

John 2:13–25 (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup> So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Just as Jesus worked a miracle on the purification vessels at the wedding, rendering them obsolete and replacing the purification water with new wine, now he promises to do a greater work replacing and fulfilling the Temple. He declares himself to be the Temple, and that this Temple's destruction and reconstruction will outshine that of Herod's temple.

### **One Cleansing or Two?**

One thing that is important to put on the table and discuss is the question of how John's account of Jesus cleansing the temple relates to those reported in the Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John has this event located early in Jesus'

ministry, while the other gospels have it later, near the end. There are three ways to resolve this (**What are they?**):

1. **One cleansing, late** - Under this scenario, Jesus cleansed the Temple once, the week before he was crucified as the three synoptic gospels report. This fits most modern historical reconstructions that view Jesus' activity in and opposition to the Temple to be one of the key human drivers behind his arrest and crucifixion. That is, Jesus' was perceived as a threat to the religious authorities and their way of life, and it was his action in the Temple that broke the camel's back, so to speak. John places the account early in Jesus' ministry, out of chronological sequence, for literary and theological purposes. The difficulty with this view is that John uses pretty precise chronological language in this story, clearly wanting it to be understood as early.
2. **Two cleansings, one early and one late** - This scenario would have John describing an earlier event that is not reported in the other gospels that happened early in Jesus' ministry. Then, near the end of Jesus ministry, there would have been a second cleansing that as described in the 3 synoptics. The benefit of this view is that it resolves the chronological discrepancies and explains some of the differences in the accounts. There is some difficulty from a historical perspective, since Jesus' actions in the Temple would have been enough to get him put on a terrorist watch list. It's a historical stretch to think that he would have been able to re-enter the complex and perform the same actions again later. Not impossible, but improbable to be sure.
3. **One cleansing, early** - Similar to the other perspective, but with one cleansing that occurred earlier as reported in John's gospel rather than the later. This view would have the 3 synoptics placing the incident chronologically near the end of Jesus' ministry for theological purposes. The purpose would be to tie the temple action to the Jesus' condemnation of the religious establishment, testimony of the barrenness of Judaism, and the prediction of the coming destruction of the Temple. Additionally, since the synoptics only cover the last year of Jesus' ministry, with one trip to Jerusalem, and since this is such a significant event, they would want to tell include the story somewhere.

It is not clear which of the 3 is to be preferred<sup>1</sup>, but it seems more likely that

we are either looking at two cleansings, or one cleansing that was early (views 2 and 3). The argument for this is that in Jesus' dialogue with the Jews in John, they misunderstand his statement about raising the temple in 3 days and they say, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple..." Since Herod's temple construction and renovation project began in 20 BC, 46 years would bring it to AD 26 or 27, a full 3 years from Jesus' crucifixion. Furthermore, with regard to Jesus' statement about tearing down and rebuilding the Temple, these words are cited by witnesses at Jesus' trial as evidence against them, but the accounts are muddled and the witnesses could not agree with one another. This would make sense if they are recalling an event from a few years prior.

### **The Magnificence and Importance of the Temple**

#### **Does anyone know what the temple was like in Jesus' day?**

The temple in Jesus' day was in the process of a grand renovation that began under Herod 50 years prior. After Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586BC and the Israelites exiled to Babylon, the prophets eagerly anticipated their deliverance, with the restoration of the Temple being a key part. As you read in the later books of the Old Testament, some Jews began to return to the land in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and under the leadership of Zerubbabel and direction from the prophets, they undertook to rebuild the temple. This second temple paled in comparison the first. This combined with the continued bondage resulted in a continued longing for the glory of YHWH to return to his house and for Israel to be set free from her captivity. This temple suffered much damage during the next few centuries from various causes.

In 20 BC, Herod began a restoration project to placate his Jewish opponents, during which he essentially tore down and rebuilt Zerubbabel's temple. The biggest part of the work was completed within a decade, but additional work continued on it until AD 64, just before the Jewish War that led to its destruction. Herod's temple exceeded even Solomon's in its size and splendor, essentially doubling the foundation that Solomon built. In order to do so, he also had to change the essential layout of the city of Jerusalem itself. This was a magnificent building by any measure.

