

A House of Prayer and the Things That are God's
Luke 19:45-48, 20:1-8, 19-26
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Introduction

A few months ago, I read a report in Christianity Today about recent cases of embezzlement in churches:¹

1 OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA - A bishop and a lay leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Church mortgaged properties owned by four different congregations to obtain \$14 million in high-interest loans to buy real estate for themselves.

2 LUBBOCK, TEXAS - A bookkeeper took just under half a million dollars from Church on the Rock, using the church's credit cards to pay for a car loan, medical expenses, meals, and a bakery business that she co-owned.

3 FORMOSA, BRAZIL - A Catholic bishop and five priests stole the equivalent of \$600,000 to buy luxury watches, laptops, cellphones, a store, cattle, and a ranch.

4 SINGAPORE - The founder and senior pastor of City Harvest church siphoned off the equivalent of \$17 million through bogus bond investments. Much of the money was used to support his wife's music career, as part of a project to use pop music to reach nonbelievers. Church leaders used an additional \$19 million to try to hide the embezzlement from auditors.

Money and ministry can be a dangerous mix sometimes, especially when churches are big and money is plentiful. Every organization needs donations for operations and expenses, and the Bible certainly encourages believers to be generous with their local churches and give to further God's work in our communities. But as these examples (and many others that I'm sure we've all heard about) show: not every church treats its member's sacrificial giving with the sacred trust that it deserves. Greedy people find ways to line their own pockets, particularly when there are not effective safeguards in place, or when those in power agree to let it happen. In today's Scripture passage, we'll see a system of commerce that was instituted in the courtyards of the temple, originally with good intentions. But greed had swallowed the good intentions and the whole place had lost its spiritual character and just served as a place for those who running things to get rich.

Turn with me to the last four verses of Luke 19, where we will see Jesus

I. Challenging Authority (vv. 45-48)

⁴⁵ And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, ⁴⁶ saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." ⁴⁷ And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, ⁴⁸ but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

I would love to somehow be able to see this whole scene unfold in person. Gentle Jesus, Mr. Healer-Teacher, the Man who loved children, who would say things like "*My yoke is easy and My burden is light*" and "*your sins are forgiven*" suddenly starts chucking tables and chairs in the temple. He goes "Hulk mode" on everybody who is selling things, driving them out. The Greek verb Luke used for "driving out" (*ekballo*) is the same one used when Jesus cast out demons.² Matthew and Mark say

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/embezzlement-fraud-theft-church-finances-crime-global.html>

² Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 343.

that He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. John records that Jesus made a whip to drive out the merchants.

To understand why Jesus was so mad, we have to first understand what the temple was all about. As Tim Keller points out, we tend to think of it as just a cathedral; and a cathedral is just a bigger version of a local church, right? But that's not exactly true. Two things happened there that didn't happen anywhere else in the world, that didn't happen in their local synagogues: 1) God dwelt in the temple. Now, in one sense, God is everywhere, but His royal presence was in the temple. What's called the *shinkinah* glory of God, His true presence was there. 2) Because it was the place to meet God, it was also the place to sacrifice to Him to atone for sin.³ The temple embodied what Pastor James talked about last week: that you can't just walk up to God and worship Him in any way that you wish. You must approach Him in the ways that He has told you to; we learned last week that's called the regulative principle of worship. In the OT and into Jesus' day, before you could approach God, you had to make a sacrifice of blood because your sins separated you from a holy God, and a death had to occur to pay the penalty for your sin. Why don't we have to sacrifice an animal today? The moment that Jesus died on the cross, He made the sacrifice for us, once and for all time for His people. Our sins still separate us from a holy God, but the sacrifice has been made.

So what was going on with all the sellers that ticked Jesus off? William Barclay informs us that "every male Jew had to pay a Temple tax every year of half a shekel... equal to about two days' pay for a working man... (usually) paid by the pilgrims in Jerusalem when they came to the Passover Feast. In Palestine all kinds of currencies were in circulation... that is where the money changers came in. To change a coin of exact value they charged (a fee)... it has been computed that these money changers made a profit" of well over ten thousand dollars in today's money in just a few days around Passover. The same thing with the animals for sacrifice, there was a big mark-up for those sold inside the temple that had already been inspected so that they were without blemish. It had all become a scam to exploit poor people, taking advantage of those who could not afford it, in the name of helping them follow the law. And a lot of that money went straight into the high priest's pocket.⁴ Jesus said that the temple should be a house of prayer, but nobody was praying, they were just going through the motions of commerce. Those activities should have been outside the temple, but they had stained and desecrated the inside of the temple, so Jesus took charge and made some changes.

