

**"The True Temple"
(John 2:12-25)
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¹² After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days.

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

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

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

²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² 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.

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

In today's passage we find Jesus on the move. He was in Cana where he performed his first miracle of turning water into wine, showing us that he is the Messiah and the real bridegroom that the world has been waiting for. He goes with his family and disciples to the town of Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and then he makes his way down south to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

The Passover was one of the most important religious days for the Jewish people. It was so important that this day changed their entire calendar. The month in which the Passover celebration fell became the first month of the year for the Jewish people (Exodus 12:1). It was a day to commemorate the great act of God, when he saved his people from slavery in Egypt through the leadership of his servant Moses. This special day was called the Passover because the angel of God literally passed over God's people when he brought judgment upon the Egyptians. There were some very specific instructions that each Jewish family was to abide by, to ensure that they weren't caught up in the judgment and that the angel of God would pass over them. The most important thing was that they were to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood of the lamb on the frame over the door and on the sides of the doorframe. So, when the angel of God passed through Egypt and saw the blood, that family was spared from the judgment of God.

Because this was such an important day, it became a national religious holiday for the Jewish people, even being celebrated by Jewish people today. It was the duty of every Jewish person to make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

As Jesus arrived at the temple courts he found people selling animals and exchanging money. The reason merchants were doing that was to provide a service for all the travelers. The worshipers were required to make animal sacrifices. Some would have come from quite a distance away and it would have been very difficult to travel with their animals. It would have been much more practical and convenient to buy an animal for the sacrifice upon your arrival at the temple.

In order to make your purchase you'd have to exchange money and you were required to pay the temple tax for the upkeep of the temple. This had to be paid in the local currency, so for practical purposes, a currency exchange, just like the ones we see at the airport was there at the temple. So up to this point there's nothing wrong with what's going on. Worshipers need to buy animals and worshipers need to pay the temple tax but, where was this entire exchange taking place? It was happening inside the temple courts. What were the temple courts? Well it was the outer, an open court. There's the inner court reserved for Jewish people. Within that there was the temple, where the priests enter, where the sacrifices were made. And then within the inner temple, there's the Holy of Holies, the inner, inner temple. This is the place where only the high priest would enter and that, only once a year, to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. That was done on the Day of Atonement, which is also called Yom Kippur.

What was the purpose of the outer court? The outer court was also called the Court of the Gentiles. It was the place where non-Jewish worshipers of God were allowed to worship and pray. It doesn't take much imagination to picture how difficult it would be to have any sort of meaningful worship when all around you, it's not the sounds of prayers being heard, but rather the sounds of farm animals, the flapping of the wings of pigeons, the clinking and clanking of coins, the conversation of a marketplace. I imagine it being like trying to have a worship service at Union Station or at a shopping mall. You and I get can get bent out of shape for a fussy baby in the chapel. Can you imagine what it would have been like for Gentile worshipers back then?

Well, Jesus sees all that is going on and begins to take matters into his own hands. He makes a whip out of cords, and begins to drive everyone out of the temple courts—the animals, the merchants, the money changers. In verse 16 we are told that he said to those who were selling doves, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

Now, why did Jesus do this? The answer is found in his actions and in his words. His action was driving out those who didn't belong there. His words were "Stop turning my Father's house into a market." This outer court was the only place Gentile worshipers of God were permitted. It was the only place they could go to offer their prayers and worship to God. The place was so filled with distractions and obstacles that it prevented worship from occurring.

Let's pause the story for a moment here and look for some application. Are there things in our lives that make a place of worship into a marketplace? Are there things in our lives that distract us from meeting with God? I think there are a lot of things. Perhaps the number one culprit is our phones and tablets. Years ago I read a book by the renowned author Neil Postman called *Technopoly*. The subtitle of the book is, "The surrender of culture to technology." It was written in 1993 when cell phones were already on the scene, but the Internet had not yet hit the mainstream. And the main premise of his book is that we must be careful with technology, because with the good that it brings, there is often something bad that comes with it as well.

So, we must tread with caution whenever we embrace technology:

- Nuclear power
- Combustion engines
- Social media
- Smart devices
- Streaming entertainment like Netflix

If we spent some time looking at all those things, we can see the great benefit from those technologies, but we can also see the negative things that they bring.

So, consider smart phones again. It is truly amazing that we have the bible in hundreds of translations in a device the size of a wallet. Your finger magically becomes a highlighter in your choice of color. You can do a word search in five seconds, when before you'd have to go to the library and look at a huge encyclopedic book called a concordance. We can read it by scrolling down with our finger or listen to it on audio. In addition we have thousands of Christian books that we can get for free or very cheap through Kindle. But, does that technology make us closer to God? Does that make us spend more time with him? Does that make us more holy? And along with the bible apps, there are a hundred other apps and alerts that are going off on your phones, making it virtually impossible to finish a chapter of the bible without being interrupted.

You see, that's your noisy marketplace, your busy outer court. How can we pray, when so much is going on around us? So like Neil Postman said, don't just accept technology as good, but think about the negative thing that it might be bringing with it. Let's not turn the Father's house, our head space, our spiritual space, into a market.

Now, in verse 17, it says, "His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." I don't think it was something that came to their mind on the spot, when Jesus was driving all those people out. Rather, it was probably after the fact, perhaps even after the resurrection, when the disciples recalled this incident and made a connection to Psalm 69. What is Psalm 69 about? We don't have the time to read it all, so let me just read a few verses and see if they don't ring a bell.

- V3. "I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail looking for my God."
- V7. "For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face."
- V8. "I am a foreigner in my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children."
- V9. "For zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me."
- V21. "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst."