In the first century, the Jerusalem temple stood at the center of Jewish

religious, cultural, economic, and political life. Theologically, the significance of the temple is clear:

- **God's Dwelling Place**
- **Place of Feasting**
- **Place of Sacrifice**
- **Place of Cleansing**
- **Place of Prayer**
- **Place of Teaching**

### **The Temple as a Marketplace**

Distressing to Jesus, and what he reacts to in this episode is what the temple had become. Essentially, it had taken on the role of a Marketplace. Each holy occasion, but especially Passover, attracted a large number of people from out of Jerusalem and the place quickly filled up. All were required to pay the half-shekel temple tax, and to offer up a sacrifice. Since the temple tax was required to be in temple coin and most travellers would need to purchase an animal, there was an instant market for money changers and animal sellers. It used to be that these activities took place outside of the temple courts, but under Caiaphas the activities were moved within the temple courts.

Undoubtedly, there were opportunities for corruption and abuse in this scenario, with exorbitant pricing being charged for animals and transaction fees piled up for money exchange - some have even hinted that those who brought their own animals would be rejected and forced to buy an "temple approved" animal from the marketplace. These types of issues would certainly have been a problem to Jesus, and may be the cause for him calling the place a "den of robbers" in the synoptic accounts. Here, however, John makes it clear that the objection is to where these activities are happening, not that they are happening at all. Jesus is objecting to this stuff taking place within the temple courts.

They had obstructed the proper worship functions of the temple - Feasting, Sacrifice, Cleansing, Prayer, and Teaching - with these market activities. In this case, the bulk of the activities take place in the Court of the Gentiles. Nationalism has won the day, as the Gentiles are completely dismissed from having any place to worship in the Temple. The business of the temple had completely overshadowed the purpose of the Temple.

**Do similar things happen in our day, where legitimate concerns have crowded out true piety and worship of God? Or have prevented outsiders a chance to come to know God? Do our religious institutions reflect God's desires or do they serve human interests?**

**"Zeal for your house consumes me"**

Jesus will simply not have this, and he engages in what amounts to a prophetic act against the Temple authorities. This is a very public sphere - the center of religious, legal, and economic life - and Jesus engages in a very public protest. He clears the sellers and money changers and charges them not to make his Father's house a house of trade. This is a prophetic critique, recognizing the true purpose of the Temple and calling the authorities to account for not allowing it.

Isaiah tells us that when Israel's fortunes are restored, this is what should be occurring.

*“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.” The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” (Isaiah 56:6–8, ESV)*

This is precisely what is not happening in Jesus' day, and he condemns them for it. In the synoptic account, when Jesus uses the term "den of robbers" he is drawing on language from Jeremiah 7, which is a sustained critique against the people of Judah who had dismissed faithful worship of YHWH, yet still maintained a show of piety and a trust in YHWH's protection because he dwelt in their temple. Jeremiah's promise is that the people and their temple will be destroyed. Redemption in Israel will not occur until this corruption of true worship is removed and replaced.

**What of Jesus response? Was it over top? How to we reconcile this with the common picture of Jesus?**

The disciples connect Jesus' action with Psalm 69:9, the psalm of the righteous sufferer.

### **Jesus' Response and Moral Authority**

Nobody objected to Jesus' critique of what was happening. He carried true moral authority and it seems that the people would have seen that he was right, and that the temple had become something other than what was intended. Jesus' indignation is a righteous response to wickedness - he is acting out of love for his Father and love for his Father's sheep, who are being led astray and hindered from worship by the self-interest of those operating the temple.

Jesus is consumed by a zeal for his father's house. This is in contrast to the zeal that was most common and honored in Jesus' day - which was a revolutionary or nationalistic zeal, a desire to cleanse Israel of sinners, to overthrow the Romans, to reestablish Israel as a kingdom power - this is what zeal signified. Paul was a zealous Jew, and persecuted the Church because of it. The people who started the rebellion in AD 66 that led to the destruction of the Temple were zealots. Jesus showed them that the true zeal is that which is concerned with the Father's honor and his desire to be worshipped by all nations, not a nationalistic or religious fervor.

