

Sermons on Matthew
A House of Prayer or a Den of Thieves?
Matthew 21:12-17
Part 1

With Study Questions

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6/17/2007

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Part 1

Then Jesus went into the temple __of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the __money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ⁻¹³⁻ And He said to them, “_It is written, _‘*My house shall be called a house of prayer,*’_” but you have made it a __‘*den of thieves.*’_” ⁻¹⁴⁻ Then the blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. ⁻¹⁵⁻ But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, “_Hosanna to the __Son of David!” they were __indignant ⁻¹⁶⁻ and said to Him, “_Do You hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “_Yes. Have you never read, _‘*Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants *You have perfected praise*’?*” ⁻¹⁷⁻ Then He left them and __went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there (Matthew 21:12-17).

A Common Accusation

As I was completing my exercise, I looked at the clock and realized I was going to be late for an appointment. I announced to my workout partners that I had to hasten my exit. One of them responded, as was his custom, by asking me if it was time for me to pilfer the collection box. “We use bags” was all I could think of.

These types of comments are not uncommon and not without substance. I decided to Google ‘corruption’ and ‘church’ and my computer began to shake. Corruption attached to the church is nothing new and shouldn’t surprise us.

Paul wrote of teachers who engaged in

useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. __From __such withdraw yourself (1 Timothy 6:5).

He also recorded for our benefit that he was not

as _so many, __peddling __the word of God; but as _of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:17).

And of teachers in the church

-whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, __for the sake of dishonest gain (Titus 1:10, 11).

The advancement of the Kingdom of God is, in part, a financial enterprise. As the church has grown the finances have become immense. And wherever there is an immensity of finance there will be corruption. But financial corruption is particularly heinous when it is attached to the name of God. This is what we read of in this passage.

Then Jesus went into the temple __of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the __money changers and the seats of those who sold doves (Matthew 21:12).

The Deliverer and the Temple

This event is placed directly after the Triumphal Entry of Christ. The promised Messiah had come and would assume His rightful place on the throne of David. This would be a source of deliverance for His people of whom He would make **“princes in all the earth” (Psalm 45:16)**. The Old Testament predictions of the liberation of God’s people were delivered in stark terms.

But thus says the Lord: “_Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, And the prey of the terrible be delivered; For I will contend with him who contends with you, And I will save your children. ²⁶ I will _feed those who oppress you with their own flesh, And they shall be drunk with their own __blood as with sweet wine. All flesh _shall know That I, the Lord, *am* your Savior, And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob_” (Isaiah 49:25, 26).

Many of the passages, like the one above, speak of a political deliverance. The Israelites were slaves of Rome. How long before Rome would be drunk on its own blood and would feed on its own flesh?

Two Errors to Avoid

There are two errors we must be careful to avoid when considering the Kingship of Christ and blessings of His kingdom. It is an error to think that the Christian faith, as it subdues the hearts of men (including kings), would not be a source of political deliverance for those in literal chains. When God transforms the hearts of sinners, He transforms their behavior.

I will put My __Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel 36:27).

The Roman Empire did come to an end. There are no more slaves of Rome. And freedom is not an enterprise the devil is concerned in pursuing. Feeding the hungry (Matthew 25:35), delivering the oppressed (Proverbs 24:11), clothing the naked (Matthew 25:36) and caring for those who have fallen victim to evil (Luke 10:29-37) are behaviors which necessarily follow faithful conversions. This is the fruit of the advancement of Christ's kingdom. But it is not the heart of Christ's kingdom.

The second error can be avoided when we observe that when Jesus came to Jerusalem, He did not head for the palace or the chamber of commerce or the court house. Though He had a perfect right, as King, to immediately demand the allegiance of all in authority, He did not head for Capitol Hill but for the Temple. Because that which was to take place in the Temple of God is that which changes men's hearts, brings honor to God and redemption to the world. The primary focus of the advancement of Christ's kingdom (which will be attended by all other blessings), is that which takes place in God's House—Word and Sacrament. If the church is corrupt, the culture has no chance. A judgment was coming, and that judgment would **"begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).**

This is the second time Jesus would bring a harsh rebuke to the Temple (John 2:13-17). Judgments don't come without warnings. This event was a clear, yet relatively mild, action from the Savior. Jesus **"drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the __money changers and the seats of those who sold doves."**

Convenient Merchandising

We observe convenient merchandising in the church. The Greek phrase to *hieron* designated the entire temple complex of courts and buildings.¹ This was a huge area of about thirty-three acres. The money changers and those

¹Brown, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (Mt 21:12). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

who sold the doves were not in the temple building but had set up stalls in what was called the 'Court of the Gentiles'.

This was a matter of convenience for the ostensible worship of God. The priests had approved this convenience but there was an insistence that the money which had been circulating in society could not be used for the sanctuary offering (Exodus 30:13) hence the necessity of the money changers. The doves were purchased for sacrifice as well (Leviticus 1:14). In principle, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that this was clearly wrong—it wasn't the actions themselves but the motives, which affected the time and place.

