

## Jesus Cleanses the Temple

### John 2:13–25 • Part One: Intro

We are seeing that John's Gospel is different from the 3 synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke which give us chronological timelines and a biographical portrait. As RC Sproul says, John's Gospel is more of a "theological reflection." Even in his purpose statement for writing the gospel: "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31) — there is essential, life-giving theology built in. By believing you may have life in his name — that's the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Before we get to the passage, we need to carefully reflect on the Old Testament and its laws and requirements for worship. We actually won't get very far into John 2, but will spend time thinking about the Tent of Meeting and its rules for worship. The Old Testament laws were given that we may understand who God is, who we are in relation to him, how we have rebelled against him, and what our rebellion cost. They involved types, pictures, shadows of what had not yet come, and what was not yet perfect, but would be perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

For instance, at God's command, the **Tent of Meeting** was set in the midst of the tribes of Israel during the Exodus. It was also known as the Tabernacle, and it is defined by God in Exodus chapters 25 to 30. It was a living picture of how God was drawing near his people, restoring the communion that was lost when sin entered the world in Genesis 3. In Genesis 2, God communes with Adam and Eve, and they are in a worship relationship with him, obeying and serving as he commanded. He communed with them in the evening, as though coming to dinner, to put it in terms that we can wrap our minds around. He was imminent. He was close. But they rebelliously engaged in sin, and communion with God is broken; they are driven away from the table.

In the Exodus, God takes the initiative to deliver the Jewish people, his chosen people, from their bondage, and then sets his Tabernacle in their midst, symbolizing that he is again with his people, right in the middle of the camp. But that tabernacle tent does not yet capture full restoration to God.

First, sacrifices must be made to draw near to God. Sacrifices? Why? Because of sin. The wages of sin is death. So there is a bloody reminder of sin's consequence, as God told them would happen in the beginning. Slaughtered bulls and goats, and their blood running down the altar into drains point to

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the fact that something must die to pay for sin in order to be restored to communion with God. So the sacrificial system reminding of deadly sin is implemented.

Secondly, only the priests could go in the tabernacle. But when they entered that first area, what beauty and grace was there. That first area was called the Holy Place. There were magnificent pointers to the life-giving relationship that God called them to. **Exodus 25** describes the **Table of Showbread** that symbolized how God provided for them in the most practical ways, sustaining and giving them life. Then there was the Golden Lampstand that symbolized God's light, guidance, presence, and illuminating truth. **Exodus 30** describes the **Altar of Incense**, symbolizing the prayers of his people, and **through prayer**, the intimate communion that existed in the garden before sin. Though only the priests could enter, God's people are being moved closer to communion with God. They are called back to worship the God who loves them and gives them life. Their sins are cleansed by the shedding of blood. They are made right with God by following God's instructions for worship revolving around the Tabernacle. But the tabernacle and the sacrificial system don't fully remedy the sin problem. The distance between them and God is not completely overcome. The priests are still prohibited from entering the Holy of Holies, where the Ark with the Mercy Seat resided. It represented the very throne of God on earth, his very dwelling and presence. A thick veil separated the Holy Place where the priests could enter from the Holy of Holies which could only be entered by the High Priest to make atonement for sin once a year. There will have to be something superior to a tent to bridge that gap.

Later, as the Kingdom of Israel is established, God gives instructions to build a more permanent place of worship, and the temple is built under King Solomon. There is essentially a one-to-one correlation between the temporary Tabernacle and the Temple. But there is an additional court outside the structure which was known as the court of the Gentiles. Now that's interesting — because that's non-Jews — you and me. We have a pointer, a hopeful indicator that communion with God for us is being introduced in this outer court. We can't get all the way in yet, but here is a sign that we are invited closer than we have been.

Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 586 BC, and a second temple was built in Jerusalem, known as Herod's Temple, which was the Temple of Jesus's day.

All of the pointers of the tabernacle and the temple point to Christ, in whom they are all fulfilled.

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- He is the bread of life that was symbolized in the showbread. He sustains; in him is life.
- He is the light of the world that was symbolized in the golden lamp stand. He is God incarnate present with his people. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” “Grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.”
- As we abide in him, he abides in us, and Communion is restored, as was symbolized by the altar of incense. And beyond the individual elements of the holy place, the Tabernacle itself was what was entered to engage in communion with God. Christ himself becomes the way to the father, so that Communion is restored. And Christ himself becomes the sacrifice that paid for sin so that the blood of bulls and goats is no longer needed.

Now, we have important background to understand what is happening here in John 2, so let’s read the passage. This is going to be another one of those cliff hanger sermons. I can’t begin to get to everything here in one sermon, so we’ll cover just the presentation problem, and get to the underlying implications after I return from the meeting next week.

