

Temple Cleansing: Jesus Promises the Seventh Sign

John 2:12-22

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¹² After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Introduction: How Can We Worship God?

So much of life is decided by whether or not you're asking the right questions. Right now, our country is focused on who will win the presidential election on Tuesday, an election that I will admit looks a lot closer than I thought it was going to be. Last week, people were asking who was going to win the World Series. Sadly, the most important question we as people need to address is one that precious few people think very seriously about: How can we worship God?

Most people aren't even thinking about that question and, if you were to ask them, they probably would not even understand it. Failing to understand the true meaning or significance of a question will certainly lead to the wrong answer. Most people think, "I can worship God any way I want to," and the way they think about worship makes it clear that they think God should be grateful to receive whatever worship they choose to give Him however they choose to give it.

But the question of how we can worship God exposes our thinking about who God is, who we are, where we stand with God, what worship is, what God requires (if He requires anything at all), what we receive from Him in worship (if we're expecting to receive anything at all). If you read the Bible, you'll find that God spends a lot of time talking to His people about the right way to worship Him. Maybe that's why most people find reading the Bible so difficult, confusing or unsatisfying, because God is addressing questions we're not asking – but we should be.

In the Old Testament, God gave His people a form of worship that would teach them much about who He was, who they were, how they were to approach Him, what pleased Him and what they could receive from Him. At its heart, Temple worship taught God's people:

1. God is absolutely Holy, separate from sinners.
2. We need to be forgiven and cleansed in order to worship God.
3. Blood-shed is required to cover our sins and allow us to approach our Holy God.
4. If God is pleased with the sacrifice of atonement for sin, then we may approach Him and offer up sacrifices of thanksgiving and prayers.
5. Once we're reconciled to God, He feeds us and speaks to us from His word.

God set up His Temple in Jerusalem to demonstrate these truths not only to His own people but also to the nations, who were invited to come and gather around the Temple in a surrounding courtyard, where they could hear and see and learn about God.

A. How the Jewish Leadership Used the Temple

And so, for God's people in Jesus' day, the question of how we can worship God was centered around the Temple. Sadly, the people who were in charge of the Temple were firmly entrenched religious professionals. They made their living from the Temple, and it was a pretty good living. Like many religious professionals, these priests had lost sight of why they existed and began to think that worship was for their personal benefit and comfort.

Temple leadership had become a family dynasty. Caiaphas the High Priest was the son-in-law of Annas, who had previously been High Priest before he was deposed. After Annas was forced to step down, he remained politically well-connected and was able to ensure that his five sons and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, each took turns serving as High Priest. Together, Annas and his sons and son-in-law served as High Priest for almost 40 years.

Over the years of the reign of the House of Annas over the Temple, a couple of practices had been established and moved into the Temple, and when Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover, He confronted these practices.

Now, one question we need to deal with before we go any further is this: Is this cleansing in John's Gospel the same as the Temple cleansing we find in the other Gospels? Here in John, this temple cleansing comes early in Jesus' ministry, during His first Passover in Jerusalem during His public ministry. John would record three Passover visits by Jesus to Jerusalem during His earthly ministry.

The other Gospels all tell of a Temple cleansing that Jesus did at the very end of His ministry, just days before He died. In fact, in the other Gospels, the Temple cleansing was the immediate cause of the Jewish rulers conspiring to finally put Jesus to death, after talking about it for a long time, because He had confronted the very source of their power, position and wealth.

Many have suggested that John places the Temple cleansing early because of theological concerns and thus reports it out of its actual time, but for many reasons it is better to conclude that Jesus cleansed the Temple twice, one at the beginning of His ministry and again at the end. The fact that these are two different Temple cleansings is clear in the language Jesus uses and in the reaction of the Temple officials. Both times, however, Jesus was confronting the same practices: animal-selling and money-changing.

1. The Animal-Sellers

Passover was a time of pilgrimage for all of God's people from all over the Roman world. More than 2/3 of the Jewish population of the Roman Empire lived outside of the Holy Land and every Passover would bring hundreds of thousands of pilgrims crowding into Jerusalem, which was a relatively small city with a year-round population of just over 100,000 people.

These pilgrims would not easily be able to bring sacrificial animals with them, especially since such animals would have to be inspected by the Temple priests and be declared spotless in order to be used. It was much more convenient for the pilgrims to purchase animals from the authorized animal-sellers, whose animals had been pre-inspected and certified. In itself, there was nothing wrong with this practice, but Jesus specifically criticized the priests for authorizing this animal market to take place in the Temple complex. Previously, it had been located across the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives. But it was probably more convenient – and more profitable – to move the business into the Temple Complex.

