

IS THE LORD PLEASED WITH THIS HOUSE?
MATTHEW 21:12-17

I have a book of sermons called *The National Baptist Pulpit* (the 1989 edition). There's a manuscript in it by a DR. HICKERSON entitled, "A Message from the Soap Dish." That title comes from the introductory illustration of the sermon. Let me share it with you. Hickerson has told his son, Lonnie, to clean the bathroom. He did. And when he had finished, Hickerson inspected his work and commended him for doing a fine job. But later, when Hickerson went into the bathroom to wash his face, he found the soap dish shouting a message to him. You see, the soap dish was dirty! Apparently, when Lonnie cleaned the bathroom, and when he inspected his work, neither of them paid any attention to the soap dish. It was an honest mistake. After all, you hardly expect the soap dish to be dirty. Soap is a cleaning agent. How could the soap dish be dirty? And, yet, there it was; the filthiest thing in the room.

With that in mind, let's examine our text, which challenges us to carefully examine the condition of the ecclesiastical "soap dish." 21:1-11 records the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. And the first word of 21:12, "And," tells us that when Jesus entered into Jerusalem as Messiah, his first official act was this cleansing of the temple. Notice that he didn't clean up the social, political, or economic institutions of the city first. And he didn't go door-to-door to see how the residents of Jerusalem were acting at home. He went into the temple first. 21:12 says, "And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons." The Lord was so displeased by what he saw that he immediately, authoritatively, and dramatically conducted a holy house-cleaning. And this cleansing of the temple is a perpetual warning to the Church to examine itself in order to determine if the Lord is pleased.

Let me put a footnote here to say that no church is perfect - not this church, not the church across town, not that church you watch on TV. Don't be impressed by the "CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE PERCEPTION." There are no perfect churches. So Christ is not looking for perfection in the church. But he is looking at the direction of the church. Every congregation is either pursuing or perverting its God-given purpose. And when the Lord's house loses its sense of purpose, it invokes a holy house-cleaning. **1 Peter 4:17** says, "For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God." The good news is that the Lord is going to clean up this sinful world. But the bad news is that he is going to start with the church. That's bad news because our text shows us that the Lord cleaned the house by messing things up! So the vital question is what direction is our congregation going in? When the Lord looks at our church, what does he see? Is the Lord pleased with this house? The sad indictment is that in leaning over to reach the world, the church has fallen into it. Consequently, we commonly judge a congregation's success based on its size, assets, programs, prominence, and notoriety. But I submit to you that's those things are not the

right standards of success. Ultimately, the only thing that really matters about a church is whether the Lord Jesus is pleased with it. And the cleansing of the temple confronts us with four Christ-centered standards by which to test whether the Lord is pleased.

I. THE TEST OF DIVINE AUTHORITY

21:10-11 says, "And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." The Triumphal Entry of Jesus excited the messianic hopes of the Jews. So the identity of Jesus immediately became an issue. And when the crowds called him "the prophet," they expressed a high but fatally incomplete view of Christ. Christ is immeasurably more than just a prophet. He himself is the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. So Jesus cleansed the temple of the things that displeased him. He called it, "My house." And he indicted them for sinfully altering the holy purpose of the temple. These actions clearly demonstrated the Lord's divine authority. And they confront us with the test of divine authority; namely, the Lord is not pleased when his divine authority over his house is violated by our personal agendas, worldly activities, and sinful motives.

Colossians 1:18 says, "And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." I repeat: Christ is the Head of the church. That means he alone is to have preeminence, supremacy, and the first place in the church. He's the head; we're his body. He's the Lord; we're his disciples. He's the shepherd, we're his sheep. He's the Bridegroom; we're his bride. He's the Master; we're his servants. Therefore, the divine authority of the Lord Jesus Christ must always take precedence over what the pastor says. It must always take precedence over, "The I's have it and so declared." It must take authority over, "We've always done it this way." It must take precedence over, "Well, that's the way they do it on my job." The Lord's authority must even take precedence over, "That's not Baptist." During the Civil War, **PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN** was asked if he thought God was on the side of the North. He responded by saying, "The real question is not whether God is on our side, but whether are we on God's side." And that's always the question the church must ask: Is the sovereign Lordship of Christ being honored in this house?

