

## Guarding What Is Holy

Mark 11:11-18

Two men were sitting at an all-night café, discussing the difference between irritation, anger, and rage. About 1 A.M., one said, "I'll show you an example of irritation." He went to the pay phone and dialed a number at random. The phone rang repeatedly. Finally, when a sleepy voice answered, the caller said, "I'd like to speak to Wilson."

"There's no Wilson here," the man muttered and hung up.

An hour later, at 2 A.M., the first man said, "Now I'll show you anger." He dialed the same number and let it ring. Eventually, the same man answered the phone.

"May I please speak with Wilson?"

"I told you, there's no Wilson here," came the angry reply right before the receiver was slammed down.

At 3 A.M., the man said, "Now I'll show you rage." He dialed the same number again. When the sleepy man finally answered, the caller said, "Hi, this is Wilson. Any calls for me?"

We are not used to thinking of Jesus as irritated, angry or enraged. So, how do we explain this?

<sup>11</sup>Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

<sup>12</sup>The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. <sup>13</sup>Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. <sup>14</sup>Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

<sup>15</sup>On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, <sup>16</sup>and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. <sup>17</sup>And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written:

"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations' ?

But you have made it a den of robbers.' "

<sup>18</sup>The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. – Mark 11:11-18

The same Jesus Who said of Himself, "I am gentle and humble in heart," was wrecking furniture at the temple. This Jesus, Who dealt so graciously with all kinds of sinners and outcasts, was busting up the joint. This was the same Jesus Who healed and consoled troubled people. This was the same Jesus that constantly pacified His battle-hungry disciples. What has gotten into the Prince of Peace? What was going on at the temple that had Him so worked-up when little else could? We cannot begin to understand Jesus' anger until we consider what the temple meant to the Jewish people.

Our modern landscape is peppered with church buildings. Jewish synagogues were scattered throughout the world in Jesus' time. The ancient temple was not like any of them. It was a uniquely holy place, for there was only one temple. Sacrifices for sin were offered there. The temple housed the "Holy of Holies" a small chamber where in days past God had descended to meet His people. Once annually, the high priest entered that place to represent the nation on a single *Day of Atonement*. One sacrifice was offered to cover every sin that had been overlooked in the daily sacrifices for sins. The temple was God's house in a sense that no church building ever could be.

To the Jewish people, the temple represented the presence of God among them. The temple was roughly patterned after the Tabernacle from the days of Moses. That elaborate tent always stood in the center of the camp - three tribes each settled to the north, south, east and west. This symbolized God's place in the midst of His people. The temple came to represent that same mind-set.

God's presence with His people, as represented by the Tabernacle, and later, the temple, was both comforting and terrifying. Everything about these structures reminded the nation that God was holy, that is, different than them. One tribe, Levi, was set apart to serve the Tabernacle and to handle the logistics for moving it from place to place. No other tribe was to touch anything. The furnishings were covered when moved so as not to be gazed upon. The Levites pitched their tents around the Tabernacle to prevent unauthorized Hebrews from venturing too close. The other tribes camped to the north, south, east and west from the Tabernacle, but as much as one-half-mile away according to some researchers. That's roughly the distance from here to WGAL. God was in the midst of His people, but His "holy-otherliness" demanded that a degree of remoteness be maintained.

Solomon built the first permanent temple and added many of his own touches. The Babylonians destroyed that temple and carried the Jews away. Years later, those who returned from exile rebuilt. Circumstances demanded that the new temple be erected on a more modest scale, but as other rulers repaired and added onto that temple, human legacy had as much to do with what was built as did any desire to glorify God. Herod the Great built many magnificent structures, a way of leaving his mark on history. Herod's temple, the temple of Jesus' day, was spectacular. Dreamers today argue that elaborate structures pay tribute to God, but the tribute He demands is that we honor His holiness. Israel's leaders in Jesus' day failed to do that, and God's Gentle Lamb became furious.

Jesus witnessed what was happening in the temple, but chose to spend the night in Bethany rather than to do anything right then. Righteous anger is never a knee-jerk reaction. We cannot know how much Jesus slept that night *versus* how much He prayed. He may have spent some time reflecting on the appropriateness of such a forceful statement. Still, by morning, His anger was already seething. We get a glimpse of this anger when He curses a fig tree on His way back to the temple.

## **I. Such a Vile Contamination!**

### **A. The Holy Temple Had Become "a Den of Robbers"**

Allegedly true, a young man arrested for stealing a car had a quite novel excuse. He explained that he found the automobile in front of a cemetery, and assumed that the owner was dead.

