

Jesus Cleanses the Temple: Mark 11:15-18

|| John 2:13-22; Matthew 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48

1. Who was Jesus protecting by clearing the money changers and animal sellers out of the Gentile court?

Which group of people would you love to speak up or act in defense of? Who should the church be defending? Who *are* we defending?

2. Is this passage primarily about (a) Jesus' authority; (b) Jesus protecting access for the marginalized Gentiles; (c) Jesus protecting the purity of the temple; (d) Jesus repudiating religion for monetary gain; (e) Jesus showing he is the Messiah by fulfilling prophecy and inaugurating his kingdom?¹

If you are tempted to answer "all of the above," which was the most important message for i) cheering crowds of the day; ii) the early church; iii) us?

3. Prior to Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem, he took pains to keep his ministry low-key; he taught in parables, he used the obscure "son of man" title, he ministered in the sticks up north, and when the crowds wanted to carry him off and make him king (as after the feeding of the 5,000), he slipped away.

Starting with the triumphal entry we see Jesus unrestrained and in control. On his way into town (Mk 20:48), blind Bartimaeus openly calls him the Son of David and for the first time Jesus accepts the title. He enters Jerusalem in royal fashion, welcomes the acclaim of the people, and boldly refers to the temple as "my house."

When you talk to Jesus, are you talking to low-key, covert Jesus or Jesus as master of the house, kicking tables and taking names? Is one more authentic?

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Fun quote from Augustine: "In another place, I said the following about our Lord Jesus Christ, 'He did nothing by force but everything by persuasion and admonition.' I forgot that he threw out the sellers and buyers from the temple by flogging them." (*Retractations* 12:6; cf. ACCS on Lk 19:45-56)

Fun fact: Evans (Mark, NICNT, 406) writes that Jewish law (m. Berachoth 9.5, TB Berachoth 54a) "prohibited anyone from entering the Temple Mount with a staff, sandals or his wallet," likely why Jesus used what was at hand to make an implement, a whip of cords, to kick people out of the temple.

¹ Michael Green, in his Matthew commentary (219-220) presents a very compelling parallel between Jesus' cleansing of the temple and Judas Maccabaeus' cleansing of the temple after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes, the difference being that JM cleansed it *from* the Gentiles and Jesus cleansed it *for* the Gentiles.

Leader's Intro:

There are several points worth noting when approaching this passage:

- **The story, history, and background**

- It appears in all four gospel accounts, with few variations, the main one being John's placing it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
 - Hurtado's Mark commentary has a good discussion of this. The bottom line is that it is unlikely this occurred twice given that it was a direct provocation of the ruling authorities and led to Jesus' trial and death, for charges which specifically mention his words regarding the temple destruction.
- Hurtado: "It is *the only account in the Gospels in which Jesus engages in any kind of violent action* against others, though there is no hint that he attempted to harm anyone; he may only have intended to force a halt to the objectionable trading operations going on in the sacred precincts of the temple." (181)
- In the synoptics the temple cleansing is part of a constellation of sayings and events which surround Jesus' final weeks including the triumphal entry, the cursing of the fig tree, the healing of two blind men (which is the first time in which Jesus approves and responds to the title "Son of David"), the parable of the tenants. Jesus in these passages is in control; he is not holding back, nor is he
- The Gentile court was the only place where Gentiles could come in the temple complex to pray and worship. Hurtado and Lane both describe the Gentile court as an "oriental bazaar," "making it impossible for any Gentile to use the area for prayer or serious devotion to God. In the original situation, Jesus' action was probably supported by many others who found it offensive for the priests to have authorized the transacting of such business within the sacred precincts of the temple." (Hurtado 182)
- There's evidence that the selling and money changing were relatively new for the Gentile court, having been allowed by Caiaphas in 30 (Hurtado 187). Before that they occurred only on the Mount of Olives, nearby.
- The activities going on in the Gentile court were not themselves forbidden, though see below about overcharging. Selling of animals allowed the requires sacrifices, and the temple tax, required by Ex 30:13-16, had to be paid in a particular coinage (McCallum says, to avoid paying with the image of the Roman emperor on it, which would make it an idol).
- There is some dispute about whether the selling of animals and money changing including overcharging. There's evidence that there were regulations preventing this, but then the implication of Jesus' charge was that this was happening. (See Keener's Matthew for this. Keener is speaking more to the historical Jesus crowd, though.) I like Hurtado's summary here, along with Lane (both in Matthew). Hurtado adds, "There was nothing new in these money-changers being in the temple during this period, and so Jesus' protest against them may have been based on their charging of high rates in the exchange of coins" (187).