The cleansing of the temple affirms the fact of the Lord's authority. But it also affirms the foundation of the Lord's authority. Because of his divine authority, Jesus didn't have to defend himself that day. However, 21:13 reports that he explained his actions by saying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." Jesus stated his authority in three words: "It is written." Then he proceeded to indict the temple

leaders by referring to **Isaiah 56:7** and **Jeremiah 7:11**. Later, in 21:15-16, the chief priests and scribes became angry because of his wonderful works and the young men chanting Messianic praise to Christ. In 21:16 they asked Jesus, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And he responded by saying, "Yes. Have you never read...?" Then he quoted from **Psalm 8:2**. Mark it down: The Lord's authority is exercised through the Word of God. **Psalm 119: 89** says, "Forever, O Lord, Your word is firmly fixed in the heavens." **Isaiah 40:8** says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." And in **Matthew 24:35**, Jesus bottom-lines it for us: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." In *Shaped by the Bible*, **WILLIAM WILLIMON** writes, "A congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God." And he's right. We don't have to use subjective, mysterious, or worldly means to determine if the Lord is actively in charge of a congregation. There's a clear, objective, and unchanging standard to measure your submission to the Lordship of Christ: Are you submitting to the authority of God's Word.

This is powerfully illustrated in 21:23-32. In 21:23, the religious leaders asked Jesus, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" Jesus answered their question with a question. He asked them whether the baptism of John was from heaven or from men. So they called an emergency council session. And they determined that if they said it was from heaven, Jesus would ask them why they didn't believe. And if they said it was from man, the crowd, who rightly considered John a prophet, would get mad. So they answered, "We do not know." And Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things?" Then in 21:28-30 he gave them a little parable to think about: "A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, Go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go." When Jesus asked which son did the father's will; the answer was obvious: the one actually obeyed. Notice 21:31-32: "Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." Here's the point: Your religious hypocrisy doesn't fool Christ. He is not pleased if we do not submit to his authority, obey his Word, and do his will. The old song summed it up: "TRUST AND OBEY, FOR THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO BE HAPPY IN JESUS THAN TO TRUST AND OBEY."

II. THE TEST OF GODLY PRIORITIES

What was taking place in the temple that day to so arouse the Lord's righteous anger and holy indignation? Well, let me clear the way for the answer to that question by eliminating the seemingly obvious, but wrong, answers. First of all, the Lord's anger was not aroused because commerce was taking place in the temple. 21:12 says that Jesus threw out everyone who was either selling something or buying something in the temple. And he knocked over the booths that the merchants and moneychangers had set up for business. Consequently, this text is often used to teach against buying and selling things in church. But Jesus didn't get upset because they were doing business in the temple. In fact, the merchants and moneychangers were actually providing a legitimate, useful, and needed service.

A temple tax was levied against the worshipers to meet the expenses of the temple, which they had to pay during the holy days. In fact, the events of the text took place during the eve of Passover – the greatest of the Jewish holy days. And the many people who thronged Jerusalem that week came from places that had a different currency. Because foreign currency most often had a pagan deity on it or the logo of a pagan government, it was not suitable to be presented to God. So the moneychangers translated the foreign coins to the suitable currency. Likewise, as pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem, sometimes the animal they were bringing to sacrifice would get sick or die. Of course, no blemished or dead animal could be offered to God. Furthermore, some poor people did not have their own animals. So the Mosaic Law permitted them to buy small birds to offer. And the dove sellers were there to sell the birds to poor people who didn't have any animal or to pilgrims who didn't have suitable animals. All of this was legitimate, useful, and needed.

So Jesus didn't get angry because business was going on. And he doesn't get angry today. He knows that administration must take place, bills must be paid, records must be kept, employees must be compensated, regulations must be followed. He just says, in **Matthew 22:21**, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Likewise, I submit to you that the Lord's anger was not aroused because the business practices were crooked or shady. Some commentators suggest that extortion was going on, that the moneychangers were swindling the people, and that the dove sellers were charging exorbitant prices. But there is no proof in the text that corrupt business practices were taking place. And nothing in the text suggests that the merchants and moneychangers had impure motives in what they were doing. As far as we can tell, the commerce was legitimate, useful, and needed. And I might add that it was all officially sanctioned by the high priest, Anna. So why was Jesus upset? The Lord's indictment in 21:13 gives us the answer.

