

**HEART FOR GOD**  
**(3) ACTION FOR A JOYFUL HEART**

Matthew 21:12-13; Isaiah 56:7-8

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**SCRIPTURE**

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. {13} He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:12-13 NRSV).

**MESSAGE**

In Jesus' day the religious leaders in charge of the Temple together with those who supported them saw the Temple as a means for financial gain. This has led to a popular interpretation of our text that says to talk about money and faith in the same breath is unspiritual, controversial and has no place in the church.

But this interpretation is so completely wrong and so diametrically opposed to the teaching of Scripture that one would think you hardly need to address it. Sixteen of Jesus' thirty-eight parables refer to the faithful management of finances and property. He repeatedly portrayed our approach to money as a primary determiner of our heart's spiritual condition. And it was Jesus himself who said:

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21 NIV).

No, the problem here was the practice of questionable activities that were not only shady but, more importantly, also usurped the purpose of the Temple. Consider the sellers of animals. We know from the parallel accounts that in addition to doves, cattle and sheep were also sold (John 2:15). Animals entered largely into the sacrificial system that was essential to Temple worship under the Old Covenant (Lev 17:11). A sacrificial victim had to be without blemish. Animals could be bought cheaply enough outside of Jerusalem, or farm families could bring their own, but the Temple Inspectors would be sure to find something wrong with them, and so the worshipers were advised to buy their animals at the Temple (at exorbitant prices, of course). Oh, and by the way, I'm sure it was just a coincidence that all the merchants in the Temple were cousins of Annas the High Priest.

A similar problem existed with the money changers. People brought money to support the work of God. But the Temple authorities made a rule that people could not use regular money to give their offering but had to change it to Temple Currency. A large fee was imposed for

doing this and a second fee if you wanted your change back. Oh, and by the way, I'm sure it was just a coincidence that all the money changers in the temple were cousins of Annas the High Priest.

To challenge this racket Jesus cleared the Temple and shouted a quote from Isaiah:

“My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is. 56:7).

The Temple was not intended to be a place of worship exclusively for the descendants of Abraham. There was a place in the Temple set aside for non-Jews to come and worship and pray to the Lord. It was called the Court of the Gentiles.

But guess where the merchants and money changers set up shop? That’s right - in the Court of the Gentiles. Thereby preventing them from being able to come and worship the Lord. (Gentiles were not allowed anywhere else in the Temple.) Jesus was furious because the purpose that God had for the Temple was being obstructed by greed and racism.

The Temple was, in this sense, only a building, but a building with a purpose - to reach out to all peoples. If this was true under the Old Testament how much more under the New (Is 2:2-3; Matt 28: 19-20). We are to share God’s love and grace with all people. And in the process we are to treat people the way Jesus would treat them. But if you cannot do a kind deed you may at least be able to say a kind word.

The story is told of a sales representative named Joe who had been away from his family for three weeks and was lonely. As he sat down in a little café to eat, the server asked, "What would you like?" Joe responded, "I want some lasagna and a few kind words." The young woman soon returned with his order, set it in front of him, and turned to leave when Joe said, "Say, what about my kind words?" She leaned down to his ear and whispered, "Don't eat the lasagna."

The New Testament does not require Christians to have buildings in order to worship God. But if we do have a building we need to follow this principle - “A house of prayer for all peoples.” Too often American congregations are focused inward. We need to stop focusing inward and start reaching outward. William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury 1942-44) was right on when he said:

“The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”

We need to allow Christ’s Spirit to change our attitude toward the House of Worship so that it fulfills God’s intent to work through us to reach out in a loving way to others and welcome them into the family of God. We see this clearly in the passage in Isaiah from which Jesus

quoted:

To my holy mountain, I will bring them in and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts...I will gather others to them besides those already gathered (Isaiah 56:7-8).

God is at work in the world gathering to himself those who have not yet been gathered. Those who are already part of the family of God have the privilege of sharing in the work. It pleases God when we engage in the work God is doing in the world. And as we grow in our desire to please God we experience greater and greater joy. This is the action that leads to a joyful heart and this is what it means to have a Heart which beats for God.



The leadership of First Church has been working on ways to help us become more outward focused. We have come up with an Action Statement represented by the logo on the front of the bulletin. A church which is actively engaged in what God is doing in the world will: “GO OUT - BRING IN - BUILD UP.”

It is a simple statement in that it consists of only six words: “GO OUT - BRING IN - BUILD UP.” It is an effective statement in that it presses for continuous action. It is a comprehensive statement in that it encourages us to be faithful to all of God’s purposes:

- ▶ We GO OUT in order to Serve Christ through **SERVICE** to others.
- ▶ We BRING IN by helping to Connect people to God through **OUTREACH** and welcome them in to the family of God.
- ▶ We BUILD UP when we Nourish people in the Spirit through **WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, and DISCIPLESHIP.**

Then those who have been BUILT UP are ready to GO back OUT to BRING IN, to BUILD

UP and so on. In this way we live out the Apostolic Blessing, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:13). We believe that a church which is actively engaged in what God is doing in the world will: “GO OUT - BRING IN - BUILD UP.”

The Christian Church faces many challenges in today’s world. The current financial crisis is one of these challenges. First Presbyterian Church, like so many congregations in Michigan and around the nation, is not immune from the effects of this crisis. But adversity is nothing new for God’s people. The Church has always faced challenges, even going back to the First Century. We need to remember that the Church is to be about God’s work and if we are doing God’s work, there is no need for us to be discouraged. Our job is to be faithful. It is God’s job to provide the resources for the work. But he does not do this unilaterally. He wants us to act in such a way that shows we are learning to trust in him.

I believe the teachings of Jesus are just as valid today as when first spoken. The Contemporary English Version translates Matthew 6:33 this way:

But more than anything else, put God's work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well (Matt 6:33 CEV).

God will give us all we need from day to day if we live for God and earnestly desire to engage in what God is doing in the world. Let us be active in gathering to God those who have not yet been gathered and then our hearts will know what it means to be joyful in the House of the Lord.