

Cleansing the Temple

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on January the 18th, 1998. The preacher is Hilary Roth.

Her sermon is entitled, Cleansing the Temple, and is from Matthew chapter 21, verses 12 to 22. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. This is a disturbing passage for some Christians, seeing Jesus angry to the point of violence.

It's an uncomfortable picture, not a picture of Jesus that we want to see. But in this passage, Jesus performed two acts of judgment.

He cleansed the temple, and he cursed the fig tree. Both acts were opposite to his usual way of ministry.

[1 : 11] Both acts showed the hypocrisy of Israel. The temple was a den of robbers, and the nation, which is symbolized here by the fig tree, was without fruit.

So it was inward corruption and outward fruitlessness that were evidence here of their hypocrisy. The Passover was one of the most important holy days on the Jewish calendar. And on festival days, the Jews of Jerusalem and thousands of pilgrims went to the temple to buy sacrificial animals. So can you imagine what incredible chaos there would have been when that city actually trebled in size?

Can you imagine the sights and the sounds and the smells of all those extra animals and all those extra people in the temple?

[2 : 27] And sometimes, in fact, some people were crushed to death in the temple grounds during that chaos.

And Jesus would have witnessed all this. What a sorry sight would have met his eyes. What a sorry smell would have met his ears and even met his nostrils and even the sounds to his ears.

The temple was being desecrated. It looked like a marketplace and business was booming. The temple was being defiled by the religious business of the leaders, they had turned the court of the Gentiles into a place where foreign Jews could exchange money and buy their sacrifices.

And what had begun as perhaps a service of convenience for those visitors from other lands soon turned out to be a lucrative business with dealers charging exorbitant prices.

And historians tell us that Annas, the former high priest, was the manager of this enterprise and he was assisted by his sons.

[3 : 55] So with all that noise, with all that filth, with all that stench, could this in any sense whatsoever be called worship?

The court of the Gentiles was the only place in the temple that was available to the Gentiles. There the Jews were to witness to their so-called pagan neighbors and to tell them about the one true and living God.

But instead of being devoted to evangelism, the area was used as a religious marketplace. The court of the Gentiles was used for money business, not for missionary business.

Instead of praying for the people, the priests were praying on the people. The temple was not a house of prayer, it was a den of thieves.

And when Jesus called the temple my house, he was actually saying that he was God. When he called it my house of prayer, he was croaked quoting from Isaiah 56 verse 7.

[5 : 18] And the whole of chapter 56 of Isaiah condemns the unfaithful leaders of Israel. And the phrase the den of robbers comes from Jeremiah 7 verse 11 and is part of a long sermon that Jeremiah delivered at the gate of the temple, rebuking the people for the same sins that Jesus saw and was judging in our passage today.

So it's not difficult to picture the righteous indignation that must have flashed in Jesus' eyes that day as he drove out those buyers and the sellers.

But Jesus is motivated here by divine wrath. He is driven by divine self-awareness.

This is no maniac on the loose. This is the son of God reclaiming his house, reclaiming his house as a place of prayer and of prayers.

The temple was intended to be the place where God met with his people.

[6 : 41] He met with his people. It was supposed to be a sanctuary for quiet, for spiritual devotion, for meditation, and fellowship in connection with sacrifice.

And it was a place where people were helped. And we read in verse 14, The blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he cured them.

So while some of the people were being expelled, others were being welcomed. Jesus had not changed. Jesus was still the good shepherd.

So when the blind and the lame came to him, right there in the temple, his eyes, which just a moment ago were flashing with fire, were now filled with tender compassion.

He didn't say, come back some other time, I'm not in the mood now to heal you. On the contrary, Jesus is standing there in the midst of those overturned tables and those scattered coins reaching out.

[7 : 59] He's reaching out with his healing power and his marvelous compassion to those in need. And none of those who came to him went away disappointed.

The presence and the power of God was shown as Jesus healed the blind, blind, and the lame. Those healings had been predicted that the Messiah would actually do. The healing should have made the people call out, the Messiah has come.

But it was left to the children to call out, Hosanna to the son of David, which is a title for the Messiah.

that we read in verse 15 that when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things that he did and the children shouting that out in the temple area, they were angry, they were incensed, and they said to Jesus, do you hear what these children are saying?

[9 : 21] Yes, said Jesus, and have you never read out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?

Children could recognize the presence of God in Jesus, but the religious leaders could not. and we move on now to verse 18 and Matthew tells us here that the next morning as Jesus returned to the city, he was hungry and seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went up to it and found nothing on it but leaves.

And then he said to it, may no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once.

