

# CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

John 2:13–25;  
Matthew 21:12–17;  
Mark 11:15–19;  
Luke 19:45–48

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[Jesus] told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (John 2:16)

### Daily Bible Readings

<b>M</b>	July 14	Isa. 56	God Gathers Outcasts to the Temple
<b>T</b>	July 15	1 Tim. 2:1–8	Unalloyed Worship
<b>W</b>	July 16	Eccl. 5:1–7	Guard Your Steps in God’s House
<b>Th</b>	July 17	Acts 17:22–34	God Doesn’t Live in Human Shrines
<b>F</b>	July 18	Jer. 7:1–15	The False Security of Religious Posturing
<b>Sa</b>	July 19	Mal. 3:1–6	The Lord Appears in the Temple

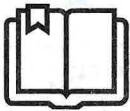
## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

One of the first principles for reading any story in the Bible is to ask about its context. What is going on in the stories or sections around it? What is the distinctive message of that book of the Bible, and what does this passage contribute to that message? How does it compare to other books in its genre? One looks at similarities and differences between a passage from one of Paul’s letters and his other writings, or see how one prophetic book lines up against others.

We’ll talk more in our second section about the Gospel of John’s distinctive character within the four gospels. For now, let’s notice how John’s story of the cleansing of the temple fits within the earliest chapters of the book. Within the first two chapters of John, multiple testimonies arise regarding the extraordinary place that Jesus of Nazareth occupies within the Reign of God. John 1:1–18 speaks of the Word who has always existed with God and is God. This Word created the world and has come and “pitched his tent” among us in the life of Jesus. John the baptizer, sent to warn people to get ready for God’s Kingdom, sees Jesus and announces

that the Kingdom has come. Jesus proceeds to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is a party by turning water into wine at a wedding feast. Throughout these early passages, the author of John makes it abundantly clear that in the life of Jesus, God has broken into human history, which will never be the same again. Seen in this context, the story of the cleansing of the temple takes on a particular meaning. By highlighting Jesus' authority in the temple, the story compels us to see who we're dealing with here and to recognize the central role he plays in God's plan for the world.

*O Word made flesh, dwell among us today. Help us to see the many ways we allow even the good things we would do to stand in the way of worshiping you alone. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

John 2:13–25

**2:13** The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup>After 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.

<sup>23</sup>When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup>But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup>and needed no one to testify about anyone, for he himself knew what was in everyone.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.



## JOHN'S SPECIAL GOSPEL

**A**lthough it is clear that each of the gospel writers have a distinctive message about Jesus to convey, our first clue of this comes with our reading of John's Gospel. When Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus, they use a common structure. Although some contain stories found in only one or two of the gospels, the events the three describe take place in roughly the same order. Likewise, they share common plot elements, like Jesus' use of parables to convey his message about the Reign of God.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, tells us the story of Jesus in ways that are often quite different than the other three. No parables show up in John; Jesus is more apt to teach with long discourses. John says nothing about Jesus' birth, his genealogy, nor his temptation in the wilderness. The structure of John's Gospel is built around a series of seven miracles or signs, the first and last of which (turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana and raising of Lazarus, respectively) appear nowhere else. Ask folks how long Jesus' ministry lasted and most will say three years. Did you know that this estimate is based on John's telling of Jesus' story? If we relied only on Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we'd say it lasted only about a year.

This leads us to the cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem, today's gospel narrative. In the three synoptic gospels, this story is depicted as part of Jesus' Passion Week, the days between Palm Sunday and Easter. In the other three, it is a climax in which opposition to Jesus galvanizes, leading to his arrest and then death. But in John, the event appears practically at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Why the difference? Many explanations have been offered, but I think the story appears early in John's Gospel for a couple of complementary reasons. First, it establishes who Jesus is. It makes it clear that in Jesus we meet someone with the authority to shake things up—even in the temple, Judaism's holiest site. Second, it tells us that if we want to follow this Jesus, we're going to have to clear all the clutter out of our life and devote ourselves wholly to the worship of God alone. No matter how good or necessary something might appear, if it distracts us from worshiping God, it's going to have to go.



**Before reading this lesson, how would you have described John's distinctive way of telling the story of Jesus?**



## FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS MOST

Jesus' cleansing the temple raises a question: what was going on that elicited such a pointed—indeed violent—response on Jesus' part? Much speculation has been offered in answer. Most of it has to do with the idea that those selling animals and exchanging currency were doing so in ways that exploited the poor who had come to make sacrifice. This seems to be based on the allusion found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's versions of the story and the phrase “den of robbers,” from Jeremiah 7:9–11. Some commentators think that Jesus meant simply that some were trying to use the sacrificial system as a shield from accountability for their sins (thus “robbing” God of true contrition). Others have pointed out that many came to the temple without animals of their own to offer in sacrifice, and thus had to buy one there. In an era with multiple forms of money in circulation, a currency exchange was necessary if people were to buy these animals.

