

Sermon for March 3, 2024 – Lent 3

John 2:13-22 (EHV)

Theme: Jesus Restores God's Temple

- 1) He restores the way of worship.
- 2) He restores the centre of worship.

¹³ The Jewish Passover was near, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers sitting at tables. ¹⁵ He made a whip of cords and drove everyone out of the temple courts, along with the sheep and oxen. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those selling doves he said, "Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a place of business!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ So the Jews responded, "What sign are you going to show us to prove you can do these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again." ²⁰ The Jews said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple! And you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this. Then they believed the Scripture and what Jesus had said.

It is that time of year again. The days are getting longer. The weather is getting warmer. It is nearly spring, and you know what comes with that, don't you? Spring cleaning: when we air out the house, get rid of the junk we accumulated, and repair winter damage.

Today's sermon text records Jesus doing spring cleaning in his Father's house. Time had damaged proper worship in Jerusalem. The Jew's spiritual condition was in shambles.

What happened over time to the temple in Jerusalem can also happen to the Holy Spirit's temple in our hearts. Let us, therefore, watch **Jesus Restore God's Temple** in Jerusalem, asking him to do the same in our hearts. 1) He restores the way of worship. 2) He restores the centre of worship.

Part One: Jesus restores the way of worship.

¹³ The Jewish Passover was near, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Our text takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He was in Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. It is worth noting that, at the end of his ministry (during another Passover Feast), Jesus would again clean the temple.^a More than that, he would fulfill every word he prophesied in our text concerning his death and resurrection.

¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers sitting at tables.

The temple was considered God's house, symbolizing the LORD's loving presence. All the worship customs and sacrifices offered there were to direct the people's attention to what the coming Christ would do to save His people and reconcile them to God.

But when Jesus entered the outer temple court, what he saw enraged him: the outer courts of His Father's house were overrun with cattle, sheep, doves, and money changers. Sellers were trying to make big profits. Buyers were bartering for the best price. The temple had become a market where money ruled - where buying and selling were more important than meditation and devotion.

"But," the Jews might have asked, "what was wrong with having a market in the temple's outer court? The sacred area where the priest ministered remained undisturbed. Besides, wasn't it more convenient to buy an animal at the temple instead of leading one through the narrow streets of Jerusalem?" Convenient? Sure, but here's the thing: proper worship has nothing to do with convenience. The LORD wants obedience. God's Law commanded the people to bring *their own* animals as offerings. And even though God exempted those who lived far away from that requirement by allowing them to sell the animals they raised for sacrifice and use the proceeds to purchase an animal closer to Jerusalem,^b that was no excuse for setting up a market in the temple itself. That would be like us putting an ATM in the back of a church to increase Church offerings: doing so would miss the whole point of what an offering is meant to be, as King David once wrote: *¹⁷ The sacrifices God wants are a broken spirit. A broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise.*^c

The LORD is far more concerned with what is in the hearts of His people than the sacrifices they place on the altar. He wants His people's worship to express proper repentance, faith in His mercy, gratitude for all his blessings, and trust in His promised providence. Therefore, He wanted the people to carefully consider and choose their offerings in advance and not be the result of thoughtless convenience.

So, what did Jesus do when he saw all the bartering? *He made a whip of cords and drove everyone out of the temple courts, along with the sheep and oxen. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.* ¹⁶ *To those selling doves he said, "Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a place of business!"*

Jesus' actions remind me of something the LORD told his people through the prophet Isaiah: *"The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?... "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. Stop bringing meaningless offerings!... Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!"*^d

Instead of promoting thought and reflection, the convenience of having a marketplace in the temple reinforced meaningless worship – going through the acts of worship without thinking. It moved people to try to earn God's favour instead of reflecting on his blessings and promised grace. No wonder Jesus was angry with what he saw.

What do you think Jesus' impression is of our little house of worship? Does he have to do any cleaning here? Thankfully, we do not have an open market in our building. Nevertheless, it is all too easy to worship like the Israelites and turn our "temple" into a place of meaningless sacrifice.

How? By not giving proper thought to our worship. For example, how often have we treated our offerings as “charitable donations” to an institution instead of a heartfelt “thank you” to God for his grace? How often have we read the confession of sins and recited the Apostles Creed or the Lord’s Prayer without thinking about what we are saying? Is that the worship God desires? No. God is more interested in what’s in our hearts than the words we speak or the money we offer. The worship He wants is our heartfelt love, trust, and gratitude for the salvation Jesus won through his cross.

