

Pure, Uncluttered Worship

John 2:13-22

In his book *The Lion and the Lamb* Brennan Manning has a striking passage in which describes what he calls “the relentless tenderness” of Jesus. Listen to how Manning describes how Jesus relentlessly pursues us – even when we want to be left alone:

When we cry out with Jeremiah, “Enough already! Leave me alone in my melancholy,” the Shepherd replies, “I will not leave you alone. You are Mine. I know each of My sheep by name. You belong to Me. If you think I am finished with you, if you think I am a small god that you can keep at a safe distance, I will pounce upon you like a roaring lion, tear you to pieces, rip you to shreds, and break every bone in your body. Then I will mend you, cradle you in My arms, and kiss you tenderly. (p. 129)

Jesus is tender with us to be sure; but he is tender in a fierce sort of way. I can’t tell you how vital this is for us to understand. If we don’t understand that Jesus is relentlessly pursuing us and that He will do whatever it takes to heal us so that we can experience God in every area of our lives, we’ll misinterpret our circumstances and miss what God is doing in our lives. We’ll think, “Why doesn’t Jesus intervene in my circumstances and help me out here?” when the truth is that Jesus is right in the midst of our circumstances relentlessly pursuing us, doing a deeper thing than we ever imagined.

Today we are going to look at an incident in the life of Christ that illustrates how fierce Jesus can be. John 2 records how Jesus pounced like a lion when He entered the temple and saw people buying and selling animals and changing money. What we’re going to see is that Jesus had a very tender reason for doing this. Jesus was zealous for pure, uncluttered worship. Jesus pounced because He wanted people to experience God in all of His fullness. What I want us to understand is that Jesus is still zealous in our day and in our lives; He still pounces so that we might experience God in all of life.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple (John 2:13-22)

Scholars disagree on whether Jesus cleansed the temple once or twice. I tend to agree with those who understand that Jesus cleansed the temple once at the beginning of His public ministry (as John records) and then a second time two (possibly three) years later (as Matthew records in 21:12-27). Whatever the case, let’s pick up John’s narrative in John 2:13.

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables.

Jews from all over the Roman Empire came to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Those who traveled a long distance wouldn’t have been able to bring animals to be sacrificed, so they brought money to buy animals once they arrived. As well, since the temple tax had to be paid in local currency, they needed to exchange money. And so people who sold oxen, sheep, and doves and who exchanged money were engaged in a necessary business. They were providing a needed service for those who came to Jerusalem for the

Passover. There's no indication that they were charging exorbitant prices for livestock or that they were exchanging money at an unfair rate.

What was wrong was that they were selling animals and exchanging money *in the temple*. They were probably in the outer court of the temple, the court of the Gentiles. This was the place where Gentiles (non-Jews) could worship the one true living God. Even though God had chosen the Jews to be His people, they were to be a "light to the Gentiles." They were supposed to invite the Gentiles into the presence of YHWH as the One who could bring them wholeness/*shalom*. Previously the sale of animals took place across the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives (Carson, p. 178). But when Jesus entered the temple, He found that they had set up shop in the temple itself. The Gentiles had been displaced by animals and moneychangers. And the Jews who walked through the court of Gentiles had to negotiate their way through commerce instead of worship.

15 And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables;

Jesus made a whip out of rope and drove out the merchants and the livestock alike. Such a whip probably wouldn't have done bodily damage, but it was certainly forceful enough to clear the temple. As well, Jesus turned over the tables and poured out the moneychangers' coins. The fact that Jesus was able to overwhelm and impose His will upon those present reflects the authority of His life. He wasn't the "pale Galilean" that some people have made Him out to be. Jesus was gentle and humble in heart, but He was also fierce when He needed to be – primarily when He encountered spiritual abuses.

Notice how Jesus identified Himself with God when He talked about the temple:

16 and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business."

Jesus was personally offended by what He found at the temple. His Father's "house" was supposed to be a place of worship, a place where people could experience God through the sacrifices and through prayer. But they had made the temple "a place of business." Again, there was nothing wrong with doing business; but they shouldn't have been doing business in the temple. It distracted from worshipping God from the heart.

17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house will consume me."

It's not clear whether the disciples remembered this verse from Psalm 69:9 at that moment or sometime later. In either case, they understood that Jesus had the same zeal for the temple that David had had a thousand years earlier. Just like David faced opposition from his enemies, Jesus would soon face opposition from His.

Significantly, the Jewish authorities didn't have Jesus arrested on the spot. They apparently entertained the possibility that Jesus was sent from God. In verse 18 the Jewish authorities asked a question that was fairly legitimate. They wanted to know why Jesus thought He had

the right to walk into the temple, evaluate the rightness of what was happening, and unilaterally change things. This was *the* temple in Jerusalem. You just can't have people showing up at the temple and imposing their will without good reason to do so.

18 The Jews then answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us as your authority for doing these things?"

On numerous occasions the Jewish authorities demanded "a sign" that would verify what Jesus was saying or doing. They basically wanted Jesus to perform some miraculous feat that would convince them that He was a man of God. If, for example, Jesus could clap His hands and make a six-foot-tall person three feet tall or if Jesus could turn goat into a sheep, presumably they would acknowledge Jesus' authority and listen to what He had to say.

Of course their request was completely misguided. Jesus never did tricks on demand to convince people that He was the Christ. Here Jesus calls their bluff by agreeing to give them a sign.

