

## **John: Cleanliness is Next to Godliness**

**John 2:12-25**

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*November 27, 2002*

We've just been looking together in John, chapter two, at the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee at which Jesus gave the first sign of His native glory and deity, the changing of water into wine-180 gallons of it. This, as John comments, was the first of His signs which He did in Cana of Galilee. Many have studied the Book of John and referred especially to the first half of John's gospel, chapters 1-11, as the Book of signs. John is giving to us sign after sign after sign of Jesus' identity and messiahship. These signs, John tells us in the twentieth chapter of John's gospel, "These signs are written so that you may *believe*." Each sign is another corroborative fact in the testimony as to the identity of Jesus Christ.

Now, in this passage we have before this evening, in the temple in Jerusalem, we've traversed now from Cana of Galilee in the north, all the way down to Jerusalem at the time of Passover where Jesus cleanses the temple. It's often raised by skeptics and liberals as one of those incidents in which Jesus lost His temper. There's no evidence of that whatsoever, but Jesus did do something quite extraordinary. Zeal for the worship of God, zeal for the house of God, zeal for the house of His father consumed Him. Now it was Passover and Jesus is in the Jerusalem to worship Passover. We can pass by that or we can pause to reflect on something of the amazing quality of that statement, that Jesus, the Son of God, is present in order to worship at the Passover in Jerusalem. The occasion celebrated the deliverance of the people of God from the avenging angel through the blood of the lamb that was sprinkled on the doorpost. Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, the lamb of atonement, is identifying Himself with sinners coming to this Passover service in Jerusalem. One scholar in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, says that perhaps something of the order of two-and-a-half million people made their way to what was normally a very small city, by modern standards, in Jerusalem. Jews from all across the land and from the Diaspora would come for one of the mandated feasts that they would have to come to. The whole city is buzzing with people. And this story has about it the twin themes of Jesus on the one hand, and the temple on the other. Now, let me try and tease out two main things from this story.

## **I. First of all, that Jesus comes to purify the house of God.**

Now, the entire apparatus of sacrifice in Jerusalem and the temple was controlled, of course, by the Levitical priests and by the high priest in particular. Every male Jew, older than 19 or 20 years and older, was required to pay an annual temple tax that would be something of the order of two days wages--a fairly considerable amount of money. The coinage which bore the image of the Roman emperor was, of course, considered too unclean to be found in the precincts of the temple and therefore, the temple had its own coinage, and for convenience sake, there would be moneychangers. If you go to the Middle East today, to Jerusalem especially, when you get off that tourist bus, there they are offering you better deals than you can get at the bank or wherever. But along with that exchange, would come a certain cost, a certain percentage, a certain exchange rate; and it is estimated that would be roughly the order of one day's wages. A considerable hike--half the cost of the tax itself. The cost of sacrifices was huge. If you brought an ox, or a sheep, or a lamb; or perhaps, if you were poor, you might bring doves to sacrifice for Passover. You remember of course, that these sacrifices had to be perfect. You couldn't bring just any old thing with one ear and half a leg and a tail missing. It had to be perfect. You couldn't bring the scrawny old thing that wouldn't be good for a pot of stew anyway, and bring it and sacrifice and hope it would get by, because it wouldn't get by these levitical priests. They would make sure that if you brought your own sacrifice, it probably wouldn't get through the gates. So again, for convenience sake, imagine people who were coming from northern Galilee for example, or especially those coming from the Diaspora to Jerusalem, far easier to travel in a little bit of luxury and then buy your lamb or ox or sheep at the gate, or as it happens here, within the court of the Gentiles in the outer circumference of Herod's beautiful, extravagant temple precincts. Well, although some commentators doubt it, it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to consider that these bought sacrifices within the court of the Gentiles, with all the convenience that that would entail, would cost a little bit more than if you bought it three miles away or four miles away in Bethlehem. Therefore, this situation was wide open for all kinds of exorbitant price hiking.

