

John 2:12-25 “Can Jesus Upset Your Tables?”

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Turn with me again this morning to John's Gospel, second half of the second chapter. Jesus has just announced the fullness of life that he brings as he turns water to wine at a wedding feast.
- But this morning, we find him not setting tables, but upsetting tables. He's not celebrating. He's angry. This is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. You may think of it at the end of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem on his way to the cross, and it's certainly possible that John has taken that incident at the end of Jesus' life and moved it up front in his account for theological reasons.
- Could be. I am in the minority who sees this likely as one of two similar instances when Jesus cleared the temple.
- [1 : 18] This one at the beginning of his ministry. Either way, as you listen to this passage this morning, I want to invite you to come in your mind with me to Jerusalem, the week of the Passover feast.
- Everyone's there. You are a 10-year-old child. Your legs are aching from the long trip. You and your family have gone miles and miles, walking some of them, riding on a donkey some. Then you had to get back down. You're exhausted. And you hit the city, and suddenly you're surrounded by millions of people.
- Jews from all around the world have come in, and you're just amazed. And you look up, and you see this huge, beautiful temple at the center of all of it.
- All the hustle and bustle circling around the temple. And as you squeeze your way into the temple, you start to smell the sacrifices that the priests are making.
- [2 : 26] And you squeeze your dad's hand tight so you don't get lost in the crowd. And you're struggling to hear his voice over the noise of sheep and oxen and pigeons over there.
- And people exchanging money. And families looking for a place to stay for the night. And merchants selling animals for sacrifice. It's getting a bit overwhelming, isn't it?
- And then all of a sudden, the animals start rushing towards you right there at the gate. And here they all come, and you hear tables being flipped over and animals making noises and people chasing after them.
- And you look up, startled, to see the one man towering over all of them, driving them out. Jesus has shown up.
- John 2 at verse 12. After this, Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.
- [3 : 29] The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And in the temple, he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money changers sitting there and making a whip of cords.

He drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and oxen, 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.

Do not make my father's house a house of trade. And his disciples remembered that it was written, zeal for your house will consume me.

So the Jews said to him, what sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

The Jews then said, it has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

[4 : 33] When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.

But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Pray with me. Jesus, you know what's in us. You know how easy it is for us to honor you with our lips, while our hearts are far from you.

We do not want that. May that not be true for us this morning. Would you, by your spirit, so help our hearts that we would hear your voice, that we would be soft and heed your correction, that we would, above all else, love you more.

So work in us, Holy Spirit, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. It's vital for us, as we consider this remarkable story, that when we hear temple, where all this is taking place, we hear God's house.

[6 : 04] This is where God lives among his people, right? It's where they come to pray to him. It's where they bring their sacrifices to him through the priest. It's where they can't go in some of the rooms because the glory of God lives there.

You can't go in. It's his house, right? Kids, if you have seen the movie Peter Rabbit, it's a great classic movie.

You may have read the book, but you will probably remember the scene where the animals take over the house and throw a party. It looks kind of like this. There are pigs swinging from chandeliers and rabbits dancing on mantles and deer and badgers sliding down the dining room table.

They just take over the place, right? It's quite funny, isn't it, kids? Imagine, though, if that was your house, how funny it would be.

If you came home tired one day and needing the refuge of your bed or your favorite comfy chair where you go to relax and there was a muddy pig in it and other crazy animals dancing around all over the place, you would run them out as fast as you could, wouldn't you?

[7 : 25] Because it is your house, not theirs. Now, some of you may like your house to be a zoo or a circus. I get that.

I don't, but you might. The temple, though, is God's house. Where he wants, what he wants to happen in his house is for his people to come meet with him.

Remember that he made us for relationship with him, that we would know him and love him. So in his house, he wants us to talk with him, to consider the seriousness of our sins and to rejoice in the provision of sacrifice for us so that we can be forgiven, so that we can know him.

But here when Jesus shows up in the temple, that's not what's happening. The chaos of Passover week in Jerusalem has overtaken the house of God, hasn't it?

Jesus is not having it. He has a zeal, a burning passion for his father's house, that it be a place of refuge for anyone wanting to pray, a place where sin and sacrifice and forgiveness are deeply contemplated, a place where the importance of being near God is never overlooked or undervalued.

[8 : 55] So the animals for sacrifice and the money for the temple tax are necessary. Most Jews coming from long distances couldn't bring the sacrifice with them.

Many of them needed to exchange their coins to be able to pay properly in the temple. Jesus does not tell them they're doing wrong things just in the wrong place.

Notice here that Jesus doesn't go into the dark alleyways of Jerusalem and start flipping over tables, does he? He's in the temple.

