

Introduction

Many folks possess an image of Jesus which is soft and tolerant. To be sure, Jesus is kind and full of mercy, but at times Jesus is quite fiery. He can be angry without sin. He displayed just that anger on the Tuesday before he was crucified. It happened when he entered the Temple. We read about it in our text for this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he directed the people to construct a portable center of worship. It was called the tabernacle. When David became king and dwelt in a fine house, he had it on his heart to build a permanent dwelling for the Lord. He gathered the materials and made the plans, but it was his son Solomon who oversaw the building of the first Temple, the house of God. First the tabernacle and then the Temple—these were the holy earthly symbols of the presence of God. Here was where the people of God were to draw near to him in worship and sacrifice, and prayer, to seek him and to display their regard for and faithfulness to him. The people, however, were not faithful to the Lord. The Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple in 586 BC when the Lord sent many of the Jews into exile. When they returned some 70 years later, the Temple was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Approximately 500 years later, King Herod the Great vastly expanded and enhanced the temple complex to about 30 acres of magnificence. His renovation was mostly completed by the time of Jesus's public ministry and by the time Jesus entered and shook things up.

Matthew's account of the events establishes a close connection between the Messiah Jesus and the worship of God. In the process of shaking things up in the Temple, Jesus puts attention on the way things ought to be in the Temple, and that's the way things ought to be in the worship of God. The Temple was destroyed in AD. 70, but the New Testament church survives as the current Temple of God. Paul makes this declaration to the assembly of believers in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? . . . For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." So my contention this morning is that the local church of believers embodies the essence of the Temple. We are God's dwelling place. And as we study the activity in the physical Temple in Matthew 21:12-17, we learn from our Messiah, Jesus, definite priorities he has for the spiritual temple which we are. My main point this morning is to point us to four priorities for the local church which emerge as Jesus "cleans house" as it were.

The first of these priorities is . . .

I. The Eradication of Irreverence.

I wonder how many of you know what Creeping Charlie is. It is also called ground ivy. I have some in my yard and it is something else. It is not an ugly plant. It produces round leaves with scalloped edges and cute little purple flowers. But it is invasive. It is an enemy to your lawn. It is hard to kill and can quickly take over a yard if you don't stop it. You do not want Creeping Charlie. You want to eradicate it. Likewise, there is an enemy to the worship of God. It was in the Temple and it can be in the church. If you do not root it out, it can quickly take over. And Jesus wants to eradicate this enemy because of how destructive it is. We could refer to this enemy in a number of varying ways, but I am going to call it irreverence.

We learn from Mark's gospel that after Jesus made his monumental entrance into Jerusalem on the back of the donkey, he went into the temple and looked around and then left. Apparently it was the next day that Jesus returned to the Temple and the events recorded in these verses by Matthew took place. To begin with, Jesus drove out all who sold and bought in the temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He charged them with making the house of God a den of robbers.

Passover was near and the city of Jerusalem swelled from its day-to-day population of about 40,000 to somewhere around 250,000. Jews came from far away to sacrifice and observe the feast. Many also paid the annual temple tax at this time, which had to be paid with Jewish currency. Under the direction of the high priest, merchants and money-changers set up shop in the temple courts. And they are known to have charged those who came a premium both for the service of changing their money and for the sacrifices to be presented on the temple altar. It was extortion at a high level. Jesus called it thievery. It was an abomination to God.

Merchandising and profiteering and taking advantage had destroyed the high and intensive sense of holiness and awe that was supposed to be sensed when one came to the Temple. The temple was massive and imposing in proportion to the rest of the city of Jerusalem. It was breathtaking and stood high and regal. Coming to the temple one would have to mount steps to the sprawling outer court and each successive court rose higher than the last by some twenty steps. It presented the reality that as one got closer and closer to the temple itself, one was also moving higher and higher. The elevation communicated an increase in proximity to the presence of God. With it should have come a sense of the sacred. Think how God operated to communicate to his people the reverence and awe and fear of him they should have. Think of Mt Sinai and the cloud and smoke and fire at the top of the mountain and how it shook and trembled when the Lord appeared. Recall how when the tabernacle and later the temple were completed. The glory of God came and filled the places so that no one could stand before the Lord. We could go back to Nadab and Abihu and their offering of strange fire at the tabernacle. The Lord consumed them with fire. We could be reminded of Uzzah whose life was suddenly snatched from him when he reached out for the ark to steady it as David was bringing it to Jerusalem. We could also think of the vision of the Lord in Isaiah in the temple high and lifted up so that Isaiah fell on his face saying "Woe is me."

