



The Gospel of John

Session Five: Cleansing the Temple

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

Today, we will examine the first of two recorded instances where Jesus cleansed the temple. Only John recorded this first instance, where Jesus threw out the vendors and money changers on the first Passover of His public ministry. The second cleansing is recorded in the other three Gospels and took place in the days leading up to Jesus's arrest (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48).

While there are similarities in the accounts, most Bible scholars believe they represent two separate events. Look for how the different figures responded to Jesus's authority. In a broad sense, they represent different ways people react to Jesus's authority today. We each have opportunity to submit ourselves to Jesus's authority or reject it. Examine ways in which we can openly receive Jesus's authority in our lives.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 2:13-25

THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus had the authority to cleanse the temple as He came as the ultimate dwelling of God, who now resides in His people.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Under what authority did Jesus cleanse the temple? What authority does Jesus have to cleanse the unrefined parts of our lives?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 2:13-17 When Jesus and the disciples arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover, He was angry at the way He saw the temple courtyards being used. The chaotic and profit-driven scene was far from the intent of God's house as a place of prayer. When the disciples witnessed His bold and decisive action, they were reminded that the Messiah would be recognized by His zeal for God's house.

John 2:18-19 The temple leaders were indignant about Jesus's actions and wanted to know by what authority He acted. Jesus declared if they destroyed the temple (referring to His body), He would rebuild it in three days. His authority came from God, and His willingness to embrace the cross and ultimately be resurrected was proof of His divine power.

John 2:20-25 The temple the religious leaders fought so strongly for would be destroyed less than forty years from this encounter. To this day it has not been rebuilt. We cannot put our hope in things that cannot save. Jesus is the living temple, and the ultimate sacrifice. When we come to Christ, we affirm a living hope that will extend far beyond any human structure or system.



START HERE

Who has authority in your life? You might say a boss, parent, teacher, or even yourself. While we all have responsibilities to ourselves and to one another, ultimate authority belongs to Jesus. In today's text, Jesus cleansed the temple of profiteers, while pointing to Himself as the living temple and ultimate sacrifice, who would make a way for sinful man to be reconciled to God.

DISCUSS

How difficult is it to submit to someone else's authority? We may have a complicated relationship with authority because of challenging relationships in our past. Jesus is the ultimate authority—confirmed not through bullying or aggression, but through His loving sacrifice. He is the ultimate authority in whom we can safely submit our lives.

ADDING CLARITY

In the clearing of the temple, Jesus brought forth God's standards of what is right and what is wrong. Present for the Passover, a time of remembrance for Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Jesus encountered individuals who were profiteering from the religious festival. Jews who had traveled great distances needed to purchase animals for sacrifice, as well as exchange their money into local currency. They encountered entrepreneurial individuals who offered both services. While legalism was denounced by Jesus, holiness was maintained. The issue at hand was not business or profit making as such but the mockery of the entire sacrificial system of the temple and the exploitation of devout men and women by greedy individuals who were capitalizing on religious sentiment.

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Jesus cares about true worship.

John 2:13-17: The Jewish Passover was near, and so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and he also found the money changers sitting there. After making a whip out of cords, he drove everyone out of the temple with their sheep and oxen. He also poured out the money changers' coins and overturned the tables. He told those who were selling doves, "Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!"

And his disciples remembered that it is written: Zeal for your house will consume me.

Unpacking John 2:13-17

Imagine you are tasked with cleaning up a filthy, disorganized building. You may not have created the mess, but it is your job to clean it up. First, you examine the space. You may poke a toe in the corner of a few boxes, scooting them along the floor. Maybe you pick up a few stacks of items from one spot and move them to another. Soon, the whole task starts to feel overwhelming, and you feel inadequate to do it. Looking for inspiration, you spend the entire day



at a chain store, buying every kind of cleaning product, tool, and organizational item you can find. You fill your car with boxes, bags, and supplies. At the end of a busy day of shopping—in order to “get ready” to clean—you realize you didn’t actually accomplish anything. The extra supplies can only do so much. To clean the space, eventually you must get to work.