Now, the evidence for that isn't all that great, but the passage does seem to lend itself to the idea that perhaps that is indeed one of the things that was taking place in the Court of the Gentiles in the temple, in the house of the living God. You know how angry you get? Maybe you don't. You know, when you go to a baseball game and you buy a hot dog, and it costs the earth. You know, you can make a hundred hot dogs for the amount of money you pay. You buy a can of Coke for 35 cents, but you pay \$3 or \$4 or something. Well of course, it's convenience. And maybe something of that is taking place in the temple itself. Where was all of this going? Well, it was going into the coffers of the temple, and especially, into the coffers of the high priests. When Crassus invaded Jerusalem in 54 BC, he took with him something within the region of 10 million dollars worth from the temple. And it was said that that wasn't all of it.

The temple of God was a holy place where God Himself manifested His glory. It was there the Shekina glory came and descended upon the mercy seat in the holy of holies. It was God's house. And Jesus, when He comes to Passover to celebrate along with everyone else, senses something of the shame of it--the righteous indignation and anger. Yes, anger; it's right to be angry. "Be angry and sin not," Scripture says. It doesn't say it's wrong to be angry; it's wrong to be angry and out of control. It's wrong to be angry when there's no right for you to be angry, but anger in and of itself is part of the instinctive response of holiness toward unrighteousness. And here the house of God is being rendered as a den of thieves, as a place of commerce. This is about worship.

You ask yourself, "What's this story about?" It's an interesting little story. You imagine Jesus with a cord of whips and He's trying to get these sheep and oxen out, and you know, they have a mind of their own. Maybe you're city folk, but it doesn't take a great deal of imagination trying to herd these things out of the court of the Gentiles to one of the openings. Some are going this way, and some in that way, and there's a little bit of a commotion. I don't think there was a riot. The Roman soldiers would have come down in a hurry if there had been anything like a riot taking place. But something extraordinary is taking place in the temple of God. It's about worship. This dovetails beautifully, I think, with what Ligon is doing on Sunday evenings in the Book of Exodus, when he's describing not the temple, but its predecessor, the tabernacle. It's the same issue--the worship of God! You don't trifle with the worship of God. Calvin says, "Why then does He drive the buyers and sellers out of the temple? It is that He may bring back to its original purity the worship of God which had been corrupted by the wickedness of men." Do you see the point? How dare you treat My Father's house in this way? It's reminiscent of the closing of the Book of Malachi, when the Lord will suddenly come to His temple like a refiner's fire. Judgment, you see, has begun at the House of God. He cites Psalm 69, that Messianic Psalm. "Zeal for your house has consumed me."

I don't know whether you've ever read David McCullough's book about Teddy Roosevelt called *Mornings on Horseback*. It contains this beautiful story of when Teddy Roosevelt was a young boy with his mother, and he was apparently frightened to enter into the sanctuary of Madison Square Church, and he wouldn't go into that church alone. And when his mother asked him why he wouldn't go into this church he said, "Because zeal is in there." And when she inquired as to what zeal was, he made out zeal to be some kind of wild animal or some kind of monster that lurked inside. So she inquired further, and little Roosevelt said to her that the preacher had been talking about 'zeal in the house of God.' And she went through all the passages until he said, "Yes, it's this one; it's John 2:17. 'The zeal for Thine house hath eaten me up.'" Jesus, my friends, is laying a strike at human religion; that's what is taking place. He's speaking here about the abuse of power, about the abuse of people--what they have been doing. What they were doing in the court of the Gentiles was not only diminishing human beings; it was diminishing God.

The Court of the Gentiles was where a God-seeker, someone who really was taken up the monotheism of Jewish religion, could come into the court, ask questions, and hear about the faith, about the one, true, living God. But with all of this commerce and noise and banter and commotion, they were actually hindering people from coming to know God. It desecrated God, it was worship without reverence. Worship should always be reverent. The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth is filled with Thy glory.

Back in the 1930s, Tozer wrote about worship, 75 years ago, that worship “is the missing jewel of the evangelical church.” I don’t know what he would be saying today. That was 75 years ago. Oh, you can go to the internet. You know, bring up the most bizarre thing you can find about worship services. And they’re out there. Trying to out-do Barnum and Bailey. Trying to introduce the circus and clowns and anything and everything, because worship is about people, it’s about entertainment, it’s about getting people within four walls. And you know what’s happened? They’ve lost sight of God.