In Psalm 69, the psalmist is being severely persecuted for his faith. The New Testament writers and Jesus himself identified with the words of the psalmist and applied it to Jesus. One of the main reasons for the psalmist's affliction is because of his zeal or passion for the house of God, which is the temple. Because of this zeal, people are not only mocking God, they are mocking the psalmist.

So, here in the temple cleansing, the disciples recognize, that Jesus too was zealous, passionate for God's house, God's temple. Why? Well the answer is found in the purpose of the temple? What did the temple symbolize in the Old Testament Scriptures? The temple symbolized the focal point of God encountering his people. It wasn't that people couldn't meet God in their homes, or while they were working at their jobs. In fact the Old Testament encourages and even commands us to be religious in every aspect of our lives. But the temple was special. It was the place that symbolized the meeting between God and his people.

Now, consider that one of the most primary functions of the temple was to deal with the problem of sin. God is holy and cannot encounter the unholy. We are unholy and cannot encounter the holy. The barrier to God meeting us, and us meeting God is sin. Sin is the impassible barrier. At the temple though, the sin-barrier is addressed. How? Through a priest, that is a mediator. He is the person that represents the sinner who wants to meet God. At the same time the priest is the person that represents God to meet the sinner.

What else do we find there? We find a sacrifice. In order for a sinner to meet God, that is, in order for sins to be forgiven, blood has to be shed. Why? Because all sins deserve death. All sins are capital offenses against a holy and just God. So, symbolically laden within the sacrifice, is the idea of a substitute. I, a sinner, wants to meet God, but I cannot because of my sin, for which I deserve to die. In order for me to meet God and not die, I require a substitute. Something or someone needs to die in my place. Once the sin problem is taken care of, we can then meet God; we can worship him, please him, honor him, glorify him, love him and enjoy him. We can begin to live out our God-intended purposes.

In our church you'll hear from time to time the famous quote by Pastor John Piper. "Missions exist because worship doesn't." It's an unforgettable quote. But we don't often, if ever, hear that quote in its full context. Let me read it for you. In Piper's book on missions called "Let the Nations Be Glad" his opening paragraph drops like a bomb when he says, and I quote,

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever."

What does this have to do with the temple? Everything -- because the temple was about worship. To worship God, to meet God, is why we were created. And what gets in the way of worship, what prevents worship from occurring is sin. We worship, not in just a formal setting like a church service, but all of life is to be regarded as worship. The New Testament even says, that we are living sacrifices, borrowing from the image of the activities at the temple. What an amazing play on words. It's an oxymoron. Sacrifices aren't alive; they're dead, but not anymore. We are called to be living sacrifices. This is our true and proper worship.

This is why Jesus was upset with what was going on in the outer court of the temple. The temple was the place where God and people met, and that was prevented from happening.

After this, the Jews asked, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" They're asking, who are you, and what right do you have to do what you just did?

Jesus' response is not what you'd expect, but it's very telling. He says to them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

He doesn't say, "I am a prophet." or "I am a religious leader." He doesn't even say, "I am the Messiah." Rather, he just says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Remember, they asked him for a sign? Well, this is the sign he gives them. Now, this statement is so pregnant with meaning that it's going to take some effort to unpack it.

First, the word he uses for 'temple' is not the same word for temple that was used earlier. In verses 14 and 15 the word for temple meant the entire temple structure -- the inner sanctuary, the outer court, everything, but here in Jesus' response the word for 'temple' is a different word. It's used generally to mean the dwelling of a deity. Specifically it was the word used when referring to the inner, inner sanctuary, what is known as the Holy of Holies. So, Jesus says, "Destroy the Holy of Holies, and I will raise it again in three days." What was the Holy of Holies? It was the most sacred room in the entire temple. It was where the Ark of the Covenant was. It was the place where the Mercy Seat was. Only the high priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. He would enter with a sacrifice, an offering. So keep in mind, it's the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter, and an offering on behalf of all the people was made, and only on the Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16)

The religious leaders reply, "It's taken 46 years to build this temple and you're going to raise it in three days?" Was Jesus some kind of religious anarchist or terrorist, intending to destroy the temple? In fact, at his trial before his crucifixion, this was one of the charges brought against him.

The key to understanding the meaning of Jesus' words is found in verse 21-22. "The temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said."

Let's try to bring it all together.

Jesus is saying that the true temple is himself. The true Holy of Holies is not merely the sacred inner room of the entire temple structure. The true Holy of Holies is Jesus. What does that mean? In Jesus we have the one and only, true meeting place between God and humans. In Jesus, we have the true high priest that mediates between God and humans. In Jesus, we have the ultimate blood sacrifice that atones for the sins of humanity. Jesus is the lifeline, he is the gateway, and he is the meeting place, the bridge. Only in and through Jesus do all peoples, Gentiles in the outer court, and Jews in the inner court, come to meet with God.

This temple is his physical body and it will be destroyed. It will be tried, and then sentenced, and then tortured. It will then be crucified on a cross. This temple, the body of Jesus will pour blood from all his wounds. This temple will breathe its final breath and commit his spirit to God. This Jesus will die, but three days later this temple will be raised. This Jesus will come back to life and once that happens, no more will the sacred Holy of Holies, inner sanctuary be necessary, no more will there even be a need for a distinction between the inner and outer courts. No more will there be a need for a high priest, or any priest for that matter. He himself is our mediator. And no more is there a need for a blood offering. He gave himself; he gave his own life, his own blood and he rose again three days later to show that he has made a way for sinners to meet with God.

Let's pray.