God's people are making God's house a house of trade and emporium is the word, a marketplace. But Jesus has come precisely so that the presence of God can be with his people.

So he cleanses God's house. He cleanses the temple. Take these things away. Get them out. With remarkable authority. Can you imagine one person coming into this huge area?

[10 : 05] He drives animals and people trying to make a buck out of the temple court. And it's that authority that gets called into question, isn't it?

Hold on, the Jews say. Who put you in charge of the temple? Show us a sign to prove that you're in charge of the house of God.

Are you the owner? Jesus responds, own the temple? I am the temple.

He's not quite that direct. He tells them what? To destroy the temple and he will rebuild it in three days. Now that would be quite a sign.

Can you imagine this huge building, bigger than this one, right? That it would be wiped out and then he'd just bring it back in three days. It takes longer than that for a lot of people. John says Jesus means even more than that.

[11 : 06] He means the temple of his body, which would be raised from the dead three days after being destroyed by these people. Jesus is saying he is the new temple.

He is God's house, the place in which God lives among his people. It's Jesus. See, back in the garden, just a little history on God living with his people.

Back in the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, the whole thing was a temple, right? Because God walked there with his people. That's what makes it a temple.

God lives there with his people. That is the glorious way that God designed it to be. But we messed that up. When we messed it up, we were separated from God because of our rebellion.

We were banished, kicked out. We couldn't live like that near to God without being destroyed, right? But God moved back toward his people who'd been sent far away from him.

[12 : 10] He moved back toward them in the tabernacle where he lived while they traveled. Then they settled in the promised land. Jerusalem was established. And King Solomon built the temple for God's house where he lived among his people.

It was the center of life for the Jews, the focus of everything. And now, now, Jesus says, that's me. I am the temple.

The word became flesh. Remember chapter one? And tabernacled among us. He is where God is known. What's he really like?

How do we know? He's the one who shows how God is worshipped. How do I live with him, come before him? The temple's veil is ripped at Jesus' death.

So we come through him into the very presence of God. So that in the new Jerusalem, we're told there is no temple. Oh, no. Oh, hold on.

[13 : 11] No temple because its temple is God Almighty and the Lamb. God no longer needs a house with rooms that you can't go into. He lives himself right in the midst of us forever.

Amen? Jesus makes that a reality. Once again here, Jesus is making an exclusive claim that he's the one connecting us to God.

He's not only cleansing God's house, he does that. But he's also saying, the way you know God is to know me. I'm in charge of the temple and I am the new temple.

Now I want to stop there before we go into applying these things to our lives and start to meddle a little bit. And I want to acknowledge that for some of you, that makes no sense.

It is an assumption for many in our society today. You would even say it's just an obvious truth that every religion is equally valid.

[14 : 22] That all roads lead to God. That no one can claim to have the way to connect with the God. So when you hear Jesus say, I am the temple.

The way to know God. The place to live with him. You may be saying this morning, no way. You're the only way. I mean, that's interesting.

It's spiritual sounding. But I've got my own way. There are other good ways to live. Every sincere religion is equally valid. Everybody knows that. Now I want you to know that's quite an exclusive claim itself.

Because if that is true, that every religion is equally valid, then either God does not exist, and therefore every way to him is equally useless.

Or if God does exist, he doesn't care how you know him, what you believe about him, the way you live in relationship with him, how you worship him.

[15 : 30] He just doesn't care. And that is a very specific view of God. It's a view of God that excludes not only the God of the Bible, but also almost every Eastern view of God or traditional view of God.

It's a very narrow, very specific view of what God is like. And I'm saying when you say that, you're asking everyone else to assume that that very specific view of God is true.

I'm not saying this to prove you wrong, if you say that, or to prove that Jesus is right when he claims to be the way to God, but rather just to show that Jesus can't be dismissed merely for being exclusive without the one dismissing him also being dismissed on the very same grounds.

Do you see? Those are very exclusive statements. And we actually get to deal with Jesus. What does he say? The one who turns water into wine and then turns over the tables of religious people who are missing God in their self-serving busyness, he's saying that you can know God through him.

So let's listen to him. See what he's like. See what he says. Because God is telling us in stories like this that he exists and that he does care deeply about how we know him, how we worship him, how we live with him, and most importantly, that Jesus is the way we know him.

[17 : 12] So if that's true, if anything distracts you from Jesus, take it away. Get it out. Turn over the tables.

Something's got to change if anything is keeping you from being near to Jesus. That's where I want us to think about our own lives here for just a few minutes.

Jesus has authority to turn over tables in the temple. Do we acknowledge his authority to turn over tables in our lives so that we can draw near to God?

