

Lent 3, March 3, 2024

JOHN 2:13–22. (EHV)

The Jewish Passover was near, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers sitting at tables. He made a whip of cords and drove everyone out of the temple courts, along with the sheep and oxen. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those selling doves he said, **“Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a place of business!”** His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me” [Psalm 69:9]. So the Jews responded, “What sign are you going to show us to prove you can do these things?” Jesus answered them, **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.”** The Jews said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple! And you are going to raise it in three days?” But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. When Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this. Then they believed the Scripture and what Jesus had said.

This isn’t the Jesus we’re used to, is it? Walk around our church and look at the artwork and you’ll see the Jesus we’re used to. We’re used to Good Shepherd Jesus, cradling a lamb in his arms. We’re used to Jesus making time for children and smiling at them.

But here we are introduced to angry Jesus, to whip-cracking Jesus.

Let’s take a closer look and see why Jesus was so rightfully angry.

On any given day there were animals being slaughtered and offered to God at the temple. On some days, especially during chief festivals like the Passover, there were many such sacrifices. Of course, not everyone owned the animals that needed to be sacrificed, whether cattle, sheep, or doves. So if they didn’t own them, then they had to purchase them or otherwise trade for them. And it makes sense to human reason that you would do so in a place as close as possible to where those animals are going to be used.

The temple of Jesus’s day, King Herod’s temple, consisted basically of three areas—the temple building proper with its Holy Place and Most Holy Place, the temple courts proper where the sacrifices were offered and where only ceremonially clean Jews could be present, and then the larger outer courtyard called the Court of the Gentiles. This larger, outer courtyard is most likely where the buying and selling was taking place. And it makes sense, right? You can purchase the appropriate animals right there, then proceed into the inner courts to have them offered up. And if you don’t have the right currency, the people who can turn your currency into the right currency are also right there.

But it didn’t make sense to Jesus. It made Jesus angry. And he had a right to be angry about what took place there. Remember who he is, after all. He reminds us: “Stop turning *my Father’s house* into a place of business!” He is the Son of God. This is the house of his Father, and so this is also his house. Imagine if you came home and discovered that your house had been turned into something other than what it is meant to be—a sanctuary for your family, the place where you feed, care for, and nurture your family, the place where you strengthen the bonds that hold it together. That’s how Jesus felt.

He was angry, first of all, because of the distraction to worship that this marketplace activity would have caused. After all, there were some religious Jews who would and could only go as far as the Court of the Gentiles for their worship, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, whom we hear about later in the book of Acts. But their thoughts of meditation and prayer have to contend with the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the cooing of doves, the clinking of coins, and bartering between buyers and sellers. And those who are able to go into the inner courts have little chance to prepare their hearts prior to entering the inner courts, and even once inside the inner courts, I would be surprised if no marketplace sounds whatsoever from the outer courtyard carried inside. Not to mention that these merchants were certainly not selling their livestock at sale prices. No, just like with museum gift shops and stands outside of popular attractions, you had better believe that convenience was taken into account.

But Jesus is even more angry about the impression this business activity gives about his Father's house, and the resulting association of the worship of his Father with business activity. God's house was not meant to be a place where commodities were sold and purchased. Obviously Jesus knew that, practically speaking, his Father's worshippers were going to have to purchase sacrificial animals in many cases, but if they associated that purchase with the temple grounds, then suddenly money and works would get mixed with worship. The focus of worship would easily shift from God graciously accepting a substitute's death in place of the people's and forgiving their sins to God doing that not graciously, but in response to them shelling out their cash. The thought could easily creep in: I have done my part, now it's time for God to do his. It is only a small shift in thought from the sacrificial animals being bought and sold on site to the forgiveness that is given on site also being bought and sold. And Jesus will not have any of that. The temple was a place for people to be bought and paid for by God with blood, not a place to buy and sell worldly goods.

Later Jesus's apostle Peter would have equally strong words when a former sorcerer named Simon tried to buy from the apostles the ability to give the Holy Spirit. Peter told him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20). The same impression could easily be given here when the marketplace has infringed upon the house of God.

Not only that, but one of the chief reasons God shows his gracious love to us is not only to save us from sin, death, and hell, but also to transform our hearts so that we show free love in return, especially to our fellow believers. So if there were any giving of cows, sheep, and animals going on in the temple itself, Jesus would have much preferred that it were of the charitable sort—Jews with greater means giving sacrificial animals to those with lesser means. Instead, with this marketplace activity taking place in the temple, the impression is given that those who believe in the promised Messiah and his deliverance will not give to others who believe in the promised Messiah and his deliverance unless they are first paid the right amount to do so.

The message being sent is: God's forgiveness must be bought and God's people are not generous either. If anything, they fleece you.

The message Jesus is sending is: If you give that impression to others, then you will stir up my anger, and I myself will come after you with a whip and drive you out of my Father's house. God's house is not a place of business.

You see, then, that at the heart of Jesus's anger is love. This is another one of the reasons his anger was justified. He was concerned about preserving the teaching of our salvation. If people didn't learn that they were saved by God's grace and mercy at the temple in Jerusalem, where else were they going to learn it?

