

THE INTENT OF THE PLACE OF WORSHIP

Matthew 21:12-17

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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. ¹³He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” ¹⁴The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry ¹⁶and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” ¹⁷He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there (Matthew 21:12-17 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

If someone you loved and admired suddenly and unexpectedly became angry, wouldn't you want to know why? We read in Matthew 21 that Jesus entered the temple area, drove out the buyers and the sellers, overturned the tables, scattered the money and made quite a commotion. He was filled with indignation. Why? Before we try to answer that question let me ask you this – Wouldn't you agree that if we knew there was something that got Jesus really angry that it would make sense to learn what that is and then avoid it in the future? So it is important for us to find out what upset Jesus in the temple. Or to state it more positively, we need to find out his intent for the place of worship.

1. OPEN INVITATION

If you look at the passage, it appears that Jesus directed his attention to the money changers and the animal sellers. In principle, these people had a legitimate cause. In those days every faithful Jewish family paid a temple tax. The problem was you could not pay the tax in standard currency. You had to change it into temple currency. That is where the money changers came in. You would give them Roman or Greek money and they would exchange it for temple money. Then you could use that money to pay your tax. However, the money changers charged you 15% for the exchange. If you wanted your leftover change back they charged another 15%. So you can see it was a hardship to be taxed and it was also painful to pay the tax. Furthermore, a lot of the money did not end up in good hands.

The animal sellers were there because animals were used in worship. Animal sacrifice was part and parcel of temple worship. You could only use certain types of animals and the animal had to be unblemished. In theory, you could bring an animal from home (if you were a farmer) or buy one in one of the outlying districts. But a funny thing always happened. For some odd reason every animal brought from home and every animal purchased in one of the outlying districts was always blemished. The priests always found something wrong with them. On the other hand, every animal sold in the temple was okay. Funny coincidence don't you think? Of course, I am being facetious. The whole thing was a racket. The money changers and the animal sellers were in a lucrative business of cheating people. But that wasn't the half of it. You see, they were the small fry. The people who owned the business were members of the high priest's family. The high priest, who was supposed to represent righteousness, and his family were lining their pockets by exploiting people. Surely, Jesus would have been upset with such injustice.

But is that the reason he did what he did? It does not say so in this passage. In verse 12 it says he drove out all the buyers and the sellers. It is as if the whole enterprise were the problem – as if the commercialization of worship was the precipitating cause. But again, I must point out, it does not explicitly say so in this passage. What does it say?

Verse 13 tells us that Jesus used a quote from Isaiah, “My house will be called a house of prayer.” Evidently these people were doing something that prevented the temple from being a house of prayer. At first, this does not seem to make sense. There were plenty of places set aside for prayer. There was a place set aside for priests, a place set aside for the men of Israel, and a place set aside for the women of Israel. Each could use their respective place of prayer without hindrance. But there was another courtyard called the “courtyard of the Gentiles.” This was a place originally set aside for non-Jews who wanted to come and pray and worship. But the money changers and the animal sellers set up shop in this courtyard so that it could no longer be used for prayer. Non-Jews could not worship. Why did the money changers and the animal sellers do that? First of all, they were greedy. Secondly, they did not give a rip for Gentiles. The popular notion in those days was that Gentiles were fit only to fuel the fires of hell. The rabbis forbade anyone from assisting a Gentile woman who was having trouble giving birth lest another Gentile child be brought into this world. So who cared about Gentiles? Apparently, Jesus did. Although he was a Jew, he did not buy into this anti-Gentile mentality.

If we were to look at Isaiah 56, where this quote is found, verse 7 says “for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations (or all peoples).” The term translated as “nations” is also used to refer to Gentiles. Even Gentiles who hunger for God were supposed to be included in the temple. The house of prayer is meant to be a house of prayer for all peoples. The word for prayer here in Isaiah and later in Matthew is the

general term for prayer which includes worship. The place of worship is meant to be a place of worship for all peoples.

Think about this. Hundreds of years before Jesus cleared the temple, God spoke through his prophet and said that the temple was meant to include even non-Jews so they would be allowed to search after him. Jesus was angry that the intent of God was being perverted by the priests, the money changers and the animal sellers. Later, the Apostle Paul would summarize God's intent in his letter to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28 NIV).

If you are following this you should grasp an immediate implication for today. We are not to use the house of God to exclude people who are hungering after God. Rather, we are to worship in such a way as to encourage people to come here and seek after God. We are to use the house of God in such a way so as to invite people to come here and seek after God. The place of worship is meant to be a place of worship for all peoples.

2. HONEST ENCOUNTER

Prayer is a direct experience of God. The place of worship is meant to be a place of honest encounter with God. Dr. Glen Martin, who has done a great deal of research on worship patterns in America, points out that there are many people who are coming to church today not just to learn about God but to meet God. Are we willing to help people experience God in worship?

Turning back to Isaiah 56, we learn more of what God says about his house of worship. Verses 6&7 tell us we are to serve him, love him, worship him, and God will give us joy in his house of prayer. The light of God's love leads us to a new life of joy.

West Virginia folklore carries a tale about a couple who called for a doctor late one night as the wife was ready to deliver a baby. The country physician turned the rustic farmhouse into a makeshift delivery room. The husband was handed a lantern and instructed to hold it up so the doctor could see. After a healthy boy was born the man lowered the lantern. The doctor shouted for this new father to get the lantern up as he delivered another baby – this time a girl. The father was thrown into shock when the doctor once again insisted that the light be held up. He said, "We can't stop now, it looks like there's another one." The nervous father then asked the doctor, "Do you think it's the light that's attracting them?"

