

## **“Zeal For Your House”**

January 23, 2022

John 2:13-22

Read John 2:13-22

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

We are flip flopping a couple of weeks: you were supposed to be hearing about Jesus turning water into wine. But no; surprise! We are going to go the opposite direction – to the Jesus that frightens us – whose response to un-holiness in the temple looks to us like a wild man.

We, like the Gospel of John, are taking up Jesus’ cleansing of the temple outside of the Holy Week. You might remember that the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – all describe this event as occurring after Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. John, however, pairs it with the first sign – turning water into wine – at the beginning of his description of Jesus’ ministry.

It is a good time to remind ourselves of something. Remember John was clear about his purpose in writing: in John 20:31 he wrote, “...these are written *so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah*.” This gospel is not a chronological record. It is not simply a biographical narrative. It is a gospel written to convey a message: Jesus is the Messiah.

So, why did John relate this event to us at the beginning of the gospel? It was because he wanted us to see how Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise.

The Messianic imagery here comes from an Old Testament prophecy; specifically, Malachi 3. The promise begins, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” What have we seen thus far? John the Baptist came, then Jesus came suddenly to the temple. But the prophecy did not stop there, it went on to say, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.”

John did not want readers to miss the Messianic revelation here at the beginning of the gospel. In fact, he was kind of beating the drum on this subject. The prologue introduced the notion of the messenger and the revelation of the Messiah. Then, the narrative began with John the Baptist’s ministry and John pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then, after gathering some disciples and the first sign revealing Jesus as the “better” wine, John paired those “revealing” accounts with this fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi.

One other quick note about the text: the question by the Jews seems a little odd to our ears. “What sign can you show us for doing this?” It demonstrated that those asking do not have a real good grasp on what was happening – or intentionally did not want to have a real good grasp – because the event *was* the sign. Nonetheless, they asked for a sign because in Jewish tradition it was

important to test the prophets; many of whom would engage in outrageous behavior to draw attention to the word they were called to proclaim. Jesus' response was that the resurrection would be the only additional sign given to verify his authority for being the Messiah.

There are two parts of this story: the cleansing of the temple and the discussion of the destruction and raising of the temple. These are two parts of the gospel as well: judgment and grace.

### **Judgment**

We start with judgment.

When we look at Jesus cleansing the temple, it does not look like the Jesus most of us want to see. We like the loving Jesus who has children on his lap, the happy-go-lucky Jesus who walks among the crowds with an inviting expression on his face, and the pastoral Jesus who is serene and calm. The picture in our text is very different.

Here, Jesus was the judge. Visually, he looked like a one-man protest mob. He made a whip out of cords and drove all of the sellers out of the temple. Haven't we seen this on the news? Portland, anyone? To us today, the question is, what made Jesus so angry?

It was the blasé approach to worship. It was using the elements of worship for commercial gain. It was the marketing of God's grace in providing a means for His people to be made right with Him.

The Temple was where the LORD was worshipped. Instead of awe, however, approaching God had been made easy and efficient. It had been institutionalized, normalized, and routine. In fact, it had become so routine that they took God for granted and stopped paying attention to the details of God's command and ignoring the reasons for those commands.

For example, Ray VanderLaan – with whom some of you are familiar from the “That The World May Know” series – observed that the money changers were located in the Court of the Nations. Whether intentionally or oblivious, the sellers were blocking the nations from being blessed. They were, in reality, detracting or preventing God's promise to bless all families of the earth through Abraham.

Jesus was reacting to people *taking away* from the worship of God. In short, he was angry because they were taking God's holiness for granted.

Holiness is a big deal to God. Perhaps because we see sin so often and so widespread, we do not see how awful it is. It becomes normal in our eyes and we stop seeing it as sin. Sin lies waiting when we take God for granted and – when that happens – we begin to try to have God serve our desires. There is a good reason why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; so says Proverbs 1. And so it is – we need to have a healthy understanding of who we are and who God is.

One time many years ago, the king of Hungary found himself depressed and unhappy. He sent for his brother, a good-natured but rather indifferent prince. The king said to him, "I am a great sinner; I fear to meet God." But the prince only laughed at him. This didn't

help the king's disposition any. Though he was a believer, the king had gotten a glimpse of his guilt for the way he'd been living lately, and he seriously wanted help.

In those days it was known that if the executioner sounded a trumpet before a man's door – at any hour – it was a signal that he was to be led to his execution.

The king sent the executioner in the dead of night to sound the fateful blast at his brother's door. The prince realized with horror what was happening. Quickly dressing, he stepped to the door and was seized by the executioner, and dragged pale and trembling into the king's presence. In an agony of terror he fell on his knees before his brother and begged to know how he had offended him. "My brother," answered the king, "if the sight of a human executioner is so terrible to you, shall not I, having grievously offended God, fear to be brought before the judgment seat of Christ?"<sup>1</sup>

Make no mistake: God takes sin seriously. Deadly seriously. He has called his people to holiness. He has called his people to worship him – for their sake, not his. God does not need our worship to be God; we need to worship God in order to remember who we are and whose we are.

Just a reminder: I was going to share this sermon with you in person but am doing so on video because of a last-minute change in circumstances. I am not hiding from you and not pointing fingers from a safe distance. I want you to know – whether I am there or here – God's holiness is absolute. It is not negotiable, relative, or graded on a scale. We need to remember our sin and brokenness – AND – the cost God paid to redeem us from the consequences of our sin. We need to remember the relief and joy of our being saved – AND – not get lulled into complacency that either our sin was not so bad or that we somehow were good enough to deserve to be saved.

