



Luke 19:45-48
Wolves and Thieves

45 Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it,
 46 saying to them, "It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' "
 47 And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him,
 48 and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear Him.

As a church listed in the phonebook, we tend to get a lot of junk catalogs with various religious goods in them, but the catalog which I dread receiving the most is from the Oriental Trading Company. I dread it, because I can't resist the temptation to go through it and to be simultaneously amused and horrified at the "Christian Items" they peddle. For instance, here are 10 examples from their catalog labeled: "INSPIRATIONAL - FOR EASTER"

- 10) Plush Bean Bag "Lamb of God"
 - 9) Plastic "Jesus Is the Light" Flashlight Necklaces
 - 8) Mini "He Lives" Bubbles (This is Bubble-soap, presumably it comes with directions for blowing "he lives bubbles?")
 - 7) Easter Inspirational Tattoos (the Girl in picture has a second commandment violation tattooed on her face – it could have come with the legend "horrify Pastor Webb this Sunday!")
 - 6) Feather and "Marabou" Angel Wings (REALLY horrify pastor Webb this Sunday)
 - 5) Mini Plastic Easter Inspirational "He Lives" Yo-Yos
 - 4) Plastic Mini Easter Inspirational Pinball Games
 - 3) Wooden Easter Inspirational Paddleball Games (and Yes, you do bounce the ball off a picture of the Resurrection)
 - 2) "Leap For the Lord!" Potato Sack
- And finally... #1) Vinyl "Smile! Jesus Loves You!" Kick Balls***

Now what the Oriental Trading co is ultimately doing, is profiting from selling tacky plastic junk to gullible churches under the guise that somehow these items will be an inspirational aid to their worship. It really is not that different from the men who made an enormous profit manufacturing and selling relics like "genuine splinters of the true cross" and "thorns from the original crown of thorns" to churches and Christian pilgrims during the middle ages.

But of course it goes back further than that, for as long as the one true God has been worshipped there have been men eager to cash in on the devotion of his worshippers. Men who look at a congregation and see not the church of God which He purchased with His own blood, but rather potential customers - sheep who exist not to be shepherded, but shorn.

Those were the kind of men who crowded into the outer court of the temple to sell their wares to the Jewish pilgrims who had come from all over the world to the temple to sacrifice and to fulfill their religious obligations. This really had become a big business, and the outer courtyard of the temple had become like an Eastern Marketplace, filled with crowds, and haggling, and arguments, and animal sounds, and smells. There in that religious marketplace they sold animals that had been certified as fit for sacrifice in the temple, and exchanged money for their worshippers. They did this because Exodus 30:13 stated that ***"The half-shekel shall be an offering to the LORD"*** Now the half-shekel coin was not a standard part of the currency throughout the Mediterranean world, so the people had to exchange their native specie in order to obtain this special coin for the Temple treasury. If you travel you know for instance, that in most countries you can't buy in the stores using dollars, you first must exchange your dollars for the native currency. That is what is going on here.

The peddlers of the animals and the money changers made a profit on their trade, and since you had to have these items in order to complete your worship, business was lucrative. The peddlers paid the priests to operate these concessions, and in turn the high priest took his own share of the profits.

Now you might be wondering, ***why didn't the people just bring their own sacrificial animals with them?***

- 1) Well who wants to drag a sheep or an Ox all the way from say Alexandria or Antioch? You would gladly pay for the convenience of buying one there.
- 2) What if you brought your animal with you, and then the priests declared him unfit for sacrifice? As you can guess, the priests would be directly benefited by doing so, because it meant more sales for the peddlers. So there would undoubtedly be a temptation to refuse enough of the personal animals to encourage sales of the certified ones.

Now when Jesus sees this, he is enraged. And with excellent reason. This is the Temple of God, the Holiest place in Israel, the house of His beloved Father, a place that is set apart, sacred, and yet the priests have turned it into a place teeming with corruption – that is why Jesus calls it "a den of thieves" – in the Greek "σπήλαιον ληστών (a *spellion lestown* – cave of robbers, think Ali Babba and the forty thieves). A place not of worship but of highly dishonest commerce.

The tragedy of all this was exacerbated by the fact that the courtyard the peddlers had taken over was called the court of the *goyim*. The gentiles or nations. It was the only place in the entire temple complex that gentiles were supposed to be allowed so that they too might be able to pray to the one true God. How on earth could they pray in the middle of a bazaar? Once again the contempt of the Jewish leaders for the nations was evident here.

The overall effect of this was to drive true worship out of the Temple. Can you imagine if when you came to church this morning, just out in the corridor we had stalls set up every Sunday selling food, and bibles, and hymnals, and prayer beads, and Inspirational Paddleball Games and that in order to worship you had to first buy a bible and hymnal and then in order to fellowship you had to buy food and a toy for your kids? Imagine also that all of this commerce went on all Sunday and that the sounds and the smells penetrated into the sanctuary. Would that encourage reverence and contemplation and sincere devotion? Would it be conducive to prayer?

