



LION IN THE TEMPLE

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John 2:12-25

Fourth Message

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SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

The end of the year is a time to reflect and plan and dream. Since our children are with us this morning, I thought they might like to hear the kind of changes that one ten-year-old said he would like to see happen. Here is his wish list, written in his poem, "If I Were In Charge Of the World":

If I were in charge of the world
I'd cancel oatmeal,
Monday mornings,
Allergy shots, and also
Sara Steinberg

If I were in charge of the world
There'd be brighter night lights,
Healthier hamsters, and
Basketball baskets forty-eight inches lower.

If I were in charge of the world
You wouldn't have lonely.
You wouldn't have clean.
You wouldn't have bedtimes.
Or "Don't punch your sister."
You wouldn't even have sisters.

If I were in charge of the world
A chocolate sundae with whipped cream and nuts would
be a vegetable.
All Indiana Jones movies would be a G.
And a person who sometimes forgot to brush,
And sometimes forgot to flush,
Would still be allowed to be
In charge of the world.

A lot of changes have occurred in our world during the past year. As I listened to the announcement of the collapse of Soviet Union, that perverted system that at last was giving way to a new system of hope and freedom, I was reminded of another One who came to abolish and replace another system that had become perverted. That one, of course, was Jesus, the Creator of life, who became flesh and entered his handiwork in order to re-create it. The originator of all physical life became flesh himself so that we might know spiritual life. The apostle Paul has declared: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" The old has gone, the new has come! That is what Jesus is saying as he begins his ministry. In the miracle of turning the water into wine he exposed the inadequacy of the old Jewish purifications and replaced them with the new wine of the kingdom of God. He will now declare that the old temple is being replaced by a new and risen Lord. (Next week we will see that the only way into this new kingdom is by means of a new birth.)

We are going to focus our thoughts this morning on the dramatic moment in the gospel of John when our Lord first

cleansed the temple. Jesus had visited Jerusalem many times before his public ministry began. He had been to the temple and had seen many of the sights which he saw on this occasion, but he had taken no action in response. Now, however, he is going to Jerusalem as the Messiah. There he will fulfill Malachi's prophecy that "the Lord will suddenly come to his temple and purify the sons of Levi."

We will notice three things in this incident: The anger of Jesus and the reason for it; the temple of Jesus and its creation; and finally, the eyes of Jesus and his perception

I. The Anger of Jesus and Its Reason

After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother, and [His] brothers, and His disciples; and there they stayed a few days. And the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove [them] all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Thy house will consume me."

The Feast of Passover was a highlight in the Jewish calendar. Tradition required an entire month of preparation: roads were repaired, bridges were rebuilt, even tombs were whitewashed. Every Jewish family spent the day before Passover meticulously going through their homes, seeking out yeast or any substance that could cause fermentation, and removing it from the house. Cleansing one's house was necessary in order to properly celebrate the Passover. Yet in a city that was given over to cleansing it is amazing to see what Jesus finds when he enters the temple. The house of God had been turned into a religious circus! As his eyes scanned the great Court of the Gentiles he saw sheep, oxen and fowl, and all the sounds and smells that go with them. He saw huckstering and bargaining, and haggling over the weight of a coin. Instead of the sounds of prayer there was the bellowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Instead of brokenness, humility and adoration there was noisy commerce. It was more than he could bear.

There was a reason behind what was going on: The cattle, sheep and doves were used in the sacrificial worship of the temple. It was convenient for worshippers who came from far away to be able to purchase the animals right there at the temple, rather than bringing them a long distance. At one point, the animal merchants set up their stalls away from the temple, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, but now, eager for business, they were setting up their stalls in the temple courts.

The moneychangers were also providing a service. The pilgrims who came to the Passover festival from all over the Roman Empire brought with them Roman and Greek coins, but the half-shekel temple tax, to be paid by every Jew 20 years old and older, had to be tendered with a special temple coin. The job of the moneychangers was to convert money to the approved coinage—charging a percentage for their service, of course.

