

65 Mark 11:12-25

A Temple Swap

15 And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. 16 And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." 18 And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. 19 And when evening came they went out of the city.

Introduction

Last week we looked at the cursing of the fig tree. We noted how that account was interwoven with this account of the temple. Mark is paralleling, (following Jesus' intention) the fruitless tree with fruitless Israel. We are also meant to see the cursing of the tree and the ominous end of Israel. Both had all the signs of life, but no fruit. It was eminently reasonable to expect some fruit, but there was none. After having cursed the fig tree, Jesus now enters into the temple and clears it out.

The Temple

A Short History: Our disconnect with this place and time may cause some misunderstandings, and so I want to spend just a bit of time on the history and description of the temple. In Bible study methods, there is something called the law of proportions. Simply stated, it means that there is generally greater importance attached to something that is given greater space in scripture. If something is mentioned in only one verse, odds are it is not that important of a doctrine. On the other hand, if 4 entire books are given to a subject (as the gospels are to the life of Christ) then this is probably something we should notice. In the OT, the temple existed in seed form, if you will, as the tabernacle. There is great care given to the construction of the tabernacle. It is spelled out in great detail. These are not details that we should groan through as we try to read through the Bible in a year, they communicate something to us. The amount of space given to the tabernacle communicates something to us.

But it was not until David that there was any desire/design for something different. But David, living in wonderful houses, considered it improper that he should so live while God still dwelt in a tent. He desired to build a temple. However, because David was a man of war God would not let him build it. That task went to Solomon his son. Solomon, for his part, did an amazing job creating the temple. It was truly a marvel of the ancient world. In due time, however, that temple was destroyed and Israel was sent into captivity.

There were some feeble attempts to rebuild the alter, and the temple, and Jerusalem after the captivity, but it was so feeble that those who remembered the old temple wept when they saw the new one. This second temple was known as Zerubabel's temple. It was this temple that Antiochus Epiphones desecrated in fulfillment of Daniel's vision. However, it was cleansed and rededicated by Judas Macabeas after the Macabean Revolt. And so it remained until the time of Herod the Great who had high ambitions for improving it. The result was so great that by all accounts it is considered a new temple. However, it was not officially finished until almost 66 AD.

Its Importance in Judaism:

Its Description:

Herod's temple was an absolutely amazing structure. It was a complex of courts of increasing holiness going inward. The outermost court was the court of the Gentiles. This court was separated from the inner courts by a wall which had signs that read, "Any foreigner that enters this court is responsible for his subsequent death." Past that wall was the court of the women. Jews could be in the court of the Gentiles, it was just so named to indicate that that was the furthest the Gentiles could go. So also, men could be in the court of women, it was just so named to indicate that that was all the further inward that women could go. Beyond this was the court of the Israelites. This was all the further that the non-Levitical tribes could go. Then there was the court of priests. Finally there was the temple itself with the innermost room being the holy of holies. This was the room into which only the high priest could go, and that just once per year. It is difficult to convey the magnificence of this temple. I have tried to assemble a slide show to help demonstrate its size. It would have been an impressive climb just to get to the base of the south-eastern outer wall. That wall, and all the outer walls, was a portico with massive pillars. There were actually a couple of stories atop these columns. The temple was made of white marble and decorated with gold. It would have been almost blinding when the sun hit it at the right angle. The total footprint of this entire complex would be close to 27 football fields! This is huge!

The Motivation: True Worship

Having looked at the background information on the temple, its description, history, and importance to Jewish life, I now want to focus the main points of this passage specifically. There are two main points that I think we should see here. First, in answer to the question, "What motivated Jesus to do this?" it was not so much the abuses of the buying and selling so much as an abuse of the purpose of the temple.

Second, in answer to the question, "What does Jesus' action mean?" I reply that it signals the end, or consummation of the temple. Jesus is the new temple. This signals a temple swap you might say.

Misunderstandings Before I get to Jesus' actual motivation for this event, I want to contrast it with some other suggestions. I have seen many sermons on this event, and for some reason the main point is missed. It seems that people are almost ashamed of what Jesus does here yet they feel the need to justify it. Why did he get so angry? What was the big deal?

I have seen people spend inordinate amounts of time trying to justify this cleansing of the temple. They will say things like, "The money changers would try to take advantage of the poor

pilgrims by forcing them to exchange their money (whether Egyptian, or Roman, etc) for Jewish currency and then take them for a ride with their exchange rates." They try to make similar points regarding the sale of animals. How can they possibly set up such an unfair practice, depriving the poor of their ability to bring their own animals for fear of it not meeting the sacrifice requirements. This was pure extortion."

Now to a certain extent, this is true. There was some level of extortion going on here. But high exchange rates is not what principally angered Jesus. In verse 15 we see that Jesus, "*entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple*". If Jesus were only concerned about the people who were ripping these poor pilgrims off, then why did Jesus drive off these travelers also? The people buying were the victims, why did Jesus drive them out? Although it is true that they probably had to pay higher than fair rates for these temple services, they were part of the problem.

Its Purpose

17 And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?"

These are the kind of things that are said, and some of that may be true. But I don't think that this is primarily what upset Jesus. Suppose these people got a fair exchange rate and a decent price for the animals? Would Jesus have approved? Was that all there was to this? No. Jesus' concern was not (primarily) for a fair exchange rate, but for the holiness of the temple of God. It is a place of worship and prayer. Can you imagine if there were side doors in this sanctuary and people would just come in one door and out the other, while the sermons was going on? People were constantly coming and going, talking to one another. Imagine that this sanctuary were full of cattle, goats, doves, lambs, etc. The smell, the noise, could you worship in that context? Could you worship and pray and sing?

