



Cleansing the Temple

Series: John – That You May Believe

John 2:12-25

March 12, 2017

Pastor Nick Shaffer

The image that we have of Jesus in this first cleansing of the temple at the beginning of His ministry presents us, beloved, with a picture of Jesus Christ that is uncomfortable to some people, disconcerting, unsettling, even unreal. We so love the image of Jesus as meek and mild, compassionate to the downtrodden, healing the broken and blind, loving the unlovable, ministering to the needy, slow to anger and exceedingly merciful, that this image of Jesus acting in righteous anger, in fury, with boiling zeal seems so out of character. And the reason that it seems that way is because this is a side of Jesus that we don't talk much about. In our minds, many times unintentionally, we make Jesus one-dimensional and flat, a placid, tolerant, and good-natured deity whose great aim is to get us off the hook and make us feel good about ourselves.

The truth about Jesus is far grander, far more complex, far more glorious. He is not only the merciful Savior; He is the righteous Judge. He acts not only in grace but also in holy anger, not just a friend of the repentant sinner, but also a fierce judge of the hardened of heart. Here we find a strong, animated, and zealous Christ acting in holy anger against sin and if it is unsettling to us, perhaps that is because it should be. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is at the same time the Lion of Judah. Jesus is a Godlike here as He was when He hung on the cross. He is God every bit as much here, at the Temple, as He is at Calvary. And my prayer is that this revelation of Christ will move our hearts, will confront us today in a purifying and powerful way. I'm praying that this text will move us, unsettle and shake us up, if need be, but in any case that this revelation of Christ will not leave us as we were when we walked in here this morning. As we look at this second sign, revealing Jesus as the Son of God, and particularly as the Lion of Judah, let's do it much like we did last week and begin by looking at the scene.

The Scene – Passover at the Temple (12-14) Pick it up with me in verse 12, **“After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”**

(John 2:12–13, ESV) After the wedding at Cana, Jesus went down to Capernaum, which would become His base of ministry operation for the next little while and He stayed there for a few days with His family and disciples. But the time came for the Jewish celebration of Passover and so Jesus, went up to Jerusalem. The Passover was one of the great high and holy days on the Jewish calendar, the annual celebration of God’s miraculous deliverance of the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. It celebrated the time when God delivered the Jews by the power of His outstretched arm by killing the firstborn in the land of Egypt in one night, all except those in whose homes a lamb had been sacrificed and its blood spread on the doorpost and lintels. The angel of death “passed over” those houses. It was, in many ways, the birth of the nation as the people of God. For that reason, this was a special day, a holy day. It was a celebration that was to be marked by every Jewish family coming to the Temple, offering a Passover sacrifice, recounting the grace and mercy of God to deliver them from slavery through a symbolic meal, by prayer and thanksgiving with true devotion. This was a very personal time of worship, meant to powerfully impact the souls of the Israelites, and to give to God the glory and the honor that He is due. It was also during this time that every male Jew, 20 and above, would pay the annual Temple tax for its operation. So this was a big deal. In preparation, roads and bridges would be repaired, sepulchers would be given a fresh coat of whitewash so no one would accidentally touch one and become ceremonially unclean and unable to participate. The streets of Jerusalem, during the Passover celebration would swell as a couple million people descended on the city and the surrounding area.

So Jesus, being a devout and faithful man, went up to Jerusalem to the Temple to participate in the Passover. And this is what He found, verse 14, **“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.”** **(John 2:14, ESV)** How what’s the deal? Let me tell you. Over time, it came to be considered that it was too difficult, too impractical, and too inconvenient for people to be expected to bring their own sacrificial lamb as they were travelling to Jerusalem. For that reason, to make it easier, some enterprising Jews decided to offer sacrificial animals for sale – oxen, sheep, and pigeons – at an inflated price in order to make worship easier. Not only that, but it became standard practice that only Tyrian silver could be used pay the half-shekel Temple tax and so money-changers would gladly exchange your currency for Tyrian silver with an accompanying surcharge.

