

THE TEMPLE CLEANSER

by Ray C. Stedman

We are coming to that dramatic moment in the Gospel of John when our Lord first cleansed the temple. This may seem a rather strange passage for Mother's Day, but any mother who has had to clean out a teenagers' room after months of nagging will identify fully with this account!

John gathers this event around three factors: where Jesus was; what he did; and what the disciples learned by watching what he did.

Beginning in Chapter 2, Verse 12, John condenses about a week of time into two short verses concerning Jesus' whereabouts:

After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples; and there they stayed for a few days. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. {John 2:12-13 RSV}

We can safely fit into Verse 12 some of the other gospel accounts of our Lord's second calling of the disciples. Matthew, Mark and Luke record that as Jesus was walking along the sea of Galilee he saw the brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and Peter and Andrew, the sons of Simon, fishing, and he called them to follow him.

That must have occurred on this occasion when, after the miracle at Cana of Galilee, near Nazareth, Jesus moved down to the sea and stayed for awhile with his mother and his brothers in Capernaum, at the north end of the sea of Galilee. Then, having called these disciples to a more permanent relationship with himself, he left with them for Jerusalem to celebrate the first Passover as the acknowledged Messiah, the Promised One to come.

Our Lord had been in Jerusalem many times during the years before his public ministry began. He had been to the temple and had seen many of the sights which he saw on this occasion, but he had taken no action in response. Now, however, he is going to Jerusalem as the Messiah, and he will fulfill Malachi's prophecy about the Messiah, "The Lord whom you see shall suddenly come to his temple," {Mal 3:1b RSV}, ... "and he will purify the sons of Levi," {Mal 3:3b RSV}. This is the background for what our Lord did when he arrived in Jerusalem.

John tells us what that action was.

In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers, and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." {John 2:14-16 RSV}

Jesus is clearly angry at what he found in the temple. He takes drastic action to cleanse it, not only of trafficking in money-changing and selling animals, but also of the extortion and racketeering that went along with it. The other three gospels record that our Lord cleansed the temple at the end of his ministry, in that pregnant last week before his betrayal and crucifixion. Some of the scholars feel that John's account is of the same event, but John records it as having occurred at the beginning of our Lord's ministry.

That is very difficult to reconcile with our belief that the Scriptures are without historic error. It is hard to understand why John would use language that sounds as though it were something that occurred at the beginning of our Lord's ministry. The answer, of course, is that there were two cleansings of the temple:

Jesus cleansed the temple both at the beginning and at the end of his ministry.

A close look at the other gospel accounts reveals that there is a considerable difference in these events. A different Scripture is referred to; there is no mention of a whip; and our Lord makes a different claim for himself in that cleansing of the temple at the end of his ministry. On that final occasion our Lord made a great and final pronouncement in regard to the nation of Israel. Standing in the temple, having for the second time driven out the merchants and the money-changers, he spoke these dramatic words: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. You shall not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,'" {Matt 23:38-39, Luke 13:34-35}. Then he went out to the mount of Olives, and from there to the upper room, to the betrayal and the crucifixion the next day. Here in John's gospel, however, is an account of violent action and of evident anger on the part of Jesus at the beginning.

Note that John says this occurred at a Passover feast. Doubtless he wants to remind us that at the Passover, every Jewish household spent the day before the feast meticulously going through their house seeking out any kind of yeast or substance that could cause fermentation and cleansing every such manifestation from their home. That was an absolute necessity in order to properly celebrate the Passover. Yet in a city that was given over to cleansing every house, when Jesus came into the temple, the house of God, he found it filled with clutter and noise, dirty-smelling animals, money-changers and merchandise, and no one seemed concerned about it. But our Lord was.

Not only was he angry at the confusion, the clutter, the noise and the smells, but primarily he was angry at the extortion and racketeering that was going on. Once a year, every Jewish male had to go to the temple and pay a temple tax. (It may be encouraging to us to realize that taxation is nothing new.) There was no escape; every male Jew was required to pay a half-shekel tax at the Passover season. Further, that tax could not be paid in Roman or Greek coin but had to be paid in a special temple coin. So it was necessary to change the Roman or Greek coins that were commonly employed into this special temple tax. That in itself was fine; money-changers were required for that. Having them available for the people was a convenience that was right and proper. But what was wrong was that there was an exorbitant price being extorted for making this exchange, so that sometimes almost as much as half of the value of the money being exchanged was paid to the money-changers for their service. The temple was making enormous revenues from this practice. At Passover season sometimes as many as two million people were in the city of Jerusalem, so there was a tremendous racket going on.

