Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Read Isaiah 56:6-7, Jeremiah 7:9-11, & Mark 11:15-19

Key verse: “Do you regard this temple, which bears my name, as a hiding place for criminals? I can see what’s going on here, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 7:11).

In his book Your Church Is Too Safe, Mark Buchanan writes:

My favorite YouTube video is a five-minute clip from an episode of The Bob Newhart Show. Bob, as you may know, is a psychologist in the show. In the scene, a woman comes for her first visit. Bob begins by explaining how he bills—five dollars for the first five minutes, and then nothing after that. The woman is thrilled. Bob assures her the session won’t go over five minutes.

He asks her to start. She explains that she fears being buried alive in a box. He asks her to say more. The fear, she tells him, extends to other things—being in tunnels, elevators, houses, cars, “anything boxy.”

“So basically you’re saying you’re claustrophobic?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

This exchange takes about two minutes. Bob takes another ten seconds or so to empathize with her—how awful it must be to live with this fear.

“It’s horrible,” the woman says.

“All right,” Bob says, “I’m going to give you two words that I think will clear up everything. Just take these two words and integrate them into your daily life, and you should be fine.”

The woman is excited. She asks if she should write them down.

“Oh, you can if you like,” Bob says. “But most people have no trouble remembering them.”

“OK,” she says, leaning forward.

“You ready?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says.

“OK, here are the two words.” Bob leans across his desk to put his face close to hers. “Stop it!”

One day in the temple, Jesus said, “Stop it!” It wasn’t a laughing matter. In one of the most scathing indictments ever spoken against bad religion, Jesus
lamented: “Hasn’t it been written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you’ve turned it into a hideout for crooks” (Mark 11:17).

What caused Jesus to be angry enough to utter this rebuke and to turn over the tables of the money changers and animal salesmen (Mark 11:15-16)? The answer lies in the origin of Jesus’ words in Mark 11:17. Here Jesus quotes from both the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah:  “My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7).  “Do you regard this temple, which bears my name, as a hiding place for criminals? I can see what’s going on here, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 7:11).

Isaiah 56:6-7 expresses God’s intention to let foreigners (non-Israelites) be part of the covenant community that gathered for worship in the temple: “The immigrants who have joined me, serving me and loving my name, becoming my servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath without making it impure, and those who hold fast to my covenant: I will bring them to my holy mountain, and bring them joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their entirely burned offerings and sacrifices on my altar. My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples.”

In Jesus’ time, the outer court of the temple in Jerusalem was called the Court of the Gentiles. It was here that, among other things, believing Gentiles could be part of temple worship. But this outer court had been turned into a noisy marketplace for selling sacrificial animals and taxing worshipers.

David McKenna notes: “[Merchants sell] sacrificial doves and animals at outrageous prices to the poor who come to worship. Priests exploit their position by taking a share of the profits and collecting an artificially contrived Temple tax from the pilgrims and worshipers….Corruption in the courtyard has blocked Gentiles from entering into faith. Never again. The Lord of the Temple comes—not just to restore His temple as a house of prayer, but to reopen the promise that His salvation is for all nations” (from The Communicator’s Commentary on the Gospel of Mark).

Jesus quotes also from Jeremiah 7:9-11. Here God, through the prophet, warns Israel about trusting in their temple sacrifices while their hearts are far from God, as evidenced by their lives: “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, sacrifice to Baal and go after other gods that you don’t know, and then come and stand before me in this temple that bears my name, and say, ‘We are safe,’ only to keep on doing all those detestable things? Do you regard this temple, which bears my name, as a hiding place for criminals? I can see what’s going on here, declares the Lord.”

Jesus came to Jerusalem and saw what was going on in the name of religion. It broke His heart and stirred Him to action.
Still today, when people make holy things common, when people trust in religiosity instead of surrendering their hearts, and when our “bad religion” blocks others from coming to know and worship God—God says, “Stop it!” Can we hear? Are we listening? Will we hear and change? (Contact Michael at mSIGLER@FUMCFWB.COM.)