

The Gospel of John
Session Five: Cleansing the Temple
Commentary

John 2:13-25

2:13–14. It was April and the great feast of the Passover was in session for one week in Jerusalem. What a different scene there than in Jesus' home town of Nazareth or the other surrounding small towns of Cana and Capernaum. This was "the big apple," and the Lord did not like what he saw. The feast included the eating of the Passover Lamb which commemorated the passing of death over the Israelites before their departure from Egypt. Sometimes known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Passover was held in the first month of the sacred year, the seventh month of the civil year.

The merchandise described in verse 14 was required for sacrifices. Worshipers had traveled from great distances, and the availability of sacrificial animals was essential to temple worship. So what was the problem? The key phrase appears at the beginning of verse 14—in the temple courts—the place where Gentiles could pray. Furthermore, in Jesus' day, these concession stands had become "cash cows," an insult to the Father and a desecration of the Father's house.

2:15–16. Though we would not respond the same way, we should also be upset by the crass commercialism of some religious activity in churches and on radio or television. But we are startled to see the gentle Lamb make a whip and drive the merchants out of the temple.

Interpreters do not agree on whether the Lord actually used violence on the merchants, suggesting that perhaps the scourge was only the sign of authority, or perhaps only used on the animals. But certainly he knocked over the tables. There seems to be a miraculous element in one man overcoming a large group of merchants, who must have been determined to protect their businesses.

The central problem with this text is not whether it contains a miracle, but the unusual placement of the event by John at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The Synoptic writers connect the cleansing of the temple to Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem at the time of his death (Matt. 21:10–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–46). We have three choices here: (1) John is right and the Synoptics are wrong; (2) there were two similar occasions, one recorded only by John and the other only by the Synoptics; or (3) John has rearranged his material for theological purposes.

Assuming serious Bible students would reject the first option, I hasten to note that no less a scholar than Tenney chooses the second: "It is not at all improbable that He may have cleansed the temple twice, two Passovers apart, and that the second so enraged the hierarchy that their animosity toward Him exploded into drastic action. Interfering with their privileges once was impudent, twice would be inexcusable" (Tenney, Merrill C. *John: The Gospel of Belief*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, p. 44).

Borchert, on the other hand, calls this the greatest historical problem in John and says, “The familiar argument of two cleansings is a historiographic monstrosity that has no basis in the texts of the Gospels” (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 160).

Both Tasker and Morris, eminent scholars of the Gospel of John, agree with Tenney. I find myself drawn to Borchert’s argument, particularly in view of the emphasis all students of John must see in the compelling power of his purpose. As Borchert puts it

Why should John have to write his Gospel as a modern newspaper reporter? His purpose was not to report but to proclaim and persuade (20:30–31). He was a great inspired artist and theologian who organized his episodes from the life of Jesus in such a way as to bring people to faith in Jesus as the Son of God. What is more, the evangelist viewed the story of Jesus in its entirety from a post-resurrection perspective. The evangelist even told us what he was doing in this very section (2:22). At the time of writing, Jesus was not then living on earth and facing death; He was reigning in power with God (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 161).

2:17. This verse seems curious, and we wonder why the disciples happened to remember Psalm 69:9 on this occasion. Certainly the reference of that verse to Christ would indicate a messianic realization, and he had just referred to the temple as “my Father’s house.” We learn here a certain holy concern for the sanctity of places of worship even though place is not the central issue. Israel had zeal without knowledge; now God was going to demand a blend of those two important qualities.

2:18–21. Since Jews required signs (1 Cor. 1:22), that is exactly what they did here, only to hear Jesus say, Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days. That magnificent building had been started by Herod in 20 b.c., and this conversation took place in approximately a.d. 26. The construction process would still go on for thirty-seven more years until its completion in a.d. 63. The temple would stand complete for only seven years before being destroyed by the armies of Titus in a.d. 70. These words would not be forgotten by the crowds, however, and mockers would repeat the charge as Jesus hung on the cross (Matt. 27:40; Mark 15:29).

Like the water turned into wine, the new would again replace the old. This time, the system of worship would be replaced. As Tasker points out:

The mission of Jesus was far from being merely negative and destructive. He had come to make possible a more direct approach by men to God in a purer worship by offering His own body in sacrifice, an offering whose acceptance by the Father as an all-sufficient atonement would be signified by His resurrection on the third day. All believers who accepted His sacrifice would become part of His body and so enabled to offer themselves, in Paul’s words, ‘A living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God’ (Rom. 12:1). This is the truth conveyed in the somewhat enigmatical words recorded by John as Jesus’ answer to the demand by the Jews for a sign (Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel According to Saint John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, pp. 63–64).

As happened so often during his earthly ministry, Jesus was misunderstood and misinterpreted. Taken by surprise with the answer in verse 19, the Jews could only apply it in their limited understanding to the temple beside which they were standing at that moment. But the Lord spoke of his resurrection. The building was not the issue, but his body. Sometimes in such language the contrast is with the temple and the literal body of Jesus. In our day we must make this distinction between a church facility and the people of God who use it.

