

THE TEMPLE CLEANSED: AUTHORITY OVER GOD'S HOUSE MATHEW 21:12–16

Introduction

The cleansing of the temple took place on Monday, the day after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mark told us this.

*Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. **Mark 11:11***

The scene was this: teeming thousands had lined the roadway for Jesus' triumphal entry. As He rode along to the shouts of welcome from the crowds, He was led right up to the steps of the temple. He entered the temple, as Mark said, "looked around at everything," and observed all that was going on. He stood off to the side observing all the corruption. After some time, heartbroken and weary, He left and returned to Bethany to spend Sunday night. When He arose on Monday morning, He returned to the temple to cleanse it of those who profaned its sacredness.

Four things should be noted about the temple during the last week of our Lord's life.

1. Jesus was ending His ministry in the temple, His Father's house of prayer, the place where God's presence dwelt in a very, very special way. He is about to complete His life upon earth, a glorious ministry fulfilling the will of God perfectly. The night before, as He stood off by Himself in the temple observing all that was taking place, His thoughts were very contemplative: meditating upon His Father; upon His life now about to be completed; upon the great sacrifice He was to pay for man's sins; upon the corruption of the temple taking place all around Him; upon the worshipping that should have been taking place; and much more. His heart was drawn ever so close to God, yet it was broken and weeping within. Right before Him was a picture of the terrible sin for which He was to die. The temple itself, the place where men should be able to draw close to God, was corrupted by men. It had become anything but a house of prayer. It was a place for commercialism, for man's greed.
2. Jesus was revealing who He was by cleansing the temple. He was proclaiming to all generations that He had the right to determine how the temple was to be used and to purge it of corruptions. As God's Son, the temple was His dwelling place, the place where the worship of God was to be especially known.
3. Jesus was revealing how men were to treat and use the temple of God.
4. Jesus began and ended His ministry by cleansing the temple. The two cleansings were separate events which marked the opening and closing of His ministry. The importance of the temple as God's house of prayer and worship was thereby demonstrated.

When our Lord entered Jerusalem, He did not go up to the palace of the King nor to the courts of the rulers, but He went up to the temple, the House of God. His kingdom was

not of this world, not physical, but of heaven and spiritual. His authority and rule were in the temple of God and in the hearts of men. Therefore, He went up to the temple of God to cleanse it and to teach men how the temple was to be used.

- I. The temple (church) is to be a place where people are not exploited (v. 12).
- II. The temple (church) is to be a house of prayer (v. 13).
- III. The temple (church) is to be a place for ministry (v. 14).
- IV. The temple (church) is to be a place where wonderful things are done (v.15).
- V. The temple (church) is to be a place where Christ is praised (vv. 15-16).

MATHEW 21:12–16 TEMPLE

One must understand the layout of the temple in order to see what was happening in this event. The temple sat on top of Mount Zion and was thought to have covered about thirty acres of land. It consisted of two parts, the temple building itself and the temple precincts or courtyards. The Greek language has two different words to distinguish which is meant.

1. *The temple building* (naos) was a small ornate structure which sat in the centre of the temple property. It was called the Holy Place or Holy of Holies, and only the High Priest could enter its walls, and he could enter only once during the year, on the Day of Atonement.
2. *The temple precincts* (hieron) were four courtyards which surrounded the temple building, each decreasing in their importance to the Jewish mind. It is critical to remember that great walls separated the courts from each other.
 - a. First, there was the Inner Court of the Priests. Only the priests were allowed to enter this court. Within the courtyard stood the great furnishings of worship: the Altar of Burnt Offering, the Brazen Laver, the Seven Branched lamp stand, the Altar of Incense, and the Table of Showbread.
 - b. The Court of the Israelites was next. This was a huge courtyard where Jewish worshippers met together for joint services on the great feast days. It was also where worshippers handed over their sacrifices to the priests.
 - c. The Court of the Women was the third Courtyard. Women were usually limited to this area except for worship. They could, however, enter the Court of the Israelites when they came to make sacrifice or worship in a joint assembly on a great feast day.
 - d. The Court of the Gentiles was the last courtyard. It covered a vast space, surrounding all the other courtyards, and was the place of worship for all Gentile converts to Judaism.

Three facts need to be noted about the Court of the Gentiles.

1. It was the courtyard farthest removed from the centre of worship, the Holy of Holies which represented God's very presence.
2. A high wall separated the Court of the Gentiles from the other courts, disallowing any Gentile a closer approach into God's presence. There were, in fact, tablets hanging all around the wall threatening death to any Gentile who went beyond his own courtyard.
3. It was in the Court of the Gentiles where so much commercialism took place. There was a regular commercial market within its walls. How did a commercial market ever get into the temple of God? Very simply, greed. Worshippers needed animals, (oxen, sheep, doves), incense, meal, wine, oil, salt and other items for their sacrifices and offerings. Pilgrims from foreign nations needed money exchanged. At some point in the history of the temple, the priests had decided to take advantage of the market themselves instead of letting retailers on the outside reap all the profits. So the priests began to set up booths within the court of the Gentiles and to lease out space to *outside* retailers. These often turned out to be family members. The owner of the booths or space was the High Priest or Annas. The courtyard was filled with booth-like spaces where worshippers could find any kind of service they needed. The atmosphere was one of commercial traffic and commotion, not of worship and prayer.