- Note that this wasn't just a simply house cleaning. Jesus expels what would have been a large number of merchants, and then teaches and heals. He was making room for his ministry. Note also the sharply divided responses: the people liked it, the rulers hated it.
 - Evans, from his Luke commentary (292): "Although far from certain, a plausible answer [to how Jesus got away with cleansing the temple and then teaching] has been put forth that the year in which Jesus cleansed the temple was the first year that sellers of animals were permitted into the temple precincts. If this is the case, then Caiaphas would hold the dubious distinction of being the first high priest to authorize this business activity in the temple. (The custom of exchanging money within the temple's precincts had apparently been established earlier.) *Opinion over the appropriateness of such a new policy would have been sharply divided. It may be (and here we are only guessing) that many priests, Levites, and temple guards were looking on sheepishly when Jesus strode boldly into the temple and began driving out the sellers and money changers. Indeed, quite possibly Jesus' action not only did not provoke antagonism from most of the religious figures (although his action surely was upsetting to the merchants), but it may have actually been looked upon with secret approval. Seen in this light, it becomes understandable how Jesus could assault the temple and then not only escape arrest but continue teaching in the temple precincts.*"
- Jesus quotes the following:
 - Jer 7:11 ("den of robbers"). In this passage God through Jeremiah is condemning the people for coming to worship in the temple while living sinful lives. The sins named are theft, murder, adultery, perjury, idolatry, oppression of widow, orphan, immigrant. This is a passage in which Jeremiah predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and is persecuted by the ruling authorities for doing so. "Den of robbers," in Jeremiah, doesn't appear to be a narrow condemnation about theft, but more general, a "criminal clubhouse." So Jesus' quote need not imply theft or monetary malfeasance, though it may be that he had this in mind.
 - Isa 56:7 ("a house of prayer for all nations"). This is a prophecy of the messianic era, when God would welcome the eunuch and the foreigner.
 - John's account adds a reference made by the disciples after the fact to Psalm 69:9 ("zeal for your house consumes me"). This is a plea for help on the part of one being persecuted.
- A surprising feature of the account is that Jesus doesn't just turn over tables and go. Rather, he sets up shop. Evans (Mark, NICNT) estimates that "The specific reference to the tables of the money changers in the Temple forecourt tends to date Jesus' action between Adar 25 and Nisan 1, i.e. more than two weeks before Passover."
- Related Evans writes, "The absence of any immediate counter-action on the part of the Temple authorities is surprising but intelligible. While the incident disturbed the activity in the Court of Gentiles, it did not interrupt the functioning of the Sanctuary. Moreover, Jesus' action was too ambiguous in character to be directly revolutionary. His violent expulsion of the merchants could be explained within a current of active pietism which openly appealed to Phineahas and

his zeal for God, or as an exercise of prophetic authority within the tradition of Jeremiah, or as the coming of the Lord to his Temple, whose purging action is the immediate to judgment.

- Also interesting from Evans: “Ironically, Jesus’ spirited protest entailed a rigorous application of existing provisions, which prohibited anyone from entering the Temple Mount with a staff, sandals or his wallet, and which specifically denied the right to make of the forecourt “a short by-path”.” So Jesus made a whip of cords because that was what was handy!
- One other point of background brought out particularly in Michael Green’s Matthew commentary is the parallel with Judas Maccabaeus’ cleansing of the temple after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. He too strode into the temple and cleansed it, but *of* Gentiles, not *for* Gentiles.
- **The point of the story**
 - Jesus clears the gentile court both to stop objectionable activity and to make it available for his teaching and healing ministry.
 - Jesus cares about the Gentiles!
 - Jesus owns the temple.
 - Jesus, to use John’s terminology, lays down his life and picks it up again.
- **Questions to ask:**
 - Observational:
 - Can you infer what Jesus is objecting to?
 - What response does Jesus receive?
 - What did Jesus do after driving out the money changers and animal sellers from the Gentile court?
 - Who is Jesus protecting, why, and from whom?
 - Is Jesus’ objection primarily to commerce? Or to commerce which prevents access to God?
 - Is this passage primarily about (a) Jesus’ authority over the temple; (b) Jesus protecting access for the marginalized Gentiles; (c) Jesus protecting the purity of the temple; (d) Jesus repudiating use of religion for monetary gain?
 - Application:
 - Whom should we be protecting?
 - If we think of the church as the temple, how does this apply?

- Starting with the triumphal entry we see Jesus unrestrained by having to keep his ministry low-key to avoid it being cut short. Shortly before this passage (Mk 20:48) Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus, who openly calls him the Son of David. For the first time, Jesus does not insist on the enigmatic Son of Man. He enters Jerusalem in royal fashion; he welcomes the acclaim of the people, and here he refers to the temple as “my house.”

We tend to think of the Jesus *before* this, the Jesus who spoke in veiled terms, who parried with the Pharisees but when threatened vanished into the crowd as the Jesus we know. Arguably, *this* is the real Jesus. How is this Jesus different? Which Jesus do you know?

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- Lane (*Mark*, NICNT) writes, “Jesus was appalled at this disregard for the sanctity of an area [of the temple] consecrated for the use of Gentiles who had not yet become full proselytes to Judaism.” For NT believers, which is the best parallel to the temple?
 - **Jesus:** “But the temple he’d spoken of was his body.” (Jn 2:21)
 - The **church:** “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.” (1 Cor 3:17)
 - **Yourself:** “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;” (1 Cor 6:19; also Origen, cf. ACCS on ...)

Setting aside (a), Paul showed his zeal for the sanctity of temple (b) by urging unity among the Corinthians, and of temple (c) by forbidding sexual immorality. What threatens the sanctity of you and your church? How could we be zealous for the sanctity of *these* temples?

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Themes and question ideas:

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Extra questions and observations:

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