

Zeal for Christ or Zeal for the World?

Matthew 21:12-13

July 26, 2020

Greg L. Price

Zeal for Christ and His truth is not optional for the Christian. As those who have been redeemed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to be a people who are “zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). Zeal is a hot passion for Christ as opposed to a complacent lukewarmness for Him. When the Lord Jesus (early in His ministry) found the merchandisers and money changers in the Temple, He manifested a zeal (a holy and hot passion) for His House by making a whip of sorts and literally chasing these men and animals out of the Temple. After witnessing this incident, His Disciples remembered that it was written, “The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” (John 2:17).

Is a holy and passionate zeal for Christ consuming your heart and life, or has rather a lukewarmness (or coolness) taken up residence there due to your preoccupation with so many things in this life that leave you little to no time for Jesus? Is spending time with Jesus in private worship been crowded out by forgetfulness, neglect, busyness, procrastination, or lack of desire? Has Christ become just a part of your life, or is He your life and reason for living every day? Is a former zeal for Christ now only a faint memory of the past? Now is the time to repent of that lukewarmness for Christ and to renew that first love you once had for Him, and to be consumed with a holy zeal for the Lord and His Word.

The main points are these: (1) A Zeal for God’s House (Matthew 21:12-13); (2) A Zeal for The Nations (Mark 11:17).

I. A Zeal for God’s House (Matthew 21:12-13).

A. Let me first begin with some contextual background leading up to our text.

1. This cleansing of the Temple occurred in the very week in which Jesus was crucified. As Jesus approached the Temple, and walked through the gates, the first courtyard which He would have entered was known as the “The Court of the Gentiles” (according to Josephus). The Court of the Gentiles was an immense open area wherein God-fearing Gentiles were permitted to pray, to be instructed, and to seek the one true living God. They were not permitted to go beyond this area. On the other side of this wall and up some stairs, the Gentiles could hear the prayers of both the men and women of Israel pouring out their hearts to God from the Court of the Women and the Court of Israel.

2. When Jesus had entered the Temple the day before, He looked around upon all things that were within this very portion of the Temple—the Court of the Gentiles, Mark 11:11). We now learn in Matthew 21:12-13) what He saw. What He saw was a profaning of the Temple by making it an actual market place where live animals were being sold to sacrifice, and foreign money being exchanged (at a profit).

a. According to the Talmud (cp. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 403), there were already four market places close enough to the Temple where animals might be purchased for sacrifices, and money exchanged. However, these four other markets were not under the jurisdiction of the High Priest, and he did not want to miss out on the financial gain to be made from the influx of worshippers on feast days like the Passover; so he established his own market place within the Temple at the time Christ’s ministry began (John 2:13-17).

b. It is now three years later, and the market place had been re-established within the Temple between the first cleansing (in John 2) and this second cleansing (here in Matthew 21). Most likely, the High Priest had only recently brought the merchandisers, animals, and the money changers back into the Temple (since there are no references to animals in the Temple during the intervening years).

B. Let us now see the holy zeal of Jesus in action.

1. First, He cast out all those who were buying and selling in the Temple (and presumably forced them to take with them all the animals which they were selling). The word for “cast out” in Matthew 21:12 is not a passive word, but a very active word—in fact, it is the same word that is used of Christ casting out demons from people. The Lord did not politely ask these buyers and sellers if they would please mind leaving the Temple and take all their goods with them. To “cast out” is to force or drive them out of the Temple (in John 2:15 the same Greek verb is used and is used with a whip). No smile was seen at that time on Christ’s face. No gentleness was observed in Christ’s actions as He chased these profaners of God’s House out of the Temple and into the streets.

2. The second act that proved the zeal of the Lord was that He overturned the tables upon which the moneychangers made their profit and upon which cages of doves were placed. If the Lord could cause the multitude of soldiers who came to arrest Him in the Garden to all fall down like a row of dominoes at His mere word, “I AM” (the Great I AM that appeared to Moses in the burning bush), then certainly He could simply have uttered a word, and all these profaners of God’s House would have fled in fear. If Jesus could have accomplished the cleansing of the Temple by a mere word had He chosen to do so, why did He use force in driving them out, and overturn their tables? This was a visible demonstration of God’s holy indignation with those who profane **His House**. It graphically displayed the holy passion and zeal that God has for **His House**. Jesus was not out of control with sinful anger, but was filled with a holy anger and zeal because **His House** had been polluted. It was not someone else’s house, but “MY HOUSE” (Matthew 21:13). He had the authority to chase them out of His House. This was a merchandizing of His House to satisfy the greed of the Jewish leaders. If you came home to find people having a drunken orgy there, you would rightly chase them out or call for the police to do so. How much more Jesus had the right to do so in His House that was to be kept holy and pure.

