

Sermons on Matthew
A House of Prayer or a Den of Thieves?
Matthew 21:12-17
Part 2

With Study Questions

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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).

Review

Corruption in the Church

Corruption in the church is nothing new. Paul wrote of teachers in the church “who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*” (1 Timothy 6:5). He also recorded that he was not “as so many, __peddling __the word of God” (2 Corinthians 2:17). He also wrote of those who were teaching things “for the sake of dishonest gain” (Titus 1:10, 11).

The advancement of the Kingdom of God is, in part, a financial enterprise¹. As the church has grown the finances have become immense. And wherever there is an immensity of finance there will be corruption. It is true now and it was the case then.

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).

¹ Even the twelve had a money box from which Judas stole (John 12:6).

The Deliverer and the Temple

Though the deliverance of the Messiah/King would affect every aspect of humanity (homes, states, and kingdoms) the heart of the redemption of the world would come through Christ's church. After His Triumphal Entry, Jesus did not head for the office of the Roman governor, He headed for the Temple.

That which takes place in the Temple of God is that which changes men's hearts, brings honor to God and redemption to the world. If the church is corrupt, the culture has no chance. The cleansing of the temple was a warning; a judgment was coming, and that judgment would **"begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).**

Convenient Merchandising

The problem was that the church had become a house of "merchandise" (John 2:16), from the Greek *emporion* from which we get the word emporium. 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 in light of our modern consumer mentality.

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).

A House of Prayer for all Nations

The house of God is to be a house of prayer; that is, all activities are to be done with a heart and mind toward God. All the temple functions—all church functions—should be designed to bring men's thoughts toward heaven. To participate in these things for any other reason was to bring vanity into His house.

The reference Jesus uses is taken from the 56th chapter of Isaiah. In the reference we also see 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 international promise would begin to be fulfilled.

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).

Praying Toward the Temple

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

Den of Thieves

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.

They had transformed the temple into a den (literally, a cave (*spelaoin*)) of thieves. It had become a hideout to justify vice. God is a gracious God, forgiving sin, but He will not be mocked. There is a difference between weakness (which is common to man) and hypocrisy (which is pretending to be something you’re not). In Jesus we find forgiveness and redemption. What we don’t find is a harbor for double-minded hypocrites.

This brings us up to date.

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'_ 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 21:14-17).

Then *the* blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them (Matthew 21:14).

The Denied yet Undeniable Truth

The heart of religion is not a building or a system, it is a person. Jesus would now remove all doubt as to who He was. When the imprisoned John the Baptist doubted, and asked if Jesus were truly the Messiah, Jesus answered his doubt by appealing to His authority over blindness, disease and death (Matthew 11:2-6). The miracles of Jesus confirmed that He was the promise Messiah spoken of by the prophets.

Say to those *who are* fearful-hearted, “_Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come *with* __vengeance, *with* the recompense of God; He will come and __save you.” ⁵ Then the __eyes of the blind shall be opened, and __the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. ⁶ Then the __lame shall leap like a deer, and the __tongue of the dumb sing. For _waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (Isaiah 35:4-6).

How would the ungodly clergy respond to this undeniable truth?

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?_” (Matthew 21:15, 16)

Never underestimate people’s abilities to deny the truth.

The denial of the truth can be masked in *intellect* by those who organize academic contraptions. They think that because they have observed the process by which things take place that they have determined the genesis of things. “Why is grass green?” I asked my father. He gave the scientific answer, “Because of chlorophyll...chlorophyll is found in the chloroplasts of green plants.” Being a typical eight year old, I wasn’t satisfied. I continued “But why is it green? Where does green come from?” I wanted to know the genesis of green. After anticipating the infinite regression of an eight year old’s cross examination, my father gave the only reasonable answer: “Because God made it that way.”

The denial of truth can be masked via *psychological disgruntlement*. People appeal to the pain of their past as an excuse to dismiss the plain and simple reality of the moment. I sought to gently encourage a Christian couple, who had not attended church for years, to find and attend a church near their new home. One of them vehemently and angrily reminded me of the difficult of their recent trials in life. The appeal to psychological vexations made any rational discussion impossible. We should never be insensitive to the psychological or emotional discomfort of others. But it never justifies disobedience.

The denial of the truth in our current text comes via *righteous indignation*. Unmoved by the undeniable truth which stood before them, the chief priests and the scribes went on the offensive. “_Do You hear what these are saying_?” The children were appealing to Jesus for salvation and proclaiming that He was the promised One of God. “Do you hear Jesus what they are saying about you? You are leading our children astray! We are their priests! It is from our lips that they are to hear from God” (Haggai 2:10). But these priests, with their robes and tassels had “**polluted the sanctuary**” (Zephaniah 3:4).