I'll be honest with you before we start, because it does get a little bit pointed. I prefer the Jesus who turns water to wine, who provides all this fullness to meet my hunger, who graciously satisfies me, the Jesus that we talked about last week who's so graciously good.

I prefer that one to the Jesus who starts turning tables over. But it's the same guy, the same one who's coming so that we can know fullness of life in relationship with our God, so that we can taste and see that he is good, so that we can live near him.

[18 : 35] That's his heart in both of these cases. But sometimes, because that's his heart, it means driving out some distractions to us seeing him and coming near to him.

And he loves us enough to do that. I see three specific tables Jesus turns over in this passage. If Jesus is turning tables over because they're keeping people from being properly near to God and connecting with him in his presence, then I'll call these three paths away from God.

One last warning before we talk about them. These are tables, remember, that belong to God's people. They have lots of good religious things on them.

They look very nice to us. So don't go pointing the finger outside. Jesus is cleansing in here today. Okay? He's talking to us.

First one is our self-determination and control. It's the very fact that these people want to treat God's house as their house, where they can use it for whatever they want.

[19 : 50] Whatever is convenient or comfortable for them, of course God would want that, right? I mean, he may not have said it exactly this way, but I mean, after all, he wants us to be comfortable.

Isn't that the heartbeat of our culture? Doesn't that seem right to you? I can do and be whatever I want. Be who I want. Don't restrict me.

21st century American Christians prefer the gracious Jesus who meets our needs to the holy Jesus who contradicts our preferences because far be it from anybody to contradict our preferences.

Amen? Amen. Thank you. It's not an either or. These aren't two different Jesuses.

I think many of us like that control, don't we? Or at least the illusion of control. I'll marry whomever I love and I'll divorce her whenever I want without asking what God's word would have me do in either case.

[20 : 56] I'll call myself a Christian, but I'm not going to be found very often in a church service because there are a lot of ways, really, to live as a follower of Jesus.

Lots of other ways to live with God besides the ones he lays out in his word. I want my church, when I do show up, to have the music at just the right volume, my coffee at just the right temperature, and the sermon at just the right length, and you're over it already.

And what's especially wrong, y'all, this is the, it's not so much that we just like our consumer Christianity. It's that when those things don't happen, I'll be frustrated enough that I won't be able to worship God, that I won't hear from him, that I'll stop listening to his word because it's not coming to me the way I want it.

I won't draw near to him. Y'all, may that never be that you're kept from God by something you want your way. He wants you near him.

I'll be a pastor who's only excited about what God's doing when it's my plan on my schedule. God, forgive me.

[22 : 14] Where in your life are you refusing to give up control to God, to let his priorities overrule your preferences?

Might Jesus be turning over a table in your heart today as he is in mine? Another table that keeps us from drawing near to God, I think Jesus seems to be saying this when he pours out the coins, when he criticizes the house of trade that the temple has become, is a love of money and possessions.

Is there any chance that's keeping you from nearness to Jesus? I didn't say how much do you have. I said, is there any chance it's keeping you from being near Jesus? Do you walk in here on a Sunday morning or wake up every other morning so consumed with your business that you can't pray for a few minutes or worship for an hour without attending to that business, at least in your mind?

It's always that. Are you checking a lot of Christian boxes like the rich young ruler? But if Jesus asked you to sell your possessions and give the money to the poor and come follow him, you'd walk the other way?

Sad? Can I ask you about your heart? This is hard. I want to ask you what you're excited and passionate about.

[23 : 51] Do you find yourself sometimes going through the motions with God, just kind of, here's the thing we do. And what you really sense yourself getting excited about, it would be fair to say you're consumed with zeal for your next money-making adventure or for your next shopping purchase.

Don't really have time, pastor, to consider loving my neighbor, praying for him, pointing her to Jesus, but if I'm honest, I always seem to have time to shop for shoes online.

When we start depending on our resources, when we start finding life and joy in our possessions, it is a pathway away from abiding in Jesus, knowing him more deeply, trusting him more fully.

What are you clinging to that's keeping you from clinging to Jesus? Take these things away, Jesus says. Nothing between you and me.

Get anything else out of the way. One more that thankfully won't apply to any of us. A life of busyness and chaos.

[25 : 13] I'll be quick because I know it's not you. How often does this keep us from real nearness to God? Is your time booked with activities?

Your mind in every down moment distracted by your phone? Your heart so wearied from all of this that it's actually resistant to rest anywhere, especially in God?

Have you become so conditioned to navigating chaos that that's just the way of life? So meditating on God's word, listening to someone in your grace group share what he's been teaching her, regularly gathering to feast on the body and blood of Jesus as your source of life.