When Jesus said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer," he was referring to **Isaiah 56:7**. The last clause of that verse says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." That phrase, "For all nations," tells us

that the temple was not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. God intended the temple to be a place where all people could come and meet with him. Ironically, the events of the text were taking place in what was called "The Court of the Gentiles." It was the only section on Herod's temple where Gentiles could come to worship, pray, and hear God's Word. But the religious establishment had turned this area into a swapmeet. And that's what made Jesus angry. Don't let that "den of thieves" statement throw you. It's a reference to **Jeremiah 7:11**, where God condemns his people for corrupt worship.

Here's the point: Jesus was not angry because they were doing business. He was angry because their business got in the way of worship. He was not angry because their business was corrupt. He was angry because their business corrupted worship. Think about it. "A den of thieves" is not where the robbery takes place. It's the cave where the thieves live. Jesus is not saying that the business robbed the people in the temple. He is saying that the business robbed the people of the temple. Their presence was robbing people of the opportunity to meet with God; thus, the God-given purpose of the temple had been replaced by the secondary activities of people who had mixed-up priorities. The Lord is not pleased with this house if our personalities, pride, prestige, plans, and programs get in the way of meeting with God. In fact, we should remember what those Greeks told Phillip in **John 12:21**, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Get out of the way! People are not here to see you. They need to see Jesus.

III. THE TEST OF CHANGED LIVES

In his book *Harvest of Humility*, John Seamands tells of a wounded German soldier who was ordered to go to the military hospital for treatment. When he arrived at the large and imposing building, he saw two doors, one marked "For the slightly wounded" and the other, "For the seriously wounded." He entered through the first door and found himself going down a long hall. At the end of it were two more doors, one marked "For officers" and the other "For non-officers." He entered through the latter and found himself going down another long hall. At the end of it were two more doors, one marked, "For party members" and the other "For non-party members." He took the second door, and when he opened it he found himself out on the street." When the soldier returned home, his mother asked him, "How did you get along at the hospital?" "Well mother, he replied, "to tell the truth, the people there didn't do anything for me, but you ought to see the tremendous organization they have!"

I submit to you that good preachers, singing choirs, large crowds, exciting services, and organized programs are not necessarily signs of a healthy church. The clearest sign of God-honoring, Christ-exalting Spirit-led, Bible-based, prayer saturated church is found in the lives of the people. The Lord is not pleased with the house if lives are not being changed. 21:14 says, "Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them." That's a perfect picture of

what happens when the Lord's will is freely at work in his house. The Lord is pleased when people come to the church and leave in a different condition than they were in when they came. And this kind of radical life-transformation takes place when the Lord's compassion and power operate unhindered.

A. LIVES ARE CHANGED BY THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST.

Phil Yancey writes about a story that was told to him by a friend who worked with the down-and-out in Chicago. A prostitute had come to him in wretched straits, homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through tears, she told him that she had been renting out her daughter to men interested in kinky sex. She admitted that she had made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her drug habit. He could hardly bear to hear her story. For one thing, it made him legally liable to report the child abuse. But beyond that, he had no idea what to say to the woman. At last he asked her if she had ever thought about going to a church for help. And the woman responded with a look of pure, naïve shock. "Church", she replied, "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Two things disturb me about that story. It disturbs me that there are many other people who feel the same way this woman did about the church. And it disturbs me that the negative view many people have of the church is the direct opposite of how hurting, troubled, and needy people responded to Christ. Notice the text. While the religious leaders were scurrying to get out of Jesus' way, the blind and the lame came to him in the temple. They didn't feel afraid, threatened, or alienated. Apparently, the violent actions of Jesus caused them to feel welcomed. They viewed his kicking the merchants out as his inviting them in. They took his anger at the religious leaders to be an expression of compassion for their needs. Mark it down: Hurting people need to be healed. And Jesus is the only one who can heal them. He can heal the body. But more importantly, he can heal the soul. But we must not get in the way. We must show the love of Christ to lost people. Like the Good Samaritan, we must get off of our high horses, stoop down, and bind up the wounds of lost, sinful, abused, suffering, and dying people. We must accept people, as they are, where they are. We must be an inclusive open-arms community where people don't have to pretend. We must be alive in such a way that good rumors start going out and people begin to say, "If you are looking for mercy, go to Shiloh."

