

Cleansing the Temple Mark 11:12-21; Isaiah 56:6-12; Jeremiah 7:1-15

Moneychanging in the Temple? Believe it or not, the idea had a kernel of truth, something from the Law of Moses. After describing in detail all the objects that were involved in Old Testament worship, from the Ark of the Covenant to the bronze altar of sacrifice, God told Moses that all of God's people were to pay a half-shekel every year, rich and poor alike, and that this money was to be used to support the worship carried out at the Tent of Meeting (Ex 30:11-16). In Jesus' time this same tax was collected, and used to support the worship in the Temple.

But here's the catch. Each person had to pay the tax in a half-shekel coin. But this type of coin wasn't used by most countries, including most of the places where the people of God lived in Jesus' time, scattered as they were throughout the Roman Empire. That meant that people coming from faraway places had to exchange their money, in much the same way that you do when travelling to foreign lands today. And doesn't exchanging money require money changers? So why would Jesus get so upset at people who were performing a necessary function?

But what about selling doves in the Temple? Again, there was a Biblical point to this. When people came to the Temple to worship in those days, they always brought animals to sacrifice. But what if the people had travelled a long way to Jerusalem? It just wasn't practical for them to have brought their animals all the way, for example, from Rome. And so, the Law of Moses made a specific allowance for just such a situation. It says that worshippers could sell their own offerings for money and bring the money to the place where God's people worshipped. They could then buy new animals to offer to the Lord. So why would Jesus be so upset with the people who provided these necessary animals for sale?

Perhaps we need to look first at the fig tree. After all, by placing the two halves of the story of the fig tree on either side of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, Jesus obviously intended to connect the two events. On the morning that He went into the Temple, He found no fruit on it and cursed it. On the day after His cleansing of the Temple, the fig tree had withered away.

So, what's the connection? It should be obvious: the Temple is no longer bearing fruit, and because of this, it too will be cursed and destroyed. Later on in chapter 13, Jesus says this explicitly, predicting that not one stone of the Temple would be left standing on another. And the Roman army did in fact tear down the Temple in AD 70, some 40 years after He spoke these words. The destruction was so complete that scholars still debate about exactly where the Temple stood on the top of Mount Zion.

Okay, so the people of God weren't worshipping in the right way at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. What difference does this make to us? We don't go to the Temple anymore. Moreover, we know good and well that salvation comes by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And we know that, because of this, anyone anywhere who loves and trusts Jesus Christ is not only saved from his sins, but is part of the Church, the true Temple of God.

But if all of that is true, if we don't have to go to a particular building to worship anymore, then what Jesus said about the Temple in New Testament times might not simply be of intellectual or historical interest. For if all of us Christians together make up the Temple of God, then maybe what was going wrong with the Temple back then could be going wrong inside of us today. So, when Jesus condemned the Temple, why wasn't it bearing fruit?

Well, the first and most obvious problem had to do with the Temple leadership. The chief priests and scribes saw Jesus' actions and heard His quotations from Scripture. But instead of being convicted of their part in corrupting the worship of God, instead of confessing their sins, they sought to kill Him.

So, what were they doing wrong? If we look back at Isaiah 56, from which Jesus quotes in verse 17, we find out. In Isaiah's time, God called the religious leaders to be watchmen, to warn the people of their sins, but they were blind. God said they were like dumb dogs, unable to bark when strangers approached. Instead of being alert to the dangers their people faced, they were only dreamers who loved to slumber. God called them to feed the people with His Word, but they proved to be shepherds without understanding. They preferred drunkenness to being filled with the Spirit.

In quoting from this passage, Jesus was saying that the priests who heard His words, by allowing merchants to set up shop in the Temple, and in taking some of the profits from this commercial activity, were just like the corrupt leaders of Isaiah's time: like greedy dogs who are never satisfied. They too turned away from God's Word, preferring unjust gain. And so they too would be swept away along with their fruitless temple.

So, how about us? Are those of us who are called to be leaders in the Church doing our job? Are we focused on the glory of God and the needs of the people? Are we willing to warn people about their sins, or are we afraid of losing whatever popularity or respect we might have? And as the culture continues to careen away from God and His Will, are we willing to take a stand for what is right?