It just doesn't seem to happen. Even though you keep saying you want it to and you want it to feel different, you want life to go at a different speed and it just doesn't. Could it be for some of us that more church meetings, teaching another class, even giving of yourself to love someone else and spend time with them is something you're using to avoid actually experiencing the love of God, deeply savoring the wonder of God's daily grace, really connecting with him in prayer.

It just doesn't seem productive enough. I don't feel active. Don't forget, this passage shows us that even right things like those at the wrong place or the wrong time can keep us from God.

[26 : 54] And when that's happening, Jesus says, get them out! You can run a wonderful 501c3.

You can parent and even foster children. You can lead a Bible study and all of those without the sacrifice of Jesus being necessary.

But for you to draw near to God, for you to live in relationship with him, for you to know him truly and personally, Jesus had to die.

There was no other way. He died to give you that relationship. Don't neglect that gift. I'm gonna trust somewhere in your heart Jesus is turning over a table this morning.

Yours may just be wobbling. It may have crashed a few minutes ago. What do you do about that? There's one path back to God for all three paths leading us away from him in this passage.

[28 : 11] Jesus turns over the tables, drives out the things distracting us from being with God and now we have two options. Either we set them back up and carry on with life just as we were.

Please don't. Don't be merely hearers but not doers. Don't see your heart in the reflection of God's word and then just go on living just the same way moving on with your life.

Don't do that. Or, second option, repent of them and turn to the new temple.

See, the path back near to God from self-determination and control is not deciding that I'm going to stay in control but you know what? I'll be a better Christian.

I'll just choose to be who God wants me to be now. The path back near to God from the love of money and possessions is not striking a bargain with him to give 10% more next year.

[29 : 19] The path back near to God from a life of busyness and chaos is not piling up good religious duties so that you are just as busy and chaotic as ever maybe more than before but in six Bible studies.

You read through the Bible every month not every two years. You listen to Christian radio while you wash dishes. You sleep only three hours a night so you have more time to pray. It's not the path back.

There's one path back to God. Repent. Leave the table down where Jesus turned it over. and trust Jesus.

The glory of this passage is that as messed up as the temple has become when Jesus shows up the solution is not a big repair job on the temple.

It is what? A new temple. The new temple has come right into the midst of the old one right here. The risen Jesus is with you now inviting you in relationship with him into the deepest closest most life-changing encounter with God that you can imagine.

[30 : 34] He's saying you find it in me. And yes as you enjoy the goodness of delighting in him what will happen in your heart is you won't want anything else to distract you from him.

He'll help you say get out to all sorts of things bad things and good things in the wrong place. So over time you likely will end up giving more money away.

Reading more of his word even sacrificing sleep at times to pray that'll happen but don't think all those things are earning your way back near to God.

No, no the beauty the glory the grace of this is that God comes near to you and then calls you not to miss out on that relationship and all the ways you can enjoy it and savor it and drink deeply of him.

It's the fruit of nearness with him as he comes to you and keeps drawing you in. Jesus has come through his life and especially his death and his resurrection to bring you home so that he the new temple God's house is actually your home that's where life is.

[31 : 47] You actually live day by day moment by moment where are you at home? I'm at home with Jesus walking with God abiding in Jesus led by his spirit so I'm eager to draw near to him I'm confident in his forgiving grace when I mess up I'm excited to tell others where life is really lived in the new holy place with Jesus.

Friends it's time to come home you may be realizing this morning that somewhere in your life you're a runaway maybe you came in this morning on the run you're stuck on one of these paths away from God a lot like the prodigal son who wanted to do things his own way to have all his money and spend it as he wanted to fill his life with everything that he thought would really make him happy and where did he find himself distant from his father and from everything that he wanted his life to be only to find that as soon as he looked up and turned to come home there was his father not frowning not waiting running to embrace him he's running to you this morning Jesus loves you too much to leave you in the pigsty far from the father's house he loves you too much to leave those tables untouched in your heart that would keep you from him he is turning them over not to run you off but to welcome you home it's time to come home

Jesus will welcome you into the presence of God forever he will show you who you were made to be he will provide for you what you truly need he will show you how to live with great purpose and deep rest come home Jesus help us Jesus forgive us for the things we've welcomed into our lives maybe intentionally seeking to avoid you maybe not realizing how they would keep us from you but we feel it we know what it's like to feel distant and to know you haven't moved thank you that indeed you have moved to chase after us God you've sent your son that we might be welcomed back into your family to your table into relationship with you so help us

Holy Spirit up turn the tables and don't let us put them back let us cling to Jesus turn from those things and run to rest in him thank you for chasing after us we love you for that we worship you we ask that our lives would be living sacrifices to praise you for what you have done in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org I love you