I've already talked about how we have to be careful about how greed can corrupt our churches, but this story is also a reminder to the church not to lose our spiritual focus. The temple no longer exists, but we are still to treat our church gatherings as the spiritual communities united to worship and serve God. There are often subtle temptations to slip into a mindset of emphasizing that making the budget becomes the most important thing, building bigger and more ornate facilities, or treating people as giving units, preferring the generous, wealthy ones. It's so easy to turn ministries and churches into businesses and start focusing on the wrong things. I'm sure the money changers and the animal sellers in the temple started out just trying to help people and facilitate worship, but it gradually morphed into a system that was out of control and reeked of greed and manipulation.

It's also a story about righteous anger. John 2:17 says that Jesus cleared the temple to fulfill the Scripture that says, "*Zeal for your house will consume me.*" So often our anger is a selfish anger – something that I set my heart on has been blocked, so I get frustrated and lash out. I actually don't

³ Tim Keller Sermon Podcasts by Gospel in Life #753 *The Cross and the Temple*, June 20, 2022.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 241-42.

have to think very hard about when this happened to me most recently. It was last week when I told my family that we were leaving at 8 am for vacation, be ready and loading the car by 7:30. And then we didn't leave until 8:40 and I was sitting in the car seething. I didn't explode, but I made it known that I was very upset. Was that righteous anger? Not even close to it. That was anger because I decided something was really important and it actually wasn't; I definitely needed to apologize to my family for getting so bent out of shape for nothing.

Righteous anger means looking past our own lives and feeling angry over evil in the world. Being angry about human trafficking and exploitation, about racism, about the taking of human life at all ages, those kinds of things. It doesn't necessarily mean that you lash out right then and there; it may require a planned response. William Wilberforce was the British legislator that was angry about the slave trade in England, but rather than just ranting and raving in speeches, he patiently let his anger over that injustice guide him to decades of introducing bills in Parliament to end it. Maybe there is a time to turn over tables, but this is the one and only time that Jesus did this in His life. Most of His life He loved, healed, and taught. Some of us take this as a license to just lash out anytime we think something has offended us. I would say be very careful with expressing your anger, please pray more than you react.

I love that it says that after Jesus cleared out all of the sellers in the temple, He just started teaching and *"the people were hanging on his words."* But the leaders wanted to destroy Him so they asked **II. By What Authority? (20:1-8)**

¹ One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ² and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." ³ He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, ⁴ was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" ⁵ And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' ⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." ⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from. ⁸ And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

The religious leaders wanted to know who had given Jesus authority to do "these things" – I assume they meant riding into Jerusalem in the triumphal entry and then cleansing the temple because those things had just happened, but maybe they meant everything about His ministry. "What seminary did you attend?" "What Presbytery ordained you?" He's actually already told everyone where He got His authority – John 6:38 – *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."* But they don't believe that Jesus was sent from heaven, and really, the leaders are threatened because they're supposed to be the ones in the position of giving people the authority to teach. And here was this guy out of a backwater town that didn't grow up in their system who had somehow become astonishingly brilliant about the Scriptures on His own. He attracted huge crowds with His teaching and miracles, but ultimately, He was still just a loose cannon. They couldn't control Him, but maybe they could embarrass Him by pointing out His lack of credentials and formal training.

Jesus was so brilliant asking them about John's baptism because it forced them to decide where John's power came from: God or men? And then they would have answered their own question because that was the same place that Jesus got His authority. But they couldn't answer it because it would have either showed their hypocrisy or caused the people to turn against them. Jesus says that He wouldn't answer them either, and I think it's deeper than just, "Aha, I've stumped you, so now I don't have to answer your question." He was saying, "If you can't tell the difference between

a true prophet and a mere man, then you are not very qualified as religious authorities; and therefore, you wouldn't be able to understand my identity as the Son of God."⁵

This is the question that still confronts everyone when they look at Jesus, when they consider the claims of the Bible and Christianity: was Jesus' authority from God or from man? Even deeper, was Jesus God Himself or was He just a man making these things up as He went? If you answer that Jesus was a man who taught His own ideas, then you will never truly understand the Scriptures and you will miss the kingdom of heaven in its fullness. If you understand Jesus to be God Himself sent to do the will of the Father, then you will find true life and salvation through Him.

We jump to verse 19 to see a related discussion that further explores Jesus' views:

III. Who is the Authority? (vv. 19-26)

¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. ²¹ So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. ²² Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" ²³ But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, ²⁴ "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." ²⁵ He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²⁶ And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.

We talked earlier about a temple tax for every Jewish male, here we see the government's yearly tax - that every adult living in the Roman Empire had to pay tribute of a denarius just for the privilege of living under Rome's power. So the scribes and priests pretended to be very troubled about paying this tax and asked Him to clarify whether they should pay it or not. This is one of those questions that had two wrong answers for Jesus; whether He said yes or no, they could use that answer against Him in some way. If He condemned the tax, they could report to the Romans that He was encouraging open rebellion, but if He supported the tax, that would alienate a lot of the Jews who resented the Roman occupation and taxes.

