

Out of the Mouth of Babes

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 21, 2020.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.” And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, “‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’” And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there (Matthew 21:12–17).¹

Arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus makes his way to the temple, specifically the outer court. Within this area, temporary booths were constructed to keep animals for temple sacrifices. Pilgrims, such as Jesus, traveling to Jerusalem for Passover could purchase a sacrificial animal. It was also at this time of year that the annual temple tax was due, which was paid not with Roman currency but only the special Tyrian coinage, the temple shekel. Whether manipulative or not, the presence of vendors and traders provided a pragmatic service for temple worshipers.

But it is not what is being bought, sold, and exchanged that concerns Jesus. It is the location, a sacred one. The temple was for worship not work, sacrifices not sales, prayer not profit. Jesus comes to the temple, but his visit begins not with prayer but with purifying.

Purifying for Worship

Jesus does not enter into the outer temple court for civil discourse. That time has passed. He comes in purifying violence and prophetic declaration, overturning furniture and sending the vendors and traders fleeing. In fact, the Gospel of John records that Jesus drove them out with a “whip of cords” (John 2:15).

Jesus’ actions are both telling and fulfilling. No longer veiled, his boldness speaks clearly of his authority and identity as the Messiah. Likewise, without a word spoken, he is fulfilling what Zechariah prophesied: “And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts [on the day of his coming]” (Zech. 14:21). Jesus, the Son of David, the Messiah of Israel, has come in purifying power to the house of the Lord.

As dramatic as Jesus’ actions are, it is the words he speaks that are most significant: “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.” Most English translations translate this verse placing quotation marks around the first clause (‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’), and rightly so, as it is a direct quotation from Isaiah. But that is not all that is “written,” as the second clause should also contain quotation

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

marks around “a den of robbers,” a direct quotation from Jeremiah. One powerful statement, two prophetic quotations, all in a single dramatic moment. But, what does it all mean?

In the fifty-sixth chapter of Isaiah, the Lord charges Israel with a call to “keep justice and do righteousness,” promising that his salvation will come and his righteousness [will be] revealed” (Isa. 56:1). Coupled with this is the surprising prophecy of Gentile inclusion, of “the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD” and the promise that all who love the Lord will be brought to his holy mountain. In fact, the Lord promises, “[I will] make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:6-7). It should not be missed that the outer temple court in which Jesus stands is referred to as the Court of the Gentiles, the closest a Gentile could get in temple worship of Israel’s God.

But, there is more to Jesus’ zeal to purify the temple. For Israel, the covenant people of God, there is significant purpose in place. When King Solomon, the son of David, dedicated the temple, he did so with a corporate prayer, describing the purpose of that sacred place. What becomes apparent in Solomon’s prayer is that the foundation of prayer is God’s covenant faithfulness. God’s faithfulness to his people underlies worship. Within the temple, prayers were to be offered for the nation as well as for personal needs and concerns, “each knowing the affliction of his own heart” (1 Kings 8:38). The priests were to assist those who came to pray, offering sacrifices for them, directing the covenant people of God to the provision of their covenant-keeping God.

Therefore, the expression “house of prayer” carries a weightier significance than merely a place of solitude or a meeting place for a prayer meeting. The temple did not exist only for corporate and personal prayers. It was the unique and holy location for communion with and worship of the one only, true and living God. But Israel had not faithfully revered and preserved the temple’s sacred purpose. They had consistently adulterated the very house of God.

In one of the more terrifying portions of Scripture, God commands Jeremiah to stand at the gate of the LORD’s house and proclaim the Word of God to all who would enter the temple to worship. For they had turned the temple from a house of prayer into a monument of idolatry (Jer. 7:1-4). They had dealt unjustly with one another, oppressed the widows, orphans, and foreigners (Jer. 7:5-7). They consistently broke God’s Moral Law, stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely, worshiping false gods, and yet had the audacity to come to the house of the Lord, presuming upon and claiming his continued favor (Jer. 7:8-10). Rather than rightly worshiping God in truth, they considered only what the temple provided for their continued selfish interests, leading God to ask rhetorically, “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jer. 7:11). Indeed, it had, and so God commanded of Jeremiah the unthinkable: “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” (Jer. 7:16). That is the definition of God-forsaken.

So, when Jesus walks into the Court of Gentiles, he knows precisely what he will find, not faithful worshipers, shining a light to Gentiles (Isa. 49:6), but a den of robbers instead of a house of prayer. And so, as the psalmist prophesied that he would, zeal for the house of the Lord

consumed him (Ps. 69:9). Rightly and fiercely did he drive out the vendors with their animals and traders with their coins, rightly did he crack the whip of his fury, for the purpose of the temple was always and only for worship.