Furthermore, a sacrifice offered at the Passover season had to be made with an animal without blemish or imperfection. If, for instance, the animal was blind in one eye, if it had a tear in the skin, whatever, it was to be rejected. Scholars have discovered that in those days if someone brought an animal of his own to offer it had to be examined by the priests and it would almost certainly be rejected; the priests would find something wrong with it. This meant that the only animals that could be offered were those which were bought from the temple herd that was kept in an open courtyard in the court of the Gentiles. These animals had already been approved by the priests. But again, a tremendously inflated price was demanded for those animals. In fact, a bird could be brought outside the temple for the equivalent of 15 cents of our money, but the same bird, bought within the temple from the authorized purveyors of animals, would cost as high as \$15! This barefaced extortion, this demand for money from even the poorest of the poor was what aroused the flaming anger of our Lord.

On television last week I saw a report of how a man in Miami, Florida, spent three million dollars to spread pink plastic around some islands in Biscayne Bay -- all for what he called "art's sake." The plastic will wash away very soon; it will be utterly wasted. As I watched that, I confess it made me angry that three million dollars could be thrown away so wantonly in the face of the poor refugees in Miami whose needs are so great.

I am sure this is something of what moved our Lord when he saw this collection of merchants, swindlers and schemers who in the name of religion were extorting money from the poor by means of a religious scam. So great was his anger that he made a whip out of the cords that held the animals together and drove these extortioners out of the temple.

Do not diminish or minimize the anger and the violence which Jesus manifested at this time. This is a different

Jesus than many people imagine him to be. Oftentimes we think of him as so loving and understanding that he lets you get by with anything; that seeing your evil he puts his hand upon your shoulder and says, "It's all right. It doesn't matter." Many people think of him that way. But this action clearly indicates that our Lord was angry. He drove these people out of the temple.

Yet his anger was under control. He wasn't raging furiously, striking out against everybody around him. In fact, he did not actually deprive anybody of anything. The animals he drove out could easily be collected again; the money he poured out on the temple floor could be gathered up and recounted; he did not open the cages of the birds and let them loose, but ordered them to be taken away. But he made his point, which was clearly: do not turn a place which is devoted to the worship of God and the cleansing of people, into a flea market. The word John employs is, literally, "emporium," a place where people are concerned about making a fast buck. The temple rather was the place where human values were to be considered supreme.

The climax of his action comes in what the disciples learned from it. Three lessons burned themselves unforgettably into the disciples' minds as they watched our Lord. The first was an immediate impression, Verse 17.

**His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me."
{John 2:17 RSV}**

Can you imagine what the disciples felt while this was going on? How embarrassed they must have been by the actions of Jesus! They had not been with him very long; they did not know him very well. They had been attracted by the amazing things he said and the things he did. They believed with all their hearts he was the expected Messiah; they saw even deeper that there was a divine quality about him that reflected the very character of God himself. They had not worked out all the theological puzzles that that must have raised in their minds, but they were committed to following him. Yet the first thing he does is to embarrass them with this uncalled-for activity.

Imagine going into the temple where this practice had been going on for decades and, without any appeal to authority, taking on himself this action of driving out money-changers, pouring out their money, driving out the animals, and even driving out the people with a whip! The disciples were highly embarrassed. But they were probably also fearful of what the authorities would do about this flagrant challenge to them. They knew these self-righteous Pharisees would not let Jesus get away with this. Perhaps the disciples even felt a little anger at the Lord himself for being so unsocial, for being so uncooperative with the establishment. Yet, knowing who he was, they may have felt reluctant to judge him. So they had mixed feelings about this whole episode.

But as they watched him do this, there came flashing into their minds a verse from the 69th Psalm. It is clearly evident that even at this early date the 69th Psalm was regarded as a Messianic psalm. The psalm describes the suffering and the agony of the One who was to be the Messiah. There came into their minds this one verse, "The zeal of thy house has consumed me" {Psa 69:9a RSV} -- has burned me up, has seized hold of me and devoured me and made me to act. There came for the first time, perhaps, the quiet realization in these disciples' hearts of the divine refusal to put up with inward impurities. They began to understand that God does not compromise with evil.

