



## **A House of Prayer, Not a Den of Robbers**

*Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*

Matthew 21:12-17

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I read the account of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem along with His cleansing of the temple this morning because the two events go together. The two accounts -- the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the Temple -- are meant to be read together. Together they declare Christ's kingship, His rightful reign over His people and the truth that He is the prophesied Messiah of God.

Let me explain what I mean. As we said two weeks ago, Christ's entry into Jerusalem was not triumphant in the human sense. It was not, for instance, how a Roman conqueror would have entered into Jerusalem, how a conquering king would have entered a city. It was humble. It was in accordance with the Scriptures. It was the presentation of the King of kings coming to wage war against sin and Satan, to triumph over sin, hell, Satan and death by the laying down of His life a ransom for sinners and to rise from the dead in power and majesty. He entered Jerusalem on Sunday, in the manner that Zechariah prophesied He would, as the rightful King of God's people, and then on Monday, Jesus went to the Temple, again in accordance with Scripture, to lay claim to the Temple and to declare openly His rule over the Spiritual life of the people.

Just as His entry into Jerusalem had been spoken of by the prophets, so was His coming to the Temple. Malachi had prophesied: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years." (Malachi 3:1-4, ESV)

Malachi told the nation that the Messiah was coming and He was coming to purify the people of God. He was coming to the temple and when he did, Malachi asks, "Who can stand in His presence as righteous? Who can stand before Christ as holy and faithful and fully obedient to the Law of God? Who of you can stand before Him as blameless?" The answer to that question is not a single person, no-one, nobody. The Messiah must come to purify the worship of God by His true people.

He must come to make for Himself worshippers who offer to the Lord worship that is pleasing to Me."

The imagery that Malachi uses here is fierce stuff. He says: For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver...That is strong imagery that Israelites would have understood perfectly. He talks about a fuller's soap. A fuller was someone who washed clothes. Back in Malachi's day, they didn't have washing machines with a gentle cycle or a delicates cycle. No, in Malachi's day, when they did laundry they used this strong lye soap that you had to dilute with water or it would burn a hole in your clothes and they used stones and wooden paddles. They would first soak the laundry in water and mix in some soap and beat around with a wooden paddle and then take it out of the water and scrub and scrub it on rocks until the dirt came out. That's the picture the Israelites would have had in their minds. The Messiah was going to come and scrub His people until they were clean. But the imagery doesn't stop there.

Malachi says, "He is like a refiner's fire... He will sit like a refiner and purifier of silver...refine them like gold and silver." They would have understood this picture too. When gold or silver was mined from the earth, it didn't just come out in a pure state. There are a host of impurities in any piece of silver or gold when you take it out of the ground and the way that a refiner or purifier of silver would make the metal pure was by placing the ore in a crucible and applying heat to it. As the heat was applied and increased the ore would melt and as it melted completely, the impurities would float to the surface where the refiner would skim them off using a ladle. As the temperature increased, more and more impurities would be released and ladled away. When the refiner was finally able to see his face reflected in the silver remaining in the crucible, he would remove it from the fire, for he knew that he had pure silver. This is

the picture of what the Messiah does. He will refine His people until He sees reflected in them His own holiness.

So Malachi is saying in so many words to the Israelites that when the Messiah comes He is going to beat the sin out of you, He is going to burn up the dross that is in you. He is going to purify for Himself a people who give to the Lord the worship of which He is deserving, lives of faithfulness and devotion and obedience.

So, what we are looking at today is Christ's premeditated, fierce and frontal attack on false religion. It is His frontal attack, as the Messiah, prophesied by Malachi, upon the corrupted Judaism of His day – a religion that was crassly commercialized and superficial, that was sinfully exclusive, and which was hypocritical, self-serving, and superstitious. These are some difficult and revealing words. This is the confrontational Jesus, the Jesus we are uncomfortable with, but the Jesus who cannot be ignored, the Jesus who challenges us and the reality of our profession. This is the King cleaning His house. Let's look at it this morning.

A Frontal Attack On False Religion (v. 12-13) Matthew says: "And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21:12–13, ESV)

Now this is the second time that Jesus cleansed the temple. He did it at the beginning of His ministry – John records that – and He does it here at the end of His ministry. In a premeditated, thought-out, and deliberate way, Jesus enters the Temple and in righteous anger, in holy fierceness, begins to cleanse His house. Again, let me say, this is not an act of spontaneous anger, but of deliberate design. It is an act designed to confront the utter corruption and distortion and defilement of the heart of the worship and sacrificial system that God had given to Israel. Let me try to set the scene for you so you can understand the heart behind Christ's actions here.

