

8. Jesus Casts the Moneychangers out of the Temple

Our last lesson focused on the first miracle of Jesus. He was invited to a wedding feast but the provisions were insufficient. As we have seen, Jesus changed water into wine, or juice of the grape, to prevent embarrassment to the bride and groom. But he did this in a discreet manner so that only his disciples and the servants who had drawn the water knew about the miracle.

Now let's consider a much more public act that Jesus did, not in Galilee in the north of Palestine, but in Jerusalem of Judea. It was an act that astonished the Jewish leaders and which surprises many people even today who have false ideas concerning the character of Jesus of Nazareth.

After the miracle in Cana, according to John 2:12,13, Jesus went with his mother, his disciples and his brothers to Capernaum, about 32 kilometers from Cana. (Yes, contrary to what some people say, Jesus did have brothers—or rather, half-brothers. These were the other sons of Mary, and Joseph was their father.) After a brief visit, they returned to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. This was one of the three most important Jewish feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16). At the time of the New Testament, the expression indicated not only the Feast of the Passover commemorating the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt at the time of Moses, but also the seven days of unleavened bread that directly followed the day of Passover.

“Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, ‘Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!’ Then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.’”
(John 2:13-17)

John tells here how Jesus chased the moneychangers from the temple in Jerusalem. While John places this event near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke

write of a purification of the temple that took place during a visit by Jesus to Jerusalem just prior to his death (the only visit to Jerusalem described by all three of these gospels).

The simplest explanation is that John is writing here of a first purification that the other three did not mention, just like other visits to Jerusalem that John described but which the other gospel writers did not mention. The religious leaders, not agreeing with Jesus' action, allowed the vendors to reinstall themselves. Three years later, Jesus chased them out again.

WHY WAS JESUS ANGRY?

But why did Jesus become angry and chase out the vendors and moneychangers? Actually, the Bible doesn't say he was angry, but we assume he was because he threw over the tables, chased the animals out with a whip and ordered the vendors to leave the premises.

If he were angry, would this have been a sin? The Bible doesn't teach that feeling the emotion of anger constitutes a sin. In Ephesians 4:26, anger and sin are associated, but they are not the same thing: “Be angry, but do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” If I do not master it, anger can lead me to act badly. James 1:20 says, “The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Anger itself becomes sin when it takes the form of a bitterness and resentment of which we are not willing to let go—which is why the apostle Paul told us not to let the sun go down on our anger.

Anger can also be a sin when it is not justified—when we become angry quickly though no insult was intended and no act of injustice occurred. It is in this sense that James 1:19 says that we must be “slow to wrath,” and Jesus said in Matthew 5:22 that “whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”

Why was it necessary to record Jesus' reaction to the vendors in the temple? First, he did not react without reflection; he was not carried away by his emotion. In Mark 11:11, we read, “And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve.”

Verses 12 and 15 tell us that it was the next day when Jesus returned to Jerusalem and began chasing out the people and animals from the temple.

Was he right to be angry? What wrong was actually being committed? First, this business which took place in the court of the Gentiles—the only part of the temple to which non-Jews had access—created an atmosphere in which respect, meditation and prayer would have been practically impossible. As the Gospel of Mark specifies, Jesus quoted the words of the Lord in Isaiah 56:7. “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” The activity of these vendors was an obstacle to men who sincerely wanted to worship God.

Besides this, Jesus accused these people of having turned the temple into a den of thieves. The activities of the vendors and moneychangers would have been useful and acceptable outside the temple court if they had not been exploiting other people. Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world, traveling great distances. It would have been very difficult for them to bring animals for sacrifice on those journeys. So they sold their animals before traveling or acquired cash in other ways in order to buy animals for sacrifice in Jerusalem. Now the animals sold at the temple were sometimes sold for twenty times the normal price. Imagine that you have sold your animal at home for \$20 and when you arrive in Jerusalem, you have to spend \$400 to buy another!

Even the people who lived in the region around Jerusalem fell into the trap of these dishonest merchants. The law demanded that the animals offered to God be “without blemish.” They must not offer an animal that was sick or blind or lame. So inspectors were set up in the temple to approve or reject the animals that were brought. But the merchants worked with the inspectors. Even if one came with appropriate animals to sacrifice, the inspectors would automatically disqualify them. The worshipper was then required to pay the inflated prices to the approved sellers.

In regard to the moneychangers, the situation was similar. Each year, each Jewish man was to pay a coin called a half-shekel to finance the daily activities of the temple. Those who came from other places had foreign money, for example Roman coins which had the image of the emperor. These currencies were acceptable in Palestine for normal business, but they

were considered polluted or unacceptable for the treasury of the Lord. The moneychangers set up in the temple swindled the worshippers and made them pay outrageous fees to purchase shekels accepted by the religious authorities.

In view of this corruption practiced in the name of religion and defiling the temple of God Almighty, we can understand Jesus’ reaction. This was a gross injustice, a case of wicked godlessness, and Jesus had every reason to be disgusted. He was not personally a victim, but he did not tolerate seeing this mockery of God and exploitation of His worshippers. After reflection, motivated by his love for God and the honor of God’s house, Jesus, on his own, purified the temple.

HIS RIGHT TO ACT

As you can imagine, the Jewish leaders were astonished at the audacity of Jesus. Who did he think he was? They wanted proofs (implying super-natural ones) that Jesus had the authority to act in this way. In their eyes, he was nothing more than a mere carpenter who had become a wandering preacher. It was up to them to supervise the temple.

“So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.” (John 2:18-22)

In similar circumstances, Jesus had told other questioners that only the “sign of Jonah” would be given to them (Matthew 12:38-40, 16:1-4). He was talking about his resurrection. The prophet Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and spent three days in its belly before being vomited onto the beach. Jesus spent three days in the tomb before coming out, a victor over death. In saying “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” Jesus gave essentially the same response.

He was not talking about the impressive edifice that King Herod had begun to renovate and enlarge 46 years earlier. He was speaking of his body. The

Jews destroyed his body by causing him to be killed on the cross. But Jesus returned to life, his body resurrected and glorified. His resurrection was the definitive and incontrovertible proof of his identity and his authority to act as he did in the temple court on this day.

CONCLUSION

Jesus once said that he was gentle and humble in heart. In many Gospel passages, we can see his great compassion for those who suffered. He taught and demonstrated mercy. He was very patient with the disciples, although they were often slow to understand. But let's not think that Jesus was only sweetness. He felt anger in the presence of sin, especially hardness of heart. His anger was justified. And he had a right to act on this justified anger. In regard to the vendors in the temple and the moneychangers, he chased them out but he did not really punish them.

One day Jesus will return. We will see one more time both his goodness and his anger, the richness of his love and the severity of his judgment. According to 2 Thessalonians 1:7,8, he will give to those who are his "rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." Will you have rest on that day? Have you obeyed the Gospel by faith in Christ, repentance from sin, confession of your faith before men, and immersion in water (baptism) in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? Or, on that day, will you know his anger? It all depends on you.