By Jesus' time, it became big business, under the supervision of one of the former high priests, Annas, who consolidated this whole affair in the outer courts of the Temple and sold franchises to businessmen who wished to participate. Graft, corruption, and price-gouging were rampant. Pilgrims to the Temple who may have brought their own offering – one of the holdouts – would soon learn that their spotless lambs were never quite spotless enough. And like ticket scalpers at sporting even whose prices go up as the tickets run out, the same thing happened at the Temple. It was a huge mess. What was supposed to be a place of worship, of reverence, of prayer, of offering sacrifices, of meeting with God and seeking His face, had turned into a marketplace, a middle-eastern bazaar, right in the outer court of the Temple. And it set the stage for the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as the Son of God, in the second of His signs.

The Sign – Cleansing the Temple (15-22) Look at this, verse 15, ***“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. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.””*** (John 2:15–17, ESV) As soon as Jesus sees this, he responds with holy anger, with righteous violence, with Godly fury. Making a whip of cords, He drives all of them out of the temple – the merchants and their animals. He flips over money changing tables, coins scattering everywhere, commands the sellers of the pigeons to take their birds and get gone. He physically drives them all out in real anger. It’s shocking and aggressive. This was not a sinful outburst of temper, not a tantrum, but the just wrath of a holy God. Jesus had a burning intolerance for false, perverted, superficial, hypocritical worship – and that is what He found here. For Jesus worship, pure worship, is the matter of gravest importance.

The anger of Jesus, His zeal, is both shocking and proper. Some commentators try to jump through hoops trying to downplay Christ’s anger, but His actions speak for themselves. It brings to the disciples’ minds words from Psalm 69:9, ***“Zeal for your house will consume me.”*** It’s from a psalm of David, when he was calling the people to true worship and was on the receiving end of hatred and hostility as a result. ***“I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother’s sons. For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.”*** (Psalm 69:8–9, ESV) Zeal is a word that speaks of a boiling pot, of passion, fervor and intensity. When Jesus saw the way that

the worship of God, His Father's house, had been defiled, defamed and denigrated, He responded with Godly fury, with righteous and holy anger.

What was the big deal? Two things chiefly. One, this whole set up undermined the heart of worship. This bazaar in the Temple had the effect of reducing the Passover, for most people anyway, to a superficial and impersonal obligation and duty. Rather than it being a heart-felt, personal sacrifice of the finest of one's flock, it became a search for the least-costly acceptable lamb and a quest for the most favorable exchange rate. The underlying truth is that the Temple had lost its true meaning. People were still going through the motions of worship, sacrifices were still being offered, but the temple worship as a whole had become corrupted. Real worship, on the whole, was absent. The marketplace was just a symptom of the way that worship had regressed in Israel. It disconnected the heart from the truth of real worship.

Think about it. Rather than giving careful consideration to the sheep that you would choose from your own flock, rather than nurturing and caring for that sheep and bringing it to God as a sacrifice from the heart, being intimately involved in the worship of God, now the goal was to find an acceptable sacrifice at a bargain price. Worship was reduced to going through the motions. It lacked reverence, awe, importance, the sense of something sacred taking place. It was all about convenience and the annual game of bargain hunting. Worship was reduced to nothing more than a business transaction that should be performed in the most convenient, most economical, most efficient, and most timely way. They lost the sense of God or never had any sense of God at all.

But that was not the only issue. The second is this: This outer most court of the Temple was a place called the Court of the Gentiles. It was as far as Gentiles could come inside the Temple grounds. It was supposed to be the place where the "God-fearers," Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel but who were not yet converts to Judaism could come and learn of Him and be instructed in how to worship Him. It was supposed to be the place where the worship of God, and all that it spoke to a repentant heart of God's forgiveness through the death of a substitute, could be considered. Instead it had become no different than what was around any pagan temple. There was place for teaching, no place for prayer, no place for God's praise and fame. What was taking place in the Temple court, completely destroyed the atmosphere of worship and obscured the glory of God.