Remember that it is Passover week and men from all over the nation of Israel were required to come to Jerusalem, with their families, during the Passover to do two things. One, they were to

come to the Temple to pay the annual Temple tax of one half shekel to the Temple treasury. You couldn't use Greek or Roman coins, you had to use the special Temple coin because of its high grade of silver. So you had to exchange your money in order to make that offering. Two, they were required to come and to offer sacrifice to God, to give Him a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, a spotless animal to serve as a sacrifice of atonement for their sins.

Let me explain the layout of the Temple area so you can get the picture of what was going on that day. The Temple area was composed of a series of concentric courts with the Temple at the middle. The outermost court of the Temple area was the Court of the Gentiles, where Gentiles could worship but beyond which they were not allowed to go. The next court in was the Court of the Women, beyond which the Israelite women were not allowed to pass. Then there was the Court of Israel, beyond which laymen were not allowed to go. Then there was the Temple itself, the Holy Place beyond which the priests could not go, and then there was the Holy of Holies. Now to help the whole worship thing along, some enterprising businessmen had set up a pretty good racket in the court of the Gentiles. It went something like this. Since to worship God through paying the Temple tax you needed to have Temple money, some moneychangers were available for you trade your Greek and Roman coins for the Temple money. Of course there would be an exchange fee, but that's the cost of doing business. And rather than having to drag your sacrifice, whatever it might be, along your journey to Jerusalem, you could just wait until you got to town and browse the animals that were for sale in the Court of the Gentiles. Besides, even if you did manage to bring a sacrifice with you, it would probably be rejected. But all of the animals available in the courtyard were already pre-approved for sacrifice by the priests so you could pick the one you wanted to offer and that would be the end of it. Pretty simple. It was kind of like going grocery shopping, compare the stuff that was there and then make a purchase that was in keeping with your budget. Behind all of this was Annas, the former high priest, who granted the business permits and whose family got a cut on all the transactions that took place.

So, into the midst of this chaos comes Jesus. For the last 21 years or so, every year since He was 12, Jesus had watched men desecrate the temple by turning it into an emporium. The sight disgusts Him. The Temple is filled with the ruckus of business. He is outraged by the disrespect, the irreverence and the greed. Why is Jesus so angry?

He is furious over the devaluing of God. He is angry over the profaning of the holy. He is angry that God has been obscured by all of the junk going on at the Temple. They had made

worshiping God just another business transaction. Nothing special, no sense of the holy, no sense of the divine, no sense of wonder at the power and the love of God, no sense of God's presence. Just doing the thing that we always do.

Do you see what happened? Think about the reason that the Temple existed. The purpose of the Temple was to provide a means and a place where people could come into contact with the Holy God, and experience his grace and his love. The Temple was where people were to go to offer sacrifice to God for all that He has done and to ask for forgiveness for their sins; it was the place to hear God's word, and receive guidance. The temple represented God's presence, his availability to all who sought Him in truth, His covenant love for all who called upon Him in faith. The temple was the place where the nation of Israel could bask in the glory and the presence of God. It was the very center of worship and God's presence was to dominate the senses of the worshippers. But coming to the temple had turned into going to Wal-Mart. And rather than worshipping God with the best you could offer out of a heart of love and gratitude, it turned into a mindless quest to find the best exchange rate on your money and the cheapest offering you could buy. The glory of God had become obscured so that the temple was no longer a place of worship. It was no longer a place to meet with Almighty God.

The commercialization of religion is at the heart of much of this. The Jewish religious leaders had turned the Temple into a financial windfall for themselves and had no real care of the souls of the people. They just made the Temple into a money generating, profit making machine. It is analogous to modern day preachers and churches that preach heresy, who condemn souls, who fleece the flock and never feed them the gospel that is life. It is always some new gimmick and program to populate the building and push the programs forward, building their own kingdom and fiefdom at the expense of eternal souls, hiding the soul-cleansing blood of the lamb.

The crass commercialization of Christianity is everywhere. You see it in the Christian junk mail and church advertisements and billboards that play on the worst stereotypes of the church – church advertising against church, the advertising that is so unashamedly man-centered and flesh feeding. You see it in the way that churches have certain target groups, a demographic that they are seeking to reach and tailor their “services” to attract. Churches that bring all manner of foolishness into the church in order to appear relevant, preaching a market driven message. You see it in the endless parade of worthless books that ride the latest fad in evangelicalism, the follow ups to those books, the specialization of those books for kids,

students, singles, couples, etc. and all the Jesus Junk that goes along with it. You see it in the packaged sermon series that you can buy so men never have to meet with God, be instructed by the Holy Spirit, or even be called by Christ to preach the Word of God. Churches where you need to have a ticket for entrance to the worship service and if you don't happen to have one, you can download the sermon from the Internet for a small fee. You see it in the endless parade of fools and liars on TV. It is sickening. It is to Jesus, both then and now.

