

# THE SETTING

*Matthew 21:12-13*

**12** 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. **13** 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**.” (**Matthew 21:12–13, 2022 LSB**)

Last week’s sermon ended up being a lengthy introduction to this passage. We looked at the building and dedication of the original Tabernacle, the first Temple (sometimes called ‘Solomon’s Temple’), and the second Temple. We saw that the cloud of God’s presence rested upon the Tabernacle and the first Temple and that the glory of Yahweh so filled those places that no one could enter. Yahweh came to dwell personally with His people in their world. But we also saw that there was no cloud that settled on the second Temple, nor did Yahweh’s glory fill it. I described the second Temple this way: It was still a place to worship and pray, and the center of Jewish spiritual life for another 586 years, but it was just an empty shell, a memorial, a preserved bit of fascinating history. It was the house of God, but uninhabited.

We also saw that God Himself, in the Person of the Son, took on human flesh.

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... **14** And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (**John 1:1, 14, 2022 LSB**)

Jesus literally dwelled with the people of His generation in Israel, but He continues to dwell with us as the God-Man today. He stands in heaven interceding for us, praying us home.

It was as the incarnate Son of God, God-with-us, Emmanuel, Yahweh dwelling with His people, that Jesus entered the second Temple following His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He did not go as the rightful King of Israel to the palace of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and demand the throne. He went straight to the Temple and claimed it as His Father's house, which made it His house as well.

What Jesus found in the Temple should have been shocking and disturbing, but it was really just business as usual.

## ABUSING THE TEMPLE

John writes that at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry,

**13** the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. **15** And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; **16** and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." (**John 2:13-16, 2022 LSB**)

These events are very similar, aren't they? Some have taken that as a sign that the Gospels were really just a bunch of randomized stories that floated around with no particular order. That's not at all true. All the Gospel writers were highly focused on presenting the truth of Jesus Christ. Matthew and John describe separate but similar events that serve as bookends to Jesus' public ministry. What it tells us is that these abuses of the Temple were everyday occurrences, not unique events.

So, what was happening?

## THE NEEDS OF PILGRIMS

Every Jewish man had to attend the three major feasts in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, health and life permitting. During those feasts, the annual Temple tax would be given, and various sacrifices would be offered.

There were restrictions on the money that could be given at the Temple. During the life of Christ, only silver Tyrian half-shekels were acceptable for the annual Temple tax. Animals brought for sacrifice had to be without blemish, that is, without any sign of disease or infection.

Many came from outlying areas for the feasts. Acts 2 describes the crowd in the city for Pentecost as coming from a massive area. If you imagine the area of the United States from Seattle to Chicago, and from the Canadian to the Mexican borders, you'll get the idea. They brought their native money with them; there was no paper money then; it was all coins. Those coins had to be changed into a currency that was acceptable at the Temple. Money changers did then exactly what currency exchanges do today: they took their Parthian, Roman, or Egyptian coins and gave them silver Tyrian half-shekels in exchange. Here's the thing. First, they charged a fee for this service. And, they couldn't be trusted to give fair exchange rates.

Imagine as well those who came from such long distances to sacrifice. Someone who lived in Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem, could bring a lamb for a sacrifice, but those coming from Iran, Turkey, or Italy would purchase animals in Jerusalem. That's not wrong, and it wasn't wrong to sell acceptable animals for sacrifices. But they did this in the Temple, specifically in the court of the Gentiles on the western end of the Temple Mount. They did it loudly, with all the haggling that is still common in Middle-eastern and Asian countries. It's thought that the population of Jerusalem swelled to at least a half-million during the feasts, if not more. The Law allowed up to ten people to share a Passover lamb. This means that during

these days, at least 50,000 lambs were slaughtered in the Temple, many of which had been sold in Jerusalem, and many of those had been sold in the Temple itself.

That's the picture we have before us.

## GOD'S HOUSE IS FOR PRAYER

*Matthew 21:13*

**13** And He said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER' ... (Matthew 21:13, 2022 LSB)

What is the proper use of the house of God? Prayer. Jesus says so right here. It was to be a house of prayer.

