

Clearing Out the Temple -- Mark 11:15-19

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, open our eyes to see the hidden treasure in this story. May our hearts be drawn to our Savior Jesus Christ. May we leave here today forever changed. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

As we begin, we are going to consider two customs that preceded the Passover in Jerusalem. Understanding these two customs will help us understand our story as well, which takes place only four days before the offering of the Passover lamb. The first custom was known as the temple tax. Its origins go back to Exodus 30:12-16. Here the Lord instituted an offering which would be taken for atonement during the census, when all adult males were numbered. This offering was in the amount of a ½ shekel, which possibly would be about \$5.00 today. Every man, who was at least 20 years old, had to pay this tax. The money was used for the services in the temple. It might be like a church budget offering today. This offering in Jesus' day had become known as the temple tax, which sounds more political than religious. This may well represent the condition of Judaism in those days, which had lost a lot of its spirituality and made up for it with lots of laws and traditions.

The temple tax was taken annually beginning 45 days before the Passover. There were several days where a Jewish man might have opportunity to pay his tax, similar to our country where we have three and one half months to pay our income taxes. Another significant part of this tradition was that the tax had to be given in the currency of the ancient temple half-shekel. A Roman coin would not be accepted. If a Jew traveled all the way from Egypt to celebrate the Passover, he could not use his Egyptian coins to pay the temple tax. It had to be paid with a temple half-shekel. And the only people who could provide these were the money-changers. They were like the Department of the Treasury, which prints all the money in our country. Money-changers were stationed around the temple and they determined the exchange rate. So, in this sense, they also played the role of the Federal Reserve in our country. If someone had a Roman denarius coin, the money-changer might decide that it was only worth half of what it was worth last year. So this was one longstanding tradition in the Jewish culture which provides some of the setting for our story today.

A second custom was for foreign Jews to purchase their sacrificial animals in Jerusalem, instead of bringing them all the way from home, which might be hundreds of miles away. This custom was mostly about convenience. But again, this presented an opportunity for fraud. Dishonest animal dealers could dispute with these foreign Jews as to how much these animals were worth. They might charge more in exchange for taking their foreign currency. And, of course, if the Jew from Egypt decided to exchange their money first with the money-changers, that was another opportunity for them to be taken advantage of. So, as we go through our story today, keep these two customs in mind.

Here is a summary of this story found in Mark 11:15-19:

Jesus entered the temple and began driving out those who were buying and selling. He declared that while the temple was supposed to be a place where everyone could pray, they had made it into a cave of criminals. The high priests and scribes were afraid of what Jesus might do next and continued trying to find a way to get rid of Him. So, in the evening Jesus continued leaving the city of Jerusalem.

We're going to consider now what Jesus experienced in the story. What would it have been like to be in His sandals on this day? Again this story is recorded in Mark 11:15-19. I encourage you to follow along in your own Bibles. If you need to use a pew Bible, this story is on page 895. First of all, Jesus experienced returning to Jerusalem. The day before Jesus had experienced a climactic royal procession that had begun in Bethany and moved towards Jerusalem. But in the evening Jesus had returned to Bethany. So with this story we find Jesus again returning to Jerusalem in the morning.

Second, Jesus experienced reclaiming His house. You might find it interesting to know that a very similar experience took place three years earlier. It is recorded in John 2:13-25. Jesus had cleared out the temple then, but things had quickly returned to the way that had been before. The temple in Jesus' day was known as Herod's Temple, due to the fact that he had spent a lot of money expanding and reconstructing the one that had been built after the Jew's captivity in Babylon (approximately 500 years before). This temple was in many ways superior to the previous one. It consisted of four main courts. First, there was the outer court where the Gentiles (non-Jews) could worship. This was by far the largest of the four courts. The inside perimeter of this court was separated from the rest of the temple by a 4½ foot partition, which had signs posted warning all Gentiles against entering upon penalty of death. There were three inner courts. The first was a court for Jewish women. The second was for Jewish men. And the innermost court was only for the priests. This part of the temple consisted of the compartments found in the original sanctuary given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. There was the courtyard with the altar of burnt offering and the laver, a large bowl of water for washing hands. Next was the holy place which contained the lamp stand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense. Last was the most holy place, which contained the Ark of the Covenant.