Remembering the teeming thousands who attended the great feasts, we can imagine the loudest commotion and our picture would still come short of the actual scene. Who can picture thousands of animals with their peculiar noises, wastes, and smells within the temple of God? And for what? What would cause men to so abuse the worshipping centre of God? As said above, money, the greed of men. It is no wonder Christ did what He did. He could not do otherwise, for He was the Son of God, the Messiah sent into the world to bring about a true worship of God. And there was no hope of worship within the Court of the Gentiles. Prayer and worship were impossible. □

I. Mathew 21:12 Temple/Church, Not a Place for Exploitation

The temple or church is to be a place where people are not exploited. Note what Jesus did to show this.

1. He went into the temple (Court of the Gentiles) where God's presence was to be and where He and others should be able to worship in quietness and meditation. But what He found was the very opposite: commotion, commercial selling and buying.
2. He reacted in the power and cleansing judgment of God — the kind of power and cleansing judgment that causes men to tremble before God (Phil. 2:9-11).

3. He ran through the temple doing three things: (a) He chased out *all* who were buying and selling; (b) He threw over the tables of the money-changers; and (c) He threw over the chairs of the dove dealers.

John 2:16 *To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"*

1 Cor 11:22 *Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!*

Lev 19:30 *"Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord."*

Eccl 5:1 *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*

Jer 7:30 *The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it.*

Zep 3:4 *Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law.*

Thought 1. There is serious warning here. The temple was corrupted for money; the church can be. People who came to worship were taken advantage of; they were used for material gain. Note something that should really speak to the church. The people were sold items that were necessary for their worship. They were not just items that would help them in their spiritual growth and their worship; they were essential items. Without them, the people were not able to worship.

Now think for a moment. If the items were necessary for their worship and growth, what was wrong with what they did? The words of v. 12 tell us: "Jesus... drove out all who were buying and selling there." The buying and selling of the items for worship and growth were necessary and good, but not within the temple. They were to be done outside the temple walls, off the temple grounds. The temple and church are not the place for commercialism.

Thought 2. People's desire for worship and spiritual growth is not to be used for material gain, neither by the church nor within the church. Church leadership has to be responsible for protecting its worshippers from abusing the hallowed ground set apart for the worship of God.

Thought 3. Legitimate things, such as buying and selling items that help us grow, can be used wrongly. *Where* something is done is critical. Buying and selling is not to take place in God's church. The point is: worship should be the preoccupation on a person's mind when he is within the church.

Thought 4. Jesus' anger can be fierce. Note who aroused such fierce anger in Him.

- 1) Those who abused God's temple (church).

- 2) Those who exploited others.
- 3) Those who made it impossible for others to truly worship God.

Thought 5. Note what happens to the man who abuses God's temple and exploits others: he is "driven out."

II. *Mathew 21:13 Temple/Church is a House of Prayer*

Jesus proclaimed the temple to be a house of prayer. This was an Old Testament quotation from two passages.

Isa 56:7 "These I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Jer 7:11 "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!" declares the Lord.

Christ made two points.

1. The temple was to be a house of prayer *for all people*. This included the Gentiles as well as the Jews. All people should have been able to worship in quietness and peace within God's temple. No one should have been barred, separated, or discouraged from worshipping God in His temple. All should have been welcomed.

Note something else. The temple (church) was called a house of prayer, not a house of sacrifice, offerings, teaching, prophecy, or preaching. Everything done within the House of God was to lead to prayer, the *worship of and communion* with the Father.

2. The temple was not to be used for commercial purposes. It was not to be a place of buying and selling, marketing and retailing, stealing, and cheating. It was not to be profaned. The temple was the House of God, God's House of prayer. It was to be a place of sanctity, refined and purified by God Himself. It was to be a place of quietness and meditation, a place set aside for worship, not for buying and selling where man gets gain.

Psa 23:6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psa 84:10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

Psa 122:1 I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Thought 1. The temple or church is a piece of ground and a structure that is set apart for the worship of God. This is the very difference between it and all other grounds and structures. It is specifically set apart and dedicated for the sole purpose of worshipping God. It should, therefore, be used for that purpose. Once it is set apart for Him and His worship, God expects it to be His and to be used for that purpose alone.

Thought 2. There are plenty of markets surrounding the church, places where all services involving buying and selling can take place. The church is to be the house of prayer, not a market place, not a place where man is to get gain. It is not to be profaned, either to a minor degree or to a major degree, by becoming a “den for robbers.”