The light of God's love leads us to a new life of joy. We are to serve and love and worship in joy! If we experience God in this place it is our hope that others will also come and meet God and know the joy of the Lord.

Jesus had more critical comments to make. He said they had turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves¹. Some people look at this and say that this obviously refers to the money changers cheating the people. And that may be true. But why then did Jesus say “den of thieves?” In our popular notion of thieves in days gone by, what was the den of thieves? Was it the place where they did their robbing or was it the place where they went to try and hide? It was their hideout wasn’t it? Jesus was referring to the temple as a place where wrongdoers were hiding. Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, once said that the safest place to hide from God is in church. At first that seems absurd. But think of it this way, when you are in church, people see you and if they see you in church they are going to naturally assume you are there to worship God. But whereas people judge by the outside, God looks at the heart. He knows what we truly feel and believe. Are you hiding from God in church?

In Jeremiah’s day the people had a superstition about the temple. They assumed that the temple was so important to God that God would always bless and protect them no matter how they lived their lives. In Jeremiah’s day they lived grossly immoral lives – Rampant injustice, bribing of officials, people cheating on their spouses, the shedding of innocent blood, oppression of the poor and the corruption of faith. But they thought that as long as they came to the temple everything would be alright. God would protect and bless them. But in 587 B.C. the Babylonian army sacked the city of Jerusalem, looted and destroyed the temple, and took away the citizenry into a long exile.

Do you think that if you come to church God owes you a favor regardless of what you did the previous week? I don’t think God is all that interested in what building you go into. God is interested in how you live. He wants you to be right with him. He wants you to know him, love and serve him. So don’t come to church to hide from him. Come to church to meet him. Come to discover his love for you.

3. MEET OUR DEEPEST NEED

Jesus drove out the buyers and the sellers but he was not throwing a temper tantrum. He still exercised self control. The text says he overturned the tables of the money changers but not the tables of those who sold doves. In the latter case he overturned the seats of those who sold doves but not the tables where the cages of doves were located lest the doves be hurt. If this had been a Hollywood film we could legitimately place a caption in the ending credits, “No animals were hurt during the making of this dramatic teaching moment.”

Jesus did not want to hurt the animals. He had another purpose. He was trying to teach

¹ NRSV uses “robbers.”

people something about the house of prayer.

What Jesus did next was nothing short of remarkable. After he cleared the area he began to heal people. The blind, the lame and others came to him and were touched by his mercy and love. That spoke volumes and it still does: God can meet our deepest need.

The house of prayer is a place of praise and worship but it is also a place where we serve people with God's sufficiency. God is sufficient for all our needs. I did not say all our wants or whims or selfish desires. He does not promise to remove us from all pain and trouble. God is not a celestial Santa Claus or a genie out of the bottle. God is our Creator. He knows what we need and he is sufficient for all our needs. The house of prayer is to be a place where we serve people with God's sufficiency.

4. WORSHIP CHRIST

There were some children watching what was going on. They got the biggest kick out of seeing Jesus turn over tables, and drive out the buyers and the sellers. They started praising the Lord. They used the term "hosanna" which originally meant "God save us" but after many generations it became a term of praise. They were praising the Lord that Jesus was doing all this. You have to understand that children were not welcome in this area. Over on the side were the chief priests and other temple authorities and, oh my, were they upset! "Th, th, th, there's children in here!" they may have said. They didn't know what to do. They were so frustrated. They just turned to Jesus and said "Do you hear what these children are saying?" How did Jesus respond? Did he kick out the children? (No!) He welcomed them. He was delighted they were there.

Erma Bombeck wrote about a time in church. She was sitting in one of the middle rows. In front of her was a little boy. He was quiet but every once in a while he would turn around in his pew and give this big grin. Bombeck and the others with her just delighted to see him with such a smile. This happened several times until his mother could stand it no longer. In a loud whisper she said, "Turn around and stop grinning in church!" The little boy did and then he started to cry. And the mother said, "That's better!" Bombeck thought to herself, "how can I tell this little boy that God is oh so delighted to see his smile in church."

Jesus quoted another verse, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise." That really got the authorities angry. If you look at the parallels of this account in the other Gospels you will see that they wanted to kill Jesus because he said this. They were mad that he exposed corruption in the temple. They were mad that he was healing people in the temple area. They were mad that he was allowing children in the house of God. But they were especially mad because of this quote. The quote is from Psalm 8 and

it refers to the praise of God. Jesus was saying, in effect, that he (meaning Jesus himself) was worthy of praise and the religious authorities thought that was blasphemous. This mere man was claiming to be worthy of divine praise. But you and I know that he was not and is not a mere human being, that he is the very Son of God. Christ is worthy of our praise. To be the house of prayer we need to exalt Jesus Christ, we need to worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

In light of all this what are we to do. Let me make two suggestions. First, welcome new people. You may think this is obvious. In fact, it is so obvious a thing to do that most of us do not do it. We must make a concerted effort to welcome people. Secondly, when you come to worship, do not come just to hear about God, come to meet God. Pray that you will experience God in this place and that you will want to love him and serve him and worship him in great joy. Pray that others also will be drawn and will come and meet and experience the living God. If you and I work on these two things: welcoming people and seeking the presence of God we shall be a house of worship for all peoples. This will be a place of worship as the Lord intended.