

House of prayer for all nations

John 2:13-22

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There is nothing wrong with talking about money in church. Jesus preached about money, the apostles wrote about it, and money is a part of life.

All of life is under God's wings, including money matters. We talk about our offerings, the need for money, and we report about matters related to money. We have agreed in our last AGM that we must talk more about it, as the church really needs your financial support! But if Jesus would come here today, would he kick us out for making the house of his father into a den of robbers? How important is money and talk about it among us here?

The history we have read in the Gospel, of Jesus cleansing the temple, is an important lesson for us. Let us try to understand what happened exactly.

Expect prayer – find business

Jesus and his disciples travelled from Capernaum in Galilee to Jerusalem, during the annual feast of Passover. This was the time all Jews had to go to Jerusalem, and they came from all over the world. It must have been extremely busy.

During Passover, all Jews had also to pay their annual temple tax, and for this, large numbers of moneychangers were needed. Alfred Edersheim, in his famous book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson, 1993, 2000) p. 254, says:

This Temple-tribute had to be paid in exact half-shekels of the Sanctuary, or ordinary Galilean shekels. When it is remembered that, besides strictly Palestinian silver and especially copper coin, Persian, Tyrian, Syrian, Egyptian, Grecian, and Roman money circulated in the country, it will be understood what work these 'moneychangers' must have had.

The business of money changing was fully in the hands of the priests; they could earn a lot in this way. And not only did people need to pay their tax, they also needed to buy great numbers of animals for each family had to sacrifice an animal in the temple. People had to pay these animals in that same currency the temple allowed, and so anyone coming from all over the world had to change money for this as well.

And the animals, guess whose animals were the only animals sold in the temple? Yes, indeed, the animals owned by the priests and their families. They managed the exchange rates and they could charge lucrative amounts for the animals.

Good business to be a priest! Those were the days! Why does this remind me of so many television preachers I have seen all over the world. 'Send your money, buy my book, and send more money...'

Jesus was extremely angry. If you like to maintain the image of sweet Sunday school Jesus, this story is not easy. 'You have made my Father's house into a market', he shouted at the business people in the Temple. There were sheep, and cows, and stalls of moneychangers everywhere! The place that was meant for prayer was a big stinking noisy mess.

So Jesus made a whip, and threw the people and the animals out. Strange actually. How could he, one man, do this? He was weak by himself alone. Maybe the business people, the priests, had some sort of feeling of guilt, so they accepted that it was in fact unacceptable?

The temple was intended for worship, not for business, is what Jesus underlines. And in our Christian life it is good to remind us of this. Nothing is wrong with money, but the focus of our life should not be on money but on obeying and worshipping God. And especially the church, the place where we come together for worship, is for the worship of God, not for the worship of the god called mammon.

The disciples remembered a verse from the Psalms when they saw the zeal of Jesus for the honor of God in the Temple: 'The zeal for your house consumes me' (Psalm 69:9). The rest of that verse in the Psalm says: 'The insults of those who insult you, fall on me.' God's name was insulted by the temple business, and Jesus felt that as an insult to himself. Hence his anger.

The early church saw these words of the Old Testament and recognized in Jesus' cleansing of the Temple a fulfillment of those words.

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The anger of Jesus was not only because the house of God was not treated with respect – there was a very different aspect to it that we easily overlook. He was not just angry because there were money stalls and dirty stinking animals – he was also angry because those were put in the area that was reserved for non-Jewish believers in God who came to worship in the Temple.

All stalls were in the outermost court – that is the court of the gentiles. And the noise of the salesmen, the noise of the animals and the enormous stench made worship for gentiles almost

impossible. For any non-Jew who came up to the temple to worship, it meant prayer had to be offered in the middle of the cattle yard and the money market. As if you have to pray in the middle of Ataba Square here in Cairo.