19 Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

On the face of it Jesus is telling them that if they tear down the temple block by block that He would restore it in three days. The Jews' response suggests that they understood Jesus' offer in a literalistic way:

20 The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?"

They couldn't conceive that Jesus was even making a serious claim. There was no way that Jesus was going to do in three days what had taken 46 years to complete. In verse 21 John makes clear what Jesus was actually talking about:

21 But He was speaking of the temple of His body.

Jesus was saying that the "sign" that would convince them of His authority was His bodily resurrection. They would crucify Him ("destroy this temple") and He would rise from the dead ("and I will raise it up"). This is what Jesus called "the sign of Jonah" in Matthew 12. Just like Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights Jesus would be in "the heart of the earth" three days and three nights. His death and resurrection would be the "sign" that would convince people of His authority over matters of worship and the temple. But signs are only effective for those who look through eyes of faith; by and large the Jewish authorities didn't have the courage to see where the sign of Jesus' death and resurrection was pointing.

Verse 22 reflects the theme we developed last week, namely that the disciples only understood Jesus' identity and mission after the resurrection.

22 So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken.

The disciples didn't have much more understanding than anybody else until *after* the resurrection. But then they understood and believed.

Let's ask two questions to help us probe the significance of Jesus cleansing the temple. The first question is, ***What does this incident tell us about Jesus?*** After all, the Bible is about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures reveal the identity and mission of the triune God. This incident tells us that ***Jesus is zealous for pure, uncluttered worship of God.*** Cleansing the temple demonstrated how zealous Jesus was for pure temple worship in first century. Going to the cross demonstrated how zealous Jesus is for pure, uncluttered worship in the 21st century. I think we can all agree that you have to be pretty zealous to die for something. Jesus died on the cross and was raised on the third day in order to secure free, uncluttered access to God.

Let's personalize this. When we read accounts the gospels, we naturally identify with different people. If you think poorly of yourself, you might read Jesus cleansing the temple and think, "I'm probably one of the moneychangers or one of those selling livestock in the temple. . ." Well, maybe. But I think it much more likely that Jesus wants you to identify with the Gentiles who had been crowded out and excluded from worship. Jesus cleansed the temple so that Gentiles and Jews alike could experience pure, uncluttered worship in the temple. And Jesus certainly died and rose again so that *you* can now have pure uncluttered worship of God. Jesus is zealous for us to experience God in that way.

The cleansing of the temple makes clear that ***Jesus is zealous that we experience God in a pure, uncluttered way.*** He died and rose again to make that possible.

What does this incident suggest about our relationship with Jesus? This incident suggests that ***Jesus will do whatever is necessary for us to experience a pure, uncluttered relationship with God.*** Jesus can be just as fierce today as He was the day He cleansed the temple. Jesus is doing the equivalent of driving out the merchants and livestock and moneychangers from the temple; He is driving out the things that hinder us and clutter up our lives and our relationship with God. This is the relentless tenderness of Jesus that Manning described.

Let me tell you how this truth applies to me right now. One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor is too much ministry and activity without really being quiet in the presence of God to hear from Him and be nourished by Him. That's why Paul wrote to Timothy and said, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching . . . for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." Quite honestly I haven't been paying very "close attention" to myself lately. It's been a fairly busy time in the life of the church, but beyond that I've been busy in mind and soul. As a result I'm somewhat at a deficit personally. I feel "thin . . . stretched . . . like butter scraped over too much bread" (to borrow a phrase from Bilbo Baggins).

In a way I feel like Jesus has pounced on me and in His relentless tenderness won't get off of me until I learn some things. Some things I've learned a dozen times before but that I need to learn in a deeper way. For example, I need to re-learn how to seek God – not as a pastor, but as a son; not because I need to but because I get to. God is pursuing me through

good friends who care enough to correct me, through the Scriptures, through spiritual writings, and through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I don't think Jesus is mad at me; but I do think He is serious about me learning these things. Pray for me if you would, but don't be overly concerned about me. I'm getting a break from teaching; the next two weeks Chris and Brian will be preaching. As well I've got some personal solitude/retreat planned.

My simple encouragement to you is simply to notice how Jesus is pursuing you. Notice His relentless tenderness in your life. Notice how zealous He is for you to experience God in a comprehensive way.

- Some of you have **anxieties** about the future (job, marriage, money, etc.). It may be that God won't give you relief until you learn how to trust Him ("w/o faith it's impossible to please God"), until you learn to "cast all your anxieties upon Him, for He cares for you."
- Some of you are **weary**. You're just tired from the wear-and-tear of life. Jesus is saying to you, "Come to Me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." You won't have true rest/shalom/wholeness until you find your rest in Him. The rest Jesus gives comes through discipleship.
- Some of you face **dangers** – spiritual, physical, and emotional dangers. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. He won't run away like a hired hand. He will fight for you. And He is more fierce than any of your enemies.
- Some of you are **heart-broken** over things that have been done to you and over things that you have done to others. Jesus died and rose again to "bind up the broken-hearted."

Whatever your circumstances, know that Jesus is "for you" – He is zealously "for you." And He will do whatever it takes to clear away the clamor and the clutter so that you might experience God in all His fullness. Jesus is so zealous for your well-being that He is willing to inflict pain if that's what it takes. It's like my friend Father Adam at Conception Abbey says, "If you follow Jesus, He will ruin your life, and He will ruin your life in beautiful ways." Jesus died and rose again so that we might have pure, uncluttered worship of God.