The answer to the question, “what was going wrong in the temple?” might be, “not all that much.” But if this was the case, what was Jesus so upset about? His concern arose from his zeal for the worship of God in the temple. It was here that Israel's worship of God found its focus; ordinary people traveled to the temple, over great distances and at much expense, to know that they were in the presence of the Holy One. Jesus' action in the temple said, in effect, that even good and necessary things, like purchasing animals for making sacrificial offerings, are a problem when they distract us from our worship.

The cleansing of the temple reminds us that our devotion to God is not simply one priority among many; rather, it is the foundation upon which all our priorities rest. Worship helps us keep our many callings and tasks in proper order, focusing our minds and hearts on the God who gave us all of life, and who will guide us through life. To allow anything, however worthy, to distract us from worship is to diminish the life that worship makes possible. This is, for example, why the question of what symbols we display in our worship space is so important. Symbols always point to a reality beyond themselves. Any symbol in the place of worship that is not explicitly intended to direct our hearts to God is a problem, no matter how important it is.



**What do you do during worship to focus your heart and mind on God? How hard is it for you to dial back distractions and focus on God alone?**



## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Worship does not happen only in the church sanctuary. If we recognize God as creator and sustainer of life, then any moment is appropriate for worship. Worship with our congregational family is at the top of the list, but many other ways exist to enter into a spirit of worship throughout the week. A discipline of regular prayer and contemplation is the option we hear about most often, but many of us find this difficult, and most of us would have to work hard to carve that kind of time out of our day. Let's consider a few other possibilities for worship.

- One suggestion is to look for moments that regularly interrupt our day, sometimes with forced inaction and waiting. Reclaim them by using these times for prayer. Waiting at stop lights is the opportunity I've heard most often, along with waiting at elevators and drive-through lines. Also, repetitive chores don't require intense focus (folding laundry, washing dishes). Prayer does not need to occupy long stretches of time to be heartfelt and intentional.
- *Lectio Divina* is an ancient Christian practice for reading Scripture. A component that fits easily into a busy schedule is to devote 5–10 minutes to reading a short Scripture passage, sitting with it for a minute, reading it again, sitting with it again, then reading a third time. Simply letting the Spirit speak to us through each reading—sometimes long after the reading is complete—is enough.
- Finally, we can use our memories of people who have made a deep impact on our life by offering prayers of thanks for these individuals, for the gifts they've given us, and for the life their gifts have made possible. We can name such people as our personal saints. My own list includes my late father-in-law, who possessed deep wells of competence, good sense, and humility. When I married his daughter, I possessed none of these traits; yet, he showed me such patience and generosity of spirit as to make me yearn to be a better person. He's been gone a long time now, but I continue to thank God when I think of all the ways his example and grace still inspire me to seek ways to be a better husband, parent, grandparent, and person.



What ways have you found to bring worship into your daily life?

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. Some scholars believe that this event is distinct from Jesus' cleansing the temple at the end of his ministry (Matt. 21:12–13 and synoptic parallels). Others conjecture that John brought the event forward for theological purposes. John seems to arrange his material to highlight the event's deeper meaning, emphasizing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry his intent to rout out the abuses of Judaism. John mentions at least three Passovers (here; 6:4; 11:55), possibly four (5:1). Mention of "the Passover of the Jews" is a note for John's readers who did not know why Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Some New Testament commentaries point to echoes of Psalm 69:9, referencing the psalmist's zeal for God's house.
2. The driving out of the animals from the temple area (the outer court) serves as a symbolic act. Jesus is not condemning merchants for dishonest business practices but for being in the temple area at all. They transformed what should have been a place for worshipful prayer into a noisy market. Jesus may be fulfilling the Messianic expectations of Zechariah 14:21 (where "Canaanite" could be translated "traders" or "merchant") and Malachi 3:1, 3.
3. The money changers exchanged currencies into the Tyrian coinage required for the temple tax, which Jews were obliged to pay. The practice was not wrong but was abused when exorbitant exchange rates were charged.
4. Jesus is the new temple. The ultimate, once-for-all-time sacrifice took place in this "temple" when others "destroyed" it, but Jesus rose from the dead in three days. The most common translation of destroy is "to loose," which could mean, "Liberate this sanctuary and I'll elevate it in three days!" Some Jews expected God to replace their current temple with a purer one. Jewish people prayed for its restoration after the temple was destroyed in 70 CE.
5. As Christians look at the purpose of their church buildings and property, especially in a post-pandemic world, they are examining their ways of doing Christ's mission. This passage invites the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal for living faithfully as the body of Christ today.