

The Cleansing of the Temple
Matthew 21:12-13
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Matthew 21:1-11 records the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This is the climax of the section of Matthew that began in 19:1 with His departure from Galilee and will conclude with the Olivet Discourse at the end of Matthew 25. The King of the Jews entered the capital city with the acclaim of the crowds. Jesus would have entered the city through the sheep gate at the northeast side of Jerusalem, which was where the temple was located and where the road from Bethany ended.

Jesus comes to the temple (21:12a)

The first recorded place that Jesus went in Jerusalem was into the temple. Mark 11:11 makes this clearer, *“Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple.”* This is unsurprisingly in that He will quote Isaiah 56:7, using the term “My house” to refer to the temple. Also, the temple was the focus of the worship and life of the nation, where many would go when they came to Jerusalem.

The word used for temple (HIERON) meant that Jesus entered the broad walled temple area. This is where the mass of travelers to the city would come, where they would pay the half-shekel tax imposed by the priests. This would need to be paid in the coinage of the temple. This would also be the area where the Jews, particularly those who traveled, would obtain what was necessary for the sacrifices.

This temple area is considered to have been about 925 by 950 feet in size. There were four different courtyards in the larger walled temple area. The court of the Gentiles was available to anyone as it was outside the inner temple walls, but the other sections were more restrictive and only accessible through one of the ten gates. Inside the walls of the temple was the court of the women, only available to Jews, men and women, who were considered ritually clean. In the half of the walled temple closest to the Holy Place, the court of Israel was restricted to only clean Jewish men, and the court of the priests was limited to only clean priests to enter.

Many manuscripts read “the temple of God,” which, if original, would emphasize that the sin of the leaders of the temple was against God Himself. However, most older manuscripts omit this reading and the phrase “temple of God” would be a

very untypical way to refer to the temple in the Bible. This is because everyone knew the temple belonged to God and so the phrase would be redundant.

Jesus cleanses the temple (21:12b)

Jesus previously cleansed the temple at the outset of His public ministry three years earlier, according to John 2:13-17. Many people consider the cleansing of the temple recorded by John to be the same event as found in Matthew 21:12-13. However, this is a separate cleansing as is evident by the context of John. John not only places the temple cleansing that he records at the beginning of Christ's ministry, with a uniquely different description, but it results in the early opposition to Him in John.

While it may appear odd that Jesus would have been able to conduct such a violent act against the moneychangers and those selling animals on two different occasions, this act of Jesus happened three years later, and suddenly. Those conducting their business in the temple area had returned to normal soon after the first cleansing. As with human nature, those making money were distracted by their other concerns.

Furthermore, the moneychangers and the buyers and sellers were viewed negatively by the Jews of the day because of the exorbitant prices that they charged. Therefore, Jesus' act of cleansing the temple would have gained the respect of many of the Jews since they viewed that they were being taken advantage of. According to both the historian Josephus, and rabbinical sources, the high priestly family lived a life of extravagant luxury that was in part derived from their cut of the whole buying and selling marketplace scene in the temple area. This support of the people explains why Jesus was able to cleanse the temple without any repercussions.

Matthew's report of this cleansing is concise, *"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves."* Mark adds that *"He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple"* (Mark 11:16). Luke's Gospel gives the briefest description.

As we look at each type of people that Jesus opposed, the first group were those buying and selling. They were buying and selling sheep for the feast of Passover. The reason there was buying, in addition to selling, is because those in the temple area required a continual replenishment of their supply in order to meet the

demand for the animals. Merchants would regularly buy the necessary quantity of these animals from surrounding areas in order to then resell them to the Jewish travelers.

This need to meet the demand for animals for the sacrifice explains Mark's statement that "*He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple.*" This second group that Jesus opposed were carrying what was to be sold and thus were what we could consider the wholesalers, who delivered their product to the retailers, who would sell to the Jews who came for Passover.