Maybe even this does not adequately convey the right sense, since, for whatever reason, we do not have a high view of the church. Imagine that we let a bunch of cattle and all this other distractions into the White House, or Buckingham Palace, or even the Louvre in Paris? Would that not be an entirely inappropriate place for such activities? Forget whether the exchange rate is fair! There is no reverence in that kind of activity. There is no awe. There is no sense of holiness! That is what is wrong with this picture. As we learned with the fig tree, it is all leaves and no fruit. All show and no substance.

The Gentile Connection:

It was in the outer courts, the courts of the gentiles, that all the selling and trading was taking place. All the inner courts seem to have been business as normal. However, this outer court, which was all the further the Gentiles could go, was overtaken and turned into a marketplace. Moreover, Jesus quotes from Isa 56 in his denunciation of this practice.

Isa 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—
7 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.”

It was expected, in Jewish thought, that the Messiah would come and cleanse the temple from Gentile pollution. As it turns out, the Messiah has indeed come and cleansed the temple, not of the Gentiles, but for the Gentiles!

The Meaning: The End of the Temple

A Den of Robbers

17. . . . But you have made it a den of robbers.”

We often refer to this episode as Jesus cleansing the temple. It is probable headed that way in your Bibles, and most sermons or references to this event refer to it as the temple cleansing. I have described as such myself. In part, I don't have a big problem with that, but it is not the whole story. Remember that Jesus has just cursed the fig tree and that this episode is interwoven with the fig tree story. That literary structure enriches our understanding of this temple cleansing. I think that the larger image here is of cursing. Jesus cleansed the tree of hypocrisy by destroying it. Just as Jesus cursed the tree and later it withered, so also, this cleansing serves as a kind of curse with the ultimate destruction to soon follow.

Aside from the literary structure, Jesus' use of the OT conforms this sense of destruction. I'll get to the OT context shortly, but by way of contrast, many people approach this text and assume that Jesus was upset at their disproportionate selling prices or trade rates. They take their cue from this verse and say, "See, Jesus called them robbers, they were robbing people blind with their rates." But what Jesus does is say that they have turned what should be a house of prayer into a den of robbers. The last part of this citation comes from Jer 7.

Jer 7:1-15 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. 3 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. 4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’

5 “For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

8 “Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? 11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord.

A den of robbers or a cave of robbers is not where the robbing takes place. The den or cave is where they gather after doing their dirty deeds. Although it is possible that people were being taken at this temple bazaar, Jeremiah in the OT and Jesus in our text have something different in

mind. This is just more emptiness. People live how they want to live and then come into the temple thinking that everything will be just fine. "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations." The pharisees and scribes may not have been guilty of the same list of sins, but the principle is the same.

Jer 7:12-15 Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. 13 And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, 14 therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. 15 And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

The cursing and sign of destruction that we saw in the parallel with the fig tree now finds additional expression in this OT citation.

Application

There seems to be two major points in this passage. The first is that Jesus is here predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He is declaring the end of the old economy. What does that mean to us? Everything! On account of the natural branches that were cut off, we Gentiles have been grafted in. We now have equal share in house of God. But beware! Do not become conceited. For if God did not spare the natural branches, but cut them off in disobedience, then you too can be cut off. I believe in the perseverance of the saints, but that is not the point today. I am not going to work that out for you this morning. Right now I want you to feel the weight of this condemnation of Israel and therefore the weight of Paul's warning that we too can be cut off. We have great cause for rejoicing because salvation has come to the Gentiles. We have great cause for rejoicing, but no room for arrogance. And if the rejection of Israel meant blessings for the Gentiles, what then does the acceptance mean? Again, the future of Israel and our place in it is too big to unpack and is not the main point. I simply want to challenge you to sober reflection both individually and corporately in light of Christ's prophetic judgment on Israel.

The second point of this passage that we may apply is the two-faced life that the people were living. They would go out and live one way, and then come into the temple and act as though everything was ok. Was this hypocritical? Yes it was. Is hypocrisy bad? Yes it is. But it is not mere hypocrisy that is the issue here. God is the issue. Who you are hypocritical toward makes a difference. These kind of gestures are highly insulting. They have been plotting the murder of God's Son ever since he healed that man on the Sabbath and they come into God's own house and offer these platitudes? They are just throwing a bone to the almighty. It is insulting when that happens to anyone, but it is highly insulting to do that to a king.

God is the King of kings and he must not be trifled with. God is not content with our leftovers. God is not waiting for us to throw him a bone. He is the high King who demands our allegiance. That demand is over our entire life. You cannot leave the temple and live as you see fit. Do you come to church and treat God that way? Do you come and dig in your pocket for a quarter, toss it in the tithe box and tell God, "Here, go buy yourself something pretty." I'm not talking money,

although that too applies, I'm talking about your life. Are you throwing the bread crumbs of your life to your Sovereign as though he were a beggar? Do you expect him to stoop and quickly gather your scraps in humble gratitude that you have seen fit to bless him?

We do not give him the leftovers of our lives. Well here is some spare time, I guess you can have it. Do you grudgingly release a particular sin of yours because it has been causing you trouble lately anyway? Or do you say, "Here! Here! Take it all! I have been clothed for too long in these filthy rags! Take them! They are offensive to me now! Take all of them from every corner of my house, make me new! Have mercy on me!" May we give all to him.