The Temple was meant to be a place of worship, for meeting with and sacrificing to the Holy God. It was a place for praise and devotion, got seeking His will and blessing. It was not meant to be a combination marketplace, stockyard and bank where hucksters and charlatans carried on their greedy enterprises under the guise of serving and worshipping the Lord.

But there is more to it than that. Jesus says to them: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." Now, here's the thing we need to understand. Whenever Jesus quotes from the Old Testament, He expects that we should understand the context from which the quote comes. This quote from Jesus comes from two different passages in the OT. The first part, "My house shall be called a house of prayer" comes from Isaiah 56:7. The greater context of that verse is the salvation of the Gentiles and their inclusion in the people of God. According to Isaiah 56, the Temple was to be the place where Jews and Gentiles, eunuchs and foreigners, where all people were to be able to approach God in worship, in humility, in faith, and to find blessing in the Lord. God promised to make them joyful in His "house of prayer. Read Isaiah 56:6-7: ""And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."" (Isaiah 56:6–7, ESV) This was God's vision for the Temple.

But because all of this was taking place in the Court of the Gentiles, there was no place for a Gentile to come and pray except in the middle of this bazaar, in the middle of this outdoor mall. The Gentiles were being excluded and prevented from worshipping the Lord. All of this garbage that was going on in the Court of the Gentiles, in the name of worship, was actually making it impossible for any Gentiles that God was calling by His Spirit to even begin to worship. All of this crass commercialism was preventing the Gentiles from being able to worship at all. It was a complete violation of the heart of the Isaiah 56 passage. Not only did all of this garbage that

was going on in the name of religion effective bar the Gentiles from being able to worship God – the Jews didn't care – the noise and racket of what was going on the Court of the Gentiles would have spilled over into the other Temple courts as well. What should have been a place of sacrifice, atonement for sin, and the assurance of divine mercies had turned into a mechanical, one-stop operation for perfunctory religious acts without devotion and delight in the Lord. It was actually keeping people from God, driving people away from God and obscuring His glory, His heart and His character.

My house shall be called a house of prayer, a place that would include Jews and Gentiles, and unhindered place of worship that had become a den of robbers. The phrase “a den of robbers” comes from Jeremiah 7:11. The context of this verse is also important to grasp. In the context of this verse from Jeremiah, the prophet is railing against the worthlessness of a superstitious reverence for the Temple, for the wickedness of the people making it a nationalistic stronghold, and for the hypocrisy of the people living faithlessly and without regard for God and yet offering sacrifices and thinking that God accepted them despite the rebelliousness of their hearts. This phrase is a phrase that describes spiritual anarchy. The Jews were oppressing aliens, stealing, murdering, living according to the passions of their flesh, etc. and still they continued to offer sacrifices in the Temple as if the merely formalistic worship of God would protect them from His judgment. The people engaged in idolatry, trusting deceptive words of false prophets that made them feel good about themselves and their behavior. They trifled with the Lord by breaking His commandments and thinking nothing of it. The false prophets had assured them that as long as they had the temple, then all would be well for them. Puffed up with pride and arrogance, the people had made this Temple – in the same way as the Temple before it had been – a symbol of superstitious belief that God would protect and defend and magnify His people regardless of the state of their hearts toward Him. It was all superstition and idolatry.

Ultimately, you can understand why Christ would be so furious. The Jews as a whole, the religious leaders in particular, had completely missed and, more than that, misrepresented the heart of God. They had misrepresented His holiness, diminished His righteousness, and ignored and had trampled His grace. For that reason, the nation of Israel, the Temple worship, religious leaders were not fulfilling their God-ordained role of being a witness to the nations of the glory, the holiness, the worth, and the saving power of God. They had become worthless. The Jews had utterly failed to be the light to the nations, the testimony to the greatness and glory of God that they were commanded to be. Instead they had thoroughly misrepresented the heart of

God. Beloved, you know how angry we get when someone misrepresents us or our words or our heart – that is what happened here but to an infinite degree.

