

Cleansing the Temple

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 7:1–15

Background Scripture: John 2:13–25

(See also Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48.)

John 2:13–25

- 13** And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem,
14 And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting:
15 And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables;
16 And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.
17 And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.
18 Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?
19 Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.
20 Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?
21 But he spake of the temple of his body.
22 When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.
23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.
24 But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men,
25 And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

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Key Text

Said unto them that sold doves, take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.—John 2:16

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 2: Jesus and the Temple

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify Jesus' reason for "cleansing" the temple.
2. Explain the relationship between being "zealous" and being "jealous."
3. Make a plan to cleanse himself or herself of one unholy practice, considering that his or her body is God's new covenant temple (see 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 in lesson 10).

Lesson Outline

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- B. Not Humans (vv. 24–25)

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- A. New Temple
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Cana*Kay*-nuh.

CapernaumKuh-*per*-nay-um.

Galilee*Gal*-uh-lee.

Herod*Hair*-ud.

HezekiahHez-ih-*kye*-uh.

JerusalemJuh-roo-suh-lem.

JosiahJo-sigh-uh.

SanhedrinSan-huh-drun or San-*heed*-ru

synopticsih-nawp-tihk.

Introduction

A. Not in my House!

Every home is different, each with its own set of rules. From an early age, I learned that certain things were not permitted in my home. For example, under no circumstances was smoking allowed in the house. “Not in my house!” my mother would say. Smoking wasn’t the only off-limits behavior; my siblings and I didn’t dare use fighting words or curse. We knew our parents expected us to follow their rules while we lived under their roof. Later, when I married, I learned that my wife’s childhood home had new and different rules. Shoes in the house? Not a chance! And don’t even think of turning on a screen during mealtime.

What about God’s house? If the rules we impose in our homes reflect our values, what does God value? God’s earthly house—the temple—would need to reflect the character of the holy God. But when Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem, He was not pleased with what He found.

B. Lesson Context

The cleansing of the temple in today’s lesson differs from the accounts given in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those Gospels recount the time of Jesus’ dramatic actions in the temple that led to His arrest (Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46). Some scholars believe that John and the writers of the Synoptics are recording different events. Others suggest that John has brought the event forward in his narrative to show its significance for everything that Jesus says and does in that Gospel.

If Jesus performed more than one cleansing of the temple, it might be that His actions caused no permanent reforms, which would make a second cleansing necessary—and perhaps more provocative to those seeking His death.

The first-century temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life. Although the faithful of Jesus’ time regarded the temple as sacred, the temple complex was filled with controversy. The temple was led by a family of priests seen as corrupt. The temple’s outer courts became the location for selling animals used for sacrifices. Although many probably approved of this practice for convenience, others found it scandalous since the priesthood profited from the arrangement.

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple of His day is analogous to the activities of His ancestors. Hezekiah (reigned 715–687 BC) and Josiah (reigned 640–609 BC) were kings of Judah who reformed and renovated the temple of their day after it was neglected and defiled by idolatry

(2 Kings 23:1–30; 2 Chronicles 29:1–36). Because Jesus is the rightful King and a Son of David, it was fitting for Him to demand reform of the temple.

Before the events of today's lesson text, Jesus had been in Cana in Galilee, where He had miraculously transformed water into wine (John 2:1–10). This miracle “manifested forth his glory” for His disciples and others to see (2:11). Following that event, Jesus traveled with family members and disciples to Capernaum, a fishing village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (2:12). After staying in that town for a few days, Jesus and the disciples departed for Jerusalem, a journey of several days on foot. Our story picks up here.

I. Jesus' Actions

(John 2:13–17)

A. Described (vv. 13–16)

13. And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

This verse is the first mention of Passover celebrations in the Gospel of John (compare John 6:4; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14). During times of feasts, it would be typical for travelers to Jerusalem to join with other travelers to create a caravan.

John's use of the phrase *the Jews' passover* reflects his intended audience of the Gospel: a combined Jewish-Gentile community in the latter half of the first century. For this audience, observance of the Jewish feasts was not expected.

