

# CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

John 2:13-22

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"Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." *John 2:16-17*

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” This is a formula taught in countless children’s Sunday School classes. It is gloriously true that Jesus, God the Son, is humble in spirit and gentle. He said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt. 11:28-29). But there is a tendency among Christians to overemphasize these traits and neglect other aspects of Jesus’ personality. Artistic renderings often mislead us into thinking of Jesus as weak and even effeminate: the kind of person you would never pick to play on your sports team. This false view of our Lord is exploded by John’s Gospel, starting with his cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-22. Here we find a strong, vigorous, and manly Christ, acting in holy anger against sin. The Jesus of John’s Gospel acts as a divine Messiah of holy zeal, unafraid to exercise his rights as Lord and God.

## JESUS’ ZEAL FOR PURE WORSHIP

John 2 begins the story of Jesus’ earthly ministry with two “signs” that together present complementary aspects of his character and mission. In the first, Jesus miraculously provided wine so that a wedding feast could continue. In the second, we see Jesus violently cleansing the temple courts. This very much agrees with the New Testament portrait of Christ as both Savior and Lord, Lamb and Lion.

John 2:13 begins, “The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” The Passover was the greatest of the Jewish

feasts, commemorating the Exodus, when God delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. John's Gospel keeps careful track of time by means of these feasts. Jesus' ministry took place during a time span encompassing three Passovers. The first is recorded in John 2 and the second in John 6. The third Passover, when Jesus was crucified, is recorded in chapters 13 to 21. Scholars, making use of the information in John 2:20, in which the Jews remark to Jesus that Herod's temple had been under construction for 46 years, date this first Passover variously from 27 to 30 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

The point made by this first Passover, when Jesus visited Jerusalem, is his *zeal for worship*. The Jewish people were to gather at the temple to worship God on the Passover, and Jesus was joyfully attentive to that duty. Sadly, many Christians today treat church attendance as a matter of convenience or whim, depending on what other activities are competing. Hebrews 10:25-26 says, "Let us... not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some." How much stronger the church would be today if its members shared Jesus' zeal to worship!

Imagine the joy it brought our Lord to participate in the festive processions leading up to Jerusalem. And how much Jesus must have looked forward to arriving at the temple: to be one with God's people as they came to praise, to pray, to remember God's mighty works of salvation, to confess their sins and to offer sacrifices for forgiveness according to the law.

But what Jesus found when he arrived took away any joy he was feeling. John explains, "In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there" (Jn. 2:14). Pilgrims who came to the temple were required to offer sacrifices. It was impractical for them to bring them on their journey, so sacrificial animals were conveniently available for purchase in the Court of the Gentiles. Moreover, each Jew paid a temple tax at Passover, and the temple only accepted pure Tyrian coins of sound weight. Therefore, money-changers were on hand to exchange currency. All of this was done at a profit, of course, which was shared by the merchants and the temple priests. Jesus' reaction was dramatic and violent: "Making a whip of cords, he drove them all

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<sup>1</sup> For the former date, see F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ), 76. For the latter date, see Andreas Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, ), 109.

out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade’” (Jn. 2:15-16).

Why did Jesus react this way? We know from the other Gospels that Jesus also cleansed the temple at the end of his ministry. On that occasion, he explained, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk. 11:17). This indicates that there was corruption and financial exploitation of those who came to worship God. But at this earlier cleansing of the temple, Jesus does not complain about corrupt *practices* of the merchants, but their mere *presence* in the temple. “Take these things away,” he demanded; “do not make my Father’s house a house of trade” (Jn. 2:16). The temple courts were to be a place where the Scriptures were read, where sacrifices were offered and where people came to pray. R. Kent Hughes comments: “As his eyes scanned the great Court of the Gentiles, he saw sheep, oxen, fowl, and everything that goes with them. There was huckstering, bartering, and haggling over the weight of a coin.”<sup>2</sup> The one thing that would have been impossible at the temple was the one thing it was made for: the reverent worship of God.

Jesus’ *reason* was understandable, but his *reaction* was shocking. Imagine him taking up cords as a whip, racing from booth to booth, overturning tables and physically driving out the shop-keepers. Some try to downplay the violence of Jesus’ action, arguing that Jesus would never have struck anyone. But if that was the case, it is hard to imagine why he made a whip. The fact is that Jesus responded with violent anger. He shows us that godly people are passionate people – passionate for the things of God, passionate in their love of good and in their hatred of evil! Jesus hated what he found at the temple, and, employing all his great moral energy, he cleansed it of impurity. It is hard to imagine how one person could do this, until we expand our portrait of Jesus to correspond with the divine being that he is. Here, the Lamb was revealed as a Lion, and the merchants fled from Jesus in terror. As the prophet had foretold: “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple... he will purify the sons of Levi and

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 67.

refine them like gold and silver” (Mal. 3:1-3). This was not a sinful outburst of temper, but the just wrath of a holy God. Considering other biblical precedents for blasphemy in the temple, the merchants were fortunate to escape with their lives.

