

A House of Prayer

Matthew 21:12-17

This scene can be hard to picture in your mind, because it is dangerous to engage your imagination to go beyond the words which God has given to us. The danger, on the one hand, is to picture Jesus having something that we might call a temper tantrum. He drove out those who were buying and selling, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. But we know that he never sinned, so he never lost his temper. He never expressed uncontrolled anger in a way that would resemble our own sinful actions, or justify them. He was not a wild-man creating chaos and havoc.

On the other hand, he was not idly standing by while the temple was being desecrated in this way. He was active, physically active, and those actions were clear and decisive. He overturned tables in the work of putting business out of the temple. On a similar occasion earlier in his ministry, recorded in John 2, he used a whip of cords to drive people out. It was an active, aggressive and effective course of action.

And there is a reason he did what he did, a reason easily identifiable and applicable to the church today. I want to begin this afternoon with that reason, to set before you the positive purpose and principle first. I would call it simply,

I. THE SPIRITUAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH.

In other words, the definition of the church is in the realm of spirituality. The definition of the church focuses upon the spiritual world, with spiritual purposes and goals. It is not a business. It is not a corporation. It is not a social service agency. It is not merely the accumulation of individual programs. And above all else, it is not an institution that is to be engaged in commerce. We

will get to all that in a moment, but first the positive definition. What is the definition of the church? Jesus simply calls it “a house of prayer.”

v.13

The reference is to Isaiah 56. The chapter begins with Is. 56:1 “Thus says the Lord: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

The sabbath had particular reference to temple worship, and the point that the prophet is making is upon the blessings of salvation. All the nations are to join in, as well, the foreigners as Isaiah identifies them. Isaiah’s prophecy continues,

Is. 56:6 “Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, And to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant—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.”

So the priority that God identifies for his people is easy to identify.

A. The priority of prayer.

That’s what the house of God is built for. For a spiritual purpose. For a spiritual activity. For spiritual work, accomplished by spiritual means. Prayer.

So we are to pray when we are here. Most broadly, that would apply to the whole of our worship, as prayer would have reference

to the part of our worship in which we address God. God also speaks to us, in the second broad definition of the elements of worship, but prayer adequately represents the whole of our worship. So house of prayer can be equivalent to saying housing of worship. The church is to be a house of worship, a meeting place for God and his people. It doesn't take much reading in the Old Testament about the temple to recognize the significance of that. And the tabernacle as the people of Israel travelled in the wilderness. It was the specific place where God would meet with his people. Where God would talk to his people. Where the people of God would offer their sacrifices of praise to him. It was a house of prayer.

In the New Testament, we read things like this,

Acts 1:14 "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers."

Acts 2:42 "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

When the first deacons were selected in Acts 6, we read,

Acts 6:4 "...but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Rom. 12:12 "...rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer..."

Col. 4:2 "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving."

And when it comes to how we conduct ourselves in the church of the living God, Paul says specifically,

1 Tim. 2:8 "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere,

lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting."

Prayer stands out as the very essence of our spiritual work, the very essence of our spiritual identity. Because prayer is, itself, entirely a spiritual matter. It is done entirely in the realm of our spiritual existence. And so it is to have a priority for the church, if we, too, are going to be a house of prayer.

So we have prayer as a vital element of our worship services, even extensive prayers. And rightly so, for how could we claim the identity of a house of prayer if we didn't actually pray? Many churches do that, however, with little prayer other than very brief and superficial sentences that serve more as an introduction than what Paul would call "wrestling" with God.

Prayer is hard work, and that word "wrestling" certainly reflects the idea correctly. It is not just a formula, or even worse, something that would resemble some magical incantation. It is hard work, privately and together when we worship. Corporate prayer is hard work, not simply listening while someone else leads in prayer, but actively, purposefully taking part in the prayer even as the words are uttered by someone else's lips. So even then, we need to learn to wrestle in prayer! Don't daydream. Don't let your mind wander. Wrestle. We are to be a house of prayer. And with that definition, let me emphasize,

B. The identity of a spiritual family.

You see, when you have a house, you have a family! It is a family who lives in the house. And so to be a house of prayer means that we are a family of prayer. That image is further expressed in,

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are...fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ

Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Mark’s gospel adds something very helpful for our awareness, Mark 11:7 Then He taught, saying to them, “Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?”

