

Overturing Exploitation & Driving Out Oppression

John 2.12-22

Phil Purkiss

¹²After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days. ¹³When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

OK, we are picking up from where Sam left off last week, when she spoke about the wedding at Cana and the miracle that Jesus did, we are now looking at the account when Jesus cleanses the temple. Now interestingly, the gospel of John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, whereas the synoptic gospels place this event at the end of Jesus' ministry. Now there are some that suggest that Jesus did this twice, whereas others suggest that the writers of the gospel account may have had reasons to order the events differently. The synoptic gospels generally place this event around the same time of Jesus' triumphal entry in to Jerusalem, and when he weeps over Jerusalem, which certainly makes some sense in terms of what is going with Jesus.

In John, the event falls after the wedding of Cana, which may be significant because at the wedding we have the idea of new wine and something new that God is doing, and after this event we have the conversation about being born again, and here Jesus is condemning this practice that is happening at temple, which is meant to be a place of worship, and declaring that there is a new temple in which we connect to God – which is the person of Jesus Christ.

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Now John places this event at the time of the Jewish Passover, which is very interesting because John refers to Jesus attending five festivals throughout this gospel, whereas the synoptic gospels don't necessarily have the same emphasis. The reason I find this interesting is that from my understanding of John is that it is written for a non-Jewish audience, and it almost seems like John is trying to get his non-Jewish audience to understand that this is a very Jewish Gospels, that is steeped in the daily Jewish living, which included the various festivals that Jews would attend. I believe that the ancient Jewish festivals point to Kingdom and a foretaste of something that God is going to do in and through his kingdom, and I wonder whether John is showing us what signs these signs mean in terms of Jesus, the Kingdom and the missional work that God is calling us to do.

The Passover feast is about the freedom of God's people from their oppressors, the Egyptians, and God bringing them to leave the land of oppression and bring them into the land of promise, and here

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in the text we Jesus going into the temple courts and condemning the injustices of the greedy and the perversion of worship.

¹⁴In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Now the Jesus is in the temple courts, and to understand what is happening here, we need to firstly understand how the temple would have been laid out. Now this particular temple is Herod's Temple and covered something like 35 acres of ground. Now there were eight gates that lead into the first and the largest court – the court of the gentiles. Now the Court of the Temple was open to anybody, but if you were not Jewish this was this was as far as you could go, and the idea of this court is that this is where Gentiles could come and pray. The actual Temple was enclosed by a balustrade, and at the entrances to it were warning notices, that would say foreigners have freedom of access provided they do not go beyond the balustrade which went all around the central edifice and which no uncircumcised could cross without incurring the death penalty.

Now from the court of the gentiles, fourteen steps led up to the Beautiful Gate, which led into the Court of the Women, now if you were a Jewish woman this is as far as you could go, and this is where the poor boxes were, where the widow would have cast her last two mites (Luke 21.1-4). Another fifteen steps led up to the famous Gate of Nicanor, to which Mary had brought the child at the time of his presentation; this led through the Court of the Men to that of the priests, which had in its center the altar for the burnt offerings and to the left of it a large basin called the Brazen Sea resting upon twelve bulls cast in bronze. Further steps led up to the actual temple, a comparatively small building. A priceless curtain, embroidered with a map of the known world, concealed from view what lay beyond, and none except the priest on duty was allowed to go farther.

Now in the temple courts, or the courts of the gentiles, Jesus found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. Now the reason we have people selling cattle, sheep and doves, is because people would have come on pilgrimage to temple and it would have been impractical for them to bring animals with them on their pilgrimage journey, so some budding entrepreneurs would have seen a gap in the market and an opportunity to make some significant profits – and this is what you see happening. These people selling the animals were exploiting the basic desire of individuals to come and worship God, by selling animals for sacrifice for a profit, and it would have been the poor people that would have suffered as a result.

Jesus' actions were premeditated – he made the whip.

The next thing that you have happening here is money changers, taking your money and exchanging for Temple Currency, and again these people were exploiting people, the exchange rates would have high, and again the poor and oppressed would have been exploited.