This episode shows us not merely Jesus’ zeal for worship, but his zeal for *pure* worship. Observing this scene, the disciples thought of Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for your house will consume me” (Jn. 2:17). Jesus had a burning intolerance for false or perverted worship. Here, he objected to worship for the sake of commerce. Yet how common this is today. Some churches seem to exist for no other purpose than to solicit contributions. Others fill their lobby with coffee shops and stores. Indeed, the logic sold today by church-growth consultants is that the more a church resembles a market the better. Worship services have taken on the feel of a comedy club or a movie house. But Jesus insists that holiness and reverence are to characterize worship in God’s house.

This does not mean that a church may not have a table where money is raised for missions or where godly literature is discreetly sold. But it does mean that activities that clutter or detract from godly elements of worship – reverent praise, confession of sin, prayer, the teaching of God’s Word, and the administration of the sacraments – are to be removed. Bruce Milne accurately states: “For Jesus, worship is a matter of the gravest importance and as the messianic King he claims lordship over it. A significant portion of the Bible is devoted to the regulation of worship and we are sadly misled if we imagine that the quality of what we offer in worship services, or the devotion with which we participate, are matters of peripheral importance.”<sup>3</sup>

What we do in worship reveals what we think about God. A church that worships through dry and joyless ritual shows that it believes in an absent God. A church that stirs up carnal enthusiasm and fills the worship service with entertainment believes in a weak God who needs our spiritual help. A church focused on money reveals a God who is unable to meet our needs, whereas a church that exalts its own celebrities shows its blindness to the glory of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 70.

But what does it say when people reverently lift their hearts in praise? It says that they think God is worthy and great. What do Christians show when they humbly confess their sins? They show that they believe in a holy and forgiving God. What does it say when we commit ourselves to prayer? It says that we believe in a God of power and love. What does it say when Christians are devoted to the reading and teaching of God's Word? It says we believe that God has revealed himself, that his Word is truth, with power to save. What does a church say by worshiping according to the Bible instead of the latest worldly fad and fancy? It says that God matters more than worldly approval and that his ways are trustworthy and right.

Jesus' zeal for God's house – violently cleansing it from the merchants and restoring it for prayer and Bible teaching – shows us that our success in worship is measured not in the amount of money we take in, not in the number of people we attract, but in the purity and truth with which we worship God and cause his name to receive glory.

## JESUS' AUTHORITY OVER TEMPLE AND CHURCH

Churches that refuse to follow the trends in worship can be sure of criticism. But opposition was more serious in Jesus' case, and the religious establishment was not slow to respond: "The Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things?" (Jn. 2:18).

This shows that the religious leaders did not deny the rightness of what Jesus had done, but only his right to do it. It seems that they understood Jesus' action as a claim to Messianic status. After all, Jesus referred to the temple as "my Father's house," which Moses never did nor any of the prophets. Moreover, a well-known Messianic prophecy foretold, "There shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day" (Zech. 14:21). It is no wonder, then, that the priests demanded to know Jesus' authority for what he did: "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" (Jn. 2:18).

Jesus' answer indicates his unwillingness to reveal himself plainly to hardened hearts. His cleansing of the temple had been sign enough. But he did point to the great sign he had come into the world to do: "Destroy this temple," Jesus said, "and in three days I will raise it up"

(Jn. 2:19). They thought he was referring to the temple building, so they replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” John explains, however, that “he was speaking about the temple of his body” (Jn. 2:20-21).

By answering this way, Jesus was agreeing that he had the right to do what he did, for the simple reason that he is the Lord of the temple. Likewise, he is the Lord and Head of the church today. This means that Jesus is the sole authority whose Word rules the church and its worship. No dynamic preacher has the right to set aside Jesus’ Word. No pope or bishop or board of elders or wealthy contributor has the right to dictate to the church of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus’ church: we are to sit at his feet, study his Word, follow his example, and worship God in trusting obedience to Jesus Christ.

The proof he gives is his resurrection from the grave: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). The priests misunderstood, and the disciples only understood after the fact. John tells us, “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (Jn. 2:22).

This is the proof that the Scriptures are true and that Jesus is the Messiah. James Boice asserts, “The resurrection proved that Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be and that he accomplished what he claimed to have come to earth to accomplish... If it can be shown that Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from the dead, as the early Christians believed and as the Scriptures claim, then the Christian faith rests upon an impregnable foundation.”<sup>4</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield adds, “Our Lord Himself deliberately staked His whole claim to the credit of men upon His resurrection. When asked for a sign He pointed to this sign as His single and sufficient credential.”<sup>5</sup>

The New Testament proves the truth of Jesus Christ through the eyewitness testimony of his disciples to the resurrection. If anyone knew the truth about Jesus’ resurrection, they did: the Bible records them seeing the empty tomb and spending time with the resurrected Lord Jesus. These cowardly and often confused disciples were transformed into bold preachers of Christ’s resurrection – a message for which

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, ), 341.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield: *The Savior of the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1916, reprint n.d.), 196.

they willingly suffered all the rest of their lives and ultimately died. To deny Jesus' resurrection, you must explain how men would act this way for a message they knew was false, and why the Jewish authorities were unable to disprove their public claims to Jesus' resurrection.