B. LIVES ARE CHANGED BY THE POWER OF CHRIST.

Isaiah 35:5-6 speaks of a day when "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame shall leap like a deer, and

the tongue of the mute sing for joy." The Jews understood these promises to point to the coming of Messiah. So when the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, they were stating their faith in his messianic authority. And they were not disappointed; he healed them. And he won't disappoint today. If you are lost, bound, or hurting, troubled, or in need, I have good news for you: Christ has the power to meet your need! **2 Corinthians 5:17** says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." **Philippians 1:6** says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." And **Hebrews 7:25** says, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." The Lord has the power to change your life.

I may be talking to some believer who has been praying for God to work in the life of some loved-one: Don't give up. Don't stop praying. Don't stop trusting Christ. He's got the power to do it. We must not get in his way. When John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod, he waited for Jesus to come and rescue him. And he waited. And he waited. But Jesus never showed up. **Matthew 11:2-3** says, "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" **Matthew 11:4-6** records the Lord's response, "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'" That's an important beatitude: Blessed is the one who doesn't trip over how the Lord handles his business. As long as lives are being transformed; so what if things aren't going the way you want them to.

IV. THE TEST OF TRUE WORSHIP

There must have been a great celebration in the temple that day, as the expectant crowds watched Jesus open the eyes of the blind and strengthen the legs of the lame. But not everyone was happy that lives were being changed. **21:15-16** reports: "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, Hosanna to the Son of David! They were indignant, and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" These "children" were boys who had reached the age of accountability – young boys who had their bar mitzvahs and were probably in Jerusalem for their first Passover celebration. And the promises of the Messiah they had been taught are coming to pass right before their eyes. So they chanted praise to Jesus. They cried, "Hosanna," which means, "Save us now." It's a Hebrew term from **Psalms 118:25**, which says, "Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success!" "Hosanna" was a petition to God that expressed the messianic hopes of

the Jews. But these children exclaim in adoration to Jesus; trusting that he was the “Son of David,” the Messiah, the promised King, they had been waiting on. It’s the same thing the crowds cried out in 21:9, during the Triumphal Entry.

And when the religious leaders heard this, they became angry. They asked Jesus, “Do You hear what these are saying?” They didn’t really doubt if Jesus heard it; they asked this question because they wanted Jesus to stop these children. In 21:16, Jesus says to them, “Yes. Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise.’” That’s a reference to **Psalm 8:2** that Jesus uses to say to these angry religious leaders that, not only is he worthy of the praises of these boys, but he’s even able to make infant babies that are still on their mother’s breast to praise him. It’s the same point he makes in **Luke 19:39-40**. When the Pharisees told him to rebuke his disciples who praised him during the Triumphal Entry, Jesus said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” Mark it down: The Lord is pleased when he is praised, exalted, and glorified in his house. Here’s why: He’s worthy to be praised.

I have a digital checkers game on my smart phone. And when I get some stolen moments, I enjoy challenging my computer opponent. But there are times when, no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I concentrate, no matter how long I think over my moves, the computer gets to my Kingdom row and takes over the game. However, at the bottom of the screen, there’s an “undo” button. And when I hit that button, it erases the plays so I can gain control of the game again. I like that button, because it comes in handy when I’m losing. But thank God it’s not that way with Jesus. God has crowned him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And there is no “undo” button to change that. **Psalm 24:7-10** says, “Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!”

BLESSED ASSURANCE JESUS IS MINE!
O WHAT A FORETASTE OF GLORY DIVINE
HEIR OF SALVATION, PURCHASE OF GOD,
BORN OF HIS SPIRIT, WASHED IN HIS BLOOD.

THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG
PRAISING MY SAVIOR ALL THE DAY LONG.
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