So this display of Christ's authority is powerful, bold and astonishing. Without any opposition whatsoever, Jesus casts out all of the merchants and drives them away. He rebukes openly the priests and the scribes. The people, the priests and the merchants are powerless to do anything to oppose Him at all. Jesus makes a shambles of the bazaar, wrecking the money tables, freeing the animals and yet no one could raise a hand or a voice against Him. The power and authority of Jesus was undeniable and irresistible. He forcefully manifests His divine hatred of sin, especially the sin that profanes God's name and His holiness so openly and which becomes a stumbling block to others. So we see the fury of Christ displayed and then we see His tenderness as He welcomes the excluded.

Welcoming the Excluded (v.14) Matthew tells us in verse 14: "And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them." (Matthew 21:14, ESV) As the corrupt are expelled from the Temple courts, the needy are welcomed. After cleansing the Temple, Jesus receives the blind and the lame. Christ's eyes, which flashed with anger and fury at the religious chicanery and deception of the priests and merchants, look with mercy upon those who need it. Having driven out what the Jewish leaders had allowed to come in, He then brings in what they had sought to keep out – the blind and the lame. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' time had twisted Scripture in order to come to the belief that the blind and the lame would defile the Temple and that they should be forbidden from coming into the Temple area. They believed that the blind and the lame were blind and lame because of their own personal sin and so were cut off from God. And yet, these are just the kind of people that Christ came to save. This was at the very heart of the Messianic ministry: "And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." (Matthew 11:4–5, ESV)

Jesus refused no-one who truly sought His mercy. Those who most know their need always find themselves accepted, welcomed, and loved by Jesus. In a purposeful, pointed and caring display of mercy, Jesus does not go outside of the Temple mount in order to heal the blind and the lame, He healed them in the very court of the Temple and it causes the priests and scribes to be furious.



Lost Men are Angry Men (v. 15-17) That much is made clear by what happens next. Look starting in verse 15: “But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they 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 infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’”” (Matthew 21:15–16, ESV)

The word, indignant, is a word that carries with it the idea of fury or wrath. The priests were indignant for a lot of reasons. Faithless hearts don’t have to look too hard to be offended. They were angry because Jesus had the courage and audacity to cleanse the Temple that belongs to Him. They were angry because Jesus welcomed and healed the blind and the lame. They were angry because Jesus received the worship of the children in the courts of God. The children’s worship of Jesus was non-regulation. There was no place for this exuberant worship and especially of Jesus. They hated that Christ had entered the Temple and taken center stage and made Himself the central figure. How dare he do that? It was blasphemous to them. That He would receive praise and adoration, again, blasphemous to them. How ironic that they would be blind to the desecration of the Temple Courts which they had allowed, the crassly commercialized, superficial, sinfully exclusive, hypocritical, self-serving, and superstitious garbage that passed for worship with them and that they would oppose the only thing that was right that was going on in the Temple that day – the worship of Jesus.

When they say to Jesus, “Do you hear what these are saying?” – Jesus response is definite and direct and meant to convey that not only does He hear and understand the implications of what they are shouting, but also that He fully approves of their praise. He says: “Yes; have you never read, “ ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’”” Of course they had read Psalm 8 in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They had read it, they just didn’t understand it or see how it could be applied to Jesus in this case because they did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah of God, God incarnate.

When Jesus quotes from Psalm 8 in answering the bleating goats, the chief priests and the scribes, the answer does three things: First, it provided a biblical basis for Jesus to refuse to silence the children. Second, it was a claim to deity since the words were words of praise

directed to God. And, third, it was a reminder to everyone that only those who are willing to become like children who can perceive the truth about Jesus and so be saved.

These religious leaders scorned the revelation of Christ while the children extolled and praised Him as Messianic King. Those considered nobodies recognized the Lord while the proud religious bigots did not. What was the difference? The children accepted the divine revelation of Christ – the healing of the blind and the lame, the revelation of His power and authority, while the religious leaders rejected the divine revelation, even though it was plain as it could be. They had been thoroughly schooled by Christ.

Last we read: “And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.” (Matthew 21:17, ESV) Jesus left them and that is symbolically significant act. This is what Christ will do with the merely religious who refuse to recognize and honor and worship and love Him for who He is and who refuse to humble themselves before Him. God will judge bad churches. He will bring judgment upon churches and upon worshippers whose worship is hollow, whose worship is corrupt. And many times that judgment is the removal of His presence altogether.

What About Us?

Beloved, it is easy for us to sit in judgment on the chief priests and scribes and their actions 2000 years ago and yet to remain oblivious to our own hearts. But that is a worthless way to read Scripture and a worthless way to hear preaching. What if Christ were to suddenly come to His Temple today? What if Christ were to suddenly come to this church today? What would he find here? What would He say?

