

Politics of the Passion: The Church without a Prayer

Luke 19:45-48

Intro: I have been in the ancient and cavernous Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, standing in line with hundreds of pilgrims from all over the world. For more than an hour we waited to pass through the grotto underneath where some think Jesus was born.

Teams of black-robed priests, both Catholic and Orthodox, rotated through the altar area celebrating the Mass. They tolerated no laughter or noisy behavior. One of them threatened me with a grimace. It was truly a solemn place, dark and uncomfortable (PIC)

Many churches are noisy, full of chatter, shouts, and loud music. This in itself seems to fit the description of worship in the Old Testament times when the throngs came before the Lord with shouts of joy and made a “joyful noise unto the Lord.” If the noise is the product of spiritual fellowship and praise, it is appropriate in the house of worship. It is also appropriate for the house of worship to be quiet at times, reflective and meditative.

Sometimes New Testament worship was very lively, even confusing. The Apostle Paul had to correct the worship practices of the church in Corinth because new people unfamiliar with their church might come in and think they were crazy. He settled them down and told them to do things “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40—“decently” is “appropriately, fitting way”).

His accusers will say that Jesus wanted the temple destroyed. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19; Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:58). He spoke these words in connection with the Cleansing as recorded by the Apostle John.

Jesus knew that the temple would be destroyed, and he predicted the destruction of Jerusalem in the verses preceding these. But even though it was bound for destruction, Jesus wanted the temple clean and pure for those who came to pray. He is teaching with a whip!

Jesus’ anger is directed toward the custodians of this house, those who maintained and protected and ordered it. Here are three of the attitudes and practices that Jesus identified by his words and actions this day as scandalous to his Father’s House:

I. More PREY than PRAYER: “den of robbers”: describe what is actually going on in the temple courts. This is a quote from Jeremiah 7:9-11: *Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.*

A. The VEIL covered the Holy of Holies. This is the place where in the Wilderness and the first Temple the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was covered by the Mercy Seat, and it represented the very Presence of God among his people.

B. PRAYER is conversing with God. I am talking to God. I am listening to God. The whole idea of the holiness of this real estate was the Holy of Holies and the very presence of God. This was a Prayer Destination because of that Holy Place

C. The Holy Place was now organized for Profit instead of Prayer. The noise of the barn and the business of the bank dominated the house of worship.

D. Why are you here this morning? Do you and I ever become so concerned about the survival of the church that we descend into materialistic views and practices as members of the church? Do you come to church mostly to further your own business?

II. More Mine than Thine: “I am thine, O Lord”

The temple as My House: I Chron. 28:6: “Solomon, my son, he shall build my house and my courts.”

A. All through the Old Covenant the temple was seen as the House of God. It was built with this purpose in mind. In fact, the prophets noted that the kings had fine houses they had built, but what about my house that will bear my name?

B. Jesus had a proprietary feeling toward the temple. The first time we have Jesus in the temple beyond infancy is when he was twelve. Luke (2:49) records that he asked his parents, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Temple Steps Pic)

You know how you feel about the house of your father. It is your house, too, as his son. Last week I mentioned Luke 15:25: “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.” The older son was upset because it was his house too. not just the house of his father.

C. We so easily fall into this trap of thinking that the House of Prayer belongs to us. It is most easy for the religious professional, the preacher, to start thinking and acting like this. We have so much invested—so much money, so much time, and so much of ourselves and our values. The house is ours, we suppose, and we stop thinking of it all as belonging to God himself.

D. Do you ever fall into that trap of thinking that the church belongs to you more so than to God? Have you worried too much about the church because you feel you are responsible for it? Have you recently presented the church to God, lock, stock, and barrel, and said in your heart, “God, this is your church. Deliver me from my anxiety about it”?

E. What about “your” ministry? Is it yours or God’s? If it is really yours, then don’t expect God to show up!

III. Too Small for ALL: “for all nations”. This is a quote also from Isaiah 56:6-8: “*And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.*”

A. The temple was never so huge as when Herod the Great rebuilt it. He is the one who added the massive courts that surrounded the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

B. But the real hugeness of the temple was not its geography but its theology of ALL—all peoples, nations, ethnicities, all languages.

1. This is why the racial segregation of churches is such a sadness to the church of Jesus Christ. It belies the very essence of the church as the house of prayer.

2. This is why the generational grading of worship is not really an answer for any of us. This house is for ALL.

3. I understand the principle of the “homogeneous unit” that helps people find others like them with whom they can connect. We actually make efforts here in this ministry to connect people to those who share a life stage or situation. That in itself is not evil but useful. Jesus did this when he chose 12 young Jewish men to be his closest associates. He built a team of shared values.

4. But that circle around Jesus always included others as well, and they were welcomed. The women, the tax collectors, and the Gentiles came close and stayed close to Jesus because he understood both the SMALL and the ALL of worship.

C. What is a “house of prayer”? An *oikos* of *proseuche*. These courts were built and dedicated to the worship of God, to prayer. This was their fundamental and essential purpose. Where was the barnyard and the bank? It was in the Court of the Gentiles. People from the nations came to pray in Jerusalem. They could not proceed through to the Court of the Jews. They had to stop in the Court of the Gentiles. And there, in that outer court, the noise and distractions that had nothing to do with worship were so persistent that prayer was nearly impossible.

D. This House of Prayer was to be “for all nations.” The prophets explicitly mentioned the “foreigners” who would come to this house to pray just as the Ethiopian eunuch came. In the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch, God specifically called upon them to come to him in Isaiah 56:4-5: *For this is what the Lord says: “to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its wall a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.”*

***When that eunuch, so precious to the Lord, arrived from his long journey at the House of Prayer he found instead a noisy barnyard with exorbitant prices for the sacrifices that he wished to give. No wonder he was reading Isaiah the Prophet. It is in Isaiah where God declares that eunuchs are included in the ALL along with Ethiopians. Philip was able to start right there in Chapter 53, near Chapter 56, and give him the gospel that applies to all tongues, all tribes, all colors of people on this planet.

E. Is your heart too small for all? Are you uncomfortable with the expanse and breadth of the church of Jesus Christ? Or do you enjoy the rich variety of people whom God calls to be his own?

F. Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). You are part of the “all” of this passage. You are invited to come and find rest.

Conclusion: Think of the TRANSFORMATION of the Temple brought about by Jesus. He cleared out the buyers and sellers, and he came to teach there daily. It went from being a barn and a bank to being the finest

school and worship place anywhere in the world. Here the pilgrims could come and listen to the greatest teacher who ever lived. When the temple was centered in Jesus it was a glorious place to be.