Yes, there were sacrifices of various kinds that took place. There were burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings, peace offerings, thank offerings, vow offerings, free will offerings, wave offerings, heave offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. But all those offerings ultimately served a single purpose: to clear the way for a sinner to come before Yahweh in prayer. And so the house of God was ultimately to be a house of prayer.

Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, which is directed toward Gentiles. Listen:

**1** Thus says Yahweh, "Keep justice and do righteousness,  
For My salvation is about to come  
And My righteousness to be revealed.

**2** "How blessed is the man who does this,  
And the son of man who takes hold of it,  
Who keeps from profaning the sabbath,  
And keeps his hand from doing any evil."

**3** Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to Yahweh say,

“Yahweh will surely separate me from His people.”

Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

4 For thus says Yahweh,

“To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,

And choose what pleases Me,

And hold fast My covenant,

5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,

And a name better than that of sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

6 “Also the foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh,

To minister to Him, and to love the name of Yahweh,

To be His slaves, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath

And takes hold of My covenant,

7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain

**And make them glad 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.”

8 Lord Yahweh, who gathers the banished of Israel, declares,

“Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.” (Isaiah 56:1–8, 2022 LSB)

The Temple was to be a house of prayer for foreigners, that is, Gentiles.

Faithful Jews and Gentiles alike would come to the Temple. They came to have their sins covered so they could pray. Women came after the birth of children to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and dedication. Those whose hearts were heavy with grief came to lay their sorrows before their God. Couples came to have their marriages blessed. Those who had prospered came to give thanks and share their blessings. Those who were gripped by poverty came to cry to the Lord for relief. They were just like us. Every person who came into the Temple came with multiple needs and concerns.

Many came to the Temple because it was the thing to do, but there were certainly many

who genuinely believed in Yahweh and trusted in His purposes. Most came in the southern entrance, up a long, very wide staircase that led into tunnels, which then emerged into the sunlight in the court of Gentiles. It was the largest open space in the Temple. It was the place specifically set aside for Gentiles to come and worship Yahweh, who could not proceed further into the Temple complex. In that court, they could look to the north and see the Tabernacle, 90 feet tall. They could see the smoke from the altar rising to heaven. And they lifted holy hands and prayed to their God, who promised to hear them.

**TRANSITION:** And they did all this amidst the clamor and shouts and haggling of merchants selling wares, of money changers and customers arguing about exchange rates and fees, of the sounds and smells of livestock being sold all around them: sheep, lambs, goats, oxen, doves, and pigeons.

## A DEN OF ROBBERS

*Matthew 21:13*

**13** 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**.” (**Matthew 21:13, 2022 LSB**)

Jesus again quotes an Old Testament prophet, this time Jeremiah. Yahweh said in Jeremiah 7,

**8** “Behold, you are trusting in lying words to no avail. **9** Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear while lying, and burn incense to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, **10** 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? **11** Has this house, which is called by My name, become a robbers’ den in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” declares Yahweh. (**Jeremiah 7:8–11, 2022 LSB**)

When we think about the Temple as a den of robbers, we might think that Jesus was saying that the faithful people of Israel, and faithful Gentiles besides, were being robbed and misused by these wicked men in the very Temple of God. That is what was happening, but that's not what Jesus meant by "robbers' den."

A robber's den is not where robbers go to rob; it is where robbers go to escape justice after they have committed their crimes. There's an old robber's den just north of here, close to the Missouri River, called the devil's nest. Back in the day, men like Jesse and Frank James hid there from the law. It was a place to hide from justice, to escape legal punishment for their crimes. Butch Cassidy's "hole in the wall" gang was named after a famous hideout in Wyoming called "hole-in-the-wall." Robbers don't go to their den to commit robbery; they go to escape justice.

Jesus says that the merchants and many others treated the Temple of God as a robbers' den. That is, they saw it as a place to escape God's justice. They were thieves, murderers, adulterers, liars, and idolaters, men who violated the ten commandments without fear. They did not come to the Temple to be cleansed and forgiven. They did not come to the Temple to confess their sin and be made right with Yahweh, who is gracious and merciful, whose kind patience is intended to lead to repentance. They came to the Temple because they believed Yahweh could not touch them there. In the Temple, they were safe from His judgment, or so they thought. After all, they had been doing business in the Temple for years, and the priests even blessed their work (probably after receiving a share of the loot). I imagine that the boldest among them probably thought, and might have said, "Yahweh can do nothing to us while we are in this place!" They were certain they had found a loophole.