The outer court, where these animals were being bought and sold, was the Court of the Gentiles, where gentiles from the nations were supposed to be able to learn about God and worship Him. How could they worship in the middle of an animal market? How could they hear and pray amid the sound of sheep and oxen and the buying and selling?

2. The Money-Changers

So, if the animal-sellers were there to provide pure animals for sacrifice, why did the Temple have money-changers? Well, the Roman World was full of different kinds of coins made in different places. Coins were made of precious metals and their value was in the value was in the metal content itself. Some of it was pure and reliable, while others impure and imprecise. Additionally, people would sometimes shave off the edges of coins to accumulate extra silver or copper.

One of the best coins of the Roman world was the Silver Shekel of Tyre. It was the only pure silver coin in that part of the Roman World. The annual Temple tax was half a Tyrian shekel per Jewish man. This is why Jesus sent Peter to get a coin from the mouth of a fish to pay the tax for both of them. The money-changers were in the Temple to weigh and evaluate and exchange foreign coins for the official Tyrian Shekel. Reports are that the money-changers

charged a 12% fee for this exchange service and that the Temple priests sold them their licenses authorizing them to operate their booths.

Overall, this was a lucrative business, and the profiteering was excessive. Later, when Jesus would cleanse the Temple courts a second time, He would say, “*It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.*” [Matthew 21:13] But this first time, Jesus simply says, “*Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.*”

B. How Jesus Viewed the Temple

I. Righteous Anger

Jesus’ reaction to this activity in the Temple is personal and passionate. He calls the Temple, “My Father’s house” and the disciples connect His reaction to the animal-sellers and money-changers to Psalm 69, “*Zeal for your house has consumed me.*” The right worship of God and the proper operation of the Temple for that purpose were not minor side-issues with Jesus. He is angry and is being eaten up with passion for His Father’s house.

The Jewish leadership should have known that purity and faithfulness in worship practices was very important to God. Two of the most startling stories from the history of God’s dealings with His people dealt with the judgment of God against impure worship. Nadab and Abihu were the first priests, sons of Aaron who ministered in the very first Tabernacle under Moses. They offered strange fire before the Lord, unauthorized incense, and God struck them dead. Hundreds of years later, when King David was bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark with his hands and God struck him dead. God told Moses and Aaron that He must be regarded as holy by all who approach Him. Worship is not just a matter of life and death. It is more important than that: It is a matter of eternal consequence that lasts far beyond death.

Sadly, today, many people have continued to confuse worship and commerce, and religion continues to be big business. Many evangelical publishers will eagerly publish books they know will sell well, whether or not they are true and faithful. Books purporting to tell reports of people’s visits to heaven rank at the very top of these kinds of books, as do speculative books on end-time and books claiming to reveal hidden codes or secret prophecies in the Bible. Secret knowledge of things God has not revealed is a big seller, but God tells us in Deuteronomy 29:29, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*”

It should anger and frustrate us when we see people peddling religion, using God’s name and manipulating God’s word and God’s people to make a quick buck. It’s wrong and it keeps many people today from worshiping God rightly.

2. Cleansing Action

But Jesus didn't just get angry. He took action. So often, we get mad and just stew in our anger without actually doing anything. Jesus made a whip of cords and drove animals, animal-sellers and money-changers out of the Temple. The right and proper worship of God was so important to Jesus that He took action and made things right.

This doesn't fit our popular notions of Jesus as the peaceful teacher of forgiveness and love, of gentle Jesus meek and mild. Now Jesus certainly was gentle and meek. He did teach forgiveness and love. But we shouldn't be too quick to domesticate Jesus and to confuse meek with weak and gentle with passive and inactive.

Scottish theologian James Stewart said of Jesus:

He was the meekest and lowliest of all the sons of men, yet he spoke of coming on the clouds of heaven with the glory of God. He was so austere that evil spirits and demons cried out in terror at his coming, yet he was so genial and winsome and approachable that the children loved to play with him, and the little ones nestled in his arms. His presence at the innocent gaiety of a village wedding was like the presence of sunshine.