So how do we keep from rousing angry Jesus today? We might most readily think of activities that take place here at church. But there isn't a direct correlation between God's house in the Bible and our local church today. God's house in the Old Testament was the only place the people were to worship God or direct their worship of God. In the New Testament, we have churches all over the place, and church can even be held in a building that isn't a church, architecturally speaking.

But the temple in the Old Testament was meant to be a picture of the Holy Christian Church, the household of God, the body and fellowship of believers. Do our interactions and relationship with each other ever resemble a place of business rather than the house of God our Father? Do we ever give each other the impression that God will only do his part if we do ours first? Are we like Job's bad friends, and when a Christian we know is suffering, we try to get him or her to find out what sin they must have committed? Do we let our focus shift from God's giving to us to what we've given to God?

Or do our interactions and relationship with each other ever resemble a place of business rather than the house of God our Father because we refuse to be generous with each other and we always expect to get something for our services to each other?

A humorous story: I had once heard a saying from a brother pastor, who had heard it from his former district president. The saying went like this: "Every congregation would gladly pay their pastor a million dollars, if they could, and every pastor would gladly work for free, if he could." I liked that saying from the moment I heard it. Well, it was customary at my churches in Wisconsin for the voters to set the pastor's annual salary at the annual voters' meeting in January, just like here. It was kind of understood that I would leave the room for that discussion, but before the first such meeting I attended they asked me if I had any requests. I shared that saying with them: "Every congregation would gladly pay her pastor a million dollars, if they could, and every pastor would gladly work for free, if he could." And I said, "That's exactly how I feel."

There was a silence, and I thought it was hitting them as profoundly as it had hit me. But as I turned to leave the room, the treasurer piped up and said, "Free it is!"

Of course I knew he was joking, and everybody had a good laugh. And it's good that he was joking, because the Bible says the worker is worthy of his wages. But "the worker is worthy of his wages" is really a saying for the laypeople, not for me. For me the saying is "not greedy for money, but eager to serve." So what if he hadn't been joking, and they still would have made sure somehow that I had food, clothing, and shelter, but I wouldn't have had a salary anymore? Would I have said, "No, sir, if you want the cow, here's how much it costs!"

A not-so-humorous story: A funeral home director called me up after one of my members died and asked me what my rate was. I didn't know what he was talking about, so I asked for clarification. He explained that some of the other pastors in the city where the funeral home was located had an actual rate for funerals that they charged, and so he was wondering what mine was so that he could bill the family accordingly. Can you imagine? Selling funerals like selling

sheep in the temple courtyard, to those mourning a loss and seeking comfort from God's word in their sorrow? "Jesus died for all the sins of your relative. Since she believed in Jesus as her Savior, you can be assured that your loved one is in heaven. That will be \$199.99."

All of this just relates to *my* job. I need to examine myself regularly and ask why I'm doing what I'm doing, because if I'm doing it for the money, then I deserve to meet angry Jesus, Jesus with the whip. But we *all* need to consider how we act toward each other. On the part of the receivers, sure, if we are able, we should always be looking to reward the givers. But on the part of the givers? Woe to us if we are looking for a single penny from each other! Is that how God treated us? If he did, we'd be bound for hell. How can we even begin to pay back the price of the lifeblood of the holy, innocent Son of God?

Of course, as we apply this to our lives with our fellow Christians, that means there *will* also be applications to our activities here at church. The first and most obvious application is that the good news of Jesus's salvation should predominate in our worship. We could also apply this to our offerings. On the one hand, they should truly be free will, not forced, but they should also be generous in response to God's generosity to us. With other applications, we need to be careful not to say too much on one side or the other. Is all buying and selling at church wrong? I think of the book sale we had last fall where the goal wasn't to make money off of fellow members, but to provide them with good food for their soul, that they wouldn't otherwise have access to, and to do so at good prices. It was actually a way we tried to serve each other generously and in love.

Is every church fundraiser wrong? I don't think so; again, it's important to look at the purpose. But fundraisers can so easily be abused and turned into a lazy substitute for godly Christian stewardship. If we end up creating a climate where people are going to give to the church only if church has a bake sale or gala or silent auction where they get something in return, then we're going to meet angry Jesus. If we find ourselves going to a church fundraiser and buying something, a good question to ask ourselves is this, "Would I have given that money to the church even if I didn't get anything? Or would I have spent it on something else?"

Here's the bottom line, brothers and sisters: You have received freely. God's house not a place of business with goods for sale; here everything is a free gift from him. The curmudgeon will always say, "Nothing in life is truly free," but actually something truly is, and it's the best thing ever. Forgiveness of all sins and eternal life are truly and completely free gifts through the blood of Christ freely shed on our behalf. And the faith to believe it is also a free gift of God given through his Word and through baptism.

You have received freely, and so you should also give freely and generously. Only a freely giving and generous attitude harmonizes with the free and infinitely more valuable generosity of God shown to us. That's what Jesus was so zealous about, so angry about.

God's house is not a place of business, so let's not let our fellowship, whether narrower or broader, turn into a place of business. Let's believe the free and generous grace of God, shown to us in kind and gentle Jesus, and let's share that free grace with others in both word and deed. Then angry Jesus will only be someone we read about, not someone we meet. Amen.