Now, as I said earlier, many people find this story very upsetting. Jesus' anger seems to be so much out of character. but we can't believe that the curse which Jesus pronounced on this fig tree was an act of punishing it as if the tree itself was responsible for not bearing fruit and as if for this reason Jesus was angry with it.

The real explanation lies deeper. this pretentious but barren tree was a fit emblem for the nation of Israel.

[11 : 19] And when we look at the time and the place that this happened, we've got a chance of understanding it better. Jesus was near Jerusalem in the last week of his public ministry to his people.

The fig tree symbolized the nation of Israel. And just as this tree had no leaves but no fruit, so Israel had a show of religion but no practical experience of faith that resulted in godly living.

Jesus was not angry with the tree. Rather, he used the tree to teach some lessons to his disciples.

The word hypocrisy means play acting, playing a part that is not really us, trying to present ourselves in a different way to what we are.

The plant is giving out a false message. It is saying, come and you will find fruit on me. But it was a hypocrite because there was none on it.

And in a sense Jesus was saying that about the religious leaders. They were acting as though they were right with God and they weren't. And he wouldn't tolerate hypocrisy in any form if it meant misleading and hurting his people.

[13 : 05] God wants to produce fruit in the lives of his people. Fruit is the product of life.

The presence of leaves usually indicates the presence of fruit. But this was not the case here. And if you remember in that parable of the fig tree in Luke chapter 13 verses 6-9, in that parable the gardener there was given more time to care for the tree.

But in this passage today, the time is up. So who are the people to whom this withered fig tree was intended to speak?

well it ought to speak loudly to the conscience of every Christian, everyone who claims to be a Christian. Though withered and dried up, this fig tree is speaking loudly.

There is a voice in this withered fig tree for all hypocritical and false hearted Christians. we need to take care that we learn the lesson that this fig tree teaches us.

[14 : 38] We need to learn and to remember that baptism, church membership, Holy Communion can be outward forms of Christianity.

They could be leaves, nothing but leaves. And without fruit will not give us the boldness and the confidence that we need to stand before God on the last day.

We need to bear fruit. There must be fruit in our hearts, there must be fruit in our lives. the fruit of repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ and true holiness in our behavior. And while we can see personal application in this passage, the main meaning of this passage is directed at Israel.

the time of judgment had come, the sentence was pronounced by Jesus, but it would not be executed for 40 years when Rome would come and destroy the city and destroy the temple and scatter the people.

[16 : 09] The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple in these things Jesus performed two symbolic and prophetic acts.

Two symbolic and prophetic acts with one meaning. He was predicting the downfall of Israel and he was predicting the establishment of his everlasting kingdom.

His everlasting kingdom that was a nation that was going to bring forth not just leaves but fruit and it's going to be gathered from both the Jews and the Gentiles.

And using that fig tree as an illustration, Jesus went on to give his disciples and give us a wonderful lesson on faith.

promise. He gave to them and he gives to us a wonderful promise. Truly I tell you, he said, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be lifted up and thrown into the sea, it will be done.

[17 : 44] Whatever you ask for in prayer, with faith, you will receive. These words of Jesus teaches us the immense importance of faith.

Faith will enable us to accomplish great works. as great and formidable as throwing a mountain into the sea.

Faith in God believes that nothing is impossible for God. And just as small children believe that their fathers can do anything in the world, so too those who belong to the household of faith believe that our heavenly father can do anything and everything.

Trust expressed in prayer is the mark of true faith. faith is not defined by Jesus as belief in a creed. Faith is defined by Jesus as the undoubting confidence of the children of God expressed in prayer for our everyday needs.

[19 : 38] It's confidence in God for our everyday needs. Every Christian, every one of us must discover for ourselves, every one of us must discover it.

how we can apply these words to our own prayer life. And one of these things that is for sure, whatever limitations there are, will all be on our side.

And lack of faith is the greatest hindrance to prayer. Do we want to grow? Do we want to grow in our faith?

do we want to grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do we want to make progress and become strong Christians and not just babies in spiritual things?

we need to pray daily. We need to pray daily for a strengthening of our faith.

[20 : 53] Because faith is the cornerstone of our relationship with God. And weakness here will affect the whole of our Christian life. According to our faith will be the degree of our peace.

According to our faith will be the degree of our joy, of our faithfulness in Christ's service, of our boldness in witnessing, of our strength in his work.

According to our faith will be our patience in trials and troubles. All, all hinges on our faith.

Happy are those who know how to rest their whole weight, their whole life continually in the strength of God.

Happy are those who walk by faith and not by sight. Amen.