Let me explain what I mean with an illustration. Parents, what kind of gift would you rather receive from your children: a gift thoughtlessly purchased because your child felt obligated to get you something because it was your birthday or something your children made for you from scratch that took a lot of thought, time, and effort? If the thought behind the gift is more important than the gift itself, how, then, do our offerings appear before God who knows how much thought we put into them?

God wants our offerings to come from the heart, not from convenience. He wants our time with him at church to be one of wanting to be with him, not because we feel compelled to be here. He wants us to help the church with our talents because we love him, not because “no one else will do it.” That is the worship God desires: to serve Him out of love and gratitude for the great mercy he expresses to us in Christ.

These truths make me want to pray: “Lord Jesus, please come into my heart and clean it. Cast out from this temple of yours all selfish thoughts of convenience and laziness. Please, let my heart be a place of true worship, where you are the centre.”

And Jesus will mercifully do what we ask for in this prayer, for He is always ready to clean our hearts to restore proper worship of him there. Not only so, but he restores our thinking to focus on him as the centre of our worship.

Part Two: He restores the centre of worship.

Many were shocked when Jesus turned over the tables and cleansed the temple. They asked him, “*What sign are you going to show us to prove you can do these things?*” Jesus’ whole ministry was a sign - fulfilling every prophecy about the Messiah. John the Baptist testified that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the world’s sins. The entire Bible points to Him as the Saviour.

But Jesus answered their request in this way: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.*” The Jews, assuming that Jesus was referring to Herod’s renovations and expansion, answered: “*It took forty-six years to build this temple! And you are going to raise it in three days?*”

²¹ *But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.*

Let us consider a few facts to understand the beauty of Jesus’ answer of referring to his body as God’s true temple.

1. God calls the temple the place where He dwells.^e The temple in Jerusalem, of course, was just a picture of this truth.^f Jesus, however, is the reality - as the Scriptures say: *all the fullness of God's being dwells bodily in Christ.*^g
2. One of the temple's purposes was to comfort God's people with the knowledge of his presence. That was a picture of Jesus, whose name "Emmanuel" means God with us.^h
3. The sacrifices made in the temple foreshadowed the once-and-for-all sacrifice Jesus would make in his body.ⁱ
4. The temple was where people could come before God in repentance and receive His love and forgiveness. That pictured Christ Jesus, in whom Man and God come together and in whom we find forgiveness, peace, and mercy from God.

Taking all these facts together, it becomes clear that God never intended the temple in Jerusalem to be the centre and focus of worship. The temple pointed to the Messiah. He was to be the focus and centre of everybody's worship. In our text, Jesus, the Messiah, stood in the temple of Jerusalem and called attention to himself as the one whom it symbolized. His death and resurrection would bring true peace, forgiveness, and fellowship with God to all who look to Him in faith. He is the centre of our worship.

Sadly, like the Jews, we are tempted to forget this. We have a loving congregation. I thank God for this fact. But we must be careful not to make our congregation itself the centre of our worship ahead of Christ. Let me explain what I mean. In our congregation, we experience many blessings like fellowship, friendship, mutual encouragement, and great food. But, as wonderful as these things are, they should never be the reason we gather together as a Church. The reason we gather should always be Jesus himself and the opportunity to hear His Gospel of forgiveness, be strengthened by His Spirit, and grow in our faith and love in Him. Jesus promises to grant us these blessings through the Word and Sacraments He has given to the Church. When we hear the Word and partake of the Sacraments, Jesus promises to send His Holy Spirit to dwell within and among us. We become His house – the place where His glory dwells.^j

Jesus restored God's Temple. He restored the way we are to worship God, namely with our whole hearts. He also restored the centre and focus of our worship to himself. His death and resurrection won our salvation. Through Him alone, we find forgiveness of sins and access to God^k. Let us, therefore, worship the LORD with a sincere heart – ever repenting of our sins and rejoicing in His forgiveness. May the LORD grant that our worship always be a purposeful, genuine reflection of the great love He has shown us. Amen.

^a Cf. Matthew 21:12ff, Mark 11:15ff, Luke 19 45ff

^b Cf. Deuteronomy 14:24-26

^c Psalm 51:17 EHV

^d Isaiah 1:11, 13a, 16c, 17a NIV84

^e Cf. Exodus 25:8

^f Cf. 1 Kings 8

^g Colossians 2:9 EHV

^h Cf. Matthew 1:23

ⁱ Cf. Hebrews 10

^j Cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16

^k Ephesians 2:18