All of this irreverence, all of this hypocrisy, mindless and false religion, it ate at Jesus. Zeal for God's glory, for His house, against this reproach of God's glory led Him to act as He did. This feast that was designated to celebrate the heart of God in delivering His people must not be desecrated like this. And what drove His zeal was His love for the Father. Martin Luther got it right when he said that the root of Christ's fury was His love, His supreme love for the Father. He said, "Zeal is love made angry." That is what was in the heart of Jesus. He loved the house of God, loved the pure worship of God, meaningful sacrifice and humble prayer and all of that was true because He loved the Father in Heaven with a perfect love.

What Jesus did here, this second sign, cleansing the Temple, driving away the merchants and money-changers was a miracle, but not in the way that we usually think. Think about it. When Jesus does this, there are hundreds even thousands in the Temple Court and no one raises a hand to stop Him. His authority and power are unmistakable. No one opposes Jesus or tries to stop Him. It's not just the force that He uses – He's one man – it's His moral authority. This is miraculous. There is no human explanation for this. The miracle is in the words, **he drove them all out of the temple**. And by this second sign, Jesus got their attention.

Look, starting in verse 18, **"So the Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?'" (John 2:18, ESV)** Notice, the Jews – read that as the Jewish religious leaders – don't argue with what Jesus did, but neither is there any repentance. There's no, "You're right. We have dishonored God and defiled the Temple. We need to repent." There's no sorrow, no bowing down, no confession. What there is, is a demand for a sign. They want to know who Jesus thinks He is to do something like this. They want a sign to prove that He has the right to do this. The irony is that His actions ARE the sign, if they had eyes to see. It is the very picture of the prophecy of Malachi 3:1-3, **"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord." (Malachi 3:1-3, ESV)** In this prophecy, God was telling the nation of Israel, "This is what is going to happen when I send you my Son, the Messiah, what will happen when He suddenly appears to the nation of Israel. No-one is

going to be found righteous, not a single one. Instead, He will come and purify His people. He is going to make for Himself worshippers who offer to the Lord worship that is pleasing to Me. When he comes, no-one will be congratulated on their holiness and righteousness – He will purify the sons of Levi and the people of God.” Christ’s action to purify the Temple was the sign.

Jesus refuses to give them a sign, some miracle on the spot. Instead, we read, **“Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body. 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.” (John 2:19–22, ESV)** Jesus does not try to convince them of anything, does not mention any of His miracles, and does not enter into debate with them at all. Instead He speaks to them of the ultimate sign, His death and His resurrection from the dead. **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”**

He doesn’t try to persuade these men to believe in Him. Instead He makes a prophetic statement of fact. They will not believe and they will be the instigators of His death but His triumph, the sign of His Lordship, will be evident in 3 days when He rises from the dead. It is a prophetic statement with profound spiritual implications. They don’t get it. They think He is talking about a physical building, but He isn’t. He talks about Himself. He is the new Temple, the true temple, the place where God dwells, where forgiveness and grace may be found, the true Lamb whose blood will atone for the sinfulness of repentant and believing men and women, the center-point of all true and real worship. The Jews are clueless as to what He is saying. Even the disciples do not understand, but it will be clear to them when He rose from the dead. Ironically, it is this statement – a garbled, gossipy misrepresentation of this statement that would be used as “evidence” to convict Him of blasphemy and sentence Him to death. **“For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “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.’ ”” (Mark 14:56–58, ESV)** The Jewish leaders didn’t have eyes of faith to see the truth, but they were not alone. Next Jesus deals with

Spurious Faith (23-25) After the Temple incident we read, starting in verse 23, **“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs**

that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.” (John 2:23–25, ESV) This text is astonishing on many levels. Jesus did further signs after He cleansed the Temple, and apparently there were many that believed on His name after they witnessed the signs, but Jesus did not entrust Himself to them. What does that mean? You could say it like this. They “believed” after a fashion in Jesus, but Jesus did not believe in them because He knew their hearts, that they were fickle and that their faith was not genuine. He knew what was in them. He knew their faith was not real.