However, most Jews of Jesus' day would go to the temple to observe Passover. This one-day observance celebrated God's deliverance of His people from enslavement in Egypt (Exodus 12:1–27; Leviticus 23:5; Deuteronomy 16:1–8). The Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately follows passover (Leviticus 23:4–6; Numbers 28:16–17). Jesus went up to Jerusalem in obedience to the law regarding these observances (Deuteronomy 16:16).

14. And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting.

The temple included the singular building that housed the most holy place and the adjoining buildings and courts built by Herod the Great (reigned 37–4 BC). By reliable estimates, the temple complex grew to be larger than 30 acres once completed.

The location *in the temple* complex where Jesus encountered these animals was likely in the Court of the Gentiles, an open-air court where Jews and Gentiles were allowed to congregate. In this court, animals for sacrifices could be bought and sold. However, Jesus' attention was not on the animals but on *those that sold* them.

Oxen, sheep, and doves are animals used for sacrifice as prescribed by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 17:3; 5:6; 5:7, respectively). Doves were offered as sacrifices by people who could not afford larger animals (12:8; compare Luke 2:24). No one could easily satisfy the expectations for offering and sacrifice without passing money to a third party, one who had the approval of the priesthood.

If a person wanted to bring financial offerings, only one type of coin was allowed for the temple. Thus, *the changers of money* allowed travelers to Jerusalem to convert their money or resources—however much that might amount to—into a fitting currency for the temple. The

money changers did business *sitting* in the temple courts and often charged exorbitant transaction fees.

15. And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables.

Actions sometimes speak louder than words. When seeing these animals and people in the temple courts, Jesus did not make a speech to persuade their removal. The *scourge of small cords* could have been a type of braided rope used to direct the animals—specifically, *sheep* and *oxen*—to move.

Jesus used the cords and *drove them all*—the animals and the people doing business—*out of the temple*. The animals' owners likely sprinted to gather their valuable commodities as these animals fled. By scattering *the changers' money*, Jesus created a chaotic scene: *tables* crashing to the ground, coins flying in all directions, and money changers scrambling to prevent theft. All the while, large animals were running through to escape the man wielding an improvised whip.

What Do You Think?

How should a believer respond when they confront an unjust situation?

Digging Deeper

How might Job 1:20–22 inform such a response?

16. And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.

Jesus singled out *them that sold doves* for special criticism. As a result, we get the first hint of an explanation. Of course, Jesus could not use cords to drive out birds. A focus on sellers of doves reveals Jesus' anger at those who were taking advantage of those who were economically impoverished. Jesus objected to a show of false motives within the temple. He encountered a massive operation that allowed people to make a show of their devotion to God as they exchanged coins and obtained animals for sacrifice.

Jesus' inspection of the temple echoed the Old Testament prophets of Israel who demanded a change of heart of the people. Isaiah told the people of Israel to quit "vain oblations" and, instead, "learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:13, 17). Jeremiah gave a similar warning to residents of Judah, who thought that sacrifices would cover sinful hypocrisy (Jeremiah 7:1–29).

The phrase *my Father's house* reveals Jesus' authority to state such commands. The people of Israel frequently referred to God as "father" (Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalm 89:26–27; Isaiah 64:8; etc.; compare Romans 1:7).

The Gospel of John describes Jesus's unique relationship with His Heavenly Father. Jesus is the "only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14) who, in coming from Heaven, "hath declared" God the Father (1:18). As the only begotten Son of God, Jesus has unparalleled authority: "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand" (3:35). Jesus did nothing that was without the agreement and authorization of the Father (5:19–27). Jesus' unique identity as the Son of God culminated in His proclamation, "I and my Father are one" (10:30). No other person in Israel's past had claimed authority as God's Son sent from Heaven.

With this authority, Jesus declared that the temple was not a place for entrepreneurs to enrich themselves at others' expense. God is giving and gracious. His house should reflect His character. The temple and the sacrificial system presented in the Law of Moses were to be a communal practice that allowed the people to experience the presence of God. In Jesus' evaluation, this temple was being corrupted by the very things—sacrificial animals and money for offerings—that would please God.

Cleaning House

In our backyard, my dad built a playhouse for my sister and me. The playhouse allowed us to have fun on our own and to pretend like we were adults. A house of their own is every kid's dream, and we had it!