Thought 3. A person's thoughts are to be centred upon God when he first steps on the hallowed ground of God's temple. While he is on the grounds of God's temple, he is to be praying and meditating upon his Lord. There should be nothing to distract his thoughts until he steps off God's property. Just think! How revered would God's temple, our churches, be if we really brought them back to God's original purpose? How far away have we really gone from true worship centres, from the house of prayer?

III. *Mathew 21:14 Church, A Place of Ministry*

The temple or church is to be a place for ministry. Jesus used the temple as a place for ministry and by this He demonstrated that it was to be a place of ministry for all men.

Two wonderful things happened when the temple was cleansed of its corruptions.

1. The worshippers, those in need (symbolized by the blind and lame), were able to come to Christ to worship and have their needs met quietly.
2. Christ was able to take His rightful position within the temple. He was able to become the prominent figure and to receive the worshippers and to minister to those who had any need.

Thought 1. People are barred, kept away from the church, when corruption is within its walls. It may not be only buying and selling; it may be divisiveness, grumbling, complaining, gossiping, and a host of other sins. But nothing will keep people away from the church quicker than sin within the church.

When such sins are removed and the church is purified, then Christ can and will be known to have His rightful place in the church. People can then come and be helped. They can worship and have their needs met.

Thought 2. The needy are often barred, cut off, and unwelcome by society. Such is not to be true of the church. The church is to have open arms and a pure heart, welcoming all, no matter how poor and needy. In fact, the church is to be the very worship centre for ministry.

IV. *Mathew 21:15 Purpose of the Temple*

The temple is to be a place where wonderful things are done. The term *wonderful things* (*thaumasios*) means wonders, wonderful things, wonderful works. It refers to all the things Christ was doing in the temple. This is the only time the word is used in the New Testament. What a beautiful description of what the church is to be: a place where wonderful things are to be done for God.

Eph 3:20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.

V. *Mathew 21:15–16 Temple/Church: A Place of Praise*

The temple is to be a place where Christ is praised. Note three things that happen in this scene.

1. Children are in the temple (Court of the Gentiles) crying, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Apparently, these children had participated with their parents in the Triumphal Entry the day before and were now witnessing the ministry of Christ to the lame and blind. They pick up the chorus which they had either sung along with their parents or heard sung the day before. The chorus, of course, proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah. It is most unlikely that the children were playing, as some suggest. Two facts suggest a seriousness in what the children were saying: Christ’s clearing out all the commotion and noise and the extreme seriousness and hallowedness of His ministry to the people coming to Him. It is very difficult to picture too much commotion allowed by Christ in His serious moments of ministry; and He certainly would not have allowed the commotion and disturbance of His meeting by a group of children playing around. He would have dismissed them along with the others if they had not been serious in their worship and praise. It would be particularly difficult to picture Christ’s allowing commotion after what He had just been through.
2. The religionists (chief priests and scribes) are displeased and object to what they see and hear. They do not like the “wonderful things” being done in the temple, nor do they like Jesus’ being praised in the temple. They object for at least three reasons.
 - a. They are angered. Their own establishment and procedures for handling things have been disrupted and, in their minds, declared “no good” or else “less good” than what they should be.
 - b. They do not like Jesus’ being proclaimed the Messiah of God.
 - c. They do not like the unseemly behaviour occurring: ministering to the needs of common men, healing the lame and blind (v .14), and teaching (see Mk. 11:18; Lk. 19:47).

Note that these are the very reasons people often become disturbed in the church today.

3. Christ insists that He is to be praised. He simply replies to the objections, “God Himself has taken the mouths of these children and provided (brought forth) the praise you hear. And it is perfect praise because it is brought forth by God Himself and heaped upon His Son. The church is to be a place where God’s Son is to be praised.”

Thought 1. Self-examination is called for. Is Christ really praised in our church? Really acknowledged and proclaimed as the Messiah, the Son of God?

Thought 2. Children should be encouraged to praise God.

- 1) Note how the children were in attendance when Christ taught and ministered (Mk. 11:18; Lk. 19:47). They were welcomed by Him and felt comfortable around Him.

2) Note how Christ stood up for the children against the leadership (priests).

Thought 3. The children follow the example of their parents. They had seen and participated with their parents in praising Christ the day before. Now they praise Him on their own as they witness His ministry and teaching.

Thought 4. Some leaders make the same three tragic objections in churches today.

- 1) They object to the old way being changed, especially if it affects one's position, recognition, or authority.
- 2) They object to Christ's being proclaimed the Messiah, the Son of God. Some are willing to acknowledge Him as a great teacher and only as a great teacher. They deny Him as the Saviour of the world who died for the sins of men.
- 3) They object to a public praising of God and to a ministry that helps the needy within the church walls.

Thought 5. Note something. Christ says that God Himself raised up these children to praise Him and His ministry within the church. If a church ceases to praise Him, the likelihood is that God will raise up another to fill its voices with the praise and ministry of His Son. ■