears the temple, it leads to his arrest and death by the end of the week. It is clear that John's focus on this action is different than how the three other gospels record it, as John appeals to a different Bible verse and leads to a very different dialogue with the religious leaders.

Regardless of which option you chose to explain the differences between the gospels, it is this text that is before us that needs to be dealt with. Here at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, John presents a radical action and a radical claim on the part of Jesus, a claim that will only be fully understood after the resurrection, but one that is very important in terms of Jesus' mission on earth.

But what triggers this cleansing of the temple?

It's not as if these sellers and moneychangers weren't needed. They were. In fact, they were extremely helpful in allowing God's people to worship the Lord. After all, the cattle, sheep and doves were used in the sacrificial system of the OT worship of our God. These animals weren't sold to eat, but to be sacrificed on the altar in the temple. Since most of the people coming to worship God had to travel quite a long ways, it made sense to buy the animals locally, rather than take them from home. The sellers made worship convenient, even possible for many.

The moneychangers, too, were providing a service that help fulfill an OT obligation. Each year, God's people were to pay a temple tax. This was to be paid in the local currency. Since many Jews came from around the

Roman Empire, where a different currency was in use, you needed to change your money into what was accepted as a temple tax.

These sellers and moneychangers were necessary for temple worship. Nor was the problem that they were gouging their customers. While the other gospels do hint at that aspect, nothing in John's account points in that direction.

Jesus did not have a problem with the business of selling and money changing. He did have a problem with where all of this was taking place. A BIG problem. Because it was taking place in the temple courts. Not in the inner courts, where the altar was located; but in the outer courts. A place intended to be a place of prayer and preparing oneself to enter into the inner courts—preparing oneself not through a last minute commercial transaction, but in preparing one's heart in meeting God.

Let us remember that the temple wasn't merely a place of worship, like this room is. It was more than that. The temple was the place where God dwelt in the midst of his people. The temple was the place where sacrifices could be offered. In other words, the temple allowed fellowship to take place between a holy God and a sinful people.

But all this commerce was intruding upon the space intended for worship. Instead of the murmur of prayer, there is the bellowing of cattle. The space intended for focusing on God is used instead to exchange money. And these outer courts were the only places where the Gentiles could worship God. They were not allowed to go into the inner courts; even the women could only go so far. So all this noisy commerce took away from the ability of people to worship God.

No wonder Jesus took a whip to chase away the animals. No wonder he overturned tables and scattered the money. He wanted to create space for worship. He wanted to restore the original intent of the temple. No wonder he says: "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" This is personal for him—it's his Father's house! It's not surprising that the disciples looked to Psalm 69:9 as a text to explain the actions of Jesus: Zeal for your house will consume me.

Jesus is zealous for his Father's house. He is passionate about fulfilling the purpose of the temple. He is concerned about the necessity of worship, the purity of worship.

At this level of meaning alone, there is a word of warning and admonition to the church today. What have we made of worship? Do we allow the busyness of life to intrude upon the space and time for worship? Do we see worship as this vital link between God and his people? Is there a

temptation to view worship as just another entertaining activity, like going to the movies or attending a hockey game?

What barriers might we have created to prevent others from worshipping God? Are we a welcoming community or do we want to keep this all to ourselves? How might worship be poisoned in our age? Does our worship, does our attitude towards worship need a cleansing by Jesus?

Intriguing questions.

But there is more going on in this passage than Jesus' concern for the purity of worship. In his actions and words, Jesus is making a claim over the temple and all what it represents. This becomes evident in the dialogue between Jesus and the religious leaders.

In response to what Jesus did, the religious leaders asked: "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" They failed to see how Jesus' action was itself the sign—as Jesus fulfilled this prophecy from Psalm 69. As a result, they wanted more.

Jesus does offer a sign: "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." Jesus rarely offers a sign to prove himself but here he does. It's a sign that the religious leaders took literally, while Jesus meant it figuratively—though given his creative powers, it would have been within the realm of possibility for Jesus to have literally rebuilt the temple.

The temple, being discussed, was a replacement for the one built after the exile. That temple was fairly plain and basic. As a result, Herod, twenty years before the birth of Jesus decided to build a grand and glorious temple. While the main buildings were built quickly, work was still ongoing during the days of Jesus. The final touches would not be completed for another thirty years—only for it all to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

Given the length of time it took to build the temple, it's not surprising that the leaders scoffed at Jesus' offer and were unwilling to follow through. But Jesus meant his words to be understood figuratively. The temple, Jesus was referring to, was his body. And it is a sign that came to pass. His body was destroyed on the cross and on the third day, he was raised from the dead.

But in making this figurative offer, Jesus not only claims to have authority over the temple, he is making the claim that he is the temple. He is the fulfillment of what the physical temple represented. That's the daring and radical claim Jesus makes here: Jesus is the new Temple.

All that which the temple represents Jesus has come to fulfill. And what is that again? Basically, the temple allowed a holy God to dwell in the midst of sinful people, because of the sacrifices offered on the altar. The temple was connection between heaven and earth. Jesus fulfilled that

purpose in a way no temple ever could. Jesus would offer the one sacrifice on the cross, allowing us access into the very throne room of God in heaven.

As a result, we have no need for a physical temple. This building is not the replacement for the temple. Jesus is what we need today. In Jesus we have the only sacrifice we need in order to gain access to God. In Jesus, we have the reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful people. Worship of God requires going through Jesus. Jesus is the new temple.

That's the radical claim Jesus makes in this passage. That's more daring than simply cleaning out the temple courts, however impressive that action was. Jesus is the temple. And we need him in order to safely worship God. And then through his Spirit, we become the temple of God, as other passages explain.

But that raises the question: What does Jesus have to do in your life to cleanse you so that you can worship God? What does he have to drive out of your life so that you can serve the Lord fully? What does he have to overturn in your life so that your life will reflect the priority of the Kingdom of God? If Jesus would have to say to you: Get these out of here?—what would these things be?

Jesus is the new temple—he's all we need to have to access to our heavenly Father. Believe in him and let him cleanse you. Amen.