2:22. John spoke for the other disciples when he observed that they did not think much of this phrase at the moment but remembered it later after Jesus' resurrection. Only then did they believe the Scripture and the words Jesus had spoken. But worship is always related to the words of Jesus and never linked with a building, as much as we like to think in Old Testament terms of a special "temple where we meet God." We will see this with greater clarity in chapter 4. This Gospel always presents Jesus in light of his resurrection, which is what we should expect, knowing when John wrote. He had seen the effects across nearly five decades of the preaching of an empty tomb around the Mediterranean world. John wasted no time inserting the doctrine of resurrection alongside creation, incarnation, and regeneration.

But what Scripture did they believe after the resurrection which they somehow linked with the promise of Jesus? According to Morris, "In the singular 'scripture' usually refers to a single passage. If this is the case it is not easy to identify the passage in mind. It may perhaps be Ps. 16:10, which is interpreted as the resurrection in Acts 2:31; 13:35. Or it may be Isa. 53:12, which is not unfairly understood of the resurrection for it speaks of the activity of the Servant after His death. There is a reference to being raised on the third day in Hos. 6:2, but this does not seem at all relevant to the resurrection of Christ" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 204).

I suggest we not worry about a specific passage here, at least as we consider application in our own lives. Knowing a specific "proof text" is not nearly as productive in overall Christian life and service as our dependence upon the Bible and its authoritative and infallible message of God's truth. Boice lays it on the line: "How does it stand with you? Do you approach things scripturally as God wants you to? Or are you still trying to puzzle out God's truth with your own weak faculties of reasoning? The Bible tells us that we will only advance spiritually and that we will only hear God's voice as we approach Him through the pages of His book" (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, I, p. 219).

2:23. This verse contains a key word in our Gospel as we read about Jesus' signs. Numerous miracles took place at this time, but the description of them does not fit John's purpose. As we have already seen, John emphasizes the message of Jesus rather than his miracles. Nevertheless, miracles led people to believe in his name. It sounds like a great evangelistic effort, as though the band of disciples was building rapidly in the big city. All the sign-miracles of John were revelations of Christ's glory, and the disciples often did not understand their spiritual significance.

The word *semeion* (“sign”) appears sixteen times in John’s Gospel and twenty-three times in his entire writings. Two other words describe miracles in the New Testament: *dunamis* (“power”) and *teras* (“wonder”). “The distinction between the three terms is one of emphasis: *semeion* refers to the purpose of the miracle; *dunamis* refers to the source that enables someone to perform the miracle; and *teras* refers to the reaction of the crowd when a miracle was performed. John’s favorite term for Jesus’ miracles was *semeion* (*dunamis* does not occur and *teras* occurs only once, 4:48), for he emphasized the purpose for these miracles: they revealed who Jesus was so that people would believe in Him (20:30–31)” (Blackaby, Henry. *Experiencing the Word—Gospel of John*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999, p. 6).

But we’re about to see a significant difference between the belief of verse 22 and the belief of verse 23.

2:24–25. John 2:24 is one of the most important verses in this Gospel because it reminds us that in the New Testament the word *believe* does not always mean that a person has placed genuine faith in Jesus. The spectators in Jerusalem must have exercised only intellectual assent—perhaps agreeing that Jesus might be some significant prophet who has come among the people. But the Lord looked right into their hearts and saw their motives. Their faith had been placed in his works rather than in his person. Therefore, he would not entrust himself to them. The Greek text is helpful at this point since the verb “*believe*” (*episteuo*) appears in three consecutive verses (vv. 22–24).

The disciples believed Jesus’ words and the Scripture only after his resurrection. The people in Jerusalem claimed to believe, but Jesus did not believe their belief. The NIV translation for *would not entrust* is the same essential root as the words translated “*believed*” in the two previous verses. The past tense indicates ongoing action in verse 24. Jesus continuously did not trust their claims to faith. The second verb of the verse (*knew*) is in the present tense, indicating that he knew the hearts of all people all the time. This includes modern believers.

For emphasis, John repeated that thought in verse 25. The Lord looks at our hearts to examine whether what we say we believe really represents our inner selves. Borchert sums it up nicely in the context of this Gospel:

When John wrote this Gospel, he knew that Jesus performed many signs and that people said they believed. John also knew that Jesus died and that while he had no intention of abandoning the believers (14:18), they could not avoid abandoning him. For John, then, there was good reason for Jesus not to believe people’s believing. Thus, when we read the stories of John, we must not treat them simply as stories from the past. They are also in fact living portraits of humanity in every era. Accordingly, we need to understand that the living Jesus does not believe everyone’s believing because he knows what is in them. Those words ought to stand as a warning to everyone (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 168).¹

¹ Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).