



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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When Jesus Cleans House
John 2:13-22

This is *not* the picture of Jesus we like to see. This is not the hymn-writer Charles Wesley's "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is Jesus with fire in His eyes! The great early fifth century Christian scholar Jerome put it this way: "A certain fiery and starry light shone from His eyes and the majesty of the Godhead gleamed in His face."¹

This is Jesus *cleaning house!*

Since the second half of the twentieth century, North American Protestant Christianity has tended to emphasize the *love of God* shown in Christ so much that it seems we have forgotten about the *wrath of God*, also seen in Christ in passages like this one. We want to limit God's wrath to the Old Testament, and even try to explain it away there.

But try doing that with John! The same John that wrote John 3:16—**For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life**²—gave us *this* story at the end of John 2! And at the end of John 3, he wrote that whoever "**does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him**" (3:36)! Tradition tells us that this same John (the Apostle) also wrote Revelation, and God's wrath is very evident throughout it! When Jesus returns in glory in chapter 19, He comes as a conquering warrior on a white stallion with fire in His eyes and a sharp sword coming from His mouth to slay His enemies!

Even so, this picture of Jesus cleaning house disturbs us, doesn't it? It's not how we like to think about Him. It's hard for us to imagine Him as becoming *this angry*, resorting to what could be considered somewhat *violent* behavior. Lest we try to gloss over it or explain it away, that's exactly how some of the church fathers like Augustine and Chrysostom understood it.³ Maybe it should make us wonder if we ought to be taking this Christianity business more seriously!

Now we're not talking here about a temper tantrum or a fit of rage. The Romans would have dealt immediately and decisively with that to restore order. No, this was a display of justified divine anger! Look at what happened.

Jesus in the temple

The Jewish Passover was approaching, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. While He was there, He went to the temple.

Now keep in mind the place of the temple in the overall narrative of Scripture—God's story. After God used Moses to deliver the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, He made a covenant with them at Sinai. He gave Moses the plans for the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant resided in the Most Holy Place. This tabernacle was a portable temple in the wilderness, then at Shiloh once they entered the Promised Land, a dwelling for God among His people. Later King David intended to build God a house. But God stopped him through His

prophet Nathan, telling David that his son Solomon would build God a temple when he became king. And so he did, on a similar model as the tabernacle. That temple was destroyed when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, and was rebuilt after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. King Herod the Great had made it his project to rebuild the temple on a grand scale. That was the temple that was standing in Jesus' day.

Now Herod's temple area had several courts. The large outer court was known as the Court of the Gentiles. This was where *anyone* who wanted to worship the God of Israel was welcome—like the “God-fearers,” Gentiles who held to Jewish teachings but had not fully converted to Judaism.

Scholars tell us that many Jews visiting the temple at Passover took this opportunity to pay the Jewish annual half-shekel tax on men who were twenty years old or older. Only Tyrian coins were accepted for this purpose, partly because their silver content was exceptionally pure, but more importantly because Roman money bore the images of their rulers and claims to the Roman emperor's divinity.⁴ So people had to exchange their Roman coins. A business grew up around this need, and these exchange agents could charge a commission of up to twelve and a half percent!⁵

There were other entrepreneurs as well. Since people came to the festivals from all over the Greco-Roman world, they couldn't bring their animal sacrifices with them. But they could bring their money! So others saw the opportunity to sell animals for sacrifice, sometimes at exorbitant prices.

Now of course on the surface, it looked like all this was done to make it possible for people coming from a distance to worship at the temple. To make it more convenient, these traders and merchants set up shop in the outer court of the temple—the common area that was the most accessible and had plenty of room. Made sense, didn't it? They were providing a needed service to help people worship God. It was convenient and profitable to boot!

But Jesus didn't see it that way! He saw it for what it really was—they had turned His Father's house into a marketplace! And He was angry about it!

So angry, in fact, that He found some cords lying around, plaited them into a small whip, and began driving the merchants along with their sheep and cattle out of the temple. He poured out the moneychangers' coins and overturned their tables. He told the ones selling doves or pigeons to take their birds and get out, saying, **“Do not make my Father's house a house of merchandise”** (2:16).

His disciples were so struck by His actions that they remembered the words of Psalm 69:9—**Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.**

Now some translations of this passage translate it that Jesus drove out the animals, not the people. But others, like the New King James Version, translate it that he drove both the merchants and their animals out. This seems to me to be more consistent with the sense of the passage as a whole, especially since it was Jewish leaders, not the merchants, who questioned Jesus about His authority to do this.

They asked him, **“What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?”** (2:18). Jesus answered, **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”** (2:19).