Then came the wasps. The insects did not "approve" of the playhouse. They attacked us every time we went in or out of the playhouse. Our mere existence displeased the insects. Of course, my sister and I disapproved of them living in our playhouse, but we were too afraid of them to do anything. Instead, we commissioned our dad to help us. He bravely entered the playhouse, took the necessary steps to remove the wasps, and ended their stay. Soon, our playhouse was clear of wasps, and we could again enjoy it.

Just as my dad wouldn't let the wasps take over our playhouse, Jesus wanted His people to have free access to God's presence and enjoy God's company. Are you making space for God's presence in your heart? Is your treatment of others helping or preventing people from coming to Him?

—L. M. W

B. Explained (v. 17)

17. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.

The underlying Greek word translated *remembered* is used three times in the Gospel of John (here and in John 2:22; 12:16); in each case, Jesus' disciples are the ones doing the remembering. Often, Jesus' motives were not clear to His closest followers. However, after His resurrection, the disciples gained a new understanding of what Jesus had done and what His words had meant (example: Luke 24:45–49).

The Scripture text that the *disciples remembered* comes from Psalm 69:9. John quotes only the first half of the verse, but the second half of that verse is equally appropriate as words about Jesus: "The reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me" (compare Romans 15:3). The word *zeal* in this context means intensive dedication, not jealousy (compare 10:2). Jesus was devoted to the temple, not as it existed, but as it was intended.

What Do You Think?

Has more reflection helped you notice God's hand in a difficult situation? When?

Digging Deeper

How are you attentive to the guidance of God's Spirit during reflection regarding spiritual matters?

Visual for Lesson 8. Display this visual as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with John 2:16.

Preparing for a Visit

As I type this, I sit waiting for my adult children to drive home for a holiday. While they make the trek, I clean the house, decorate, and prepare food. Knowing they are coming motivates me to prepare. I want them to see their old stomping grounds and remember happy times, not focus on how dilapidated things might be! I want to create a homey and welcoming atmosphere for them so they can enjoy family time.

I think Jesus wanted something similar for His Heavenly Father's house. He wanted a place where all of God's children could gather to worship the Father and strengthen their bond with Him and one another. Jesus' reaction showed that temple merchants were doing things that prevented that from happening. Are your heart and your home places where people are welcomed? Can Jesus use you to provide comfort and safety?

—L. M. W

II. Jesus' Announcement **(John 2:18–22)**

A. Authority Challenged (vv. 18–20)

18. Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?

Jesus' actions demanded a response. *The Jews* were religious leaders who had a keen interest in the temple and its function. Jesus had put them in a difficult position before a crowd in the temple courts. On the one hand, they could not be seen as being less devoted to God's house than to Jesus. On the other hand, they had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Perhaps the religious leaders believed Jesus' actions were right and His devotion to the temple was from God, but they wanted to know whether or not Jesus could prove His authority. Their demand for a *sign* pressured Jesus. The underlying Greek word translated as "sign" is used elsewhere in John's Gospel to refer to a miracle (examples: John 2:11, 23; 4:54; 12:18). The leaders wanted a public demonstration of Jesus' power (compare Matthew 16:1–4; John 6:30).

What Do You Think?

Describe a time when you waited for God to provide a sign before making a choice.

Digging Deeper

Is it wise or unwise to ask for a sign from God? How might Mark 8:11–12 inform your answer?

19. Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

Jesus indirectly *answered* the leaders through a riddle-like response. The underlying Greek word translated *temple* in this verse differs from the word translated as “temple” in verse 15, above. The Greek word in the verse before us often refers to the Jerusalem temple (examples: Matthew 23:16–17; Mark 15:38; Luke 1:9). The apostle Paul used the same word to mean a body as a place where the Spirit of God can dwell (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The plain meaning of Jesus’ words would seem to be that He would rebuild the temple building in Jerusalem after three days should His questioners *destroy* it. For the audience observing and listening, it would seem that Jesus was asserting His commitment to preserving the temple building. Words with similar implications were later used as allegations against Him during His trial before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:21; Mark 14:58).

20. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?