There is to be no discrimination. There are no exclusions. No one is barred entrance. The spiritual nature of the church transcends all other identities, even the barriers that would have divided Jew and Gentile. The house of prayer is open to all nations, the house of God is open to every nation. God makes no distinction between nations, none superior, none identified as distinct from another.

Rom. 10:12 “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Gal. 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

And again, all those verses I read just a moment ago describe the church as a whole, the church as a body, the church as a family. A spiritual family. But there can be,

II. A DANGEROUS INTRUSION INTO THE CHURCH.

A dangerous intrusion that contradicts the spiritual nature of the church, namely business. Commerce. Buying and selling.
v.12-13

Jesus went into the outer court of the temple, the section open to Jews and Gentiles, and what he saw resembled a market place. Business was booming, and obviously lucrative as well. Some men were selling oxen and sheep, animals obviously contributing an unpleasant odor and much noise to the whole situation. With the passover so close at hand, there were plenty of buyers around willing to pay high prices for these sacrificial animals. No doubt the temple merchants paid generously for their place in the market, bought from the priests. The whole thing was a money-making endeavor, with an economic partnership developing between the tradesmen and the priestly caste.

Jesus also saw the money-changers, exchanging out foreign money for a fee, providing the pilgrims Jewish money in order to conduct their business. The nature of man being what it is, you can assume that there were unscrupulous cheaters taking great advantage of naive and unsuspecting visitors. The vendors of pigeons and turtledoves were there to provide those not able to afford a lamb to still have a sacrifice to offer. History records tell us that even the poor were being grossly overcharged, taken advantage of at their most vulnerable point, purchasing temple sacrifices.

Jesus would have a righteous anger and indignation at the whole sight. He acted forcefully and deliberately. He drove out the buyers and sellers. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those selling pigeons. He is, and shows himself to be, the Lord of the temple. It is his house. He claims it as his own, and he rebukes those who so violate the spiritual nature of this holy place of worship.

v.13

Jeremiah prophesied very similarly,

Jer. 7:1 “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, 2 “Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!’” 3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. 4 Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.’ 5 “For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, 6 if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, 7 then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. 8 “Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, 10 and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered to do all these abominations’? 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 men of Judah were judged for that abomination.

Jer. 7:15 “And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren—the whole posterity of Ephraim.”

It was a serious thing! And as we would apply that to ourselves, the reality is that,

A. The church is not a place for commerce.

Why is it that many huge churches today have come to resemble shopping malls? Why is it that many churches have given themselves over to commerce, buying and selling? Perhaps, it is only fundraising, but even that fails this test. The

church is a house of prayer, and the fundraising that we do is not commerce, but rather the act of worship which consists of the giving of our tithes and offerings.

So we don’t have bazaars and spaghetti dinners to raise money. We don’t have a Starbucks out in the front foyer. We don’t rent our space to commercial enterprises to conduct their business. There is a reason for that. The nature of the church is spiritual. The work of the church is spiritual. And the intrusion of commerce is a dangerous concession to the patterns of this world. Jesus would have none of it. For,

B. The church is not a place to gain economic profit.

It’s not just commerce, per se, but the outworking of the whole system of capitalistic enterprise. Making money.

Now, it’s not wrong to make money. It’s not wrong to conduct a business. It isn’t wrong to buy and sell, and to make a profit doing so. There is honor in our work and employment. But the church is not the place to gain that economic profit. The church ought not to be in the business of money-changing. The church out not to be in the business of sales and investments. The nature of the church is spiritual. The work of the church is spiritual.