In today’s text, Jesus and the disciples traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. When they arrived, they found people selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging money intended for paying temple taxes right inside the temple area. The outer temple area was meant to be a place of preparation, literally and spiritually, for making sacrifices. Instead, it functioned like a raucous marketplace for buying and selling goods and services. While religious pilgrims had traveled many miles to the temple to make their required sacrifices, these “businessmen” exploited their need through chaotic hawking of wares and financially exploiting those who came to worship. While they did need items for worship (an animal sacrifice and temple coins), these salesman made procuring the items more important than the worship of God in that space. The travelers came to Jerusalem to empty their hearts before God but instead encountered confusion and clutter.

Jesus was appalled by the lack of reverence for God’s house. In verse 15, we read that He took time to make a whip out of cords. This was not an angry rampage but a deliberate response. He was clearly in control of His thoughts and actions when He drove the animals out of the temple courtyard and knocked the money changers tables over. Imagine for a second the chaos that must have ensued. Animals would have been wandering about, spilling out of the confines of the temple courtyard and into the streets. The money changers would have been on their hands and knees in the dirt, desperately trying to recoup their investments. Even the people selling doves, the smallest sacrifices meant for the poorest of attenders to purchase for their family’s sacrifice, received a strong rebuke—“*Stop turning my Father’s house into a marketplace!*” (v. 16).

The very items people needed to worship became obstacles to worship. It wasn’t wrong to sell animals for sacrifices or help people exchange currency. What made it inappropriate was that the rambunctious activity and concern for profits overshadowed the people’s desire to meet with God. As was written by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years before, “*My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*” (Isaiah 56:7). The chaos of the courtyard hindered the prayers of the people.

The same can be true today. Without maturity and restraint, some of the things meant to help us worship (music, lights, media campaigns, etc.) can steal our focus away from Jesus and foolishly place it on the quality of the music, the preaching, or programming. It would be a tragic loss to come to church, drink great coffee, meet with friends, and sing good songs, but never encounter Christ. As God’s people collectively keep their eyes on Jesus, the less tempted we are to make church about other things.

Verse 17 gives an interesting note on the event—“*And his disciples remembered that it is written: Zeal for your house will consume me.*” The disciples were getting to know Jesus. This



might be the first time they experienced His passion and authority in that way. In Psalm 69, David wrote about the depth of his despair at the hands of his enemies. He had fought for righteousness and honor, but his enemies advanced on him anyway. In one of several verses David wrote about himself—verses that also apply to Jesus—he said, “*Zeal for your house has consumed me*” (Psalm 69:9) Like David, Jesus had a passion for God’s house. Unlike David, who because of his sin would never build a house for God, Jesus would become both the temple and the sacrifice, reconciling people to God.

Near the end of Psalm 69, David prayed, “*But as for me—poor and in pain—let your salvation protect me, God. I will praise God’s name with song and exalt him with thanksgiving. That will please the LORD more than an ox, more than a bull with horns and hooves*” (Psalm 69:29-31). God is pleased, not with the size of our sacrifice but the sincerity of our worship. Zeal for God’s house means creating a space where the poor and suffering can encounter God’s salvation and praise Him without hindrance.

DISCUSS

- *What distractions or “marketplace clutter” sometimes threaten our worship?*
- *In what ways might Jesus need to “clear space” in your life so that you can focus on God?*
- *How can you seek to keep your heart a place of reverent worship instead of self-focus?*

2. Jesus speaks with divine authority.

John 2:18-19: *So the Jews replied to him, “What sign will you show us for doing these things?”*

Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.”

Unpacking John 2:18-19

Have you ever faced a cleaning or organizing task so arduous you imagined simply setting the room on fire, or bulldozing everything right into the trash? That would be an extreme reaction to cleaning a messy space, but perhaps there are some instances where the best course of action is to empty a space completely and start from the beginning. Sometimes, in messy garages and in life, the only real solution is to go back to the drawing board and begin again.

The temple leaders and vendors were shaken. Jesus pointed out their neglect of the true purpose of the temple—to meet with God in prayer. However, rather than repent, they demanded proof. “*What sign will you show us for doing these things?*” (v. 18). They wanted to know by what authority Jesus had cleansed the temple of the moneychangers. In their minds, only the Messiah could have exercised such a right. Demanding a sign became a token phrase used often by religious leaders in Jesus’s day (Matthew 12:1-8; 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16). Instead of acknowledging their own sinfulness and reflecting on how they had strayed from authentic worship, they pointed at Jesus and demanded He prove His “right” to interfere.



