

The Purge: Temple Edition

John 2:13-22 (NIV)

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰ They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

What is going on here? Jesus comes up to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, this special festival remembering how the Lord saved the Jewish people from their slavery in Egypt by means of 10 powerful plagues. Jesus is coming to church to worship his Father. Yet, instead of finding people peacefully praying and joyfully offering their sacrifices in accordance with God's law, we're told, "In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money." (verse 14) God's house, this place of worship, had become a market full of distraction!

Put aside the practicality of the out-of-towners being able to buy their sacrifices in Jerusalem at the temple and being able to pay their annual temple tax courtesy of the money changers. The temple was the one place God promised to dwell with his people on earth. All the sacrifices that God commanded guided the Jewish worship life to realize that a person cannot come before God on their own terms, but on his, with the sacrifices he requires. As we have been learning through the midweek Lenten worship services, these sacrifices did not forgive sins in and of themselves. No, they were a shadow of the things that were to come, a preview of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

But with all the bleating of the sheep, the mooing of the cattle, the cooing of the doves, the clinking of the coins, the chatter, the smell of animal waste, how could someone worship here? And the money changers were tempted to sin, to overcharge their brothers and sisters in faith to make a tidy profit. The Gentiles were supposed to worship here, pray here, learn about God here. They couldn't even go to any other part of the temple, and yet it was filled with animals and the IRS. What kind of outreach program was this? It would be if we sold hymnals and bulletins in the lobby as people walked in or put up an ATM with a hefty surcharge that went to the church or charged you by the seat you picked. By the way, the ones in the back and the ones by the exits cost more.

All of those things would hinder people from coming to church. They would turn this church from a house of worship to a market. You would be right with me calling, "Purge that! Get rid of that! No fees! No exploitation of people wanting to worship God! God's gifts to us are free. How can we possibly justify charging people to receive from God what he has already given to all of us freely? Why would we do things in our house of worship that would distract us from our relationship with God?"

With these calls you start to feel the zeal that Jesus had for his Father's house, a zeal that he wants us to share about the temple of God. That's why Jesus "made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!'" (verses 15-16) In his passion for making sure nothing hindered people's relationship with God, he purged the temple, cleansed it of all these distractions, all these things that got in the way of people worshiping God.

What do we need to purge from our temple, our place of worship, God's house? Before we go listing things like silencing cell phones and keeping our conversations quiet, let's always look to ourselves first. Not even so much with the idea of how am I distracting people at worship, but, that when I am distracted, how can I focus my heart and mind on God? Instead of saying that I need to remove someone else, what can I say to help the struggling parent so that they feel welcomed and loved in God's house. How can I keep from ever hindering anyone from coming to see Jesus here?

There's more, though, that needs purging. It's about what's inside of you. God says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own." Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He dwells in you by the faith he created in you, by the trust he gave you to believe what he has done for you to take away your sins, to make you right before God, and so he has made you a part of his family, his Church, his temple.

What needs purging from you? What things are in you that distract you from worshiping God or hinder your relationship with God? Is it making plans for the rest of your Sunday, or the rest of the week during worship? Is it the mental (or written in the margins of the bulletin) grocery lists you are forming instead of focusing on what God is saying to you right now? Is it thinking about who you have to talk to after worship? I know that I personally start to stumble through leading worship when my mind wanders that way thinking about what I have to do after worship, who I have to talk to, what I can do for this person or that person, wondering if people are getting the message. And when I stumble as my mind is distracted from worshiping God and serving him, I affect all of you.

But we can go deeper. What mental baggage do you carry with you in your temple as you come to church? Is it a sin that you are planning to do later, a sin that you have started to become callous to, that you know objectively it's wrong but that's not going to stop you? You've ceased to fight it. You've resigned to doing it even as it damages your relationship with your God. Is it anger that you hold on to? And this is not the righteous anger that Jesus displayed, an anger that came from all these things that were harming people's relationship with God, things that were keeping them from God. This is an anger that refuses to forgive in spite of remembering and recalling how God forgave you, that while you were a powerless, sinful, ungodly enemy of God, he died for you to reconcile you to himself.

As our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we need a purging like what Jesus did in the temple at Jerusalem that day. We need God to clean house in us to remove what hinders our relationship with God. And that is exactly what we get by coming here.

All of our past, present, and future sins are purged as we enter church. See the baptismal font. Remember your baptism. There we were washed clean, purged of all sin, robed in Jesus' perfection, his righteousness. We often begin our worship with the confession of our sins, admitting all the things that we have done wrong, all the things that distract us and hinder our relationship with God, all our faults, all our flaws, all our wrong-doings. Then, immediately, God tells us, "I forgive you," which means he has purged those sins from us and we sing, "Surely it is God who saves me!" In the sermon, God's Word gets applied to our lives, showing us our sins, yes, but also showing us our Savior from sin. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus gives us his body and his blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine to again have our sins purged and to be personally forgiven by Jesus' sacrifice and to receive a unity with him in being cleansed, strengthened in the truth that the blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin.

This purging of sinful distractions, of the hindrance of sin to our relationship with God, this needs to keep happening over and over again just as Jesus purged the temple of sinful distractions and hindrances a second time during the week before he goes to the cross and dies. That earthly temple needed repeated purges, and so do our bodies, these temples of the Holy Spirit. It's not as if we become an unbeliever as soon as we sin again after receiving our purging here at church, our forgiveness of sins. But we live lives as both sinners and saints. We are to constantly live for God in all we do, to put sin that hinders our relationship with God out of our lives. This is a continual need until the day we die.

There will come a time, though, when we will no longer purge our bodies, these temples to the Holy Spirit. Jesus pointed to it when the Jews asked for a sign to prove his authority to purge the temple of all these sinful distractions. Jesus gave them this sign, the same as the sign of Jonah: Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." (verse 19) John clarifies for us what Jesus meant: "But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." (verses 21-22)

The temple in Jerusalem with all its sacrifices, all its worship, was always meant to point ahead to Jesus, to the Passover Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who purges sin from all people, and who, on the Last Day, will purge it from all the world. Because Jesus has died and was raised again in three days on Easter Sunday, just as he said, we know that on the Last Day he will raise us as well. Because we have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, because God has purged our sin from us by Christ's sacrifice once for all, we will be raised with a body that never needs to be purged of sin again. On that Last Day, on Judgment Day, God will restore our bodies with ones that can never be infected with sin again because all sin will have been purged forever.

Until then, we continually come here to worship, to have God purge us of our sin, to draw us closer to him. In our zeal for him and his house, may we never hinder anyone from coming to him, including ourselves. We come knowing that Christ in his body, his temple, was raised. Because he made good on his sign, we know he will make good on it for us as well. Draw us to thee, and renew our spirits. Purge us of sinful distractions until our resurrection from the dead when our bodies, our temples of the Holy Spirit, will never need any more purging and we will be clean forever. Amen.