No one was half so compassionate to sinners, yet no one ever spoke such red hot scorching words about sin. A bruised reed he would not break, his whole life was love, yet on one occasion he demanded of the Pharisees how they ever expected to escape the damnation of hell. He was a dreamer of dreams and a seer of visions, yet for sheer stark realism He has all of our stark realists soundly beaten. He was a servant of all, washing the disciples' feet, yet masterfully He strode into the temple, and the hucksters and moneychangers fell over one another to get away from the mad rush and the fire they saw blazing in His eyes.

He saved others, yet at the last Himself He did not save. There is nothing in history like the union of contrasts which confronts us in the gospels. The mystery of Jesus is the mystery of divine personality.

C. How Jesus Would Replace the Temple

1. Jews Demand a Sign

In response to Jesus' anger and actions, the Jewish leaders demanded a sign, some proof that He had been given authority by God to criticize and condemn their actions: "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"

In reality, their demand for a sign was just a dodge. They knew they were wrong. They knew Jesus' condemnation of their action was just. But they were deeply committed to their corrupt practices, and rather than repent, they would rather turn the tables back on Jesus and put Him on the spot.

2. Jesus Promises a Sign

Jesus responds to the Jewish leaders' demand by promising a sign that leaves them and Jesus' own disciples confused. He says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

One of the slightly confusing issues in John's Gospel is that everyone seems to agree that John reports seven signs that Jesus gives to authenticate His identity and ministry, but scholars don't fully agree on what those seven signs are. The first sign is turning water into wine. The other signs definitely include:

- Healing the official's son in chapter 4:46-54
- Healing the invalid in chapter 5:1-15
- Feeding the multitude in chapter 6:5-13
- Healing the man born blind in chapter 9:1-7
- Raising Lazarus in chapter 11:1-44

But that's only six signs, so most scholars add Jesus walking on water in 6:16-21 as another sign, although John never explicitly identifies this as a sign. That would make the raising of Lazarus as the seventh sign and then chapters 1-11 get labeled as the Book of Signs.

But Jesus here promises the seventh sign: His resurrection.

3. The Disciples Remember the Sign

In promising this sign, Jesus was making a bold and vitally important claim: Jesus' body is the true Temple. The same lack of reverence and evil self-interest that led the Jewish leaders to set up a marketplace in the Temple in Jerusalem – so destroying its significance and proper function – also led them to destroy Jesus' body through Pilate on the cross. Once they had destroyed the Temple of Jesus' body, He raised it up again on the Third Day. Thus, His body is now the living and eternal Temple of God, our access to God and our worship of God is through His body, seated at the right hand of the Father.

The disciples themselves did not remember this until after Jesus was raised from the dead. It makes more sense that Jesus' own resurrection is the seventh, final and definitive sign, and that seems to be what John is saying here.

This story ends with the same note as the last story of turning the water into wine, with a focus on the faith of the disciples: "*his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*" John's focus is on the disciples' faith because the goal of his Gospel is to call forth faith in us. Jesus gave clear signs of His deity and of His saving work. John highlights seven of them so we can see who Jesus is, why he came and what he did, so that we might believe in Him.

Conclusion: How's Your Temple?

So, do you believe in Jesus? If so, how can you worship God?

If you are a believer, the Bible says that you are in Christ, that you are a member of the Body of Christ, and your body is part of this living Temple. The Holy Spirit dwells in you. This makes your body and your whole life centrally important to how you worship God.

God gives us several points of application as we think about this profound truth, from I Corinthians 6, from Romans 12 and from Hebrews 13:

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. – I Corinthians 6:18-20

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. – Romans 12:1-2

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. – Hebrews 13:10-16

Clearly, based on these passages, our worship of God involves our whole lives: God tells us to flee and avoid sexual immorality and worldliness (conformity to the world) because, based on our identity in Christ, these are totally inappropriate and must be set aside.

Instead, we are called to see our whole lives as an offering to the Lord. We are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, which the Holy Spirit does through the word of God. We are called to test and discern the will of the Lord, to go to Jesus for our feasting and our sustenance, to seek the city that is to come, to continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, to do good and to share what we have with those in need. This is the lifestyle of a sanctified temple of God, which is what our bodies are, by God's grace, if we believe in Christ Jesus.

If you do not believe in Jesus, Jesus says you are a slave to sin. The Bible says you are dead in your transgressions, your body is a temple to idolatry, your mind is not renewed and can only be conformed to the patterns of the world. But you can come to Jesus today and be redeemed and transformed, if you will see the work He has done and believe in Him! The Jewish religious leaders showed their stubborn

foolishness when they refused to believe in Jesus even after He did the incredible and impossible sign He promised. Don't follow their foolish and self-destructive example.