Jesus responded with authority, not just anger. Scripture warns us that we should not allow our tongue to spew anger unchecked. As James 1:19-20 says, *“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness.”* Anger is a normal human emotion and one Jesus experienced. In Mark 1:41, Jesus expressed indignation (compassion) over the brokenness and sin in the world that caused a man to suffer from leprosy, and in Mark 10:13-16, He expressed anger at people who tried to prevent children from reaching Him. Anger is not inherently sinful. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:26, *“Be angry and do not sin.”* Jesus was angry at the systems that kept people away from authentic worship. However, in his anger, He did not sin, even under the scrutiny of the religious leaders of the day. Rather, Jesus responded with authority when they demanded a sign.

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days” (v. 19). Jesus’s response surely outraged the teachers of the law. They couldn’t imagine that anyone would talk of destroying Herod’s temple, let alone claim it could be rebuilt in three days. In 20 BCE, Herod the Great, the client-king of Rome, began a massive reconstruction project of Zerubbabel’s temple (built in 516 BCE), which was small and had fallen into disrepair. To curry favor from his Jewish constituents and establish a “wonder of the world” in his name, Herod spent forty-six years constructing a glistening temple that far exceeded the modest one Zerubbabel built after the Jews returned from Babylonian exile. You might recall that the ark of the covenant and many of temple artifacts were taken when Solomon’s temple fell to Babylon in 586 BC. While Herod’s temple may have resembled Solomon’s temple in opulence, the lost temple articles were never recovered. Nevertheless, maintaining Herod’s temple and enjoying the admiration of other nations was important to the religious leaders of Jesus’s day. The idea of its destruction infuriated them.

Jesus could have responded to the religious leaders with anger. He could have called them out for their abuse of power and disregard for God’s house. Rather, He responded with authority. He did not need their approval, and He knew that their dogged attachment to the temple and to their understanding of temple worship would ultimately be their downfall. Jesus has authority because He gave His life in exchange for our sin. He became the ultimate sacrifice, and His death, burial, and resurrection would render animal sacrifice null and void. Jesus could respond with authority because He knew from whom it came—His Father. In John 10:17b-18 Jesus said, *“. . . I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”* His authority was given by His Father.

As followers of Jesus, we can rest in His authority. We don’t have to earn the favor of others or perform ritual acts to be in good standing with God. Jesus, the One who has authority over sin, death, and grave, paid the price so that we can enter an eternal relationship with Him.



DISCUSS

- *Have you ever been tempted to “throw in the towel” and destroy something completely rather than do the hard work of cleaning up a rough situation? How does Jesus’s authority encourage you when you’re tempted to think some struggles are too big to overcome?*
- *Where do you struggle to recognize Jesus’s authority?*
- *When challenged, do you more often lean on your own reasoning, or rest in Jesus’s power and promises? Why?*

3. Jesus is the true temple.

John 2:20-25: *Therefore the Jews said, “This temple took forty-six years to build, and will you raise it up in three days?”*

But he was speaking about the temple of his body. So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the statement Jesus had made.

While he was in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. Jesus, however, would not entrust himself to them, since he knew them all and because he did not need anyone to testify about man; for he himself knew what was in man.

Unpacking John 2:20-25

If you’ve ever sent a young child into their bedroom to clean, you probably have experienced coming back an hour later and the room looks worse than it did before. The mess on the floor has become two piles, the clean clothes mixed with the dirty ones, and there is your child, happily in the middle of it all playing with a forgotten toy he or she discovered under the bed! For kids to clean their rooms, they need some executive functioning skills they may not yet have acquired—skills like sorting, prioritizing, and organizing. They do not need a new room or more bookshelves, they need a whole new system and way of relating to their belongings. Until they have the skills they need to succeed, they might just keep moving around piles and calling it cleaning.

Likewise, the Jews didn’t just need tidier temple courts. They, like all of humanity, needed a completely new way to relate to God. The services and sacrifices in the temple were never intended to be a permanent way to relate to God, but a temporary measure that would be replaced when the ultimate living temple and sacrifice appeared in Jesus Christ.

After Jesus’s claim that they could destroy the temple and He would rebuild it in three days, the temple leaders were furious. *“This temple took forty-six years to build, and will you raise it up in three days?”* Their reply revealed their hearts. Through their neglect of the proper use of the temple courtyard, and their dogged attachment to a building, they expressed a devotion to



places and systems over a devotion to God. They, better than anyone, knew the prophecies about the coming Messiah, and they surely knew of Jesus's ministry. They should have rejoiced in His arrival (John 8:56), but their commitment to tradition blinded them to the work God was doing right in front of their eyes.