The excuses behind the thievery going on at the temple of God were more sophisticated for it was conducted under the cloak of religion. It was Passover week. Jews from all over the world flocked to Jerusalem. Many people did not choose to bring a sacrificial animal along on the journey, waiting to purchase one in Jerusalem. That was risky. A lamb sold in the streets might be rejected by the priests as sub-standard. So, animals were also sold on the temple grounds, but the price there could be as much as fifteen times higher than on the street. Providing animals to pilgrims met a need. Price-gouging sullied the holy occasion. The priests, who were already well-off because of the perks of priesthood, were apparently not satisfied. This mercenary racket just made a rich priesthood richer by exploiting the masses. Did they authorize this predatory enterprise for a cut of the profits?

There were also “money changers” at the temple. Every Jew paid an annual temple tax of one half-shekel. Most of this revenue came in during the Passover migration to Jerusalem. Currencies from throughout the Roman Empire were accepted in Palestine, but this temple tax was payable only in temple-issued half-shekels or in Galilean shekels. You couldn’t use your MAC card. Exchange booths were set up at the temple, but Simeon bar Jethro ben Bodine from some synagogue in backwoods Crete was clueless as to the exchange rate between a half-shekel and his Cretan currency. A cut from this money-changing racket provided the priests with yet another occasion to line their pockets at the expense of these out-of-town rubes.

Passover, the holiest Jewish holiday, was being tainted by the greed of men called to be holy, and in the holiest of all places. Any sensitive man would be offended. Small wonder that Jesus was furious.

## **B. God’s Holiness Had Become a Trivial Matter**

Aaron was the first high priest from whom every priest descended, but there were issues in the first generation after him. Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, were struck down for offering “unauthorized fire before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:1, 2). Speculation abounds as to what this means, but the vagueness tells us more than specifics ever could. It could not possibly matter *HOW* these boys amended God’s instructions for offering a sacrifice. The fact that they *DID* spelled their doom.

Some people think that God mellowed between the testaments. Is the God of the New Testament any less offended when His holiness is ignored? In the early church, Ananias and Sapphira tried to pass themselves off as more generous than they really were. People were sacrificing right and left for the common good, and all the glory was going to God. But, when this pair tried to steal some of God’s glory for themselves, He dropped them where they stood. Fear gripped the church. God did not have to make many such statements. He doesn’t seem to make many today, but make no mistake about it, He is as holy as ever, and His anger still burns whenever His holiness is trivialized.

## **II. Such a Violent Sanctification!**

### **A. The Temple Had to be Restored to “a House of Prayer”**

The Jews prayed in the temple. If they were not able to do so, they faced the temple at designated prayer times. Local synagogues where Jews around the world worshipped were built facing Jerusalem and the temple. The sacrifices that were offered at the temple daily, year-round, were visible expressions of prayer. When these sacrifices were true reflections of the hearts of the worshippers and not just empty rituals, they expressed praise, thanksgiving, commitment, confession of sin, petition for God’s forgiveness - everything our prayers express.

The temple was a place of learning. In fact, after Jesus rearranged the place, He taught there daily until His arrest. Learning God’s truth should be considered prayerful communion with Him. Our objective in learning the Bible should never be merely to learn more Bible facts, as though that alone measures spiritual progress. When we open the Word of God, it ought to be to allow the Holy Spirit to teach us more about the Person of Jesus and how to better live under His Lordship.

A radical cleaning was certainly in order. The temple represented the presence of God. It was a place where God comforted and forgave His people. It was a place where sacrifices rightly given expressed the hearts of worshippers to their God. It was a place where God made His heart known to His people when credible students of the Scriptures opened His Word to others. But how could any of those things happen when the men entrusted for seeing to it that they happened were corrupt?

## **B. A Holy God Requires a Holy Dwelling**

If only God *WERE* confined to a building! We could come, drop something in the plate, sing a couple of verses of *Amazing Grace* and be on our way. He'd be happy. We'd feel safe. But, God loves us too much for such meaningless fellowship. He chooses to abide with His people – in the church collectively and in the hearts of believers individually. If God has made you His own, but your heart harbors anything that keeps it from being a holy dwelling place for the Lord, then a radical cleaning is in order. Purge your heart. Maintain a suitable dwelling place for God.

