

Seven Days to Glory: Holy Week

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Monday: Robbers in the Narthex

Scripture

Mark 11:15–19 This surprising, even disturbing, scene of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple follows on the heels of his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Here we find an example of Jesus’ anger and indignation. To understand the events of Monday, we must understand the teachings of the Old Testament prophets underlying them.

Prayer

God, whose Word both comforts and challenges those who have ears to hear and hearts to understand: open us to what you have to say to us, even if your message challenges us and the church we love. We ask for your help to become the people you want us to be.

May your Word lead us into new paths of understanding and service.

May your Spirit open us to new directions in our lives.

May we live in the freedom of your Word and Spirit in all we do. Enlighten us, guide us, and give us your grace. Amen.

Introduction

We begin our exploration of the days of Holy Week on Monday with the cleansing of the temple. Comparing the Gospel accounts, you may be surprised to find differences about when Jesus’ encounter with the money changers occurred. John reports that it followed the wedding at Cana, which was the first act of his public ministry. In Matthew, it is suggested that Jesus entered the Court of the Gentiles on Palm Sunday after his triumphal entry. In Mark, the confrontation occurs on Monday, probably in the morning, after paying a brief visit to the temple on Sunday.

Remember the Gospel writers were working from a “catalog of memory,” their personal recollections of the various events and their time of occurrence. It might help to imagine they are each working from a stack of note cards, from which they drew their individual

recollections. Thus, the Bible includes four different accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, interpreted by four different authors. For the purposes of our Holy Week study, we accept Mark's chronology, that the cleansing of the temple occurred on Monday, the day after Passion/Palm Sunday.

When placed on the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus' angry scene in the Court of the Gentiles reflects a wrenching change of mood. Only yesterday, his disciples had thrilled at the festivity of the triumphal entry with its waving palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna!" Just yesterday, the followers of Jesus felt the thrill of thinking that just maybe their Lord would be a success, that he would be embraced by the acclaim and acceptance of the people. They hoped for a happy ending. But now, coming into the temple and overturning tables with a stern rebuke was a public relations disaster! Jesus was spending all his political capital. They were frightened, disappointed, and confused. Here was no "gentle Jesus, meek and mild,"¹ but an angry prophet, reacting to what he saw as dishonesty in the holy place.

Starting here, the story of Holy Week begins as a kind of *dark* tale. The road to glory begins in the shadows.

The Money Changers

The money changers were highly visible, one of the first things we would have noticed upon entering the temple. They were necessary. Every Jew was required to pay a temple tax of a half shekel, and tax day was the Passover. About a month before Passover, tax booths were set up in various towns and villages. But after a certain date, it could be paid only in the temple, and in a particular currency. Tyrian currency was preferred.

The function of the money changers was to exchange unacceptable currency for proper currency. A small handling fee would have been understandable. The fee was called *Qolbin*. The issue was not the fee itself; it was the amount. Some of the handlers saw an opportunity to gouge the people, charging what the traffic would bear. And at Passover time, the traffic bore plenty.

The selling of doves was another matter. For most visits to the temple, some kind of offering was expected. For example, doves were necessary when a woman came for purification after childbirth (which is why Mary and Joseph brought a couple of young pigeons with the baby Jesus, at the time of her purification in Luke 2:22). It

1. This phrase is taken from Charles Wesley's well-known hymn "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild."

was easy enough to buy animals for sacrifice outside the temple. But any animal offered for sacrifice had to be without blemish, so there were official animal inspectors at the courtyard gates. And it was not uncommon for inspectors to be “on the take.” They would reject animals purchased elsewhere, thereby forcing people to buy their sacrificial animals within the temple itself.

There would have been little problem if the prices inside the temple matched the prices outside the temple, but the price could double once people were inside the temple gates. That these abuses had gone on for years did not excuse the money changers. This financial abuse led to Jesus’ angry scene.

But there is more. To understand fully the scene in the temple, we must go to the prophet Jeremiah, who warned his people about the chasm that existed between their worship practices and their lack of justice and compassion. God had placed Jeremiah at the entrance to Solomon’s temple to warn worshipers that right worship practice is not a substitute for justice:

If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. . . . Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

—Jeremiah 7:5–7, 11

Jesus’ use of the term “a den of robbers” hearkens back to Jeremiah. His concern is the same—the lack of connection between the people’s worship practices and their lack of justice and compassion.

