

Cleaning House

Matthew 21:12-17

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Several years ago, a popular TV show brought attention to an issue few people had ever experienced before. The show was called “Hoarders”, and the issue was a compulsion to keep all sorts of things, to the point that clutter took over the home and made it unsafe to live in. The condition of some of these houses was appalling. Most of us cannot imagine living in such conditions.

I suspect part of the appeal of the show was that it made many of us feel better about the cluttered lives we sometimes live. Some people are very neat and tidy. These are the people who believe there is a place for every thing and everything should be in its place. Others (I would fall into this category) have much less structured systems of organization. We sometimes organize by piles. But even if we naturally embrace a bit of chaos, most of us still eventually realize there’s a time to clean things up and restore some semblance of order to our houses and lives.

Today, we’re going to look at Jesus restoring order to the temple in Jerusalem. His actions are some of the most memorable, and seemingly out of character responses we see from Him during His earthly ministry. We often refer to this encounter as Jesus “cleansing” the temple. But Jesus didn’t come in with a mop, bucket, and scrub brush. He was concerned about something far deeper. We should share His concern today.

An Odd Choice

Now, you may be confused by the fact that we are talking about the cleansing of the temple today. Normally, we work through a book of the Bible, as we believe doing so helps us to gain context and to be balanced in our preaching. But since today is Palm Sunday, I’ve chosen to break away from our current study to do a Palm Sunday message. Next week, we will have a message specifically dedicated to Easter. After that, we will return to Acts and complete our study there.

Nonetheless, this raises the question, why are we talking about the cleansing of the temple on Palm Sunday? Aren’t we supposed to be talking about Jesus riding into town on a donkey, with the crowds waving palm branches and saying “Hosanna” to Jesus? Well, yes, that is the typical story of Palm Sunday. It’s also a story we’ve preached on many times. As I was reading the passages that record Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem during the last week of His life, I was struck by this event instead. I suppose what struck me most was the juxtaposition of Jesus’ triumphal entry, which in Matthew’s gospel was followed immediately by His cleansing of the temple. I believe Matthew was intentional in placing these two accounts back-to-back, so I want to focus on that today.

Most scholars believe that Jesus cleansed the temple twice. John records an instance that seems to take place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all seem to indicate that He also did so at the end. There is some debate on whether

this cleansing took place on Palm Sunday or if it happened the next day. I lean toward the idea that Jesus returned on Monday to carry out these actions, and that rather than it being a fit of rage it was a calculated choice on His part.

Regardless of the exact timeline, Matthew intends to give us a contrast between the Jesus who rode in on a donkey and the Jesus who stood in the place of God and condemned the sinful actions of the religious leaders of the day.

If you've heard a few sermons on the triumphal entry, you've probably been told the significance of Jesus entering the city on a donkey. Normally, you would expect a king to come in triumph, riding on a mighty stallion. Jesus didn't do that. He came much more humbly, riding a donkey—one that was borrowed no less! This was a fulfillment of scripture, and a picture of Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Unfortunately, this has led some to view Jesus as weak or permissive. Matthew intends for us to see that while Jesus was peaceful, gracious, and loving, He was not permissive. He is more than willing to pour out His wrath on those who deserve it.

The Temple

To understand this story, we must understand the layout of the temple. The temple in Jesus' day was basically laid out in concentric rectangles, and as you progressed further into the temple complex, each rectangle restricted access to fewer people. Inside the main building of the temple were two rooms: the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place. The Most Holy Place represented the very presence of God and was shut off from everyone. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and even then, only on the Day of Atonement. The next room was the Holy Place, where priests would come and perform various duties.

Once you left the main building of the temple, there was the courtyard of the priests. This was where the priests performed sacrifices. Jewish men could proceed into this area to offer their sacrifices. The next area outward was the courtyard of women. Jewish women were permitted into this area to worship, but could not enter the courtyard of the priests. The outermost area was the courtyard of the Gentiles. Gentiles who worshiped God but had not been circumcised and initiated into the full Jewish faith were permitted to worship here, but could progress no further into the temple. There was a sign posted on all the gates that Gentiles could not move further into the temple, under penalty of death. This was one of the few situations where the Jews were permitted to impose the death penalty without permission from Rome.

It is in this outer courtyard, the court of the Gentiles, that Jesus' confrontation took place.

¹² Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out all the people buying and selling animals for sacrifice. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves. ¹³ He said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!" (Matthew 21:12-13, NLT)

This seems so out of character for Jesus, and we are left to ask why He would have acted in this way. The Jewish laws stated that you needed to offer sacrifices that were perfect and unblemished from your own flock. God had given this command to remind the people that only a perfect sacrifice can atone for the sins of another. A sacrifice that has its own issues cannot pay for yours. (All of this pointed forward to Jesus, as the ultimate, perfect sacrifice).