Jesus came as the living temple, which far exceeds any building constructed by human hands. He is the ultimate connection between sinful man and a holy God, but the leaders preferred their rituals and riches. John Piper comments, *"Jesus made it very clear that underneath the religious legalism . . . he saw the love of money . . . My Father is not being worshiped. Money is being worshiped — in my Father's house."*

At this point, the author, John the apostle, adds a little commentary. *"But he was speaking about the temple of his body. So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the statement Jesus had made"* (vv. 21-22).

Jesus replaced the temple system as the meeting place between God and man. He replaced the sacrificial system. His body became the ultimate sacrifice, once and for all, to atone for sin and make a way for reconciliation with God. He is not a cleaned-up system, or a reformed way to view temple worship. Through Christ, God established a new, eternal covenant, in which sinful man can have relationship with a holy God, made possible by the ultimate sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

When the author of Hebrews wrote to Jews who had become followers of Jesus, he explained the new temple and new covenant in this way: *"Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified"* (Hebrews 10:11-14). Jesus is the living temple and the living sacrifice.

Jesus told the religious leaders, *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days."* That's exactly what happened. Roughly three years after this encounter, Jesus's body would be destroyed on the cross at Calvary. The religious leaders were right there, calling for His death. However, the One they thought they had destroyed rose from the grave three days later, overcoming sin and death. His sacrifice atoned for sin once and for all, rendering the continual need for animal sacrifices useless. As the author of Hebrews concluded, *"Now where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sin"* (Hebrews 10:18).

Despite the hardness of heart of the leaders, *"Many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing"* (John 2:23). Those who came to Jesus humbly and sincerely saw signs of His divinity. The religious leaders who should have anticipated His arrival missed it. Jesus came to those who were willing to receive Him.

What the religious leaders of the day did not realize, is that in their lifetime, the physical temple would also be destroyed. In 70 AD, the Romans, under Titus, destroyed the temple in retaliation



for a Jewish revolt. All that remains of the structure is a portion of the temple mount, and a retaining wall, which you might have heard referred to as the “wailing wall.” The temple has never been rebuilt, and many Jews around the world today are waiting and praying for a day when the temple will be reconstructed. Not only was the temple destroyed by Rome, but animal sacrifices ceased, as there was no longer an acceptable location in which to make them. The very temple and sacrificial systems the religious leaders held onto too tightly were lost just decades later.

Jesus is the living temple and the living sacrifice. When He cleansed the temple in John 2, He made clear that a new system was on the way—a renewed covenant with God made possible through His ultimate sacrifice. The religious leaders’ response to Jesus serves as a sober reminder for us. We were never called to protect religious traditions, spaces, or systems above all. We are called to walk in a living relationship with our living Savior. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father and has completed the work necessary for us to have a relationship with God. When we come to Him authentically, in a posture of worship, we acknowledge nothing we do can make us right before God. And we rejoice in the work of Christ for us. Through Him, the sacrifice has been completed, and we are invited into God’s presence, free from the penalty of our sin.

DISCUSS

- *How does knowing Jesus is the true temple change the way you think about worship?*
- *If Jesus has authority over life and death, how should that encourage you in your struggles today?*
- *Where are you tempted to hold onto tradition over Jesus? What needs to change?*



DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *What “good things” might keep us from experiencing authentic worship?*
- *What would it look like for you to clear out spiritual clutter to make room for more of Jesus?*
- *Why do we need Jesus’s authority in our lives above anyone else? Why is His authority a good thing for us?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

Is there an area in your life in which you are struggling to submit to Jesus’s full authority? What would it look like to set down fear and pride and embrace His leadership in that area?

APPLY

What areas of your life need to be “cleansed” so that your body, as God’s temple, reflects His presence?

REFERENCES

John Piper, “*Destroy This Temple, and in Three Days I Will Raise It Up.*”

https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/destroy-this-temple-and-in-three-days-i-will-raise-it-up?utm_source=chatgpt.com

How Many Times Did Jesus Cleanse the Temple? <https://www.gotquestions.org/temple-cleanse.html>