But as He had done over and over, Jesus silenced them with His brilliant answer. He didn't refuse to answer like He did on the authority question by asking them a self-incriminating question back. He simply asked for the coin that the tax was paid with, a denarius. In the ancient world, if your face was on the currency, then you had the right to tax those who used the coins. Jesus supported this, essentially saying that, "If you're using Caesar's currency, you are bound to accept his taxes too."⁶ So give to Caesar what is Caesar's. This is both a teaching of submitting to the governing authorities as well as a separation of powers: there is a realm that Caesar rules over, but it's not comprehensive. It's why the early Christians were not anarchists but were good citizens who paid their taxes, while at the same time they refused to bow down to Caesar. Because they knew their higher authority was to God. They knew, as Romans 13:1 teaches, that all authorities that exist "have been instituted by God," and even when Caesar thought He was a god, Christians could obey him and his government without bowing down to him.

⁵ Adapted from Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 2008), p. 297.

⁶ Barclay, p. 248.

What did Jesus mean by “*render... to God the things that are God’s*”? Is this talking about tithing – that God requires 10% from us, so be ready to give that just as you would give the government your tax money. That’s not a bad idea, of course I support tithing, but let’s think about that idea of Caesar’s likeness being on the coin. Where is God’s likeness found? In us. Human beings are made in God’s image! Genesis 1:27 – “*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*” Jesus was saying that we need to give all of ourselves to God because His image is on us. God has put His claim on us by stamping His image on us – He has a right to our allegiance and obedience as our Creator. Give to God what is God’s – Your whole life.

This idea of the image of God in every human being is the foundation for how we understand so many things. Why do we oppose racism? Because every human being is made in the image of God, no matter what their skin tone or cultural background. Why do we love our enemies? Because they are made in the image of God just as much as we are. Why do we oppose abortion and care so much about “fetuses”? Because every human life is stamped with God’s image and dignity from conception, and to take a life is to take away an image-bearer of God. God is the giver of all life, the bestower of all worth and authority.

Conclusion

As we look for threads to tie these three stories together, I was reminded of C.S. Lewis’ essay called “God in the Dock,” the dock meaning the defendant’s chair in a courtroom. He wrote:

“The ancient man approached God... as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge; God is in the dock [the defendant]. [Man] is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.”⁷

How true is that? Every human being likes to think that it’s up to them whether God exists and whether He’s a just God who meets their standards or not. If they decide He is, great, maybe they’ll follow Him, maybe not. If He’s not, well, then they’ve decided to be an atheist or an agnostic. But God is not the defendant who owes you an answer, He is the Judge and we are the defendants. Our lives are on trial. It really doesn’t matter at all what Biblical truths about God you’ve decided are true and which aren’t; they don’t become true simply because you believe in them, or false because you think they’re absurd. They’re eternally true regardless of your view on the matter.

Why do I bring that up? As we see in these three stories, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day were constantly putting Jesus on trial. They were under the mistaken assumption that they ran things spiritually for God’s people, and it was up to them to allow or forbid anyone else from being a spiritual leader that they didn’t approve of. Jesus coming out of nowhere, not submitting to their rules and regulations, was a huge threat to them. So they had Him killed. But He took every chance He could to remind them: you’re the ones who have to answer for what you do. I am the Son of God, One with the Father, whether you recognize it or not. I have been given all authority in heaven and earth, and my death and resurrection will accomplish God’s great plan of salvation for His people.

Let’s get back to this idea of God’s temple. The temple was destroyed in AD 70, if you go to Jerusalem today, you will only see remains. But it lives on in other ways:

- 1) Jesus is the greater temple. What do I mean by that? In John 2:19-20, Jesus said, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” *The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the*

⁷ C.S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 12.

temple of his body.” Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is where we truly experience the presence of God, eternal life through His sacrifice on our behalf.

- 2) God’s people are temples. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 asks the pointed question, “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” Just as the original temple held the spiritual presence of God, so we hold the spiritual presence of God inside of us. That is a mind-blowing idea. It’s been corrupted in New Age and pantheistic thinking where everyone and everything is connected as part of the god-consciousness. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit inside of us because we are “in Christ,” righteous before the Father. Our lives and our bodies should be temples of prayer so that they are not dens of thieves.⁸ Sometimes Jesus needs to throw some furniture around inside you or me. Sometimes He needs to wreck some holy havoc and tell us that we’re prioritizing the wrong things. He wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth, and to live our lives in obedience to Him and His word.
- 3) Finally, in Revelation 21, the vision that John had of the New Jerusalem at the end of time says this: “*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*” There will be no need for a place of worship, because we will be in the presence of God Himself, free to worship Him without the need of an atoning sacrifice.

Amen.

Benediction

2 Peter 3:18 - “*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*”

⁸ Ryken, p. 346.