One man who investigated Christ's resurrection was the great jurist, Simon Greenleaf. He was one of the founders of Harvard Law School, and his 3 volume *Treatise on the Law of Evidence* remains the foundation for legal practice in America today. Greenleaf decided to apply his approach to evidence to disprove the biblical claims of Christianity, focusing on the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. But when he actually faced the New Testament claims, Greenleaf came to the conclusion that the witnesses were so reliable that he would have to accept them in a court of law. His book, *The Testimony of the Evangelists: The Four Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence*, remains unrefuted to this day, and is a standing testimony to the results when one honestly inquires about Jesus Christ. As Jesus told the Jews who asked for a sign when he cleansed the temple, the facts of his resurrection serve for anyone as proof of Scripture. Just as jurors in a trial have a duty to believe sound evidence, the evidence for the resurrection morally obliges us to believe in Jesus.

## JESUS' BODY AS THE TRUE TEMPLE

This account shows Jesus' zeal for pure worship and his authority as Lord. Lastly, it makes an important point about Jesus and his coming into the world. The Jews were confused when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn. 2:19). They naturally thought he was talking about buildings. But Jesus was making the point that his body is the true temple of God.

There are a number of ways in which this is true. One is that whereas the temple was the place where God symbolically dwelt, Jesus is the Person in whom God truly dwelt in the flesh. Paul writes, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). Furthermore, the temple was intended to reveal truth about God, and Jesus does this in a full and perfect way: "Whoever has seen me," he said, "has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3).

But the most important function of the temple was to house the Ark of the Covenant, the golden box that contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, along with Aaron's staff and a jar of manna. The most important part of the ark was the mercy seat. This was where the blood of sacrifices was spread so that sinful humans could dwell in God's presence. This was why the Israelites came to the temple for Passover. Every family was to sacrifice a lamb for their sins. They came to the temple because that was where the sacrifices were made by the priests and received by God.

We see what Jesus meant, then, when he referred to his own body as the temple. It is his death on the cross that serves as the place where sin is forgiven and where man is received into God's grace. Have you come to the cross? Have you confessed your sin and looked to Jesus as the Lamb of God, slain for you – looked to his blood, shed for you – for the forgiveness of your sin and your only reconciliation to God? Just as the Jews had to come to Jerusalem, you have to come to Jesus. There is no other temple, no other place where you can meet with God, and no other way for you to be forgiven and gain eternal life.

Paul explained why we must come to Jesus: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). But how does Jesus redeem? Paul adds, "God put [him] forward as a propitiation by his blood" (Rom. 3:25). A propitiation is an offering to satisfy God's wrath. The glory of the gospel is that God sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to avert his own wrath. Jesus shed his blood on our behalf, so that by his death we might be freed from the death and hell that we deserve, and be received by God's grace into eternal life. We receive God's gift of eternal life by faith alone, so that Paul completes his teaching about Jesus: "God put [him] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:25).

We should note, as well, that the New Testament refers to the church as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23). This means that we now serve the function that the temple once did. The temple pointed forward to Christ's once-for-all shedding of blood and we point back to that atoning sacrifice. Through us, unbelieving sinners are to learn the good news and come to faith in Christ. Surely this indicates that we are to be holy in our worship and ministry, and that if we are not

we can expect an angry Lord to come, violently cleansing us so that we will become the church he wants us to be.

The same is also said of us individually: “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it,” Paul says (1 Cor. 12:27). Therefore, he adds, we must be pure in the way we live and in the use of our bodies. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” he asks. Paul’s specific point there has to do with sexual purity – an important calling for the church today – but the principle demands holiness in all of life. “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price,” he concludes. “So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Are you doing this? Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, every believer is a dwelling-place of God; thus you are called to a holy life that is suitable for God’s dwelling.

What are we to do if we have defiled our bodies with sin? What are we to do if our worship has been impure – individually or as a church? The answer is the same whether we are being forgiven for the first time or the hundredth. The answer is that we must come to the true temple – the cross where Jesus died – to confess and repent, to believe on his shed blood, to be forgiven, cleansed, and renewed for holy fellowship with God. In his first epistle, John explained, “The blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness... He is the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 1:7-2:2).

What if you do not come? What if you allow the temple of your heart and body to remain defiled, not repenting and not seeking cleansing? If you are a believer and thus one of God’s own, you can expect Jesus to come to you as he did to the temple, whip in hand if necessary, to cleanse and correct you. Hebrews 12:6 says, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” How much better for you willingly to seek the holiness God demands!

If you are not a believer, if you refuse to humble yourself before Jesus, confessing the guilt of your sin and worshiping him as Savior and Lord, then Jesus will come to you as well. But it will not be with a mere whip of cords or with loving chastisement. The Bible tells of a day of wrath, when Jesus will come “from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not obey

the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thess. 1:8-10).

Jesus has come as Savior; he returns soon as Judge. Jesus has died as Lamb for those who believe – that is the past; he comes back as Lion to conquer, judge, and reign forever – that is the future. So what about now? The Bible says, “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”... “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (2 Cor. 6:2; Rom. 10:9).