The first Jerusalem temple was built by King Solomon (1 Kings 5–6). The Babylonians destroyed it when they took the nation of Judah into captivity in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:8–17). Following the exile, the temple was rebuilt (Ezra 3; 6:13–18). That temple remained somewhat intact until Herod the Great took control of Jerusalem and, in approximately 19 BC, began renovating the complex. The project continued after Herod died in 4 BC and was a little past its midpoint during Jesus’ ministry. The authorities must have thought that a 46-year building project could not be redone in only *three days*.

B. Answer Explained (vv. 21–22)

21–22. But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.

These verses provide an editorial explanation to readers of John’s Gospel: Jesus himself would become *the temple* since He will be killed and restored (*risen from the dead*) after three days (Matthew 27:45–28:10; Mark 15:33–16:8; Luke 23:44–24:12; John 19:24–20:9). The temple was the physical manifestation of God’s presence with His people, the place where they could find mercy and forgiveness for sin (see Isaiah 56:4–7; etc.).

However, the spiritual significance of the temple was fulfilled in Jesus, for “no man cometh unto the Father, but by [Him]” (John 14:6). Jesus was revealed as the true temple, while the physical tabernacle and temple were simply fleeting shadows (see Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). Likewise, the bodies of His followers become a temple, welcoming the presence of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19).

There is some debate about which *scripture* the disciples *remembered* and *believed*. John may mean a specific text from Scripture, such as Psalm 69:9 (see commentary on John 2:17, above). However, the phrase *the scripture* parallels *the word which Jesus had said*, and Jesus did not repeat Psalm 69:9. Alternatively, *scripture* and *word* might be shorthand for the Old Testament, which is fulfilled in and through Jesus (compare Luke 24:44; John 20:9).

What Do You Think?

Do you find it easier to learn from concrete examples or from metaphors? Why?

Digging Deeper

What kinds of experiences did Jesus use to communicate spiritual truths? How might

Luke 13:6–21 inform your answer?

III. Who to Believe?

(John 2:23–25)

A. Jesus (v. 23)

23. Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.

John does not state what *miracles* Jesus did while He was *in Jerusalem*. John concludes his Gospel with the statement, “There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25). These miracles in Jerusalem would be an example of such unwritten things. Whatever these miracles were, they caused *many* to believe *in his name*. It seems that when put to the test and asked for a sign, Jesus resisted. But to those who followed and witnessed His work in Jerusalem, He performed miracles and gave evidence of divine power at work.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond if someone were to ask what you consider a miracle or sign from God?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture texts would inform your response?

B. Not Humans (vv. 24–25)

24. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men.

The Greek word translated *commit* is the same word translated as “believed” in verse 23, above. Others “believed” Jesus, but He did not trust them. He anticipated the ways their hearts could change. Later in this Gospel, Jesus will provide for the crowds, leading them to want to make Him their king (John 6:1–15). Yet, the leaders and crowds of Jerusalem would ultimately reject Him (19:14–16).

25. And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

John’s Gospel shows how Jesus knows and anticipates the motives of others (examples: John 1:47–48; 6:64; 13:11). Generally, other individuals in this Gospel testified *about Jesus* rather than *to Jesus* (examples: 1:6–15, 32–34; 4:39; 19:34–35; 21:24). Jesus did not need to receive the testimony of others because He *knew what was in* all people.

Conclusion

A. New Temple

Ironically, in an account expressing Jesus' zeal for the Jerusalem temple, He redefines the concept of "temple." His actions were like those of a prophet—one who does not come to destroy but comes to communicate God's perspective.

Jesus saw that the temple was filled with people who faced a business model that extracted financial value from them to enrich others. Regardless of Herod's renovations of the temple, Jesus knew that the building would not stand. Instead, Jesus' body is a temple because He is the Word of God from Heaven (John 1:1, 14). The temple in Jerusalem was a failing human institution. Sinful humanity cannot welcome God's holy presence without repentance and God's help. God's desire to dwell with humans was so great that He sent His only begotten Son to bring them eternal life (3:16). In and through Jesus, we can have direct access to God.

B. Prayer

Lord God, we are amazed to consider ourselves a temple of Your presence. We ask You to renew us and rid us of anything not pleasing in Your sight: greed, selfishness, and insincerity. Help us to be more like Jesus, who communicated Your truth and mercy to those around Him. In His name we pray, Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The body of Christ is God's temple.