They scoffed at Him, thinking He was talking about the temple building. But John tells us that He was talking about His own body, and that after His resurrection, His disciples remembered what He had said and **believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said** (2:21-22).

Jesus cleaned house

Jesus cleared the outer court—the Court of the Gentiles. He cleared it of activity that not only defiled it *in the name of* helping people worship, but actually *blocked the way* for many who came to worship! *Jesus cleaned His Father's house of abuses and obstacles*—abuses for personal gain and obstacles that prevented others from coming to God.

There's an important distinction in the language John uses about the temple here. He uses the Greek word *hierón* to describe the temple as a whole—not only the original temple plan (the vestibule, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place), but also the various surrounding courts of Israel, Women, and the Gentiles, and all the buildings connected with the temple proper that Herod the Great and his successors had added and were still adding in Jesus' day. Remember, it was from the court of the Gentiles that Jesus drove the moneychangers and the sacrificial brokers with their sheep and cattle and birds.

But when Jesus says to the Jewish leaders, **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,”** John uses the Greek word *naós*, which describes the innermost part of a temple. In the case of the Jewish temple, it's the word used for the temple proper—the vestibule, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place. Jesus, of course, was speaking of His own body! Though they might destroy it, He would rise. His body was where God was dwelling on earth!

And He still does . . .

When we read further over into the New Testament, especially Paul's letters, we see this connection between body and temple regarding believers. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul asks the Corinthians:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

In other words, as followers of Jesus, there's a sense in which our physical bodies are a temple of the Spirit—where God dwells on earth, because the Spirit dwells *in us*. Guess which word Paul uses here—*naós*.

Paul also makes this body-temple connection in another way. He frequently uses the body metaphor for *the church*, the gathered followers of Jesus who are united together in Him. Paul uses this image, for instance, in Ephesians 1:22-23 and 4:1-16, and implies it in Ephesians 2:14-18 as he writes about how in Christ, God is making one new man in Christ out of Jews and Gentiles who believe, having reconciled both into one body through the cross. Then he shifts the metaphor, saying that Gentile believers are

no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

A holy temple . . . a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. And which word did Paul use? You guessed it—*naós*.

So, Jesus described His own body as a temple, the place where God was dwelling while He

was here on earth. And since His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the New Testament describes both the church and the body of the individual believer as a temple of the Holy Spirit—through whom both the Father and the Son are in us and among us.

I think that this truth forces us to ask some hard questions.

First, if what Jesus saw in the outermost court of the temple complex, the *hierón*, angered and moved Him to such action, how do you think He would have responded if such things were going on in the sanctuary, the *naós*?

As I said earlier, this is not “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” but Jesus with fire in His eyes! This is Jesus *cleaning house*, moved to righteous indignation, Jesus with a whip in His hand, driving out cattle and sheep and those who sold them, telling those selling doves to take their birds and leave, and overturning tables! Not a temper tantrum or a fit of rage, but a display of justified divine anger!

That leads to a second question, or cluster of questions.

Where is His sanctuary now? According to what we see in Paul’s letters, isn’t it in and among His people? Aren’t we His temple corporately as the body of Christ? Aren’t we individually as His followers?

When we see Jesus like this over that temple, I wonder. *What if Jesus came to His temple to clean house today?*

Let’s be painfully honest here for a few minutes. Let’s put aside our religious masks and our legalistic checklists and come clean with God and with each other.

If Jesus were to come to clean house today, what would He drive out? What would He get rid of?

What would He drive out of the church throughout the world? Corruption? Divisions?

What would He drive out of the church in North America? Greed? Corruption? Immorality? Arrogant self-sufficiency?

Let’s bring it down a little closer. What if Jesus came to this local expression of His church known as the Temple Baptist Church to clean house? What would He drive out? Complacency? Arrogant self-sufficiency? Gossip? Idolatry? Immorality? Divisiveness? Prejudice? The things that not only defile His holy habitation, but block the way of those who may not be like us who would come to Him?

And what about us individually? What would Jesus drive out? Self-centeredness? Self-will? Idolatry? An unforgiving spirit? Some attitude that needs changing? Some sinful behavior we need to leave off or addiction we need to confront? Brokenness in some relationship?

Jesus can clean house in two ways. He can do it gently by His gracious washing in His blood as we yield to Him in repentance, or in the wrath of His righteous anger.

The fact is, the choice is ours. Because one way or another, in His time and way, *Jesus will clean His Father’s house!*

†MEG

¹ Cited in A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. V (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the SBC, 1932), 39.

² Scripture taken from The New King James Version.

³ Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, N.T. Vol. IVA (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 102.

⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Second Edition, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 36 (Nashville:

Thomas Nelson, 1999), 38.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 74.