**This poses a question to us - are we outraged by the things that outrage God? What outrages us? What kind of zeal do we find in ourselves?**

What does it look like in the Church today to be consumed by zeal for the Father's house? How do you think Jesus' actions would go over in the Church of our day? Why is Jesus opposing people who are ostensibly rooting the right team? In first century Rome, where pagan immorality abounds, where idolatry in the most grotesque forms happens, where oppression is seen in the very structures of society, yet Jesus mounts his protest at the seat of authority for a people who at least give lip service to the worship of YHWH. **What lesson is there in this for us?**

This is not to say that we do not have a role to play in challenging injustice and disobedience in the so-called "non-religious" areas of society. When

Jesus confronts the temple, he's going to the Vatican, to City Hall, and to Wall Street at the same time. There was no concept of separation of Church and State in Jesus' day, so he was speaking prophetically to both. What's needed from the Church in the political and economic sphere is speaking prophetically into those areas and shaping the hearts and minds of members to think biblically in these areas. We need less organizing and playing the world's game on its own terms and more prophetic witness, speaking the counsel of God regardless of who we offend.

### **"Destroy this Temple"**

After Jesus cleared out the money changers and the animal sellers, the Jews asked him for proof that he had the authority to do these things. They ask for a sign. It's noteworthy that John sets out to tell of several signs that Jesus did to reveal his glory in order that we may believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet, in this book, each time someone asks him for a sign, Jesus rebuffs the request. In this case, he promises a sign but not what they were expecting. He says "destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days." They are incredulous, having misunderstood his meaning to refer to the physical building. An impossible sign to say the least, given that the temple has been under construction for 46 years, Jesus says he will rebuild it in 3 days? It's not that destroying and rebuilding the temple was unheard of, since many in John's day expected and hoped for a new temple to fulfill Ezek. 40-46, and many view Herod's temple as illegitimate and corrupt.

This statement by Jesus was later used against him by false witnesses at his trial. In Mark 14:58, we find an interesting recollection, distorted from Jesus' original statement and not agreeing with each other, perhaps reflecting the passing of time: *"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' "* Yet even about this their testimony did not agree." (Mark 14:58–59, ESV)

### **Jesus - The Real Temple**

John makes clear, however, that Jesus was referring to his own body and upcoming death and resurrection, which would establish a new covenant and put an end to the function of the temple as the place of service to God. In place of the Temple, Jesus describes his own body as the temple, the

dwelling place of God, where heaven and earth meet, where sacrifice, cleansing, and forgiveness are accomplished, are where the Word of God is taught in its fullness. In Jesus is feasting and community, hope and deliverance. This is simply a continuation of the theme that began with the "Word became flesh and tabernacled among us" and continued with "you will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is the Messiah who has come to change the meaning of worship and sacrifice. This theme we'll see continue in later chapters where Jesus declares that the hour is coming (and now is) when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth and not in any particular location.

### **Jesus overturns the tables in the Church - Revelation 2-3**

Jesus' zeal for his Father's house did not stop with the temple cleansing, but continues to this day. We get a glimpse of this in Revelation 2-3, which for some of the churches addressed could be compared to Jesus coming in and overturning the tables. **What if Jesus were to visit our church?**

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What are the apparent discrepancies between the Temple cleansing account in John and that which is reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? How can we reconcile these?

What was the Temple like in Jesus' day? What theological significance did it serve?

What made Jesus so upset about what was happening at the Temple?

Do similar things happen in our day, where legitimate concerns have crowded out true piety and worship of God? Or have prevented outsiders a chance to come to know God?

Do our religious institutions reflect God's desires or do they serve human interests?

What do you make of Jesus' response? How does it square with the common picture of Jesus in our culture?

Are we outraged by the things that outrage God? What outrages us? What kind of zeal do we find in ourselves?

What if Jesus were to visit our church?

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<sup>1</sup> There is very little dispute that maintaining a straight-line chronology was not the primary focus of the gospel writers. For example, in Mark's gospel,

Jesus curses a fig tree, cleanses the Temple, and then the next day they pass by the fig tree and it is withered, whereas in Matthew's gospel, Jesus cleanses the temple and then the next day walks by a fig tree, curses it, and it withers right away. On this subject, Carson, "Intro to Matthew", *Expositors Commentary*, Vol.8, 38 notes:

"Some of the material is organized along thematic lines, some according to a loose chronology, still other pericopes are linked by some combination of catchwords, themes, OT attestation, genre, and logical coherence. The result is not exactly a history, biography, theology, confession, catechism, tract, homage, or letter - though it is in some respects all these. It is a 'Gospel,' a presentation of the 'good news' of Jesus the Messiah."