

Sunday Feb. 28, 2021
Lesson 13: Jesus Clears the Temple
Scripture: Matthew 21: 12-16

Context:

Our series concludes the focus on God's hope for humanity with a final story on holiness and hypocrisy. Fitting with the season of Lent, the last passage is one where we read of Jesus entering the Temple and turning the tables. From the passage, we learn more of repenting of that which is not of God.

The dramatic action of Jesus entering the Temple is found in all four gospels, making it an important event in Jesus's ministry. Even so, there is difficulty in reconstructing the historical incident behind the accounts as the Temple markets were huge and would have taken much force to overtake the whole operation.¹ Jesus's actions were most likely symbolic, limited yet profound as he overturned a few of the tables and made his declaration of the purpose of the Temple as a house of prayer.² Much like the prophets before him, Jesus knew how powerful actions could convey a message and declare a point.

Yet it is important to note Jesus was not dismissing the piety associated with the institution. Rabbinic records propose the temple market was a recent innovation introduced by the high priest Caiaphas for the purpose of providing ruinous competition for established markets on the Mount of Olives owned by his political enemies.³ Many people in Jesus's day potentially struggled with some of these markets as they were more for the benefit of one person than that of an entire people.

If anything, Jesus understood the importance of what the Temple markets sold. According to the Torah, the sacrificial system was commanded by God and Jesus would have expected the people to understand and respect that system.⁴ The concern would have been the location as well as the potential secularization of the temple by worshipers (buyers and sellers) whose lives do not conform with their religious profession but claim to find steadfastness in their religiosity.⁵ Jesus saw this as a time to put word with practice.

Jesus continues to move into the Temple, where the lame and blind usually come for healing and receive it from Jesus. Little ones shout songs of praise and the chief priest and scribes come forward. Jesus does not mince words with them. He is making statements about who he is and what he came to do. The Messiah has come into the

¹ Douglas Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 240.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 241.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Temple and there is a connection to the foreshadowing of Jesus being the sacrificial lamb.

Application

This passage has often been misinterpreted and at times portrayed as anti-Semitic. Jesus was not condemning the temple buyers and sellers or the idea of making sacrifices to God. Instead, we might look at this passage and turn the mirror to ourselves. Do we allow secularism to invade our churches? Do we use our religion as a source of security instead of allowing ourselves to be remade by it?⁶ These are the questions given to us in the text for life today.

When we talk about secularism invading the church, we are not discussing the youth who wears his Aftco shorts instead of khakis to church on Sunday morning. Nor are we discussing how there are a few changes in a secular song to make it more religious. These are part of liturgia, the words and the works of the people coming in new forms to the church.

Instead, I believe secularism creeps into the church when we start accepting morally ambiguous practices in the world as the norm for things such as conflict. For example, some businesses and corporations believe it is okay to have back room or parking lot meetings. These are meetings in which other people or issues are targets and there is little regard for the Christian commentary for the Bible about honesty and transparency. As a result, the church becomes like any other secular institution where little white lies are told and there are cover-ups.

The whole point of Jesus coming to this earth was to show us a new way. Even as sinners, the Spirit is at work in us to make us a new creation. To be dishonest, manipulative, or sneaky never leads to anything good. If anything, it dishonors God and leads to hurting and brokenness in the community. Just because the secular world does it does not mean we are given permission to do it. God calls us to a different standard.

The second question asks us about how we understand religion as a form of security instead of as something to remake our life. I once had a conversation with someone about this as we discussed how we understood Jesus in our personal walk with him. They noted from my teaching and preaching that I tended to view Jesus as a comfort and a place of hope, at times comforting and compassionate yet always regal. For them, they said that Jesus was someone who busted up in their world and tore it all apart. Jesus was more about afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.

We eventually came to conclude Jesus can be all those things and that at different times in our lives, he pushes or draws us close in different ways. For the person mourning the loss of a loved one, Jesus is perhaps the tender shepherd who wipes away the tears from their eyes. For the person studying the Bible for the first time, Jesus is the one to rock their worldview and get under their skin about sin, poverty, and injustices in the world.

However, if we ever get to the point that religion makes us complacent and content to never grow to new understandings of our Lord, perhaps it is time to take a deep dive and do some praying and scripture reading. Every day should be an opportunity for us to see how God is inviting us to new places, somewhere we may have never been

⁶ Ibid., 243.

before. As we do, God transforms us.

How do you see secularism creeping into your church? Why do you think we have lost touch with scripture and the Lord on how the church is to function? How do you think we can fall into complacency when we think religion as supremely a form of security? How does Jesus both comfort and challenge you?

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