When Jesus came to the temple, therefore, he was confronted with rampant commercialism. Instead of a quiet courtyard where people could pray he found a stock exchange. A Gentile had to worship in the midst of a cattle yard and a money market.

So great is our Lord's anger he makes a whip of cords and drives the animals and the merchants out of the temple. Jesus' action was forceful, but not cruel. Without a whip of cords, cattle and sheep are not easily driven out. It was the passionate anger of Jesus, not the whips, that drove the people out.

Is this a different Jesus than you imagined him to be? Sometimes we think of him as so loving and understanding that he lets us get away with things—a God who sees the evil in our lives and says, "It doesn't matter." But this action indicates that he was angry. And yet his anger was under control. He wasn't raging around furiously. But he made his point: Don't turn a place that is devoted to the worship of God and the cleansing of people into a flea market.

Jesus, however, is not like any other zealous prophet coming to reform the old system of worship. He has come to abolish it, to replace it. His complaint is not that these men are guilty of unfair business practices and should reform their ethical life, but that they should not be in the temple area at all. "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market," says Jesus, in effect. In an act of prophetic symbolism, he drives the animals and the moneychangers out of the temple, thereby declaring an end to the whole sacrificial ritual.

Here we have the beginnings of the conflict between two systems: the perverted religion of Israel and the new faith of Jesus. Neither will give way. John records that when the disciples reflected on Jesus' drastic action here, they became more and more convinced that his zeal for purity of worship was one of the reasons for his death: "Zeal for Thy house will consume me." His zeal for God's house was bound to lead to his own destruction. In fact, it was Jesus' second act of cleansing the temple, at the beginning of the last week of his ministry, that led directly to his death.

Our Lord's act was one of prophetic symbolism. As he stands in a temple that has no glory in it, he in whom the shekinah glory dwells looks around at the temple itself, that focal point where God and believers meet, where God accepts believers because of a bloody sacrifice, and he proclaims that it will be replaced by another temple, another sacrifice.

Notice the response of the Jews.

II. The Temple of Jesus and its Creation

The Jews therefore answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, seeing that You do these things?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews therefore said, "It took forty-six years to build this

temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken.

The Jews understood that Jesus was challenging their sacrificial system, and they demanded a sign from him showing that he had the authority to do what he did. If they had eyes to see, however, they would have realized that what he had just done was indeed a sign; but they were less concerned about purity of worship and a right approach to God than they were about questions of precedent and authority.

As always, Jesus refuses to give any sign other than what is already inherent in what he is saying and doing. He utters words that were to receive wide circulation, but which no one understood. Jesus' words are a challenge to the Jews: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They thought he was referring to a building, thus they ridiculed what they perceived to be his absurd claim to perform this architectural impossibility.

Even the disciples missed it. They didn't understand until the resurrected Jesus stood in their midst and they saw the nailprints in his hands and the wound in his side. It was then they realized that, incredibly, he was alive again. They talked it over, and one of them probably said, "Remember when he first cleansed the temple? He said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again.' We didn't know then, but now we can see what he was referring to. The real temple was not the building, it was his own body!" They learned that bodies are the temples of God; a building is merely a figure, a shadow.

As we travelled in Europe this past summer we saw many great and beautiful cathedrals. Often these great edifices stood empty—both physically and spiritually, I felt. Many of them had plaques erected inside them that said, "Erected to the glory of God." I am sure that these places were built with pure motive and intention, but the Scriptures teach that God is not glorified by buildings. No building is the house of God. Even the temple in Jerusalem was not really the house of God. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he acknowledged that fact. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"

Buildings have always been pictures of the house of God. The real temples are bodies—human beings, made up of body and soul and spirit. This is the place that God created for himself to dwell. The apostle Paul knew this, as he wrote in 1 Cor. 6:19: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body." That is where God is glorified. And, speaking to the entire congregation, Paul wrote: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

We have our children in the service this morning, and I suppose it has probably been difficult for some of you to sit in one place for so long. Maybe your parents said to you, "Now when we go into church, you can't talk or make any noise. You have to behave yourself because this is God's

house." But that is not true. This is not God's house. The reason we must remain quiet is that it's rude to talk while someone else is talking!

