

Text: Matthew 21:12-17

Title: Initial Holy-Week Confrontations with the Religious Leaders

Truth: The Lord arrives in Jerusalem and gives judgment and mercy.

Date/Location: July 17, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

I am struck on the initial reading of this passage that Jesus went into Jerusalem, visited the temple, saw it needed some tidying up, and then cleaned it out in preparation to work there in the upcoming days. He was cleaning up his workspace!

When Jesus came into the city, he was making a public announcement of Himself as king.

I. Purification of the Temple, v. 12-13

A. As far as the chronology is concerned, Matthew compresses some events. Mark 11:11-14 adds that between entering Jerusalem and purifying the temple, He went into Jerusalem, looked around at the city and temple, and then retired to Bethany for the evening. Then on the way back into the city the next day, He encountered the fruitless fig tree, which was a perfect illustration of the fruitless city he had just seen the previous evening. *Then* He went into the temple and cleaned it up after pondering overnight what to do. The events of our Matthew 21:12-17 passage occurred on Monday after the Sunday triumphant entry.

B. Because of the religious activity at the temple which was busy with people and required animals for sacrifice, there was a “market.” Enterprising—but not very sanctified—people took advantage of this. They set up tables and booths for exchanging currency, selling small sacrificial animals (doves), and also general goods. John 2:14-15 records the Lord’s earlier cleansing of the temple, and mentions larger animals, sheep and oxen, there too. I suspect that although larger sacrificial animals would be more cumbersome, there was nearby a market for them too. Herod’s temple was large enough to accommodate this activity.

C. The Lord’s cleansing of the temple was an attack not only on the people who bought and sold, but the leaders who allowed them to

do that instead of reserving it for holy purposes like prayer. They took this as a direct threat to their authority—when it should have been a wakeup call that they were off base before God.

- D. There was a provision in the Old Testament Law for people who lived at a distance to be able to bring money and purchase animals nearer to the temple so that they would not have to transport a sacrificial animal over a great distance. Note esp. v. 25-26 below:

Deut. 14:23-26 "And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. 24 "But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, 25 "then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. 26 "And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

- E. To fulfill this, the Israelites were not required to set up a full-blown market *inside* the temple precincts. It was more about money than faith in God. And because it was about money, it became about greed and thievery. You might not have to think hard to imagine that the “captive audience” would be charged exorbitant prices for the goods so as to maximize the profits of the entrepreneurs.
- F. The Lord quoted Jeremiah 7:11:

Jeremiah 7:11 "Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the LORD.

The people of Jeremiah’s day did all kinds of evil (7:9) and then came to the temple as if nothing were wrong (7:10). They made it a den of thieves. Unsaved people plus money often tends toward that direction without any restraints.

G. The Lord also quoted from Isaiah 56:7:

Isaiah 56:7 Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices Will be accepted on My altar; For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Earlier in that chapter, God promised that salvation will come to the Gentiles. Those believers among the nations will have a special place before God and will be able to participate in worship at the temple such that the temple will be a house of prayer for all nations—not just for Jews! Reminds us of “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also” (John 10:16).

H. This is a matter which has direct application to the church. We are not a marketing center; we do not set up a coffee store or other shop because there is a ready-made “market” of people available. We want the emphasis here to be on worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, prayer, and the like.

II. Ministry, Praise, and Criticism at the Temple, v. 14-17

A. The Lord continued doing what He had done all throughout his ministry: healing the blind and lame. The miracles are so frequent that they barely register notice in the reader. Nevertheless, we should not overlook the power that is evident in these events, the compassion of our Lord, and the impact on the lives of those so blessed.

B. Young people were seeing what the Lord did and repeated what they heard others saying during His entry into the city: Hosanna to the Son of David. “Son of David, save now, we pray!” They recognized Him as the rightful heir to the throne of David, and they were applying to Him language that was directed toward God in Psalm 118:25.

Please note that this is an historical record, and an ancient one at that. We have multiple eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s life, far more than almost any other person in ancient history.

C. The chief among the priests and the scribes saw all this—the healings, the children crying out—and this amplified the threat of Jesus in their minds. They became “indignant.”

That word is rarely used in the Bible—four times of God in the Old Testament and once of Nebuchadnezzar. In the New Testament, it is used not only here, but also in Matthew 26:8 of the disciples (and Matthew 20:24, Mark 10:41, 14:14), once of the Lord (Mark 10:14), and once of a synagogue official (Luke 13:14). Its rarity probably is indicative of its “strength.”

They were angry at what they perceived to be a wrong done by the Lord, which was inducing wrong in the young people and others.

D. They asked a question, “Do you hear what these are saying?” It reads like, “You cannot be letting them say this about you!” It was inconceivable to them that any human being would receive such praise from other people as Jesus was receiving and not rebuking them for misplaced praise. Of course, we know that their praise was only the beginning of what the Lord Jesus will receive in the future, because He deserves it. Praise to God can be given to Jesus because He is the God-man as we understand from combining all of our knowledge of Scripture.

E. Jesus indeed heard what the crowds were saying, and was not about to disclaim it. He instead cited a third Scripture:

Psalm 8:2a Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength.

This is praise of God applied to Jesus Christ.

The LXX (Septuagint, Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the word “praise” instead of “strength” and that is where “praise” comes from in Matthew. Although a lot more study could be invested here, we should be satisfied to take it that the Lord Jesus knew what He was talking about and that the LXX is a correct use of the original Hebrew text.

We can say slightly more than that, however. Songs of worship in the Old Testament often ascribed in their praise the attribute of *strength* to God. Psalm 29:1 says, “Give unto the LORD...glory and

strength.” Psalm 59:16, “I will sing about your strength...To You, O my Strength, I will sing praises.” Psalm 68:34-35, “Ascribe strength to God...His strength is in the clouds...” God has ordained *strength* out of the mouth of His people because He has ordained their praises which speak of His great power. There is no contradiction between strength and praise.

The context of the remainder of 8:2 is very fitting:

Psalm 8:2b Because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger.

This is exactly what the praise of the youngsters was doing to the Jewish religious leaders. I can imagine them “sputtering mad” and unable to even speak about how indignant they were behind the scenes. The praise of the little ones put them to shame.

F. It is interesting that God uses little children to express profound truths, truths which they do not even understand. In modern English we have the “out of the mouth of babes” phrase that is in fairly common use, even in un-religious circles. They speak more than they know. As we grow older, I wonder if we lose that somewhat innocent, profound view of life.

Conclusion

Verse 17 tells of our Lord’s departure back to Bethany to stay for the night. He did not have a home in Jerusalem to stay and the city was packed with worshippers, so he stayed where he had made other arrangements. Tuesday would see continued confrontation with the religious leaders.

Notice how the Lord judged some of the people but also exercised mercy toward others. Behold the goodness and severity of God (Romans 11:22).

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