So you have several things happening here:

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1. Firstly the authorities have allowed the House of God to become a House of Merchandise, and people are using God and worship as a way of making money, and in the process exploiting people.
2. Secondly, the court of the gentiles, which was meant to be a place that gentiles could come and pray to God, has been turned into a noisy market place, and the gentiles are turned away.
3. Thirdly, the poor and oppressed would have been robbed and exploited through the sale of sacrifice merchandise and money changing, smacking the very values that the temple is meant to represent in the face.
4. Finally, the purity of the temple and worship has been desecrated, in that this is no longer a house of prayer and worship, through the activity and exploitation.

Now Mark 11.17 records Jesus saying 'It is not written my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers', and he is referring to Isaiah 56.7. Jesus takes a whip and literally over turns tables, more than likely whip some people, and drove out these traders out of the temple courtyard.

His disciples, at some later point in time, relate this event to Psalms 69.9 which speaks significantly of the life of Jesus and refers to this event by stating the 'Zeal of your house will consume me'. (Maybe even justifying his events).

I think this story account speaks significantly of God anger when it comes to how we take worship and prayer, which is something so pure; so beautiful; and so powerful, and we corrupt it with greed, religion, and exploitation. When we make access to God, his Kingdom, and good things associated with that, something that people need to acquire from us to the extend where we stop them from getting to God and his Kingdom, we are desecrating the temple. And I am not just talking about how we use religious merchandise to do this, but how we make people pay us homage before we give them what God has freely given to us. This story speaks about when we take worship and prayer, and we make it something that pushes those who don't know God away, just like the gentiles who could not get to the court to pray because of these money changers. When we become so consumed with whole religious ideology of worship and pray that the people who need to pray can't get to the place to do so, because we have crowded that place with junk that has no right there.

We need to pull down the barriers that stop those who need to get to that sacred space, and kets the gentiles come into the courts – get rid of the stupid rules and religious paraphernalia that mean nothing but drive people away. Let us overturn the tables of exploitation, and allow people to freely access what God gives out freely, with no homage paid to you or me, no payment to a religious idea necessary.

¹⁸Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

²⁰The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

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Now when Jesus does this, the Jews demand a sign from him to prove his authority, and what amazes me is that he is healing the sick, raising the dead, and yet they are still demanding a sign. What you see is that the miracles that Jesus does are signs but not signs to everyone, they are signs to the poor, oppressed, broken and sick but for the power brokers and those in authority, that are not willing to believe, he has no signs. In Matthew 12.39-40 Jesus says:

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

And Jesus says something similar back to these leaders, that they will get a sign which is destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days. And this just goes over their heads and they miss the significance of what Jesus is saying, and John helps us to try and understand what Jesus is saying because the Greek word used initially for 'temple' is 'hee-er-on', which means 'sacred place'. However when Jesus starts talking about destroying this temple and raising it up, the Greek word used is different, it is 'nah-os' which means 'to dwell'.

When Jesus speaks about destroying the temple and raising it up, he is speaking about his body, and he is saying that Herod's temple, this sacred place is only a symbol, the real place is where God dwells, and that is in this temple – this temple is the place where people worship and pray to the father – this body is the House of my Father. The literal temple is just a sacred place but my body is the dwelling place of God, in this temple there will be no courts dividing who can come where, it his temple – whosoever will let them come.

He is prophetically referring to the nature of his own death and resurrection.

Conclusion

This account for me tells me about the justice of the kingdom and the need to overturn the tables of exploitation and drive out the tools of oppression whenever we find them. It tells me that worship and prayer is connected with liberty and justice, and how what we do in the name of God and as God's people, must never be used to exclude, exploit and oppress others.

In fact, and on the contrary, we through the Spirit need to overturn the tables of exploitation where we see them, and we need to drive out the exploiters where ever we see them, because these are not the ways of God's Kingdom.

We need to let the zeal for God's house, for the Kingdom, consume us, and cause us to act with the same level of passion and intensity that Jesus did, whenever we see something that is contrary to the kingdom.