The abuse was, buying and selling, and changing money, in the temple. Note, lawful things, ill timed and ill placed, may become sinful things.²

The problem was that the church had become a house of "merchandise" (John 2:16); the word "merchandise" is from the Greek *emporion* from which we get 'emporium.' There is clearly a financial aspect to the work of the church. But there must be continual self-reflection as to whether or not financial considerations have taken over.

These money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals had turned God's temple into a flea market. God is a holy God and the advancement of His kingdom is a holy affair. It would appear that God frowns upon His holy name being marketed as if He were just another retail item—something we all need to take to heart.

And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves' (Matthew 21:13)."

²Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 21:12). Peabody: Hendrickson.

A House of Prayer or a Den of Thieves

The house of God is to be a house of prayer. By this Jesus doesn't mean there are no other activities which are to take place. Worship, sacrifice, instruction were all activities which were to take place in God's house. By prayer I take Jesus to mean that all these activities are to be done with a heart and mind toward God. All the temple functions were designed to bring men's thoughts toward heaven. To participate in these things for any other reason was to bring vanity into His house—a violation of His third commandment.

The reference Jesus uses is taken from the 56th chapter of Isaiah. In the reference we also see a reference to the international nature of God's grace.

For __My house shall be called a house of prayer __for all nations (Isaiah 56:7, 8).

Jesus had arrived at the Mount of Olives (Matthew 21:1) and that promise would begin to be fulfilled. The Kingdom of God was going to begin to have its affect upon the earth.

And in that day it shall be—*That living __waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward __the eastern sea and half of them toward _the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur.* ⁹ And the Lord shall be __King over all the earth. In that day it shall be _“_The Lord is one,_” and His name one (Zechariah 14:8, 9).

In 2 Chronicles 6:19-21 God's people were told to pray toward the temple—that which we see as the practice of Daniel (Daniel 6:10). Yet the temple was a type of Christ. In our prayers we no longer face Jerusalem but we fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2) who is at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34).

The house of prayer had become a den of thieves and it would soon be destroyed (Matthew 24:2). The true temple of God would no longer be associated with a structure in Jerusalem but with Jesus Christ and His body, the church, which would continue to grow, as Calvin states,

...when out of it resounded the doctrine of the Gospel, by which the whole world was to be united in one common faith.³

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Jesus rebukes them for having turned His Father's house into a den of thieves, or more literally a cave (*spelaoin* which was used a hideout sometimes among the graves—John 11:38). The sad irony here is that these money-changers, and the priests who approved their behavior, were using the temple as a cloak for their own vice (1 Peter 2:16). They were sinning with greater comfort because they had the approval of religion.

Jeremiah 7: Hiding our Sins in the Temple

A brief observance of the passage in Jeremiah that Jesus uses may bring color to this event.

**The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ⁻²⁻
__“_Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there
this word, and say, ‘_Hear the word of the Lord, all *you of* Judah
who enter in at these gates to worship the Lord!’” (Jeremiah 7:1,
2)**

The message was for church-goers.

**-Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: __“_Amend your
ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this
place (Jeremiah 7:3).**

And the church-goers needed to repent in order to continue dwelling in the House of God.

**__Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘_The temple of the
Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord *are* these_’
(Jeremiah 7:4).**

The lying teachers were seeking to comfort their students by appealing to the temple, as if the mere attendance was sufficient to find favor with God.

**“_For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if
you thoroughly __execute __judgment between a man and his
neighbor, ⁻⁶⁻ if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless,
and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place,
_or walk after other gods to your hurt, ⁻⁷⁻ _then I will cause you**

to dwell in this place, in __the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

Sincere faith in God does not reveal itself by the oppression of strangers, the neglect of the fatherless and the widow, the shedding of innocent blood and the following of false gods. One must repent of these things if they wish to continue dwelling in the true house of God.

**-“ _Behold, you trust in __lying words that cannot profit. -⁹⁻
_Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and __walk after other gods whom you do not know, -¹⁰⁻ __and *then* come and stand before Me in this house __which is called by My name, and say, ‘ _We are delivered to do all these abominations’(Jeremiah 7:8-10)?**

Double-mindedness has no place in the house of God. You can't live as a pagan from Monday to Saturday then expect the clemency of God on Sunday. This is nothing less than hypocrisy. It is in this context that Jesus finds His appropriate quotation.

Has __this house, which is called by My name, become a __den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen *it,*__” says the Lord (Jeremiah 7:11).

The lame and blind would then come to Jesus and He would confirm His authority by healing them. This would bring a response from the clergy which we will discuss next time.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose there is so much corruption in the church (pages 2, 3)?
2. What were many of the people of Israel expecting in terms of a Deliverer (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are the two errors Pastor Paul mentions in connection with the Kingship of Christ and the blessings of His kingdom (page 4)?
4. What was the role of the money changers and seller of doves (pages 4, 5)?
5. Why were their actions so wrong (pages 5, 6)?
6. What does it mean to be a “house of prayer” (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is a den of thieves and discuss the context of how it is used in Jeremiah 7 (pages 7, 8).