God's intention for his temple was that it be filled with an attitude of reverence, reflecting the serious nature of the God whose dwelling this was. Such a sense was only right in view of the acts of sacrifice constantly transpiring there. Transcendent God meeting with lowly sinful human beings through sacrifice. To recognize the reality would be to be hushed and sober and to take seriously the law of this great God. But the Jewish priests had swept it all aside and corrupted the whole sense of reverence by bringing sellers and money changers onto the temple grounds to garner wealth by taking advantage of the ordinary farmers and herdsmen that entered to worship.

The picture of Jesus overturning the tables and seats and driving out the merchants is a violent one. It displays how seriously the Messiah loathes thievery but also the irreverence from which it proceeds. It also displays how highly he regards the reverence due the majesty of God. Brothers and sisters, the holiness of God is a feature of his being that should grip us at all times but certainly every time we draw together to be the temple of God, the house of God. The Messiah takes this temple seriously. He is consumed with zeal for his Father's house. So was Paul, who said in 1 Corinthians 3:16: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him." Brothers and sisters, we need to have a holy zeal for God's house as well. We need to preserve among ourselves a sense of

the holiness of God and the awe over his glory and mercy to be able to draw near to him in worship. The eradication of irreverence must be one of our priorities in worship.

A second priority for the worship of the church is . . .

II. The Priority of Prayer.

When Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple, clearly he was angry. We could justifiably take time to consider the fact of righteous indignation which Jesus illustrates. But the question I want to focus on here is "why?" Why was Jesus so angry. And the answer is that the Jews had overturned the purpose of God's house. It was not supposed to be a commercial enterprise. It was intended to be a house of prayer. Jesus refers to Isaiah 56:7 where the Lord says, "For my house shall be called a house of prayer." Jesus was angry because the Jews had completely lost sight of what the temple was actually for. The priority and centrality of prayer had been eclipsed. The temple was meant to be a house of prayer—a place where human beings draw near to God. And in New Testament era, our gatherings as the temple of the Lord must be no different. We gather together to draw near to God. Prayer is essential to what we are to be doing.

Commonly we define prayer as talking to God. But I think we need to deepen our understanding a bit here. Prayer is speaking to God, but prayer is about more than just what we say to him. Prayer is about approaching God, drawing near. James says, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." It is reflected in David's passionate expression in Psalm 27:4, where he declared, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." Prayer is encountering God; it is communion with the Lord.

Drawing near is exactly what folks were supposed to be doing by coming to the temple. Drawing near has much to do with listening or absorbing something of the majesty and greatness of who God is. Listen to Solomon's wisdom from Ecclesiastes 5:1-2. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few." Solomon is not saying not to speak but he is saying that there is more to drawing near to God than speaking. Our attention to God himself and what he has to say to us is way more crucial than what we would say to him.

But we should talk to God. Paul exhorts Christians in Ephesians that one of the central elements to being strong in the Lord is to pray. We should pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." In prayer we talk to God, and there are various categories of prayer. Prayer includes adoration and confession and thanksgiving as well as making known our requests and crying to him for help. And all of these should be involved in our prayer lives. If all we do in prayer is ask for things, we are barely touching the surface of what praying is really meant to be. We should be a people who in our own personal lives are devoted to prayer. And as a body of believers, as the temple of the Lord, we when we are together, we must be vigilant to guard the time as sacredly drawing near to speak to and to hear from God.

A third priority for the church is . . .

