

TEARING DOWN THE TEMPLE **A Sermon on John 2:13-25**

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In John 2:1-12, we looked at the wedding at Cana and at how Jesus Christ makes all things new. We saw how that passage demonstrated a renewal of relationships, of our wholeness, and of our faith. In this next passage, we continue the theme of Christ making things new, this time focusing on Christ himself as a new and perfect temple. Previously, we saw new things in the context of celebration, but now we are going to see newness in the context of confrontation. We'll also see that Christ intends all the nations to come and worship, and how Christ bids us to worship on God's terms, not our own.

But before we dig into the text, we need to address an issue that distracts enquiring minds. John presents this episode of the cleansing of the temple at a different time than the other three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell this story at the end of their gospels while John tells it at the beginning. Some point to this as evidence that the gospels contradict one another. However, it is important to note that the gospel writers, as do all good writers, carefully arrange their material. Chronological arrangement is not as important to the gospel writers as thematic arrangement. John places the story here because thematically it fits the idea of Christ doing something new. On the other hand, the other gospel writers place the story near the end because it also fits their purpose of explaining why Jesus was tried and arrested. Scholars of good conscience debate whether the temple cleansing actually happened at the beginning or the end of Jesus' ministry – but the key thing is that it did happen. The gospels are not in contradiction on this point at all.

That having been said, we look to the text. Verses 13 and 14 show Jesus going up to Jerusalem to the temple. Here, a bit of a history lesson is in order. In Jewish thought, the temple was not just where sacrifice took place. It was not just the gathering point for the festivals. It was first and foremost the dwelling place of God – it was a physical reminder of God's presence in the midst of the people. The holy of holies in the center of the temple was considered God's actual throne room.

You can trace the importance of the temple through the Old Testament. First there was the tabernacle, the tent that the Israelites carried in the desert. This tabernacle functioned like a portable temple, and when they set it up, God would manifest his presence by descending in a cloud of glory upon the tent. This cloud was a visible sign of God dwelling with his people. Look at Exodus 40:36-38:

“In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out – until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.”

Centuries later, King Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem. You can read all about it in 1 Kings 5-8. The key thing is that after Solomon built the Temple, God appeared to him, saying,

“I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, but putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there” (1 Kings 9:3).

Again, God dwelled with his people.

But God qualifies that statement later by saying that if Solomon and his sons abandon God, he will also abandon them: “Then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name.” Sadly, that’s exactly what happened. After centuries of decline, Israel was conquered by Babylon and the temple was destroyed. It was later rebuilt during the return to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah, but it was a pitiful reflection of the original. In 20 B.C., Herod the Great made his try at rebuilding the temple. Herod was a ruthless and powerful administrator. He built fortresses and structures all throughout Israel. He didn’t rebuild the temple because of piety – he rebuilt lots of pagan temples too. His vision was for his own glory and for economic and political stability throughout the land. Bear in mind, this Herod was the same Herod who later in life slipped into paranoid insanity – this is the same Herod who in the gospel of Luke orders the slaughter of all children below age 2. He thought that rebuilding the temple would be a part of his legacy.

The key thing is that the temple had always been a source of national pride for the Israelites because it showed that God dwelt with them. God wasn’t on Mount Olympus like the Greek gods. God didn’t live in Asgard like the Norse gods. God was here and accessible. However, by the time of Jesus, this had become more of a political statement rather than a faith statement. The temple had become a rallying place for the Israelites to thumb their collective noses at the Romans and the rest of the pagan world.

This was part of the problem. Read what Jesus does when he arrives at the temple (vv. 14-16). He finds people trading and he drives them out. Many take this action as Jesus’ condemnation of price-gouging and corrupt business practices, and undoubtedly this is partly true. But notice Jesus’ particular offence at turning “My Father’s house into a market” (v. 16).

At this point it is important to note that Herod's temple was a massive structure spanning twenty-six acres in all; it was twice as large as the previous temple. The complex consisted of four increasingly smaller courts. The outermost court called the "Court of Gentiles" was not holy ground. This was the place where non-Jews could come to worship the God of Israel, and it is the most likely place where the trade was going on. The trade and confusion didn't disrupt the inner courts where Israelites could go pray and where the sacrifices were made. It disrupted only the non-Israelites who came to worship God. In cleansing the temple, Jesus showed his concern not only for the purity of the house of God, but also for the Gentiles: he wanted to make sure that they were given the opportunity to pray. Jesus made it clear that the temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all the nations.

This global concern has always been a part of God's plan. Look at Psalm 47:1 and 9, or at Psalm 67. Even though the Israelites were God's special people, God has always had a concern that all nations be able to worship him.

So, the principle for us is that Christ takes offence when anyone is hindered from worshipping him. We do all kinds of things to make our space physically accessible – we have a wheelchair ramp, large print bulletins, a great sound system. But oftentimes a problem arises with an atmosphere that hinders worship. This is why at the beginning of every service, I ask for silent reflection during the prelude, so that those who come to worship will not be hindered as they prepare themselves to meet God. Have we prepared our hearts for an encounter with the almighty God, or have we prepared our hearts for an inspiring message and a coffee hour? And please note that this atmosphere of worship has very little to do with the style of music and arrangement of furniture, and that it has everything to do with the orientation of our hearts (I preach first of all to myself!).