The ungodly are angered by those who follow Jesus. Ungodliness in our current culture has become emboldened. There are accusations against the church that they are indoctrinating the youth. Popular atheist Richard Dawkins was disgusted with a recent documentary (which was up for an Oscar) entitled *Jesus Camp*. The movie chronicled a Pentecostal movement

where children were encouraged to take American back for Christ. The limited amount of footage I saw of the movie led me to believe that it is not a movement I, or the majority of orthodox Christianity, would be comfortable with. But understand the strategy: Christianity is harmful... Christians need to repent... Jesus, according to these Pharisees, needed to repent.

I am bloated with curiosity as to who our new god is going to be.

Then Jesus said to the twelve, “_Do you also want to go away?_” -⁶⁸- But Simon Peter answered Him, “_Lord, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:67, 68)

Children and Their Decisions

Since we are walking under the light of this particular lamp, I feel obliged to address one of the most common and silly statements making the rounds in our current culture. Perhaps you’ve heard it: “I want to let my children make their own decisions.” A couple of quick responses: First, don’t worry, they will. No matter what we do as parents, our children will make their own decisions, and there is nothing we can do about it, so the statement itself is senseless.

Since that is so obvious, it would seem that parents who make this statement are saying something else. I take these parents to mean that they don’t want to overly influence their children. They want their children to find their own course. They don’t want to domineer. It is a common idiom that nature abhors a vacuum; I think it is a biblical one. Jesus said, “**He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad**” (Matthew 12:30). So parents, if you are not the ones influencing your children, someone or something else will. We must therefore determine whether or not that someone or something else loves and cares for your children as much as you.

Never underestimate people’s ability to deny the truth.

And he said, ‘_No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent._’ -³¹- But he said to him, __‘_If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, __neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:30, 31).

Man, in his fallen estate, is so hardened against the truth that all the miracles in the world are insufficient to bring us to repentance. Every last single one of us, apart from the grace of God working through the word of God (here referred to as Moses and the prophets), would be denying the truth of Christ to this very moment.

**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 21:14-17).**

Mouth of Babes

It’s always worth noting that Jesus expects the word of God to be read and understood. **“Have you never read?”** is a chastisement. Jesus then quotes the eighth Psalm: **“_’_Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise.’”**

Some understand this reference similarly to Psalm 19:

The __heavens declare the glory of God; and the _firmament __shows __His handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

Or Psalm 148:

**Praise Him, sun and moon; Praise Him, all you stars of light!
(Psalm 148:3)**

I don’t doubt that this reference to praise includes the idea that all of creation, by virtue of its very existence and function, cries out concerning the glory and infinite craftsmanship of God. But I think it goes further than that. The children were making verbal proclamations regarding the person of Jesus (verse 15).

Even though our worship of God should be profound and thoughtful, we overly magnify our own intellect if we suppose that our scholarly capacity sets us in superior strata to the infants when it comes to the worship of an incomprehensible God. That John, as a fetus, leapt in his mother’s womb due to the nearness of Jesus, should not be thought inferior to our verbalizing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”.

Perfecting Praise

It is not man, but God who “perfects” our praise. The verb *katertiso* means to put in order, to make adequate or sufficient. Matthew had used the word earlier in reference to James and John *mending* their nets.

Clashing with Human Confidence

Let us appreciate the entirety of this interaction, that we may be ever conscious of our own propensity to fall into similar transgression. Jesus, in cleansing the temple, clashed with the epitome of human confidence—confidence in personal righteousness (Luke 18:9) and confidence in a religious system. He responded by appealing to God’s power to bring about praise through the gurgling infants. God would suffer this hubris only so long before the temple would be destroyed as a house left desolate (Matthew 23:38).

And although the New Covenant would be established as a covenant which would endure forever—which the gates of hell would not prevail against (Matthew 16:18)—Jesus issues a similar warning to individual churches who depart from the faith. To Ephesus He warns,

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, __or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent (Revelation 2:5).

The lampstand in the temple was destroyed with the temple because those who attended it refused to let it shine the light of Christ. May the church ever seek to shine the light of Jesus.

_And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a __light that shines in a dark place, __until _the day dawns and the morning star rises in your __hearts (2 Peter 1:19).

Questions for Study

1. Should we be surprised that there is corruption in the church? Explain (pages 2, 3).
2. What was the main emphasis of Jesus after His Triumphal Entry (pages 3)?
3. In what ways do you see today's church becoming a house of merchandise (page 3)?
4. What does it mean for the church to be a house of prayer (pages 3, 4)?
5. Why did Jesus use the phrase "den of thieves" (page 4)?
6. What are some tactics people use to deny the truth (pages 5-7)?
7. Discuss the popular idea of "letting children make their own decisions" (page 7).
8. Is it possible for children, even infants, to praise God (page 8)?
9. What does it mean that God perfects praise (page 9)?
10. What is the warning for the modern church in this passage (page 9)?