The problem was that many people traveled a long distance, and it was difficult to travel with your sacrificial animal all that way. An animal that may have started the journey as clean and unblemished may not be so by the time they got to Jerusalem. The priests inspected the animals before offering the sacrifice, and for many, traveling a long distance with their animal might result in it being rejected by the priest and no longer having a sacrifice to offer.

So the Jewish leaders came up with a solution. They offered animals for sale at the temple which would be sure to meet the requirements outlined in the law. On the surface, this seems like a reasonable thing to do, even if it missed the bigger point. The problem was that these animals were sold at vastly inflated prices. Some have suggested that the priests would reject outside animals so you'd have to buy them at the temple.

It's like how movie theater concessions work. They tell you that you cannot bring in any outside food or drink because they want to charge you 6 dollars for a fountain soda and 12 dollars for popcorn. We don't like the practice at the movie theater, how much worse is it when that is the practice of your place of worship? (I feel compelled to mention at this point that I don't think this passage serves as justification for you to turn over the popcorn machines at your local cinema.)

Additionally, every man 20 years old or older was required to pay a temple tax. This had been instituted by the Lord in the law. This offering provided for the upkeep of the temple and provision for the priests. The Jewish leaders had declared that the only currency you could use to pay the temple tax was their own currency, because Roman money had an image of the emperor on it, so they saw this money as blasphemous. So, they provided people a service of exchanging their Roman coins for the Hebrew coins they needed...at a tidy profit, of course.

So, part of the issue was that these people were in the temple and cheating people while they were trying to worship God. They were claiming to obey God's laws while completely ignoring what He said about dealing honestly with people. They had focused on figuring out all the details of their worship while missing the main point of it! Their worship had become about themselves, not about their Lord. The other big part of the issue was one of location. All of this was taking place inside the temple itself!

As you look at diagrams of the temple, it's clear the court of Gentiles was a massive area, so you can understand why the leaders gave permission for the vendors to set up their stands in this section of the temple as opposed to making them set up outside the

temple walls. But even though this was a huge area, by the time you get all the vendors in there, and as the city swelled in population during the week of Passover (some estimates suggest there would have been over a million people there, with 250,000 sacrifices being carried out at the temple), it became very crowded very quickly.

And as you can imagine, when you get loads of live animals, with all sorts of people buying and selling, standing in line, and trying to sort out all the details of their sacrifices, it was a loud, chaotic, and smelly place. This area would have felt more like that Grand Bazaar than a place of worship. That's what Jesus was responding to.

Jesus made a scene, driving these vendors out of the temple and disturbing their business in the hopes they would leave. The justification He gave was from scripture. He quoted from Isaiah, which said that the temple would be a house of prayer for all nations. Jesus didn't include the last part of the verse in His quote, but his hearers would have known it. Instead of making this a place where Gentiles could worship, they were making it nearly impossible for people from all nations to come to God. This was the only place the Gentiles were permitted to be in the temple, but it was certainly not conducive to worship. It was no longer a house of prayer for all nations.

Jesus' second charge was a quotation from Jeremiah, talking about how the people of Israel had come to believe that they were good because they were at the temple of the Lord. But in fact, it had become a den of thieves, where evil people plotted ways to rob others, not a place to worship the Lord. Jesus was saying that the people of His day were no different than the people of Jeremiah's day. Those who heard Him speak would have surely understood the connection He was making.

All of this shows us that while Jesus is loving and gracious, the idea that we can come to Him on our own terms is completely wrong. Jesus offers salvation, but it is through submission to Him. When we begin to think that He exists to serve us, or that we are pleasing to God simply because we go through the motions of worship, we are putting ourselves in dangerous territory. The Lord does not want outward rituals, He wants our hearts to be close to Him, to submit to Him, and to worship Him as He has commanded.

The Response

After everything that had happened, I suspect this area that had once been a cacophony suddenly became eerily silent. Jesus was not behaving the way anyone expected a person to behave in the temple. As people realized who He was, I suspect they began to quietly watch to see what would happen next.

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ The leading priests and the teachers of religious law saw these wonderful miracles and heard even the children in the Temple shouting, "Praise God for the Son of David."

But the leaders were indignant. ¹⁶ They asked Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" "Yes," Jesus replied. "Haven't you ever read the Scriptures? For they say, 'You have taught children and infants to give you

praise.”¹⁷ Then he returned to Bethany, where he stayed overnight. (Matthew 21:14-17, NLT)

What happened was that the blind and the lame began coming into the temple for Jesus to heal them! Previously, these people were not permitted into the temple at all. They were seen as cursed by God, so they had to stay outside the temple walls, where many took up a post to beg for help. I wonder why they came into the temple. Did Jesus invite them in? We can't be sure. But we know He was trying to help the people to see God's intent. His intent was to make himself available to all people, regardless of their situation or nationality or any other category we might use to exclude people. Everyone who came to Him in faith would receive the healing He offered.