Jesus was particularly angry that the Jews in the Temple did not care at all about the gentiles and their relationship with God. While God's desire was for those foreigners to serve and worship him. I read from Isaiah 56:4-7:

For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord and to worship him...these I will give the joy in my house of prayer... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'

So when Jesus was angry, his focus was not only on the fact that the Temple should be a place for prayer, but especially, that all nations should be welcomed there. All people are welcome in the house of God. And the people of God in his day did not show them any welcome, with their stinking animals all around.

In the Gospel of Mark we read:

And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (Mark 11:17)

Instead of a house of prayer, it has become a house of robbers. St Mark says that Jesus *taught* this in the temple. He took time to explain, I am sure, and the quotes in the Bible are just a summary.

The text 'you have made it into a den of robbers' was well-known to the Jews. They immediately understood what Jesus was saying. This is the verse from the Old Testament that he quoted, from Jeremiah 7:8-11:

But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then

come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, We are safe— safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

Jesus is stressing in the Temple that the Jews themselves broke every law, and they made it impossible for the gentiles to worship God properly.

No wonder the leaders of the Jews asked him how he had the guts to cleanse the temple and to speak such condemning words. 'What is your authority'?

End of the temple

Jesus answered the Jewish leaders with a riddle.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." John 2:19.

The critical Jewish leaders could not understand what Jesus said – and that is not strange. The disciples of Jesus only after his resurrection realized what he had been speaking about – he spoke of his own body – the real Temple of God. The real place where we can find God. But the Jewish leaders thought he spoke of the buildings of the temple. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, king Herod had begun with the beautification and renewal of the temple in the year 19 or 20 BC.

So now, when Jesus was in the temple, for 46 years work had been going on in the temple to make it very impressive. That was a long time, at great cost, with hard labor. And Jesus spoke of tearing it down, and even stranger, of rebuilding it in three days? Impossible!

But Jesus spoke of his own body. In other places in the Gospel we also see that Jesus knew about his coming death but also that it would not be permanent; after three days he would be raised. This is stressed in all of our Gospel versions. And Jesus, consistently, always refused to give miraculous signs to those who asked for it. He only pointed to his own death and resurrection after three days as the true sign that he was sent by God. That is central in the Gospel.

The Jewish masses later remembered these words of Jesus, but in a distorted way. They quoted him as saying: 'I will destroy this man-made temple' (Mark 14:58). Before the crucifixion of Jesus, this was one of the accusations against him. And later, when Stephen was arrested, he was accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the temple. (Acts 6:14)

Jesus never said that he would destroy the temple. The temple was actually finished in the year 64 AD, over 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. A few years later, in 70AD, it was destroyed by the Roman armies.

But still, there was a link between the destruction of the temple and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fact is, that the death and resurrection of Jesus did mean the destruction of the temple as a viable religious system.

Leon Morris, *Reflection on the Gospel of John Vol I* (Grand Rapids, 1986), p. 85:

After Jesus had offered the sacrifice that would put away the sins of the world, what place would there be for a temple in which the central act was the offering of the bodies of animals on the altar? When Jesus died, the temple died as the center of a religious system.

Where do we find God? In a temple? In a church? In nature? Our Lord Jesus Christ taught that He himself was the ultimate temple – the place where God is to be found. A church building, and nature, can point us to God, but not more than that. We truly and only find him in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In serving God, we must take care that money is not a stumbling block. Our money, and our buildings, are assets that we must use well in the

service to God - to point people the way to God – through Jesus Christ. Not for our own pleasure only.

Not using our money for serving God is wrong. To misuse money that is donated for serving God is just as wrong.

The sad fate of the Temple of Israel is a graphic image of the fact that even what was once to the glory of God, can be turned into a shameful thing.

We devalue our possessions, buildings, our organizations, our churches, all things good in themselves, if we do not have an open heart and open doors for all people who are outside our churches and if we do not use all we have to glorify God.

Our service to God should never exclude other people. God wants all people to know Him and to serve him. How is our life? How do our words point to him? How do we use our possessions for his service and for pointing people to God through Jesus Christ?

++ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit *Amen*