How is this done in practical terms? First, examine the passions of your heart. If your passions don't seem to be in line with godliness, examine the diet upon which your mind feeds. Does your mind feast on things that draw you closer to Him? You don't need me to tell you how damaging lurid stimuli are to fashioning your heart into a home for God. But, you don't have to be enslaved to lurid things. Many respectable interests do little to bring you closer to God. You may be engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, a skill or an art. Still, when such seemingly fine areas of interest squeeze out passion for God, a believer loses balance. When you give your life to anything that displaces your first love, a radical cleaning may be in order whether your heart really seems that dirty or not.

## **III. Such a Virtuous Indignation!**

### **A. Sinners Seldom Got Under Christ's Skin**

Arriving home from work at his usual hour of 5 p.m., a husband discovered that it had not been one of his wife's better days. Nothing he said or did seemed to be right. By 7:00, things had not improved, so they agreed he should go outside, pretend he had just got home, and start all over. He went outside, came back in and, with a big smile, announced, "Honey, I'm home!"

"And just where have you been?" she replied sharply "It's after seven o'clock!"

Zacchaeus, the tax collector of Jericho, could not get under Jesus' skin. He was despised by his fellow-Jews, but Jesus restored his dignity and reminded his critics that he too was a "son of Abraham." Jesus rescued an adulterous woman from a pious mob that contemplated stoning her. He crossed rigid lines of gender and race to share "living water" with a rather immoral Samaritan woman. Even though it outraged His enemies, Jesus attacked none of these people. He loved them.

Jesus' anger was never directed at the most obvious sinners, but only at those sinners who were convinced that they were righteous. The priests and Pharisees thought of themselves as pious men, but, at best, they were apathetic toward people and more often, harshly judgmental. To them, righteousness had become about their credentials and reputations. They were in awe only of themselves, but such self-righteousness is an obvious proof that a man's religion has lost sight of God's holiness.

### **B. Holy Wrath Had Been Brewing for Some Time**

After Jesus spent the night in Bethany, He set out for Jerusalem. He was hungry so He approached a fig tree. It was adorned with leaves, but there was no fruit. He cursed the tree so that it might never bear fruit. This seems a little over-the-top at first glance. Mark notes that it was not even the season for fruit. But sure enough, when the disciples passed the tree again, it was dead: "In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!'" (Mark 11:20, 21).

I get a little cranky when I'm hungry, but it seems clear that Jesus had a point that He was making. The fig tree was a picture of the Jewish nation. That nation had been called, protected, disciplined and rescued by God, but they squandered those opportunities. They had failed to be a light to the nations of the world, and God took Israel's light away. That dead fig tree prefigured the destruction of Jerusalem and the leveling of the temple in AD 70. Wasting blessings, spurning opportunities and dismissing God's holiness do stir His wrath. God was angry, frighteningly angry, when He poured out His judgment on Jerusalem and effectively ended the practice of temple Judaism.

We don't like to think of God as angry. We have been so inundated with the message that "God is love" that we tend to forget that He is also a "consuming fire." We struggle with this angry Jesus because we do not understand holy anger. We do not understand holy anger because our own anger is usually anything but holy. As a Person, God has many emotions. He experiences love, hatred, joy, sorrow, grace and rage – just like us. What separates His emotions from ours is His perfection and holiness. As sinners, we often love what we should hate and hate what we should love. We are angry when we should be patient and patient or indifferent when we should be angry. Suffice it to say God is never angry at the wrong things and He is always angry at the things that merit anger.

John records Jesus cleansing the temple three years earlier and quoted Psalm 69:9: "Zeal for your house consumes me." Now, the week before He died, it still did. Zeal for God's house still consumes Jesus. Does it consume you? What kind of cleansing does your heart radically require? If you are not a Christian, deeding the mastery of your heart over to Jesus is step one. If you are a Christian, and that transaction has been made, perhaps, there are still corners and dark places where Jesus does not have the run of the place. Consider something Paul prayed for God's people:

... <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may **dwell** in your hearts through faith. – Ephesians 3:16, 17

"Dwell" in that verse, is a compound word meaning, "dwell down", connoting the permanence of making a place a home. God has been named the Owner of the house, but can He feel at home in your heart as it is? What do you need to do to make your heart a suitable dwelling place for God? Is your heart a holy place? What fills your heart? Do its passions reflect the appetites of the world or do they reflect a yearning for the holiness of God? You were bought at a price. What yielding must you do so that He might sanctify His own temple and dwell there in comfort?

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