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Well, what else was wrong with the Temple back then? It seems that the merchants and moneychangers had set up shop in the Court of the Gentiles, the only part of the Temple into which people who were not Jews were welcome to pray and worship. But

Jesus' quote from Isaiah 56 in verse 17 reminds us that, even in the Old Testament times, the Temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all the nations. And the rest of the passage from Isaiah extends God's welcome even more broadly: "Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, And to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants-- Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant-- Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices Will be accepted on My altar."

In other words, it was always God's plan for His Temple to be a source of light and truth to people from all over the world. Come to think of it, why else would God have chosen to put the Temple where He did, right at the point where three continents come together? If God had wanted His people to keep to themselves, He could have sent them up into the Himalayas. But God put His people at the crossroads of the world, and God wanted His Temple to be a house of prayer for all nations.

So, how are we modern-day Christians doing? After all, isn't the worldwide church of God the new temple, the Body of Christ, the place where God reveals His Spirit on Earth? And isn't evangelism still one of the principal functions of the Church? So are we bearing this sort of fruit? Are we reaching out to the people around us? Are we encouraging the lost to love and serve the Lord? Or like the Temple that Jesus cursed, are we allowing roadblocks to be put in their way – barriers of worship style or dress code or music or liturgy or language? Are we content to let the lost remain lost?

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Of course there was one more criticism Jesus leveled at the Temple in His day – He called it a Den of Thieves. Now, we've already seen that moneychanging was necessary for the Temple to do its business – but the transactions presented lots of potential for abuse. After all, silver and gold coins were weighed in those days to make sure that none of the precious metal had been shaved off – that, by the way, is why your dimes and quarters have ridges all around the edges, to testify that they are in fact whole. It would have been easy for an unscrupulous merchant in Jesus' time to put a thumb on the scale and claim that the money you were changing wasn't worth as much as you thought. Jesus was right to condemn such people as thieves.

And sure, people needed to buy sacrificial animals, but if you didn't buy one of the pre-approved specimens from the authorized Temple merchants, which cost a bit more than they did back home, you would have to pay an examiner to testify to the suitability of the animal you brought yourself. Think of the higher prices you pay for everyday items in airports or amusement parks and you get the idea. The Temple had a monopoly on religious services, and so prices increased accordingly. Again, Jesus

condemned as thieves those who sold sacrificial animals at inflated prices, especially those who jacked up the prices on doves, the only offerings the poor could make.

But surely, none of that applies to us, right? The only time money changes hands in the church is when we give offerings, and our elders make sure that money is spent wisely. So, what could this part of Jesus' judgment mean to us?

Well, when Jesus calls the Temple a "Den of Thieves," He is once again quoting from the Old Testament, this time from Jeremiah chapter 7. And that passage was directed not just to religious leaders, and not just to merchants engaged in Temple business, but to all those who went into the Temple to worship.

So, how were everyday worshippers acting like thieves in Jeremiah's time? God says they were stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely and burning incense to Baal – in other words, they were breaking the Ten Commandments. And remember that when Jesus taught on these same commandments, He said that being angry with someone is just as bad as killing him, and that lusting after someone is just as bad as committing adultery. So, none of us can claim innocence on this front.

But here's how the sinful people of Jeremiah's time were acting like thieves. They were doing all these bad things, breaking the Ten Commandments, and then coming into the Temple to worship God. They claimed God's deliverance and salvation, but only so they could keep on sinning against Him. In other words, they looked on going to the Temple as a sort of spiritual "Get Out of Jail Free" card. They thought that as long as they offered the right sacrifices and went through the right rituals, they could live the rest of the week as they pleased. So they were stealing from God – stealing the devotion and the reverence that He deserves, and keeping it for themselves. In their time, as in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Temple wasn't bearing the fruit of true worship, but of the rankest sort of hypocrisy.

Okay, so how about us? Remember, we Christians are the new Temple, the Body of Christ, the place where God's Spirit dwells on earth. In a sense, we are living in the Temple all the time. So, are our lives marked by the sort of worship and devotion that God deserves? Are we really loving Him with all we are and all we have? Are we fully devoted to His glory, fully given over to His service? Or are we holding out on Him, claiming His salvation while living for our own pleasure, calling Him Lord while doing whatever seems right to our reason or our experience?

The Temple that Jesus cursed wasn't bearing the fruit of leaders who stood for truth and righteousness anymore. It wasn't bearing the fruit of evangelism anymore. And it wasn't bearing the fruit of true worship anymore. Does Jesus need to cleanse our Temple too?