In the old church of Scotland, many churches would have a service of preparation for worship. People would arrive an hour before the worship service to sing psalms and to pray. They would do this to get their hearts and minds off the stuff of the week and to orient themselves on worshipping their creator. Sinclair Furgeson, a contemporary scottish preacher, tells of going to preach at one church in the highlands. As he approached the church, he saw the men outside kneeling in the grass with their arms stretched out crying out, "Give us a word, O Lord, Give us your message through this preacher today." They prepared their hearts for worship.

I'm not asking you all to be kneeling out there in Piatt Park before the service. But I am asking that you prepare your hearts before the service. You do that through: prayer (e.g. confessing to God and cleaning the slate of your mind); reading the Scripture ahead of time and praying for illumination and

insight; putting yourself in the mindset that you are coming here not to hear a message from a little preacher, but to meet the Creator of the Universe; saying an internal amen as the soloists and the choir lead us in prayer through song; anticipating the presentation of God's authoritative truth. Such preparation on our parts will help establish an atmosphere where the visitor comes and knows that the Holy Spirit is at work among God's people (again, I preach first of all to myself). Christ is concerned that nothing hinder the nations from coming to worship.

Now look to verses 18-21 to see how Jesus redefines the nature of the temple. The temple leaders ask on what authority Jesus does these things. They aren't thinking that Jesus is some wandering thug, or else their guards would be dealing with him then and there. Instead, they question him. They want to see if he is a genuine prophet. The problem is that they ask the wrong question: they ask Jesus to prove himself. They don't ask about the justice of his actions; they don't search the Scriptures to see if Jesus' words and deeds hold up to God's revelation. No, they say to Jesus, "Prove yourself to us." They want proof on their own terms rather than on God's terms.

Jesus answers them with a riddle: "Tear down this temple and in three days I will build it back up again." His immediate listeners only hear it on the surface level – they think he's talking about the building. But after the Resurrection, his disciples remember and believe. Only after the Resurrection do they see that Jesus himself took the place of the temple. Everything in the temple found its fulfillment in Christ. All the sacrifices were completed perfectly in Christ. God's dwelling with his people is completed perfectly in Christ. The book of Hebrews goes into great detail explaining how Jesus is our perfect High Priest who is continually making sacrifice for us. And later in John's gospel we'll see how Christ gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can enjoy the continual presence of God. Indeed, Christ in his riddle says something wonderfully new is going to happen.

But the people don't get it. They're blind and want to see things on their own terms. The great romantic Poet, Percy Shelley, wrote a short piece called "Ozymandias" – which is the greek name for Rameses II, whom many believe to be the pharaoh of the Exodus. In the poem, he describes a shattered statue in the middle of the desert – two legs growing out of the sand, and beside them a half-buried face. On the pedestal are written these words, "I am Ozymandias, King of kings. Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Shelley then writes, "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level lands stretch far away." What a picture of irony, of the man who wanted everything on his terms. He builds a statue and places his boast on a pedestal, and it is nearly all destroyed. The same thing happened with the Jewish Temple. In A.D. 70, the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The Jews were scattered all over the world, not to have

an independent country again until 1947. On the site of the temple now stands a Muslim mosque. The building that had grown out of the pride of Herod the Great has disappeared.

Just as the Jewish temple was replaced by Jesus, so all our personal temples are replaced by Jesus. We cannot approach the salvation offered by Jesus on our own terms; we can only approach it on Jesus' terms. That means that no matter what you do for God, you won't earn your way into heaven. It doesn't matter how much money you contribute. It doesn't matter how often you pray or how many times you come to church during the week. It certainly doesn't matter how well you know the pastor. It doesn't matter how many committees you serve on. It doesn't matter how well you know your Bible, or how many verses you've memorized. Don't get me wrong, all those things are important, but they are a response to salvation, not a cause of it. When it comes to salvation, it doesn't matter what we've done, only what Christ in his sacrifice has done for us.

So our passage shows Christ's concern that the nations are not hindered from worship, and his insistence that we come on his terms not our own. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great Welsh preacher of the mid-20th century, told a story of a woman who began attending his church. She was a spiritualist, a medium who talked to the dead. Her shop was just across from Lloyd-Jones' church. She watched for years as people streamed into the church for worship. One day, business was particularly slow, so she closed down the shop and ducked in the back. She returned the next week and the week after that. Soon, she became a Christian. Lloyd-Jones later asked her what she had experienced on her first visit that made her come back. She replied, "The moment I entered your chapel and sat down on a seat amongst the people, I was conscious of a power. I was conscious of the same sort of power as I was accustomed to in our spiritist meetings, but there was one big difference: I had a feeling that the power in your chapel was a clean power." First she was not hindered in coming to worship: She came and found an atmosphere where all the people were focused in such a way that she could palpably sense the presence of God around her. And notice what she said: it was a clean power. All her life she had been doing spirituality on her own terms, conjuring up dead spirits and seeking to exert control. The power she felt was dark and dirty. And then she sits next to people approaching God on God's terms, and the power is clean.

Jesus Christ is the new temple to which all the nations will come and worship. And it is on his terms alone that we come and worship.