III. The Ministry to the Debilitated.

In zeal and righteous indignation, Jesus drove out all who sold and bought, but here is a group he welcomed in the temple. The blind and the lame came to him there. These people would be the lowest of the low, helpless individuals on whom society at large would have turned its back. But

when they came to Christ in the temple, he did not turn his back on them. He healed them. Jesus's healing of these debilitated individuals demonstrates yet again that he is Messiah. But Jesus's ability and work to heal human beings stricken with the consequences of sin as represented in their infirmities demonstrates what kind of Messiah he is. The Jews wanted a Messiah to overturn the Roman intruders. But Jesus came to overturn sin and its consequences. And he did the work right here in the temple, the place of sacrifice and the place of drawing near to God.

Likewise, the New Testament church is meant to be a place for soul healing. These physical healings are emblematic of the healing Jesus accomplishes for the souls of those who come to him in faith. He relieves the blindness of our hearts and gives us eyes to see the truth of God. He also gives us wholeness spiritually from the lameness with which we walk in sin. The church is not a museum where perfect people are put on display. The church is a hospital where the sin-sick come to be made whole. We preach Christ and him crucified to sinners who need to repent. We preach Christ crucified to saints who have repented but all of whom are still putting to death the deeds of the body. For it is in our union with Christ that we are set free from the punishment we deserve and from the power of sin over us.

The church must never get away from the fact that we are called to minister to one another in the name of Christ, and this happens as we do the work of evangelism and discipleship and soul care. We are not concerned merely with performing religious rituals here but with hearts and lives being changed from glory to glory. We are commissioned to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to spur one another on to reflecting Christ's own image. So let us do that. This is why we do what we do. We worship together; we preach; we teach; we meet in groups and one-on-one. We study; we pray that we might walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called.

A fourth priority emerges . . .

IV. The Centrality of Christ.

Jesus is the heart and soul of what it means to be the temple of God.

While Jesus was healing the blind and lame, young people were ascribing salvation to Jesus. Their acclamations proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, as God's king, and asserted that he is the one who saves us. "Hosannah" was a cry for salvation. And they were ascribing their salvation to Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David. They put the spotlight on Jesus. And when the indignant priests asked Jesus, "Don't you hear what they are saying?" it was to suggest that he correct them. He would not because what they were saying is the truth. He then quoted from Psalm 8 and affirmed that on the basis of the scripture itself he is worthy of such praise and that this praise was ordained of God.

What these children were doing is precisely what is fitting. It is fitting anywhere and everywhere but especially in the house of the Lord to praise Jesus Christ. All eyes fixed on Jesus. All voices lifted in praise of Jesus. All fingers pointing at Jesus. All hearts captivated with Jesus. He is the Savior. He is the only one who can save. He is also the King. Ascribe salvation to him. In the temple of God, which we are, it is our privilege and delight and joy and occupation to extol Christ Jesus the Lord! It is our business, our calling, our captivation, and our responsibility to proclaim the excellences of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, out of blindness into sight and out of our spiritual lameness into strength. Such focus undoubtedly led Charles Wesley to write these words:

You servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious and rules over all.

God rules in the height, almighty to save;
though hid from our sight, his presence we have;
the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.

"Salvation to God, who sits on the throne!"
let all cry aloud, and honor the Son;
the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.
Then let us adore and give him his right:
all glory and power, all wisdom and might,
all honor and blessing with angels above
and thanks never ceasing for infinite love.

Jesus is the incomparable and preeminent one. He is the one who has reconciled we who once were alienated and hostile in mind in the body of his flesh in order to present those who trust in him holy and blameless and above reproach before him. Let us then continually join the chorus of these children and ascribe salvation to Christ and keep him at the center.

Conclusion

Having spoken words of rebuke to the chief priests, Jesus turned and left and went out of the temple and out of the city. Here he was, the one to whom ultimately the temple points. But the religious establishment was so wrapped up in itself, he was not welcome where he ought to have been extolled. Let it not be that way in this place! Reverence. Prayer. Ministry. And Christ Jesus at the center of all we do. That's the temple being the temple as it ought to be!