So as Jesus enters "the temple", it is not the holy place or the most holy place. It is the very outer court, where the Gentiles were allowed. And that will become clearer as we go along. In Mark 11:15 Jesus began to drive out three different groups of people. Apparently all of them were guilty of fraud and dishonesty. The first group was those who were buying and selling. The words that are used here by Mark give the idea of a market place, where there was a lot of bargaining and noise. The second group mentioned consists of the money-changers. We have talked about them earlier and how they cheated people. The third group consists of those who were selling doves. If a family was really poor and could not afford to buy a lamb, the Lord had made a provision for them to bring a dove as their Passover offering. So this group of people would have been taking advantage of the poor.

Mark 11:16 pictures Jesus acting as a policeman: "He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple." The word translated "wares" is actually singular and means, "utensil". In essence Jesus was saying, "Take your stuff somewhere else! This is not a highway. It's a place for prayer!" In verse 17 Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:7, where the Lord refers to His house as "a house of prayer". The remarkable claim here seems to be that Jesus was referring to the temple, not as Herod's temple, but as His House! Jesus also quoted from Jeremiah 7:11, accusing the people of making His house "a den of thieves". A better translation might be "a hiding place for criminals". Jesus' words were very pointed and full of authority. He was reclaiming His house for its intended purpose.

Last of all, Jesus experienced avoiding danger. Mark 11:18 mentions "the scribes and chief priests". This was their turf. The temple was the center of their identity. And Jesus had claimed that it was not theirs but His. He had thrown them out. They became afraid of what He might do next. And so they began to redouble their efforts to get rid of Him. Mark 11:19 says that in response to these intentions, Jesus was leaving the city as soon as the sun was beginning to set. The use of the imperfect tense here by Mark gives the idea that Jesus did this repeatedly in the following days. He kept going back to Bethany to spend the night. He was avoiding danger. He knew that His enemies were inclined to carry out their murderous intentions under the cloak of darkness after the crowds had gone home.

So this is what Jesus experienced in our story. Hopefully this helps us understand what it would have been like to have actually been there when this story took place. Let's now consider how this story reveals Jesus as our Example. This story is just as much about what kind of life I should live as a healthy Christian as it is about Jesus' life. The goal of this story is to somehow get from our ears into our hearts. The purpose of this story is to affect how I live my life and the choices that I make. It's to show me what it means to do what Jesus would do and to be a healthy Christian.

Jesus is first revealed as our Example in that He reclaimed His house. Others had cluttered His house and filled it with dishonesty. There was no room for Gentiles who wanted to come into the temple court in order to talk to God. Their prayers were drowned out by the noise of greedy men. But Jesus got rid of all of this. He cleared out His house. And He guarded it from outside influences that corrupted His house and distracted His people.

Matthew records this same story. In Matthew 21:14-16 he describes what happened in the temple after Jesus cleared it out. His house became a place of healing and was filled with songs of praise.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy Christian is someone whose house is a house of prayer. What is keeping your house from being a house of prayer? Maybe instead of spending time praying, you're spending time watching TV. Is your house cluttered with secular magazines and immoral movies? Maybe it's just plain messy and in the clutter it's hard to feel like it's a place for prayer. Or perhaps your house is clean and neat, and yet there's an air of tension filling the house. Maybe there's just too much traffic and a general feeling of stress. Perhaps your house used to be a house of prayer, but over time you've lost control of your family. And prayer has been forced out the window. It's time to reclaim your house. I have found in our own home just how easy it is to let things come in and replace time for prayer. Lack of sleep, sickness, and just not sticking to a schedule can quickly steal away our time for prayer. I need to be continually reminded that my house is not just a place to eat, sleep, work, or play. It is primarily a place for prayer.

I invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 6:19. (Read) This takes this discussion a step further. Not only does my house need to be a place of prayer. My body, as God's temple, needs to be a place of continual prayer. This comes down to the level of our thoughts. Is my mind a place of prayer? At any time of the day is it a place where God is welcomed and feels comfortable residing?