This touches one of the great paradoxes of our Christian faith. Throughout this Gospel of John we will see plainly how anyone can come to Christ, no matter what his background, no matter how far he has gone wrong, no matter how evil he has been -- murderers, prostitutes, swindlers, liars, perverts, drunkards, self-righteous prigs, bitter, hard-hearted cynics, religious hypocrites, proud self-sufficient snobs -- anyone who realizes there is something wrong in his life, that something has seized him, gripped him and introduced evil, hurt, pain and heartache, anyone who wants to be free can come to Jesus. "Come unto me all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," Jesus said {cf, Matt 11:28}. Anyone can come.

But now the disciples understand, perhaps for the first time, that if you come, be assured that Jesus is not going to leave you the way you are. He is not going to settle for clutter, compromise, extortion and racket, whatever may be defiling and corrupting the temple courts. He may leave you alone for awhile. Many young

Christians have misunderstood that. Because he brings us in love and he deals with us in patience, we think that he is going to let us get by with some of the comfortable but wrongful habits we have built into our lives. But he will not. If we mistake that delay for acceptance, we are in for a surprise. If we refuse to deal with what he puts his finger on, one day we will find him coming with flaming eyes and with a whip in his hand, and we will find all that traffic in immorality is driven out whether we like it or not.

This explains what happens to many Christians who, like the Pharisees, make their outward actions look good, but allow sinful habits -- pornography, a bitter, unforgiving spirit towards another, an evil lustful habit, a private indulgence, a compromise with expediency in business -- to be hidden in their lives. As surely as people do that, one day they will discover that their Lord has changed his attitude towards them. He is no longer tolerant, understanding and patient. His eyes are aflame; and he means business -- and their life begins to fall apart. All the evil they thought was hidden is exposed. "That which is done in secret is shouted from the housetops," {cf, Matt 10:27, Luke 12:3}. People who think they are successfully hiding what they are doing are suddenly revealed before all. That is what the disciples learned: "Zeal for thy house will consume me," {cf, Psa 69:9a RSV}

The second lesson the disciples learned was a delayed reaction, Verses 18-22:

The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "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 spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken. {John 2:18-22 RSV}

It is amazing how blind everyone was at first to the meaning of this event! The Jews expected the Messiah to give them certain signs, and one of the signs the prophet Malachi prophesied was that the Messiah would suddenly come to his temple and purify the sons of Levi. The Messiah had just done that, but they did not recognize him. Instead, they said to him, "What sign do you have that you are the Messiah?" Our Lord's answer, of course, was to give them the only sign that would have any meaning to them -- the sign of his own resurrection.

But even the disciples missed it. Notice how blind they are. They did not catch the meaning of his answer until after the resurrection, when the risen Lord stood in their midst. When they saw the prints of the nails in his hands and the wound in his side, and realized, incredibly, that he was alive again, they talked this over among themselves. One of them probably said, "Remember when he first cleansed the temple he said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again'? We didn't know what he meant then but now we can see. The real temple was not the building; it was his own body!" They learned that bodies are the temples of God; a building is merely a figure, a shadow.

Across this nation today great cathedrals have been erected -- typically, in Southern California, a glass cathedral, costing over 15 million dollars! Every one of those buildings has on it somewhere a brass plaque that says, "Erected to the glory of God." I always feel irritated when I see that. The Scriptures teach that God is not glorified by buildings. No building is the house of God. It never was, it never will be. Even this building in Jerusalem was not really the house of God. When Solomon dedicated the temple he acknowledged that fact. He said, "Heaven, and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" {2 Chr 6:18 KJV}.

Buildings have always been but pictures of the house of God. The real temples are bodies -- human beings -- of body, soul, and spirit. That is where God has created a place where he can dwell. The Apostle Paul caught this truth. In the 6th chapter of First Corinthians he reminds us, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, which you have from God? You are not your own;" {1 Cor 6:19 RSV}. You do not have the right to run your life, to regulate it and make all the ultimate decisions as to what you ought to be or where you ought to go. Paul continues, "You are not your own, you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body," {1 Cor 6:19b-20 RSV}. That is where God is glorified.

Chapter 4 of John's gospel relates the story of Jesus' conversation with a woman at the well of Jacob. She raises the question, "Where should we worship God? On the temple mount in Jerusalem, or here in this mountain in Samaria?" {cf, John 4:20}. Jesus' answer was, "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father," {John 4:21 RSV} "God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth," {cf, John 4:24 RSV}. That is where God is glorified.