When we consider how many people were coming to Jerusalem for the Passover, we can begin to understand the size of this enterprise. There is a Passover account by Josephus that around the time of Jesus' birth, 256,000 lambs were sacrificed for this feast. Since one lamb could have been used for a feast of up to ten people, this explains estimates of as high as 2.5 million people participating in the Passover in Jerusalem. Even if these numbers are significantly overstated, there was still a very large number of animals

These lambs, or in some cases, goats, were required to be a year old and to be perfect, without blemish, "*Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats*" (Exodus 12:5). The requirement led the priests to have the position of determining if a particular lamb qualified as being the right age and unblemished. Therefore, if a worshiper acquired a lamb for themselves, they ran the distinct risk of having their lamb declared unfit for the sacrifice.

In addition to the difficulty for those who traveled to Jerusalem to bring a one year old lamb with them on their journey, there was a significant disincentive for them to risk an injury to the lamb along the way, or some defect to be found. Therefore, the opportunity for the priests to participate in the selling of pre-approved lambs at the temple arose. Indeed, the priests were motivated to hold to a rigid, if not unfair, standard of perfection, since they themselves received a residual from the sale of the lambs at the temple.

In addition to those buying and those selling the lambs, there were others who were seated and selling doves. These doves were being sold to those who were too poor to purchase a lamb. This alternative was provided in the Old Testament Law, "*But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD his guilt offering for that in which he has sinned, two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering*" (Leviticus 5:7). When the poor

arrived, they would purchase their sacrifice from those selling the doves. The merchants and priests were making money even off the poor, through using this provision of the Law to sell them doves. Jesus made sure to aim His attention to this group of profiteers as well.

The fourth group that Jesus opposed was the moneychangers, whose tables He overturned. The moneychangers were necessary in order for the business of the temple to be conducted. The throng of people coming to Jerusalem came from many different places, with different coinage. Acts 2:9-11 provides a sense of how diverse the people who came to Jerusalem were just 53 days later, *“Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.”* There would be even more people coming for Passover than for Pentecost.

The moneychangers were necessary to exchange money from the visitors to Jerusalem for two purposes. One was to pay the half shekel tax for Passover and the other was to purchase the sacrifice. This half shekel tax due for the temple was the equivalent of two denarii, and we saw Jesus pay this in Matthew 17:24-26. Of course, the moneychangers profited from their service and the priests received a cut of this business as well.

The priests exempted themselves from this half shekel tax on the dubious basis of how the priests' offering was handled in Leviticus 6:23, but other Jewish men between 20 and 50 would have to pay this tax. Those without the local currency would be charged a fee to exchange their money and those who did not have the exact half shekel coin, would also be charged a fee for the moneychangers to give them half shekels in return for larger coins. The moneychangers normally functioned as a rudimentary banking system and would lend money for profit as well, and facilitate other business, but the issue in this passage was not the act of exchanging currency, but it was where they were doing it.

Jesus condemns the temple leaders (20:13)

Therefore, Jesus condemned this entire enterprise, and everyone who was profiting from it. This was certainly an implicit condemnation of the priests, who oversaw the activities in the temple area and also received their portion of the profits. This only served to increase the animosity of the priests against Jesus, leading them to become indignant at Him in verses 14-15, even though He healed the blind and the lame in the temple.

Jesus referenced Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 in his condemnation, *“And He said to them, ‘It is written, “MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER”; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN.”*” These words were directed at all the groups mentioned in verse 12 and in it, Jesus considers the temple to be *“My house.”*

Isaiah 56:7 was referred to in order to emphasize the purpose for the temple, *“Even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.”* Mark 11:17 includes Jesus speaking the last phrase of Isaiah 56:7, *“MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS.”* The reason that Matthew might have chosen to omit these words of Jesus is because his audience was specifically the Jews.

These words about the purpose of the temple pointed to its spiritual nature. Those profiting from the worship at the temple undermined that purpose, distracting from God’s plan for it. Yet the priests allowed this corruption to take place, which served as a barrier to worship for the people it was designed to serve. This was also true of how it affected God’s love for the world, for it was built to serve the Gentiles, not only the Jews.

This is seen in Solomon’s prayer when he dedicated the temple to God, *“Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name’s sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name.”* (1 Kings 8:41-43).