What makes humanity so special is that we have the capacity to hold God. And when God dwells in something, he turns it into a temple. If we could understand this principle it would revolutionize us!

The Spirit of God now dwells not in a building, but in a believer. And that is possible only because the Spirit of God rested on Jesus and filled him to the full. When he died and rose again, he poured out that Spirit, now personalized by his own character, upon all who would have it.

Jesus' death replaces the sacrifices in the temple. The cross replaces the altar of sacrifice. Believers who are now linked to him by faith, from all the nations of the world, replace the costly stonework of Herod's splendid temple. It looked beautiful, but actually it was barren. It was forty-six years in the building. Begun in 19 B.C., it was hardly completed before it was destroyed, in A.D. 70. It was as if God had to say, "We are finished with all of that; we don't need it anymore. The true temple has come—the one in whom God's glory dwells."

The place where this mighty action is included in the gospel of John is significant. Jesus of Nazareth, the one who has been baptized by John, came making revolutionary claims. In Cana, that claim was clear to the disciples, but it was kept hidden from others. But now in Jerusalem, that claim of newness, of finality, is made loud and clear at the heart of the organized religion of the nation; at the center of its very nervous system. It is stark. It is explicit. All the cards are thrown down on the table. The day of external religion and money games in the temple is over. The day of sacrificial animals, holy buildings and a separate holy people is finished. A new day has come. And a new people will celebrate it—in the new temple of Christ's body, crucified and risen, a body that displays the glory of God; both his resurrection body, and his spiritual body, the church.

But not everybody hears this. And Jesus knows it.

III. The Eyes of Jesus and the Hearts of Men

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.

This act of cleansing the temple made followers for Jesus as well as enemies. As the disciples watched him perform miracles—healing the sick and touching the lame—they no-

ticed that though many believed in him because he was the miracle worker, Jesus did not seem to commit himself to them. That is still true today. There are those who appear to follow the Lord for a time—maybe they even make a profession of faith—but their life never changes; they go right along as if nothing ever happened, and they eventually drift away. Why does that happen? John tells us here. It is because Jesus knows us. He knew they saw the signs, but not the thing they signified. Their allegiance was not from the heart; it was worthless. He wanted disciples of a cross, not courtiers of a crown. He knew the fickle hearts of men and women. He could see through the facade and the insincerities, therefore he was never deceived.

A number of years ago, I read that a survey organization had collected all the reports of conversions in the United States by some of the outstanding evangelists of our day. The total came to 250 million, which at the time was the entire population of the United States! That would make everyone in our country a Christian, which we know is not true. And our Lord knows it is not true. He sees through all the facades and the illusions, much deeper than we can see.

Maybe this is where you are this morning. You can identify with the Pharisees in that all of your religious experience has been a focus on externals. You have worked hard to look good, to make others think that you are not so bad, and all the time you have been blind to your deep inner need. You don't want to face your bitterness, your unforgiving and critical spirit, your lusts and private indulgences. Remember we are dealing with a God of reality, a God who cannot be fooled. Whenever we come justifying our actions, excusing them, fooling ourselves, we will find him refusing to commit himself to us. All belief is superficial which doesn't have at its center the consciousness of our need for forgiveness and the conviction that Jesus is the only one who can forgive. When we admit our need and come, asking to be cleansed, he never turns us away; he never deals harshly with us. This is the message of our text today. The sanctuary is inside you, if you are a believer. It is not found in a building, or in what you do. It is found in who you are deep inside.

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