This brings us face-to-face with the reality of superficial faith. We see in this text superficial worship in the Temple and superficial faith on the part of the people. There is such thing as superficial faith, faith that does not truly affect the heart and soul, faith that only interested in the benefits but not Jesus Himself, faith that lacks repentance. It is a frightening reality and the reason that Paul counsels us saying, **“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5, ESV)** Jesus does not entrust Himself to these people, whoever they are, because Jesus will not accept as His disciples those who are not willing to take up a cross and follow Him, those who are not committed to bow to His Lordship, those who do not seek Him for who He is. He will not have convenient disciples. False, superficial, artificial faith does not save. An emotional experience with God does not save. Simply repeating a prayer and being baptized does not save. All belief is not true belief if it does not reject any idea of personal merit with God, if it lacks repentance, if it lacks a sense of real need, if it does not rest on faith alone through grace alone for the forgiveness of sins, if it does not bear real fruit. There are many who will be surprised on the day of judgment to find that their faith was not real. **““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21–23, ESV)** Those are sobering words. This entire passage that we have looked at this morning, if we are wise, if we care about our souls, requires of us some

Serious Reflection If all we do is hear this sermon today and shake our heads at the Jews; if all we do is hear these words, it will not benefit our souls. Like James, the brother of our Lord said, **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if**

anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” (James 1:22–25, ESV) We need to hear and be moved to respond to what we hear this morning. I pray for this all the time.

First, let’s reflect on Christ’s purifying of the Temple. The truth is that there is a way to read this text and sit in judgment of the religious leaders at the Temple and remain oblivious to what God is saying to our own hearts and that is worthless way to read Scripture. But there is a way to read Scripture like that until we realize that by Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection, the church collectively and we individually are the Temple of God. Ephesians 2:19-22 says of the church, ***“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”*** (Ephesians 2:19–22, ESV) Speaking of individual Christians, Paul says in 1 Cor 6:19-20, ***“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”*** (1 Corinthians 6:19–20, ESV) When you realize this, the implications of this text are staggering.

Nearly a century ago, AW Tozer said, “Worship is the missing jewel of the evangelical church.” I wonder what he would say today. We could talk of all of the crass commercialism, the modern showmanship, the buffoonery of man that draws a crowd, but I’m not concerned with them today, not chiefly. What if Christ were to suddenly come to His Temple today? What if Christ were to suddenly come to this church today? What would he find here? What would He say? Christ is after worship that is in spirit and in truth. He wants real, meaningful, heartfelt worship. He wants us to worship him in light of His grace, pouring out our gratitude because of what He has done, realizing that we don't inherently deserve His favor, that we have received it according to His mercy and His grace. We should worship as if the most important thing about us and to us is that we have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus wants sincere, deeply considered, honest, earnest and authentic worship from us.

And we need to genuinely think about that today. Don't just blow this off. Beloved, I know from experience how easily my worship, our worship, can become mechanical. How great the temptation to slip into the duty of going to church, of going through the rituals of worship, of distractedly singing songs, of being unmoved by the preaching and application of Scripture, or worse yet being offended by it. I know how easily we can be tempted to come into worship unprepared.

Sinclair Ferguson, a contemporary Scottish preacher, recalls how surprised he was when he was invited to preach at the church in the Scottish Highlands to find the men of church outside kneeling in the grass with their arms outstretched and praying, "Give us a word, O Lord. Give us your message through your preacher today." Now I am not saying that I want all the men to gather in the foyer on their knees and pray like that before the service, but we do need to prepare ourselves for worship, to orient our hearts around the reality of what we are doing when we come here. We must prepare ourselves for worship, take this seriously, to guard our hearts from the superficiality that infested the Jews. We need to prepare ourselves in prayer – confessing our sins and preparing our souls for worship, we need to be reading the Scripture ahead of time and praying for illumination and insight, putting ourselves in the mindset that we are coming here, not to hear a message from the preacher but to meet with and hear from the Creator of the Universe. We need to make ourselves mindful of the ways that we have received the grace of God, particularly the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save us and make us God's people, which will lead to earnest expressions of worship in song. If we are the temple of God, not just corporately, but individually, we need to wrestle with the questions: "Lord, is my life pleasing to You? Is my love for you genuine and growing? Is my thought life pure in your sight? What does my life – my priorities, my relationships, my service – say about what I truly believe about you? What needs to be cleansed from this Temple that belongs to you?" That kind of preparation will prepare our hearts for worship and help to establish an atmosphere of expectancy in us and an atmosphere of true reverence where a guest can come into our midst and see that God is real and alive and the gospel has substance. Our church will not become like the outer court of the Temple.