Note who Jesus drove out: the sellers. They were people who came to the temple for the purpose of getting something out of it. They were not there to worship God. They were not there to humble themselves before God. They were there to use God to get something for themselves.

Listen: being blessed by coming to church is not a bad thing. It is part of the reality of coming into the presence of God with brothers and sisters in Christ. However, that blessing is a by-product, a secondary result, a good side-effect of coming to worship God. People who come to church only to get the side effect always leave unfulfilled or unsatisfied.

The church consumer is alive and well in the United States. I have to tell you that the temptation to cater to the church consumer is pretty strong. As we have talked about numbers and reaching out to draw new people in, the temptation is to try to figure out, "What do they want? What do they need? How can we package the gospel in a way that will be attractive to them?" We have the tendency to focus on the *felt needs* of the consumer.

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<sup>1</sup> From sermonillustrations.com

Even when we try to meet their felt needs, we find that people are hungry for something more. Their real need is something else, something more. The something more is the right relationship with God.

The right relationship with God is one of awe, wonder, and humility. It is a constant surrendering of anything – except God – we hold onto for security. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” I think the lack of love is one of the reasons why Jesus’ anger and judgment came out that day in the temple.

Many times, when we hear this story we focus on the moneychangers – and rightly so. I do not think that is the whole story, however. I think Jesus was making a point to those for whom sacrifice had become too easy. They no longer worried about bringing the best of what God had given them as they were commanded in Deuteronomy, they would simply purchase something when they arrived at the temple. God did not get their best, God got their “it’s good enough.”

When the relationship with God becomes too easy, it is easy to ignore or take for granted. We get complacent about coming to church – we will come when it is convenient. We get complacent about our giving – I don’t have enough for the things I want, so I can’t God give any more; besides, the church has enough and enough other people are giving, so everything is ok. We get complacent about our sin – well, we go to church more than other people, God still loves us.

Friends, those are traps. Do not believe it even for a moment. God cares about holiness – your holiness. Your worship is an integral part of your relationship with God – nothing anyone else does excuses you from your relationship with God. If you are thrilled with the ministry or program here, great; but your giving is still your act of worship to God. Likewise, if you are angry or disappointed with the ministry or program here; your giving is still your act of worship to God. God wants your best, not what is left over at the end.

In Malachi 1 – the same book from which the disciples remembered later “Zeal for my house will consume me” – the prophet also wrote this word from the LORD:

A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, “How have we despised your name?” By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, “How have we polluted it?” By thinking that the Lord’s table may be despised.

When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts.

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“What a weariness this is,” you say, and you sniff at me, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in

the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name is revered among the nations.  
(Malachi 1:6-14)

When you come to church, what do you bring? (And, by the way, by coming to worship, I am including all of you watching the livestream. You are, in fact, participating in worship where you are.) So: are you coming to worship God, to present yourself before the sovereign LORD? When you go to a party, you take a gift with you for the host. Have you brought something with you this morning that has value to you and will be received – will be pleasing in the sight of the LORD?

Jesus' judgment on what the temple had become: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" For Jesus, worship is a matter of giving yourself and your best before the LORD, not coming to see what you can get out of it.

### **Grace**

The second part of this passage is the conversation between Jesus and the Jews regarding the temple. Here, we get a powerful expression of grace.

The Passover was a pivotal and defining event – formative for the Jews. It was the night when God effected judgment on Egypt for Pharaoh's hardness of heart. It was not a conceptual judgment, it was a very real, very tangible, very horrible judgment.

Remember how the Jews prepared for the first Passover: in Exodus 12, the LORD has Moses and Aaron instruct the people to take a lamb – an unblemished lamb – and put its blood over the doorway. They were to eat the lamb and break bread together. "It is the Passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments; I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

The Passover was an expression of judgment and grace. Grace to those who accepted God's offer of a sacrifice on their behalf; judgment on those whose hardness of hearts kept them in rebellion against God.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple came at Passover. It was an expression of judgment towards those whose hardness of heart prevented them from humbling themselves before the LORD. Jesus would later present himself as the unblemished sacrifice at the temple so that the sins of believers would be passed over. In Jesus, God was offering the very best, the unblemished Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Jesus would incur in his own body the weight of the judgment for the rebellion against God, for the indifference, for the apathy towards God.

There's a praise song we have sung here entitled "Amazing Love," that includes the refrain, "I'll never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross." "Amazing love, how can it be, that you my king would die for me; amazing love, I know it's true, and it's my joy to honor you."

Friends, please do not miss the profound truths revealed today: 1. God is holy. Period. There is no exception. It is not negotiable, relative, or graded on a scale. 2. God did not *excuse* our sin; rather, God took steps *to forgive* our sin. In Jesus, God took on himself the consequences of our sin and fulfilled all righteousness. Without Jesus we stand – or more accurately, fall – on our own.

What did the Baptist say? “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world!”

Again this week, note how Apostle concluded this event, “After 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.*” The gospel was written so that we would believe. So: believe.

### **Conclusion**

Judgment and grace. Worship and blessing. God’s unyielding demand for holiness. Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice we receive in grace. He was an offering made in righteousness: He is the Messiah.

He has made the temple clean once again.

Amen.

Prayer

Questions:

1. What is your attitude and expectation when you come to worship? Do you have a sense of awe?
2. When you come to church, what do you bring?
3. How do you understand the relationship between judgment and grace? How would you describe what Jesus did to someone who is not a believer and wonders what it is all about?