Now they could have set up stalls to sell sacrifices and change money in the marketplace, but hey, then the priests wouldn't have gotten their cut and the franchise wouldn't have been assured and it wouldn't have been so *convenient*. I mean who cares anyway, its just something we do and the Lord forgives

and blesses us after we go through the motions right? Wrong. The whole system degrades and destroys true heart religion.

So Jesus drives the peddlers who are profane his fathers house out of the temple courts. And not for the first time either. He had done this once before at the start of his ministry. Turn if you would in your bibles to John 2:13

13 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

14 And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business.

15 When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables.

16 And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!"

17 Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten me up."

Not surprisingly when Jesus had left the city again and gone back to Galilee they went back to business as usual.

But this time, Jesus stays at the temple. We read in Luke 21:37-38 ***And in the daytime He was teaching in the temple, but at night He went out and stayed on the mountain called Olivet. Then early in the morning all the people came to Him in the temple to hear Him.***

Now of course this enrages his enemies, but they are unable to do anything about it. At this point the people are all still in the *Hosanna to the King of David!* Mode. That is why the treachery of Judas is going to be so crucial to their plans. They can't seize him during the day while he is teaching the multitudes in the temple, lest the people tear them to pieces. I mean here the people are still thinking that Jesus would be the political messiah they were hoping for.

So the leaders need to seize him at night, while the crowds are away. Once they had arrested Him and degraded him through mockings and beatings and dragged him before the Sanhedrin and then Pilate and the Herod, then the people would no longer believe he might be the great and mighty political Messiah. Once that happened, the people, fickle and disillusioned, turned on Jesus like a pack of wolves.

Jesus knows what they are about, and that is why when they came to arrest him in the garden: ***Luke 22:53 "When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness."***

Now what are the applications of this?

1) One of the quickest ways you can spot false religion is it emphasis on this: money.

Whether it is a high priest who bought his office from the Romans and used it to enrich himself and his family, or Popes who sold indulgences and the offices of the church in order to stock the coffers of the vatican, or Bishops who bought their offices in order to tax the sheep, or Cults who use their followers like cash cows, or Televangelists who peddle phoney healing prayer cloths in order to purchase mansions and limos, or the people who subscribe to the "give to get" theology. It is all a sign of the

same corruption and selfishness and avarice that has afflicted men since the fall. It is a taking of the church, and making it into a den of thieves.

What a contrast that is to Christ himself who confessed "*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*" I heard a televangelist explaining that Jesus meant that his advance team hadn't yet booked his accommodations in that city, not that he was poor. What a travesty.

Brothers and Sisters remember that Paul had to fund his missions via tent-making, and virtually every giant of the Christian faith has either been poor or had just enough to get by, because you see they understood well that you cannot serve both God and Mammon and that with great wealth there are huge temptations. I've been reading Dallimore's excellent little biography of Charles Haddon Spurgeon of late and it is notable that Spurgeon himself could have been quite rich, with the sales of his books and sermons, constant contributions from benefactors and anonymous donors, and even presents from his own congregation that they begged him to keep – and yet again and again he and his wife gave all their money away and plowed it back into various ministries and benevolent organizations so that the Spurgeons often had to economize themselves.

Kids, the 23rd Psalm says "The Lord is my..." what? Shepherd. Shepherds take care of what kind of animals? Sheep. And that is what we are supposed to be Christ's sheep. Now real shepherds love the sheep and are willing even to die for them if they have to. Just like Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave his life for you and me.

Now let me ask you, do wolves love Sheep? No they only love to *eat the sheep*. Well the Apostle Paul warned you in Acts 20:29 to watch out for wolves in the church. Now he wasn't saying that you should worry that a real wolf was going to come into the church building. The wolves he was talking about are people who don't really love you, but just want to gobble up what you have.

A Desire for riches amongst the leaders of the church is almost always a sign that the man is not a Shepherd, but a wolf. Beware of him.

- 2) You need to beware of a Christianity that is made up of hype, and doo-dads, and gimmicks, and 12 step books, and things that are bought and sold. Because we can fall into the same error of those who bought in the market place. Oh if I just get the newest fad book, or say this prayer, or visit this shrine. That is not true Christianity, true Christianity is a heart religion.

Christ himself showed what it was, verse 46 – prayer and verse 48 – hearing him. If a simple heartfelt love to Christ and a desire to speak to him in prayer and hear from Him in his word read and preached is not at the center of your religion, then it is not true Christianity. True Christianity is not what we buy, or what works we do, or where we go, it is union with Christ pure and simple. It is believing in him, trusting in him, and resting upon Him and his completed work alone for your salvation. As William Guthrie put it so well: "**Believing on Christ must be personal; a man himself and in his own proper person must close with Christ Jesus—'The just shall live by his faith.'** (Hab. 2:4.)"

Well if I know Jesus can I have the doo-dads too? It's like the question, what harm will relics do if someone is a true believer anyway? If you have Christ what do you need doo-dads for?