The Corinthian church wasn’t shy about trying things like that. The Corinthian church wasn’t shy about meddling with the worship of God. Do you remember what Paul says to the Corinthian church, in 1 Corinthians 14, “When an unbeliever comes into your church and sees you worshipping God, do you know what they’re supposed to be saying? ‘Surely God is in this place.’” I wonder, if an unbeliever walked through these doors on a Sunday morning, I wonder if that’s their response? Surely, God is in this place. I’m just asking a question, that’s all I’m doing.

You see, what was taking place here, in the temple of God, was sickening. Do you remember David, in Psalm 51, “You do not desire sacrifices, else I would have given them to you.” What is it that God desires? A broken spirit and a contrite heart, He will not despise. It’s a challenge, isn’t it? In a congregation this size, I’m sure there are 25 or 30 different views about what worship is. Do you know, it’s irrelevant what our view of worship is. Rather, “What is God’s view of worship?” That’s the question we need to ask. Not, “I prefer it this way, and he prefers it that way, and she prefers it some other way.” Not the supermarket approach to worship, with a cart. What does God say about worship.

And you know, my friends, God has said a great deal about worship. God has said a great deal about worship. He is concerned about the way we worship Him. That’s what this story is about. There is a way that focuses on our selves and our convenience and our entertainment that actually sickens God. Yes, and Jesus will drive it out of His Father’s house. My friends, do you have that kind of zeal? Do you have that kind of zeal that it taken up with the honor, and the integrity, and the majesty, and the glory of God? That should be our chief concern. Is God being glorified in this? Is God’s honor in this? Is God’s name being lifted up in

this? That's the first thing.

## **II. Jesus comes not only to purify His house, Jesus comes to personify His house.**

What we have in this section is a little hint. It's more than a little hint, it's a big hint from Jesus, about the abolition of religion. The bringing to an end of all religion and paganism and external rituals. Israel's institutions are going to be replaced. The sacrifices are being rendered unnecessary and useless. Worship is being deepened. A new place where God can be found — in Christ. Go back to John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And tented or *tabernacled* among us. There's the key. It is in our relationship with Jesus, believing into Christ so that we are in Christ. They were to remember this at His trial. This incident, they would misquote it, of course, Jesus destroying the temple and building it up again in three days. They had taken so far 46 years on the magnificent Herodian temple, with the Antonio Fortress that looked down on it. It was a magnificent structure in white marble. You could see it for miles and miles away on Mount Zion. They had been building this from about 19 or 20 BC, and it was probably being still built because it wasn't finished until about 63 AD or so, just before it was finally destroyed again in AD 70. And at His trial, they took this incident and took Jesus' words and they threw it back at Him, as somebody who was treasonous, and they hated Him for it.

So they asked Him now, “What sign are You going to give?” Give us a sign. The only sign that Jesus will give them is the sign that involves, on the one hand, a cross, and on the other a resurrection. The sign that validates every word that Jesus spoke, the sign that confirmed every attribute that Jesus reflected, was His death and resurrection. When they killed Him and He was pronounced dead and they put Him in a tomb and they sealed the tomb and they put Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, what happened? On that Sunday morning when the women came to dress that body, what did they discover? They discovered that beautiful, extraordinary sight of the stone that would take 12 men to roll back, and an empty grave, an empty tomb, and Jesus alive and risen and in bodily form and appearing in various places in Jerusalem and on the road to Emmaus and up in Galilee on the shores of the Galilean lake and eating fish with His disciples. That's the only sign that Jesus will give.

There were some ready to believe certain signs. Changing water into wine, they liked that. But do you notice what it says in verse 24, “Jesus on His part did not entrust Himself to them.” They were ready to believe in Jesus for the things that He would do for them and for their convenience, but Jesus will not accept as His disciples those who are not willing to take up a cross and follow Him. He will not accept as His disciples those who are not committed to bow to His lordship and say, “Master, what will You have me to do?” It's an extraordinary little story, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. There's another account at the end of the

synoptic gospels, at the Passover just before Jesus was killed, there's another incident of cleansing the temple. But here it is, the only sign that Jesus will give, is that He comes to personify the house of God, that the house of God is to be found in Him.

May God help us to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. Let's pray together.

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