A second way in which Jesus is revealed as our Example is that He left Jerusalem at night. We have found throughout the book of Mark that Jesus often avoided confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees. But this last week of His life He acted differently. He initiated a royal procession in which He was honored as the rightful heir to David's throne. He cleared out all the religious leaders from the temple. Instead of staying away from Jerusalem, the headquarters of those who were trying to kill Him, He kept coming back every morning. And yet, every night He left the city. Why is He so confrontational in the day and yet so elusive at night? I invite you to turn with me to John 18:20. Jesus is on trial before the high priest. In a few hours He will be condemned to death on a cross. Notice what He says. (Read) Jesus always taught in public places and in the daytime. He never worked at night or in secret places. No one could honestly accuse Him of secretly organizing a rebellion against the religious leaders. Whenever He had something to say to His enemies, He said it in public. Whenever He met with the crowds, it was always in the daytime and in a public place. And so when night began to fall over Jerusalem, Jesus left, because His work was done. He returned to Bethany for the night. He was not only avoiding danger, He was revealing Himself as someone whose work and teaching were open for all to see.

And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who has nothing to hide. Turn with me once again to the book of John. We will read chapter 3 and verses 20 and 21. (Read verse 20) Jesus spoke these words at night to a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a prominent leader of the Jews - a Pharisee, in fact. He was acting secretly. Jesus rebukes him indirectly, saying that people who do bad things, do their work at night. They don't want to be exposed for who they really are. In fact, in the text we read earlier from John 18, the scribes and Pharisees had arrested Jesus at night and were bringing Him to trial at night. They were working very secretly. On the other hand notice what Jesus says in verse 21. (Read) Someone who is doing what's right, does his work out in the open. He doesn't have anything to be ashamed of.

I recently had a couple interviews for a residency in chaplaincy. There were evidently quite a few applicants being interviewed for these positions. Some of these applicants apparently tried to lie in their interviews. It seems odd that someone would break one of the 10 Commandments in order to be in the ministry. But clearly they felt that the truth was something to hide. They weren't comfortable with their weaknesses. They were ashamed of who they really were and tried to embellish their own story. Honestly, I felt pretty insecure after my first interview. Those interviewing me did a pretty good job pointing out areas where I was lacking and qualities that I wasn't proud of. And yet in my second interview I maintained that I had nothing to hide. I answered their questions as honestly and openly as I could. I decided that I would rather be denied a position in resident chaplaincy than try to be secretive and hide the truth about myself. I don't want to stay the way I am, but at the same time I don't want to be ashamed of who I am either.

It's hard to read this story and not consider Jesus' emotions. He seems very angry with these people who were filling His house with acts of crime. He drove them out like a herd of pigs. He didn't seem too concerned about hurting their feelings. He didn't go in and ask politely, "Would you please, if it's not too much trouble, quiet down a little." Does Jesus' severe confrontation give us an excuse to steamroll anyone who disagrees with us? What do we do with Jesus' anger? Meek and mild certainly aren't enough to describe Him. He is like one untamable. Those guarding the tomb found out the next Sunday that He is uncontainable. Here are the words to a song by Phillips, Craig, and Dean entitled, "You Are God Alone":

*You are not a God
Created by human hands
You are not a god
Dependant on any mortal man
You are not a god
In need of anything we can give
By Your plan, that's just the way it is*

CHORUS

*You are God alone,
From before time began,
You were on Your throne,
You are God alone,
And right now,
In the good times and bad,
You are on Your throne,
You are God alone.*

*You're the only God,
Whose power none can contend,
You're the only God,
Whose name and praise will never end,
You're the only God,
Who's worthy of everything we can give,
You are God,
And that's just the way it is.*

BRIDGE

*Unchangeable,
Unshakable,
Unstoppable,
That's what You are.*

How do you feel about this kind of God? He's not safe. But He is good. So I can be glad that He is no longer in the tomb. He is alive. So, I can face tomorrow. I invite you to turn with me to hymn #526, "Because He Lives" for our closing song.