The Court of the Gentiles

Remember this scene takes place in the Outer Court of the temple. The temple of Jerusalem was designed in a series of concentric courts. The Outer Court was for anyone, including non-Jews. Next came the Court of the Jews, where Gentiles couldn’t go, and then came the Court of the Priests, where the laity could not enter. At the

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very center was the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could go, only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The cleansing of the temple took place in the Outer Court—the Court of the Gentiles. The Outer Court was the most inclusive place in the Jerusalem temple. Imagine people of different nationalities, in their varied garb, milling about in a bazaar-like atmosphere where money changers, guides, and priests could be seen in great numbers at Passover. It was the place where seekers came—those who might be exploring the idea of God, drawn out of curiosity. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus refers to the temple as “a house of prayer for all the nations.” For reasons that are unclear, Matthew omits the words “for all the nations.” But that is exactly what the Outer Court was—a place for everyone, including Gentiles and strangers.

Inside the Outer Court was the Court of Women, where Jewish women and men were allowed entrance—no non-Jews allowed. Then came the Court of the Priests, where the laity was excluded. Finally, the Holy of Holies, where God was believed to hold court. In fact, there were signs at the entrance to each succeeding court, defining who was allowed entrance and who was forbidden. The courts toward the center were most exclusive, while the ones farthest from the center were the most inclusive. It would be instructive to

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reflect on what parts of our churches are seen as exclusive rather than inclusive. Particularly if we have been church members for a long time, we might assume that our church is a welcoming place for strangers. You might ask visitors to your church whether they felt welcome and included.

It is likely that as Jesus entered the Outer Court, he was particularly sensitive to what was happening in that most inclusive of places. The scene in the Outer Court may have looked similar to modern Jerusalem, with people of many nationalities and ethnic backgrounds milling about. Perhaps he was angry at what the strangers and the seekers saw there. Could it be that rather than finding deep and genuine faith—rather than seeing people at prayer, in a living relationship with God—they saw a temple on the take? If so, it would be understandable that they would be turned off by the scene. It is ironic that all this exploitation was taking place in the only section of the temple where non-Jews could worship—that the

people who were most inconvenienced by the presence of the money changers were those who were furthest from the faith and least versed in its beliefs and practices. No wonder Jesus was angry!

The Narthex

So what do we make of this? What does this Monday scene say about Jesus—and about us?

Of course, it raises the question of commerce in the church. At what point does the church cease to be a house of prayer and become a den of robbers? As the pastor of an active church, my thoughts turn to all the announcements I've made in church about upcoming events: "Buy your tickets in the narthex!" We sell pansies in the fall, poinsettias at Christmas, and lilies at Easter. I can't count the number of statements I have made in worship to remind the saints about making a reservation, buying that devotional, or paying for a study guide. Who knows, we may even end up selling this participant's book in our worship space! Is our narthex a den of robbers? Not once have I gone over to the narthex and turned over any tables, nor have I cracked any whips. But this story does raise a question for me: Where is the line between honest commerce and the kind of activity that made Jesus angry?

I don't really think we have sold out to the marketplace, nor have I noticed any robbers in the narthex. The booths are there for the convenience of our people—and the same was true in the temple. What Jesus was angry about was the misuse, the corruption of the money changers making excessive profits off those who came to worship God. The problem was greed, and we hear a lot about greed these days—big company CEOs accepting bailout funds, then approving billions in bonuses for their cronies; supposed financial gurus making off with billions of trusting people's money. There is nothing wrong with commerce, but there is something inherently wrong with greed. And greed is even more sinful when it happens in the house of God—or when Christians fail to reflect God's justice and compassion toward others.

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It is no surprise that nowadays people are skeptical about churches. They have seen too many TV preachers selling their wares for a love

offering. A pastor friend recently admitted his amazement at members of his congregation who left the church because they were against organized religion, only to join a church where the pastor owns the place! People have good reason to be suspicious of the church.

Just as Jesus was sensitive to the seekers in the Outer Court, we need to be sensitive to the seekers in the narthex. When some soul walks into our church for the first time, testing the waters of faith, that person will be experiencing the ways in which what we believe squares with what we do. Will such people be welcome for who they are, their spiritual and relational needs valued? Do we greet them asking, “What can you do for us?” or “How can this church help you along your spiritual quest?” Few of us are selling doves at a marked-up price, but we would do well to ask ourselves what kind of message we are sending to the seekers in the narthex. That’s the question we ask on Monday.

Spiritual Practice

Spend time observing in a narthex or gathering place. Watch for the seekers. How are they welcomed—or are they ignored? Does your signage or map clearly indicate the way to the sanctuary or a Sunday school class? What is happening around them? What is your church doing to communicate care, respect, and hospitality?

Questions for Reflection

Does Jesus’ anger surprise you? Does your image of Jesus allow for anger, for righteous indignation, or, as quoted by Charles Wesley, only a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”?

A rabbi once wrote that some of us get angry too much, while others of us don’t get angry enough. When is it appropriate for us to express anger?

How might your church be more sensitive to the needs of the seekers in the narthex?