C. Application.

1. The issue question for us is, Why are we not more like Jesus who was not tolerant when His House was being desecrated? Why are we rather complacent with false doctrine and impure worship in the Church of Jesus Christ? Do we have that holy zeal for God’s House (the Church of Jesus Christ—not brick and mortar, but living stones)? When we tolerate corruption within the Church (in false doctrine, corrupt worship, or scandalous lives) we will stand before the Lord and give an account as to why we have allowed His holy Church to be profaned (1 Corinthians 3:17). We may not be able to go forth as Jesus did in cleansing professing Christian Churches of their merchandizing and corrupting the pure doctrine and worship of Jesus Christ, but we can testify with the zeal of Christ against all corruption in the church and refuse to unite with them in their corruption of the pure doctrine and worship of Jesus (searching our own hearts that we not be filled with pride or self-righteous anger, but with humility and tears over our own need of Jesus to purify our own lives—we must always begin with ourselves, otherwise we will just be hypocrites).

2. Zeal for the Lord cannot be hidden. It is the fruit that Christ produces in the life of every Christian (not a fruit for just the super saint). Zeal for the Lord is manifested when the reproaches cast upon Jesus and His truth become yours and mine. Zeal for Christ is manifested in your willingness to suffer for Him, in communing with Him in that secret place of the Most High which no one else sees but Jesus, and in your swift and loving obedience to keep God’s commandments. Zeal for the Lord is to love what Jesus loves, and to hate what Jesus hates. There will be no zeal for Christ where there is no time for Christ. A zeal for Christ and His holiness that is according to knowledge and truth comes from a heart that is set on fire through time spent with Christ in prayer.

3. True biblical zeal is not just heat, but is a heat that is illuminated by the light of God’s Holy Word (like that of John the Baptist whom Jesus said “was a burning and shining light”, John 5:35). There are professing Christians that are burning lights (a lot of heat and passion, but having very little shining light of

knowledge of the truth and love for Jesus in keeping His commandments in doctrine, worship, and church government). There are also professing Christians that are shining lights (a lot of light and knowledge, but having very burning light of holy zeal and passion for Jesus Christ). Christ calls us as Christians to be both burning and shining lights.

II. Zeal for the Nations (Mark 11:17).

A. Not only had the High Priests and merchants profaned the Lord's Name (which is the supreme offence here), but they had as well excluded from the Temple those earnest seekers of Jehovah among the Gentiles by setting up their market within the Court of the Gentiles. How could they worship with all of that noise and confusion? Apparently these merchandisers believed the Gentiles could be excluded for the sake of their profit, but they would not think of setting up their markets in the Court of the Women or the Court of Israel. Not only had God's holiness been trampled underfoot, but the Gentiles had been trampled underfoot within the Temple. Christ's words come from Isaiah 56:7 where the promise of God's grace to the Gentiles is prophesied.

B. Your zeal for the Lord's House will not only be evidenced in your desire for pure worship, but also in your prayers and zeal to see the lost to come to Christ. We cannot alter or change our doctrine or worship to accommodate the tastes of people, but we must long to see family and friends come to Jesus Christ. The gospel is not for a certain class of people, but is for all classes of people. Jesus did not come to save the righteous (who believe they are just fine the way they are, who are comfortable in their sin), but Christ came to save sinners (who believe they are not righteous, but have offended a holy God and will suffer His eternal judgment apart from faith in Jesus Christ alone for eternal salvation). Parents, this truth must be taught and lived before your children. They must not see us as snobs who don't want to get our hands dirty (in helping and ministering to others), but rather as seeking to bring to Christ family member, friends, co-workers.

C. You can always count on the fact that your zeal for Christ will be opposed by those who despise Him and His truth (Mark 11:18).

1. There are consequences in following in the footsteps of Christ and living a life that is zealous for Christ and for good works in reforming His Church. There will be those who will seek to destroy your testimony, to slander you, to mock you, and to persecute you. There will always be opposition to true reformation in the Church of Jesus Christ. How comfortable and coddled we have become when we consider what our faithful fathers in the faith were willing to suffer to bring reformation to the Church (and what many faithful Christians are suffering even now): exile, isolation, privation, fleeing, imprisonment, mockery, torture, and death. Why? Zeal for Christ and His Church consumes them.

2. But even in their seeking to extinguish your life and mine, they cannot extinguish the truth of Christ which we profess. An emblem/symbol used by our faithful and zealous Reformed forefathers to designate their zeal for Jesus and His truth was the picture of two hands lifting up a heart to God that was set ablaze with fire. That is what should be emblazoned upon our minds if zeal for Christ would consume us. Our heart, our affections, and our entire lives are set on fire unto Jesus.

3. A passionate zeal for Christ and His Truth is not optional in the Christian life—it is commanded and is portrayed for us in Christ. What is hindering and cooling your zeal for Christ, dear Christian? Busyness, other priorities, pleasure, worldliness, a mere profession of the truth, a besetting sin? All people have zeal. It is simply a question of what each person is zealous for. An unbeliever is zealous for the things of the world. A Christian is zealous for Jesus and His truth. Flee to Christ and cast yourself upon Him. Zeal is a grace, but it must be exercised and grown like all graces. Pray daily that zeal for Jesus would consume you.

Copyright 2020 Greg L. Price.