Let’s read, and I trust that in light of the overview of the Tabernacle and the pointers that are found there you will immediately begin to grasp why this defiling of the temple warranted such a hot, and even violent response from the Lord Jesus. With all of that in our minds, **John 2:13–25** —

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. <sup>15</sup> And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

<sup>18</sup> So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he

knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

## PRAY

The Passover is at hand. This is another pointer to how God would deliver his people from death. John loves to write in a very meticulous way about feasts. He mentions three different Passovers in this gospel. The first here in **Ch 2**, then in **6:4**, and then headed toward holy week, beginning near the end of **Ch 11**. John places this at the beginning of Jesus ministry. The synoptic gospels place a cleansing of the temple at the conclusion of his earthly ministry tie closely with the triumphal entry. So how do we understand what is happening? Some options:

1. John is not writing to provide a timeline as the synoptic writers are. His gospel does not require us to have things in order. His purpose for writing is to make sure that we understand. Jesus is the Messiah. So he can place this wherever it seems fit to him as he is writing under the inspiration of the spirit to accomplish that goal. This position assumes that there was only one cleansing of the temple, and for John's purposes, he includes it more toward the beginning of his writing.
2. It actually occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the Mark, Matthew, and Luke included it in their writing because the cleansing of the temple ties closely with the veil of the temple being torn in two at the point of his crucifixion. Of all the positions, I think this is the weakest one. The synoptic writers clearly indicate a time progression after the triumphal entry that makes it hard to understand it in any way other than it happening during that week.
3. There were two different times that Jesus cleansed the temple. John records the first and the synoptic writers record the second. This seems to be the most natural way of reading the passage that doesn't require any hoop-jumping to get there. If you question why there are two different cleansings of the temple, I think that's fairly easy to understand. Consider this. If you tell a 12 year-old boy to clean his room, do you ever have to tell him that again, or do you tell him once and it is forever clean? If by chance it does get clean after you tell him once, how long does it stay clean, and how long is it before you have to tell him again? In a similar way, sin in the darkness of the world are always in a state of advance. They are never static. You may recall when we were in Ephesians that one of the commands was walk in the light lest the darkness overtake you. Darkness and evil are not static. It is the assignment of the church militant to always be pushing back against sin and darkness. Once pushed back, it does not stay there. Once Jesus drives out the money changers and purifies the defiled worship, that cuts into the profits of the temple. So no doubt as soon as it was over, and

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all the corruption was driven out, those who benefited from the corruption likely immediately set about to reinstate their money-making corrupt scheme. Thus what we have recorded in John is an early cleansing of the temple. Over three years they go right back to their corrupt ways, and at the end of Jesus's ministry, he cleanses it again. I think that explains the placement here at the beginning, and the placement in the other gospels at the end.

So Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to observe the feast. His attendance at the Passover was part of his active obedience to the law of God. This was required of Jews. He gets to the temple, and finds merchants selling ox and sheep and pigeons which could be purchased for sacrificial offerings, and also money changers. There were actually two different types of commerce: the selling of animals, and the money exchange in order to have the particular coinage necessary for trade in the temple. Neither of these businesses are sinful in and of themselves. There were a number of offering and sacrifices required. If you were coming from a great distance, it was a challenge to just get your family there, much less manage a menagerie of animals for sacrifice with need to keep them watered and fed and in unblemished shape. The Mosaic Law did not require you to bring a sheep that you had raised yourself. It did require unblemished animals for sacrifices. To have a business that offered animals for you to purchase for sacrifice was not prohibited. And the same for the money changers. This was not an illicit business.

The problem is that the outer courts given for the Gentiles to draw near to God and worship — they had been turned into a marketplace. And those of us Gentiles, who would draw near to worship God were now put out and worship of God as prescribed was not an option. This is God's house, for God's worship, built for God's purposes — and those who come near do so at his invitation. So those who were in charge of the temple, which was built for worship, they were keeping away from God people who had come to worship God. It was a grievous offense to God himself and corruption of worship in that they were even making money off of it. All those merchants who were selling animals, all those people who had booths to exchange money — they were all paying a fee in order to have that space, and guess who got the fee? The temple religious leaders.

Does v 15 now make sense? All of those elements of the temple that were pointers to Christ — all of those things that he came to fulfill — the proprietors of the temple are working in absolute opposition to the worship and communion that Christ has come to restore. He makes a whip of cords and drives

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them all out along with all of their animals. Pours out the coins of the money changers. Overturns their tables.

Now I know we are just barely scratching the surface of this passage. But let me point out just a couple of things and we'll draw a line for today. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, he employs different levels of rebuke. The disciples fall asleep instead of praying, and he says "could you not tarry one hour." In another case he says, "Oh, you of little faith." But when he has come to call and rescue the souls of men, and the human agents he has put in charge of seeing to it that those people have access to God, and those very human agents shove people out – this is the most aggressive we see him. It is counter to the very core of his mission: The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10); he seeks and saves that they will worship him in spirit and in truth, for such worshipers the Father is seeking (John 4:23) This is what he is seeking. The religious leaders are working against both of those. He does not take that lightly. This should clarify the overarching mission of our lives. Am I on his mission as his mouthpiece to seek those who are lost to introduce them to the Savior? And that is a means for them to become worshipers of the Savior in spirit and in truth. That was what he was seeking. Let us take a lesson from this event and never work counter to that.

That's enough for us to think about today and consider if our words, our actions, our behaviors are helping people meet the Lord, or hindering them from doing so. May he never need to discipline us because we do the latter.

PRAY: Lord, thank you for the beauty of the Tabernacle and the Temple that helps us understand you. Thank you that you are our bread of life. In you, alone, is life. Thank you for giving us eternal life as we place our trust in you. Thank you for being the light of the world. Thank you for illuminating our minds and our hearts so that we may know you and know truth, and be led by you out of darkness into your eternal light. Thank you for the Golden Lampstand that reminds us of the communion of prayer that you call us to, and your nearness. Thank you for drawing near and overcoming the chasm of sin by paying the price for sin. May these beautiful truths from the Tabernacle and the temple stay on our hearts and minds so that we know you better and love you more as we ought. Bring souls now into the kingdom and give faith to believe you and taste and see that the Lord is good.