But then Jesus walked in on that Spring day. In a different context, He said words that still fully apply:

**6 "But I say to you that something greater than the Temple is here." (Matthew 12:6,**

**2022 LSB)**

Jesus was greater than the Temple. He was and remains to this day, the permanent dwelling place of Yahweh with men. The Lord Jesus Christ, and not a man-made Temple, is the sanctuary for humble sinners. He stood in that majestic complex of buildings and structures, and spiritually dwarfed it.

## BRINGING IT HOME

The tragedy of those who made the Temple a robbers' den is that it was the very place where Yahweh intended for sinners to come to have their sins covered and their worship and prayers accepted. Those men spent hours every day in the very place that offered them hope for forgiveness, transformation, and eternal life and threw it away for profit. Worse, they ignored and despised Yahweh Himself.

Psalm 84:10 says,

**10 For better is a day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would choose to stand at the threshold of the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.  
(Psalm 84:10, 2022 LSB)**

But for these men the courts of Yahweh were exactly the same as the tents of wickedness.

In the Psalms David and others extol Yahweh as:

- My strength
- My rock
- My Redeemer
- My help



- The God of my salvation
- My deliverer
- The help of my countenance
- The God of my strength
- God my exceeding joy
- The sustainer of my soul
- My stronghold
- My refuge
- My fortress
- My lovingkindness
- My shield

(Psalm 4:1, 18:1, 18:46, 19:14, 22:19, 25:5, 27:9, 40:17, 42:11, 43:2, 43:4-5, 51:14, 54:4, 59:17, 88:1, 91:2, 92:15, 94:22, 144:1-2).

What we have in Jesus Christ is infinitely greater than the Tabernacle or the Temple, even when the glory of Yahweh filled those places. Our sins are not merely covered, but taken away. We are not merely His people, but the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are not bound to a physical place to experience God's blessing; He is with us everywhere we go. The church is not this building (or any building) or this corporate, non-profit entity (or any corporate non-profit), but these people. We probably should never say, "THIS is the church," and instead only say, "WE are the church." We are God's house.

But changing the focus of God's house from a particular place to a particular people doesn't change the core of this passage: we must never treat God's house, the church, as a robbers' den where our sins can be protected. God's house is meant to be a sanctuary for *sinner*s, and never a sanctuary for *sin*. Do you understand the difference?

There are terrible things happening in the name of Jesus Christ today. The prosperity

movement has turned the church, the house of God, into a profit-making venture. Spiritual wolves prey upon God's people and cheat them out of their money, which is used to fund lavish lifestyles. The LGBT+ movement rooted itself into progressive, mainline churches many years ago, and now – God have mercy – is making inroads into formerly biblical churches. They all view God's house, the church, as a robbers' den, a place where they can openly practice their sin and think to themselves, "God can do nothing to me in this place!"

But we must also beware of more subtle, secret sins we might carry with us and protect. Secret hatreds, hidden lusts, private attitudes of judgment and superiority, undercover sins that we refuse to confess.

Beloved, NO sin can keep us from Christ if we confess and repent and trust Him to remove it from us.

But at the same time, NO sin is safe from His judgment if we coddle it and protect it and use His church as a robbers' den to keep it safe.

Why would we do that? Perhaps some don't believe that their individual lives in Christ matter. Perhaps some believe that their secret, furtive sins are harmless or invisible. Perhaps we have believed the lie that says that we are powerless over sin, or the lie that says since all our sins are forgiven, what we do with them doesn't matter.

By His grace, if we know Him, He will not throw us out; we have Jesus' promise on that. But if we protect and defend our sin, especially by claiming that the house of God protects us, we will receive His earthly displeasure. We will never find Jesus satisfying as long as we remain worldly. We will never experience victory over sin if we never battle it. We will probably come to the ends of our lives fearing what comes next instead of eagerly anticipating it.