It is to be house of prayer, not a house of commerce. The church is not a place for people to get rich, it is not a place to gain a profit at the expense of others. It is to be a house of prayer.

Then notice what happened, as Matthew records it. Jesus resumed his spiritual labors, his spiritual work, and continued to heal.

v.14

But there was a problem, amazingly enough, The chief priests and the scribes became indignant. Mad. Angry. We can guess at their motives. And we read elsewhere of their jealousy. But notice the explanation given here.

v.15-16a

In other words, they were mad because the children were making noise! It didn't matter that the noise was actually the joyful noise of praise and worship. It was just noise, an intrusion into their own sense of peace and quiet. And children will, of course, do that! But this was to be,

III. A PLACE FOR JOYFUL PRAISE.

And this is the occasion for Jesus to make his point, and, as we have seen before in this gospel, he uses children to do it! He uses the example of children to teach adults a valuable lesson. You see, the children were doing just exactly what they should have been doing! They were doing what the adults should have been doing, what the chief priests and scribes certainly should have been doing. They were singing Jesus' praise!

v.15

We read of Jesus' triumphal entry in,

Luke 19:37 "Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, 38 saying: " 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!' Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 39 And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." 40 But He answered and said to them, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."

Same idea! It is right and proper to sing praise, and if men

don't do it then the stones will! Or, here in Matthew, if the Jewish leaders won't sing Jesus' praise, then the children will! That's how it works! Jesus will receive his praise! And what will they sing? "Hosanna to the Son of David." Do you remember that emphasis from last week? The king who would come in the line of David, the great king, David's son, who would also be the son of God. The king who would reign forever. The king whose throne would never end. King Jesus!

And, if you remember, Hosanna means "save now." An obvious reference to the work of redemption, for Jesus the King would also be Jesus the savior. So the children got it right, with a profound and significant expression of praise, "Hosanna to the Son of David." It was,

A. Praise for all the benefits of redemption.

Praise for the work of salvation, a praise echoed by the theologically rich words of Paul in,

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."

The children got it right! The children were crying out in praise to Jesus. They saw the miraculous healings, and they responded out loud! And Jesus' has this occasion to emphasize by example what he has already taught,

Mat. 19:13 "Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." 15 And He laid His hands on them and departed from there."

And, Mat. 18:1 "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 Then

Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

So the children demonstrate the requirements for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus honors the praise of children. And I would choose the word “innocence” to describe that praise.

B. Praise from the innocence of children.

I don’t mean the children were without sin. Surely they were not, as they are descendants of Adam. But their praise of Jesus was natural. Unpretentious. No ulterior motives. Just the simplicity, the open honesty of children saying the obvious thoughts that are on their mind. They see Jesus perform a miracle and they sing his praise.

Jesus has a point to make, doesn’t he?
v.16

The quote is from,

Ps. 8:1 “O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth, Who have set Your glory above the heavens! 2 Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, Because of Your enemies, That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.”

God doesn’t need all of our sophistication and pretense. God doesn’t need the attractive appearances of a polished outward show. His is honored and glorified by the simplicity and uncomplicated motives of children. He accepts his praise even from infants and nursing babies! The most simple and the most

dependent of all creatures. Even they are able to offer God praise, while the self-righteous and hypocritical leaders and rulers of the Jews get made that they are making noise.

Do you see the priority for us? The pattern that we are to follow? We are to become like little children, who when they see something worthy of their praise and excitement, they show forth their praise and excitement.

We can be way too complicated, sometimes. Way too deliberate. Way too full of ourselves and too much focused upon our own sense of importance. God is pleased with the simplicity of children, who simply offer their praise because Jesus is worthy of it!

I’ll end with just such a song of praise, the whole of,

Ps. 8:1 “O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth, Who have set Your glory above the heavens! 2 Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, Because of Your enemies, That You may silence the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, 4 What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? 5 For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, 7 All sheep and oxen—Even the beasts of the field, 8 The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea That pass through the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth!”