Here is the thing; Christ’s expectations have not changed. Christ is after worship that is in spirit and in truth. He wants us to worship him in light of His grace, pouring out our gratitude because of what He has done, realizing that we don't inherently deserve His favor, we have been given it to us by His grace, we have received it according to His mercy, and we are simply saved blood-bought sinners, coming into His presence to lift up our hearts to Him in prayer and praise. He doesn’t want our worship corrupted.

What are the ways that commercialism or superficiality manifests itself among us? What are some ways in which we are sinfully exclusive and make it unnecessarily difficult for people to come to Christ? How do hypocrisy, selfishness, and superstition infiltrate our lives with Christ? Here are just some things to consider.

Beloved, I know from experience how easily my worship, our worship, can become mechanical. How easily can we slip into the duty of going to church, of going through the rituals of worship, of singing songs rather mindlessly, of being unmoved by the preaching and application of Scripture, or worse yet being offended by it. I know how easily we can be tempted to come into worship unprepared, to come to worship with habitual, unconfessed still in our hearts, to come all the while knowing that Jesus says: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23–24, ESV) It can become easy to enter worship and leave our hearts unaffected. We have to fight for vitality and authenticity in worship.

I know how easily we can get sucked in the latest evangelical fad, the latest and hottest topic of conversation, the latest preaching phenomenon, to have the right rotation of the right preachers on our iPods, to listen to sermon upon sermon without applying any of it and become hearers of the Word and not doers.

Sometimes, if we are not careful, we wear the fact that we go to a reformed church that gets the gospel right and preaches the Word of God faithfully and accurately as a badge of honor rather than an undeserved blessing of God. We can mount a mighty defense for a minor point of doctrine while neglecting “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” (cf. Matthew 23:23, ESV)

I know that too often we make much of head knowledge and because we do, to use grace as a license for sin. We make much of having a head full of doctrine, but do we have a heart of obedience and love?

There are some ways, I think, that we put a stumblingblock before unbelievers or even before new or immature believers. I think, for some of us, the longer that we have been saved, the more doctrine and theology that we have learned, the more we understand the ways of God, we sort of unintentionally move the bar regarding what is required to be saved. Rather than simple faith in Christ alone for salvation and trusting His work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, in our minds we add other requirements – the ability to perfectly articulate the doctrines of grace, the use of the approved translation of the Scriptures, the proper vocabulary and the right personal convictions. Beloved, salvation belongs to those who repent and believe the gospel of Christ, who trust in Him alone – the rest will come.

We are sinfully exclusive when we serve as God’s screening committee and predetermine in our own minds who does and does not have hope of being saved. We do it when we do not speak the message of the gospel as we should but get wrapped up in attacking the symptoms of people’s lostness rather than going to the heart of the issue – the need for a Savior and forgiveness of sins. We do it when we are satisfied for we, ourselves to be saved, and that is good enough. If we have the message of life, we need to speak it.

We are like the chief priests and scribes when we are not intentional to pursue unbelievers – they are not untouchables. I hear people say in a rather disheartened way, “No one in my workplace is saved.” Good. That means you are there for a reason. We need to get outside of our comfort zone. God’s goal is not to make you comfortable in your workplace by surrounding you with believers, it is to advance the gospel of His Son.

We need to work on being welcoming to the unbeliever, hospitable even though it takes work and investment, even when they do not respond instantaneously to the gospel. So often we look down our noses at the very people that before God’s grace we used to be. Very rarely do we err on the side of too much effort, too much hospitality, too much warmth.

Beloved, remember how it is that Jesus purifies for Himself worshippers. He brings forth true worship by saving sinners, saving rebels, by transforming the enemies of God into the children of God, children who bring forth true worship from hearts that are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and lay hold of the saving work of Christ upon the cross by faith. And He continues to

purify those worshippers for Himself as He roots out sin patterns as He renews our minds, as He convicts and brings to repentance, as He powerfully sanctifies into His holy image.

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple needs to lead us to examine our own hearts before Him, to ask the Lord to examine us, examine me, and see if there is any wicked way in me. I know our heart as a church is not to be crassly commercialized, superficial, sinfully exclusive, hypocritical, self-serving, and superstitious. I know that. I know we desire to be pleasing to the Lord, faithful, genuine, welcoming, sincere, to have depth, to be sacrificial and real. And that requires wrestling with texts like this one that we are looking at today. Wrestling and applying the text where we need to.

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