Jesus referenced Jeremiah 7:11 *“Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” declares the LORD.*” The people of Jeremiah’s day had also turned the temple into a den of robbers. Like it was in the first century, so it was over 600 years earlier, where it was a den of robbers *“in your sight,”* that even the people of the day saw what was happening. And certainly, God saw it as well, *“I, even I, have seen it.”* No one was confused by what was happening at the temple.

The context of Jeremiah 7 were rebels who had dishonored the temple by using it to serve their ends, while hypocritically claiming allegiance to God within it. *“Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder,*

and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—that you may do all these abominations?" (Jeremiah 7:8-10).

While the priests had made the temple “a robbers’ den,” we must examine what was being robbed. Jeremiah 7:9 noted the sin of stealing, and the practice of buying and selling and exchanging money was certainly exploiting those coming for Passover. Jesus also took specific note of those who were selling doves, for they were financially exploiting the poor.

However, this financial exploitation was only part of what was being robbed. The worship of God was the more significant theft. Note that the term “robber” connotes one who takes something unlawfully by force, beyond simply stealing what did not belong to them. They had made the dwelling place of God into a center of business to enrich themselves. The house of God had become a house used to serve the desires of the merchants and their religious leaders. Those who came to worship God encountered those who “*walk after other gods,*” for greed “*amounts to idolatry*” (Colossians 3:5). They presented themselves as righteous but had truly corrupted the worship of God.

Importantly, the group that was not singled out by Jesus for judgment were those who came to worship at the temple. They were at the mercy of this fraudulent religious enterprise. Jesus came in judgment of the religious leaders who had served themselves in the name of God.

As with the first cleansing of the temple three years prior, this cleansing was temporal, for the evildoers would return again. While the nation’s rejection of their Messiah opposed the cleansing of the temple and the restoration of worship, God’s glorious plan included the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in the church age. The worship of the temple would be replaced by those who worship from the heart, in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Jesus is now the high priest, who truly intercedes on behalf of His people, as a mediator of a new covenant. “*Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.*” (Hebrews 8:1-2; cf. 9:11ff.).

The immediate response of the religious leaders is found in Mark 11:18, *“The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.”* Those most responsible for this robbery, the chief priests, joined by the scribes, sought to kill Jesus. Jesus knowingly expedited the opposition against Himself by His enemies.

Conclusion

Jesus cleansed the temple because the Jewish leadership had turned the God’s house into a robbers’ den. Various opportunists seized the opportunity to make a profit off the worship place of God. The issue was not the buying and selling of animals, nor the exchanging of money. This was a necessary practice in order to fulfill the sacrificial requirements of the Old Testament. The problem was where this practice was taking place.

In the Old Testament, the temple was the dwelling place of God (1 Kings 8:13, 30, 39, 43, 49). In the New Testament, believers in Christ are the dwelling place of God, both corporately, *“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* (1 Corinthians 3:16), and individually, *“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God”* (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Since Christ’s church is now the temple of God, and the Holy Spirit dwells in us, when we turn His church into a business, we are guilty of the same that the buyers, the sellers, and the moneychangers were doing in Jesus’ day. We are commanded to love one another (John 13:34-35) and serve one another (Galatians 5:13), not to use one another for our selfish gain. When we understand the New Testament tells us that we are the temple of God, then we must not turn the Lord’s church into a robbers’ den.

This may occur individually, where people seek to merchandise the church to sell products and view others as potential clients more than brothers and sisters in Christ. This may occur by the church, where worldly fund-raising tactics are used to manipulate God’s people into providing money for the church’s own agenda. This manipulation was one of the main factors in the Reformation, where the fraudulent sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church in order to build grand cathedrals was opposed by God’s people.

The worst cases involve religious leaders who deceptively and hypocritically profit from their ministry. The most overt are the teachers of the prosperity gospel that fraudulently tells people to become rich by giving (to them). Also, many celebrity pastors who may even denounce such prosperity teachers also profit handsomely through conferences and the sale of books. Christians should not become wealthy off God's people. *"For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God"* (2 Corinthians 2:17).