The religious leaders saw this but couldn't do anything about it. They hated what Jesus was doing, but He was performing genuine miracles, showing He had the power of God at His disposal. And then, the children started shouting, "Praise God for the Son of David." This was the same cry people had made when Jesus had entered the city. The religious leaders were indignant. The Pharisees and Sadducees, who didn't agree on anything, suddenly agreed on one thing: they hated Jesus. He was challenging their power and authority, and they felt He was putting Himself in the place of God. They were correct—Jesus was challenging their authority and was claiming to be equal with God, but their hatred was misdirected.

They challenged Jesus, asking, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" The implication was that Jesus should silence them, telling them that such shouts of praise were inappropriate. But Jesus doubled down. He quoted from Psalm 8, which said that God had taught children and infants to give Him praise. By quoting this, Jesus was saying that He was worthy of the same praise that God the Father was—and that God had intended these children to praise Jesus as they were now. It was a clear claim to divinity, and it incensed the religious leaders. They burned with anger against Him—and their anger would soon boil over, coming to a head before the week was over.

Matthew indicates that Jesus returned to Bethany after that. Most pilgrims stayed outside the city during Passover, as there simply wasn't enough room in the city. But this statement didn't just describe Jesus' lodging situation. Matthew's description of Jesus leaving Jerusalem is meant to bring to mind what is recorded in Ezekiel, where God's Spirit left the temple. Jesus was now doing the same. And by the end of the week, Jesus would forever change the temple, its function, and its purpose.

Conclusion

Admittedly, this is not your typical Palm Sunday message. But there is much for us to learn from this account. Unfortunately, many see this story and think of all the things they think need to be cleansed from the lives of others, or even their own churches. Jesus' intent was to cleanse the temple, but His deeper message was about our need to cleanse ourselves. So with that, let's consider what lessons we should apply to our lives.

First, worship must be on God's terms, not ours. There is a dangerous pattern happening in American Christianity. We sometimes plan our church services around what most appeals to the people in attendance instead of what most honors the Lord. There's not necessarily anything wrong with worship bands, lights, screens, or other such things. But sometimes we have our focus wrong. Worship is not supposed to be directed at the people worshipping, but the One we worship! Sometimes I fear we lose sight of this. The term "worship" has become a synonym for singing in many churches. And singing is a valid and powerful form of worship. But so is prayer, reading of scripture, hearing scripture expounded, and seeking the Lord together with other believers. We must ensure that our focus in worship is the Lord, not on ourselves. When our focus is on what most "moves" us, or what we most desire, we miss the point, and we run the risk of building a service that worships ourselves rather than our Lord.

Second, simply being in church or doing religious things does not impress God. The passage Jesus quoted from Jeremiah pointed to the fact that the people of that day kept pointing to the fact that they were in the temple of the Lord. The Lord responded that simply being in the temple didn't make them holy. They were physically where they were supposed to be, but their hearts were far from Him. Do not assume that simply being in church makes you "good" with God. He does not desire empty ritual; He desires genuine devotion to Him. And He will not be satisfied by anything less.

Third, God will punish those who are far from Him. There is a pernicious notion in our society today that Jesus would never punish people for their sin; He is too loving to do that. I do not see how you can reach that conclusion after reading this passage. God will punish everyone who does not submit to Him. There will be no mercy. He is wonderfully gracious, but He will also not hesitate to pour out His wrath on those who deserve it. We must not presume upon His mercy, and instead turn to Him in faith.

Finally, Jesus makes a way for everyone to come to God. This is the other picture we must see in this passage. Jesus' concern was that the way of salvation is open to everyone. It doesn't matter what you may think is wrong with you, it doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter what your background is. Any of the things you think might disqualify you from being acceptable to God are moot. Jesus has made it clear that all who come to Him in faith, who will worship Him, follow Him, and look to Him for forgiveness and a new direction to their lives will receive it. While Jesus will not hesitate to show wrath to those who refuse Him, He will welcome *all* who come to Him in faith. My prayer is that you will be counted among that number.

There were many on Palm Sunday who paid lip service to Jesus. They cheered with the crowds, but they did not really believe. There were many who went through the motions of worship, but their hearts were far from the Lord. My prayer is that you will learn from these mistakes and refuse to repeat them. Jesus was and is the Messiah who came to set His people free. I'd challenge you to look at your life and see where your priorities are. If they are out of order, let me encourage you to do some house cleaning. Because if you don't, the Lord will eventually do it for you.

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