When I was a little boy I was told, "Now when you go to church you have to behave yourself. You can't whisper, you can't talk, you can't make any noise, you can't crawl around under the seats or anything like that. You have to behave yourself in church." It was not until years later that I realized that, if that is true, a believer is never out of church; he is always in the temple of the living God. The revelation the disciples learned was that the Lord of that temple cares about the inward clutter, confusion and immorality that may be there, and he will not make peace with it. This is taught by John himself later on in his epistle, when he says of Jesus, "as he is, so are we in this world," {1 Jn 4:17b}. Jesus was the temple of God which, if destroyed, God would raise again in three days. So are we: we are temples of the living God.

There is further significance to this in the fact that John puts this account back-to-back with the miracle of the changing of water to wine. That miracle says to us that when we obey God he gives us something to do, something human, ordinary, a commonplace thing that we as human beings can do. We can fill the jars with water, and when we draw from it we will discover that something has happened to it: it has become full of flavor, fragrance, effect and zest. It has become wine; it is no longer water. Human ability put into God's hands, touched by his touch, will accomplish far greater things than mere human beings could ever do.

But here Jesus is saying the opposite. Let human beings do their worst, let them oppose God, let them destroy the temple of God, let them carry out their rebellion to the utmost, and when they have done everything they can, God will touch it and will change it; he will work and it will still accomplish his purpose.

This is what the disciples are learning: the fear of God! That phrase is frequently found in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New: "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," {cf, Psa 111:10a, Prov 9:10a}. Understand that the God to whom you have come, that loving, healing Lord with the warm, accepting and understanding eyes who touches you with forgiveness and cleansing is nevertheless unwilling to put up with the continuance of sin; he will cleanse his temple whether you like it or not. Hebrews tells us that if the Father loves us he will scourge us and chasten us out of his love until we begin to be what he designed us to be {cf, Heb 12:5-7, 12:11}. Some get upset at God for this. We feel he ought to settle for what we think is holy enough, but he does not. He has in mind a temple where he can be glorified, where our deepest human desires will find satisfaction and fulfillment, and that requires cleansing. He will bring that about.

The third thing the disciples learned John records in Verses 23-25:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and he needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man. {John 2:23-25 RSV}

As the disciples watched him doing miracles -- healing the sick, touching the lame and opening the eyes of the blind (which the other gospels tell us occurred in this early ministry) -- they noticed that, though many were believing in Jesus because he was the miracle worker, Jesus did not seem to commit himself to them. That is a strange phenomenon in the Christian world yet. How many people come to Christ and ask him to be their Lord, yet they do not seem to be changed; there is no reality about their Christian living; they go right on much as they were, even, eventually, drift away, and never come back. Why is that? John explains it here. He says it is because Jesus knew Man, therefore he knew what a man or woman was like.

This is not a manifestation of a miraculous power; it is not divine omniscience. Rather it is the fact that as the perfect Man, Jesus could read all the signs that telegraph what we are. We are always indicating, by the looks on our faces, the tones of our voices, the positions, the stances we take with our bodies, what we really are like inside. None of us can read those signs adequately enough to be able to see through the facades and insincerities of others. But Jesus could. Therefore he was never deceived, never fooled, about anybody.

Though they came to him and said they wanted to follow him, he could read their hearts and know whether it was real or not.

Dr. Richard Halverson told me a few weeks ago that he had read a report in which a survey organization had collected all the reports of conversions in the United States by some of the outstanding evangelistic agencies of our day. The total came to 250 million! Now there are only 250 million Americans to begin with, so according to these organizations' figures, everyone in this country is a Christian! But we know that is not true, and the Lord knows it is not true. He deals only with realities. He sees through the facades and the illusions, deeper than we ourselves can see.

It is clear in this account that many of the people involved in the traffic in the temple were unaware there was anything wrong with it. Money-changing was necessary, selling animals was necessary. But that could have been carried on outside the temple courts and been just as effective. Through the years and through tradition, however, it had all crept inside the temple until people were probably unaware that anything was wrong with the practice. But our Lord knew. He refused to compromise with it, or put up with it, and forced the issue so people saw what God saw when he looked at the temple. This is what John wants us to remember. We are dealing with a God of reality, a God who cannot be fooled, a God who will always deal in loving forgiveness with anyone who does not defend his evil. When we admit it, when we come asking to be cleansed, and freed, he never turns us away, he never deals with us harshly. But when we come justifying our actions, excusing them, fooling ourselves, we find him refusing to commit himself to us.

Thus the disciples learned in this account very wonderful things about God. They learned to fear God, to realize that though he is a God of mercy he is also a God of majesty. They looked at our Lord with different eyes as they walked away from this scene. They felt the full warmth of his acceptance, but they felt the thrust of his justice and his majesty as well. That is what being a disciple must come to mean.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

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