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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“WALKING IN THE TEMPLE”

Matthew 21:12-16

☑ Early in my first pastorate I took an unpopular stand on a controversial issue. The Board of Deacons agreed that my position conformed to Scripture. They said they “admired” my convictions. “But,” the chairman added, “You can’t always follow the Bible if you want to attract young people.” (The irony is that I was 29 years-old at the time; he was in his upper ‘70s!)

☞ I took him to mean that a church must sometimes mute its witness or compromise its distinctive character in order to succeed. (Those are my words. However, I think that was the gist of his argument.)

☑ This attitude has caused Christians to sin in Jesus’ Name by: converting pagans at the point of a sword; waging (so-called) “holy” war; controlling political institutions; extorting and hoarding vast fortunes; viciously suppressing dissent; endorsing nationalism, militarism, racism, classism, sexism, and sexual sin; collaborating with anti-God systems and regimes; even participating in slavery and genocide – ostensibly to protect the Kingdom and to spread the Gospel.

☑ And it is not only in the past. Jesus compares wrath to murder {Mt 5:22}, commands us to {Mt 5:39, 44} “**love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute [us],**” and warns us not to seek earthly power but to live as servants {Mt 20:28}. Yet I recently heard a Christian leader say: {Name? WMBI} “**Evangelicals are not angry enough. We**

won’t take back America until everyone else knows we are good and angry.” As he elaborated his viewpoint, he suggested that the imperative to protect our rights by all lawful means outweighs the imperative to surrender our rights by prayerfully, lovingly serving our neighbors who don’t follow Jesus.

I realize that it is easier to see {Mt 7:3} “**the speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye**” than “**the plank in [one’s] own.**” I, too, have spoken and acted in worldly ways. When I do that, it raises the question: *whose kingdom am I trying to build?*

(Lord, have mercy! Praise Him, He does!)

☞ This tendency to undercut God’s Kingdom for the sake of the Kingdom (which is tantamount to trying to manipulate God’s Kingdom for sinful purposes) is what makes it necessary for Jesus to purify the Temple in Matthew 21.

■ In verse 12, “**Jesus [enters] the temple courts and [drives] out all who [are] buying and selling there. He [overturns] the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.**”

I used to assume this was a spur-of-the-moment reaction, as though Jesus impulsively lashed out in rage. It is an easy mistake to make, in part because it follows so closely on the heels of the Triumphal Entry in verses 1-11.

● But Mark clearly states that the procession and the clearing happened on different days. Mark 11:11: “**Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany**

with the Twelve.” The next morning He went back to Jerusalem, entered the temple complex, and began his demonstration (Mark 11:15).

(This discrepancy between the two accounts is not surprising. Matthew routinely compresses major events by leaving out less dramatic interludes.)

In this case, Mark’s report indicates that the Lord had all night to pray about his actions. Jesus was angry; yet the cleansing was not a spontaneous outburst – it was a reasoned, well-planned protest.

Why does He do it? What is He protesting?

■ In Matthew 21:13 Jesus says, **“It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”** His critique has multiple targets.

⊕ 1st, there are the chief priests and the Sanhedrin.

Every Jewish adult must pay an annual temple tax of ½ shekel, but only certain kinds of coins are accepted. Money changers provide an essential service by trading invalid coins for the correct ones.

The problem is they charge a 14.3% fee on the transaction, and another 14.3% fee for handing back the change. Excluding the ½ shekel tax, that adds up to 2/3rds of the average daily wage.

Nevertheless, most money changers are not thieves. The bulk of what they collect goes into the temple treasury, and the interest rates are set by the chief priests and Sanhedrin.

Likewise, worship would be impossible without dove sellers. The people must have access to the birds if they are to make the necessary offerings.

Here is the catch: these salesmen charge up to 20 times the street cost for the same birds. But guess who owns the concession and sets the prices? Annas, a former high priest and the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who is going to adjudicate part of Jesus’ trial!

Two additional details are helpful here.

One is that Scripture requires the sacrifice of physically perfect animals and birds. To that end, priests inspect each offering to ensure it is of the highest quality.

The other is that ever since Annas bought the dove concession, the priestly inspectors have consistently disqualified birds that are brought in from outside.

God has given the chief priests and the Sanhedrin the sacred duty of overseeing the Temple and the worship system. By handling it as a commercial venture they are robbing the LORD of honor and glory and making worship a burden for the people. They **“are making [the Temple into] ‘a den of robbers.’”**

★ What about us? This has special application for clergy, leaders who manage church finances, and greedy people who try to con the church. But, more generally do we use faith and worship as a tool for earthly gain (be it financial, social, or emotional)? Is it our first concern to get or to give?

⊕ 2nd, there are the ordinary worshippers.

■ Whom does Jesus drive out? According to verse 12 He drives out the money changers, the

sellers – and the buyers (the lay people). They, too, are “**making [the temple] ‘a den of robbers.’**”

- How so? The answer lies in the phrase, “**a den of robbers.**” It is an excerpt from Jeremiah 7, in which the LORD God denounces his people as idolaters.

Inside the temple they dutifully perform the prescribed rituals and offer the correct sacrifices. Consequently, they presume God will always favor and protect them.

But outside they {Jer 7:6} oppress the foreigners, orphans and widows. Their communities are rotten with {7:9} theft, violence, adultery and falsehood. {7:9} Some are dabbling in pagan religions.

Their hypocrisy robs God of true worship. {7:11} “**Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.**”

Fast forward 600 years: most first century Jews do not venerate the temple structure in the way their ancestors did. Still, they take it for granted that their religious, cultural and ethnic heritage (symbolized by the temple), guarantees their salvation and ultimate success – even as they hate Gentiles and Samaritans, abuse the poor, neglect the sick, and reject Jesus. They “**are making [the temple] ‘a den of robbers.’**”

★ What about us? Is our relationship with Jesus integrated into our home lives, work lives, and social lives? Is there a false gap between what we think, say and do here and outside? Do we suppose that correct belief and worship excuses a multitude of sins?

⊕ 3rd, there are the Nationalists.

When Jesus says, “**you are making [my house] ‘a den of robbers,’**” He uses a word that describes common thieves and Zealots alike.

Zealots are holy warriors whose goal is to vanquish the Romans – not just so Israel can be free, but because they believe the Messiah won’t come until Israel is cleansed of Gentiles. Believing that the end justifies the means, Zealots attack Romans, assassinate Jews who collaborate with Rome, and (when it serves their agenda) rob loyal Jews. Furthermore, they claim that anyone who does not embrace their goals and methods betrays the nation and even the LORD God.

- That brings us back to Isaiah. When Jesus says, “**My house will be called a house of prayer,**” He is quoting part of Isaiah 56:7. In keeping with Jewish practice, his brief citation implies the whole phrase: “**My house will be called a house for prayer for all nations.**” It is the climax of a prophecy that groups who have been excluded from the Temple will one day be welcomed – including {56:6} “**foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love [his] name, and to be his servants.**”

Gentiles {56:6, 7} “**who hold fast to my covenant – 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.**”

By blending Hebrew nationalism with biblical religion the Zealots make it impossible for foreigners to enter the covenant – thereby robbing them of salvation, and God of their worship. When Jesus says, **“My house will be called a house of prayer,”** He is condemning Israel’s national pride as much as their prayerlessness.

★ What about us? Do we mistake our national, ethnic or class interests for those of God’s kingdom? Do we equate patriotism with Christian devotion?

“Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written,’ he said to them, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

What tables and benches might the Lord of the Church need to overturn in my life? In your life? Here at Beverly Covenant?

Walking with Jesus means allowing him to cleanse us as He cleansed the temple.