Second, let's reflect on Christ's zeal. Everybody is zealous for something. Isn't that true? All you have to do is offend someone's loves and you will see what he or she is zealous about. What are we zealous for? When does our zeal boil up and for what reason? Jesus was zealous for His Father, for His Father's honor. If the Savior had such a zeal for God, should not those who have been saved by God? Too often, if we are honest, we can be zealous for

the wrong things – when we feel personally attacked, instead of blessing those who curse us and loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us; or when our personal kingdom is threatened. Look, I’m preaching to myself too. Jesus didn’t react when He was personally attacked, but when the truth of God was perverted, when God’s glory was desecrated, when those who claimed to be followers of God openly lived like the ungodly, when God’s Word was misused or misrepresented, that is when Jesus’s zeal was stirred up. What fires our zeal? Do we care deeply for what is good and lovely and true and right, for the institutions that God has created and blessed – marriage and the family, the church, that God be loved with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, that we love our neighbor as ourselves, that we walk in holiness and righteousness, that God be honored by lives of obedience – honesty, integrity, purity in thought and deed – and not just by other people, but by us, by me, first? What do we let slide that we shouldn’t, what do we ignore that we ought not to ignore, what do we allow in our lives that interferes with love for Christ, for service to Christ, with following Christ, that interferes with worship– in ourselves first? What fires up zeal in us, what we are zealous for, is a window to our hearts.

Third, let’s reflect on the reality of our faith. Superficial faith is a dangerous, dangerous thing. Our faith should be evident in the way that we live and what we deeply care about. Charles Spurgeon said, **“Genuine faith that saves the soul has for its main element – trust – absolute rest of the whole soul – on the Lord Jesus Christ to save me... Faith and works are bound up in the same bundle. He that obeys God trusts God; and he that trusts God obeys God. He that is without faith is without works; and he that is without works is without faith... If you have been truly born again you have a new and holy nature, and you are no longer moved towards sinful objects as you were before. The things that you once loved you now hate, and therefore you will not run after them. You can hardly understand it but so it is, that your thoughts and tastes are radically changed. You long for that very holiness which once it was irksome to hear of; and you loathe those vain pursuits which were once your delights. The man who puts his trust in the Lord sees the pleasures of sin in a new light. For he sees the evil which follows them by noting the agonies which they brought upon our Lord when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. Without faith a man says to himself, ‘This sin is a very pleasant thing, why should I not enjoy it? Surely I may eat this fruit, which looks so charming and is so much to be desired.’ The flesh sees honey in the drink, but faith at once perceives that there is poison in the cup. Faith spies the snake in the grass and gives warning of it. Faith remembers death, judgment, the great reward, the just punishment and that dread word, eternity.”** Make sure your faith is real, beloved, that it is not merely superficial or convenient. This is no small thing and it is the reason that Peter says to us, ***“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and***

virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:5–11, ESV)

This is a serious text this morning. Again, my prayer for us is that this revelation of Christ will move our hearts, will confront us today in a purifying and powerful way. I’m praying that this text will move us, unsettle and shake us up, if need be, but in any case that this revelation of Christ will not leave us as we were when we walked in here this morning.

If you hear these words and are convicted by them – and if we have ears to hear we all should be, I know I need to hear them – what do we do? The answer is the same whether we need forgiveness of Christ for the first time or the hundredth. The answer is to come to the true Temple, to the Lord Jesus Christ who gave His life on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins – to confess and repent, to believe on His shed blood, and be forgiven, cleansed, and renewed for holy fellowship with God.

© West Salem Baptist Church, 2017

Permissions: You are free to reproduce and distribute this material but you may not alter its contents in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. If you are posting online, a link back to this original document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.