Healing to Worship

As if in revelation to Jesus' identity and authority, the blind and lame come to him in the temple, and he heals them. Were it not for its placement, we might quickly read past this without noting its significance. However, in considering Isaiah's prophecy, those who profane the Lord's "house of prayer" are not the vendors nor the traders but blind watchmen "without knowledge," lazy "dogs" who neither bark, bite, nor eat. They are "shepherds" without understanding and sinfully-indulging hedonists presuming upon the continued generosity of God (Isa. 56:10-12). When Jesus says, "you make [the house of prayer] a den of robbers," he does not mean the merchants. The "you" is the chief priests and the scribes, the spiritually blind and sick leaders of Israel, who neither see God nor walk in his ways.

Therefore, Jesus' healing of the blind and the lame in the temple is telling and teaching. For, the problem is not with the God of the temple but with those who defile it. They are, as Jesus called them, "blind guides" (Matt. 15:4) in need of sight. They are lame, unable to walk in the way of the Lord.

In evidence of their condition, consider their response to the works of Jesus and the praises of the children: "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple . . . they were indignant. The word translated "indignant" means to "be indignant against what is assumed to be wrong."² What they see and hear is in their eyes and to their ears wrong. We might presume that it was the cleansing of the temple court that led to their indignance, but Matthew reveals that it was the "wonderful things" that they saw and the cries of praise of the children.

Can you imagine seeing a blind man gain his sight? Even if you did not know him, you would rejoice for him, taking him by the hand to show him all of the beautiful sights of God's creation. Can you imagine seeing a lame man walk? Even if your skipping and running days have passed, you would want to celebrate with him, skipping and running down the street. Even the most reserved among us would smile with happiness that the blind see and the lame walk. Not the chief priests and scribes, they are indignant.

What does it reveal about a person when witnessing the mercy of God angers them? It reveals that they neither know him nor worship him.

This of course was their problem with the children who were crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Literally translated "Save us, Son of David!" the phrase was used as a form of jubilant

² Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

praise, a rejoicing in the coming of the prophesied heir to the throne of David, the Messiah of Israel. Who doesn't love the jubilant sound of children's voices, praising the one who had come in the name of the Lord? Not the chief priests and the scribes! The cries of the children just make them angry. But they are not angry at the children but with the one who is praised, asking, "Do you hear what these are saying?" As if to say, do you not realize they are singing praises to you? You, the Son of David; you, who healed the blind and lame before our eyes; you, who zealously cares for the purity of temple worship; do you not hear what these are saying?

What does it reveal about a person who is angered by children singing praises to the Son of God? It reveals that they neither know God nor worship him.

Rejoicing in Worship

The indignation of the chief priests and scribes does not stop the cries of the children, nor does Jesus. Instead, knowing precisely the significance of the children's words, he asks, "have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" Jesus is quoting from the eighth psalm, from which we get our idiom, "Out of the mouth of babes," meaning children can surprise us with unexpected words of wisdom. How is Jesus using this quotation? Prophetically, we could say that Jesus considers the cries of the children in praise as prophetic fulfillment. This would be the most obvious interpretation, and a right one. But, Jesus is using it more directly as a statement of his identity and authority: "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise" . . . for me, the Son of David, the prophesied Messiah, indeed the Son of God. But the leaders of Israel deny Jesus' identity and denounce his authority. They would rather see him dead than praised.

What does it reveal about a person who sees the work of God and hears the Word of God but does not believe in the Son of God? It reveals that they neither know God nor worship him.

You cannot truly worship God unless you know him, and no one may know God except through the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). True worship begins with Christ. When asked to justify his actions in the Court of the Gentiles with a sign, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), referring not to the building but his body, not to reconstruction but his resurrection. The temple in Jerusalem was a temporary place of worship of the only one, true and living God, but in Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). For this reason, he could say to the Samaritan woman,

the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24).

Through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit by God's grace through faith in Christ, we who were "dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked" have been made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5). Not with a whip of cords but by the Spirit of Christ, we have been

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cleansed to worship through the resurrected temple of Jesus Christ in spirit and truth. And, since the veil within the temple was ripped in two, we worship not in the cleansed Court of the Gentiles but with confidence we “enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God,” we worship God purified through the imputed righteousness of Christ (Heb. 10:19-21).

No longer spiritually blind and lame, we have been given eyes to see our Savior and to walk in newness of life. We have been healed to worship him, not indignant like those who have no hope, but celebrating the goodness of God’s mercy and grace. Out of the mouth of babes, like you and me, we sing praises to our Lord Jesus Christ, who delights in the praise of God’s children. And the praises we sing today are but a foretaste of the kingdom to come, in the heavenly Jerusalem, where “there is no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

We were created to worship God, and so we do in Christ. As we gather as Christ’s assembled house of prayer, let us not forget the joy that comes in beholding the work of Christ in his church, of hearing the Word of Christ among his people, of worshiping God in his spiritual temple. Let us be as passionate as our Lord for purity, as gracious as our Lord in giving, and as bold as our Lord in defending his authority over us. For, we are his people, a holy house of prayer, assembled to sing praises to our Lord. Amen.