

A Zealous God

John 2:13–23

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Our text this morning is about the temple, and it is about Jesus, and it is about God's holiness. Jesus is the means by which we approach the holy God — and our passage today is where the temple and God's holiness come together in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Scene: Passover in Jerusalem

Our passage begins with Jesus going to Jerusalem for the Passover:

“*The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*” (John 2:13)

The Passover was a feast prescribed to be observed. It involved the slaying of a lamb and the placing of its blood on the doorpost — all part of remembering the redemption of Israel from slavery. Passover itself was one day, after which came the Feast of Unleavened Bread, symbolizing the sanctification of Israel, of being set apart and made holy. These feasts were important, and as much as one was able, if you were a Jew, you were required to come to Jerusalem to observe them.

By the time of Christ, the Jewish people were spread throughout the world — in lands extending even beyond the Roman Empire: Ethiopia, Egypt, Lystra, Crete, Asia. Historians tell us that the population of Jerusalem at this time was somewhere around eighty to a hundred thousand, but at the high holy days such as Passover, the population could swell to as many as three or four million. Now, if you are traveling from Ethiopia, if you are traveling from Libya, Cyrene, Asia, or Rome, it would be rather difficult to make that journey bringing your own sheep or ox along with you. And so having sellers in Jerusalem — vendors offering oxen, sheep, and pigeons — was actually a helpful service. And as anyone who has ever traveled knows, at some point money exchange becomes necessary. The selling of sacrificial animals and the exchange of currency were, in themselves, genuinely useful.

The problem was not so much that these things were happening. The problem was *where* they were happening: in the courts of the temple.

It is because of these activities taking place in the space reserved for worship that Jesus does what he does.

“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’” (John 2:14–16)

The Problem: A House of Trade

Why was this wrong? Why did Jesus literally become violent?

The other Gospels describe Jesus calling the temple a “den of robbers” — a direct quotation from Jeremiah 7 — and that language does reveal something about the impure motives of those doing the selling. But I don’t think that even if the merchants had been selling at cost, with no corruption and no markup, it would have changed what Jesus did. The issue was not primarily the greed or the dishonesty of those involved. The issue was that those activities simply did not belong there — in the place of worship. They belonged on the outside, but they had worked their way to the inside and usurped the space meant for something holy.

By turning the courts of the temple into a marketplace, worship itself had been transformed into a mechanical exercise — a transaction. Come for the Passover, buy a lamb, say a few prayers, get your certificate, and you have done what is required. There was no real worship taking place. Everything was about going through the proper motions. It was, in the truest sense, transactional worship.

And beyond that, for those who *did* come to the temple with a genuine heart to worship, the buying and selling of goods was a massive distraction. Not only did the market occupy space that had been set aside for the Gentiles to pray, it pulled the attention of everyone away from God. Distraction in worship is something Jesus takes seriously — seriously enough to make a whip, drive out the animals, and overturn the tables. His action was to remove anything that distracts from a pure and singular focus on God.

The Prophecy: Zeal for Your House

Why is he doing this? Verse 17 gives us the answer:

“His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’” (John 2:17)

This is a quotation from Psalm 69:9, one of the great messianic passages of the Old Testament: *“For zeal for your house has consumed me.”*

That word *zeal* has largely dropped out of common usage. We don’t hear it very often anymore. But it means a great passion, a burning love, an intense fire for something. A zealous person — like a jealous person — wants the removal of everything that distracts, everything that diminishes, everything that introduces impurity into the relationship. The zealousness of Jesus, his passion, is directed at removing any distraction that keeps you from a pure love and worship of God.

There is actually a prophecy about the Messiah as this kind of refiner of worship. In the third chapter of Malachi — the last book of the Old Testament — we read:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.” (Malachi 3:1–3)

A refiner was a craftsman who separated the impurities from the pure. Generally, by means of a furnace, precious metals like gold would be heated to the point where the dross — the impure material — could no longer stay attached to the pure. It would separate out and float to the surface, where it could be skimmed away.

As Malachi prophesied, the people believed that the Messiah would separate the pure from the impure — that he, the Christ, would have a burning intensity, a zeal for the temple, a jealousy for God, such that God alone would be honored as holy by all who approached him.

And I think it is this prophecy that stands behind the question the religious leaders ask Jesus in verse 18:

“So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’” (John 2:18)

The question implies: *Who gives you the right?* But the word *sign* carries a prophetic weight. By what sign do you prove that you are the one zealous for the holiness of God? By what sign do you demonstrate that you have the right to be the refiner?

The Answer: The True Temple

Jesus answers them — and his answer reframes everything:

*“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’
The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you
raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.”
(John 2:19–21)*

This is why this passage in John is so critically important. It is not only about pure worship and the removal of distraction — it is about *Jesus himself*. Jesus equates the temple with his own body. Do you realize how radical this is?

Jesus is saying that *he* is the true temple. The altar, the showbread, the lampstand, the basin of water, the incense, the mercy seat — it is *him*. The religious leaders believed that a person could be made right with a holy God through the bloody sacrifices that atoned for sin, but here is Jesus saying: *I am the priest, I am the sacrifice, I am the altar. I am the showbread and the light. I am the temple, and it is only through me that you can approach the holy God.*

And the passage closes with this:

*“When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he
had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had
spoken.” (John 2:22)*

What It Means: Home Ownership Makes All the Difference

So what does this passage mean for you and me today?

Consider where John places this story. Chapter 2 of the Gospel of John begins with Jesus at a wedding, where he is a guest. And being a guest, it is not appropriate to make demands. Imagine if a guest came to stay at your home for a few nights, and when they arrived, they had a list of demands — knock down that wall, build a staircase here, paint the room this color. A guest simply cannot do that. But if you are the *owner* of the house, it is your right, your prerogative, to make any changes you wish.

The difference between the wedding feast and the temple is that Jesus is the *owner* of the temple. He has the right to demand change. He has the right to drive out those who are dishonoring God.

Now apply that to your life. When you give your life to Jesus, you are handing over the deed of your life to him. You are saying: *You are the owner*. And that is precisely what it means to confess Jesus as Lord. Making him the owner means he now has the right to bring about changes in your life — to drive out even those things that are distractions from the worship and love of God.

So the question is this: Is Jesus the owner of your life, or is he merely a guest?

You know that Jesus is the owner when he is putting his finger on things in your life and saying, *I want this gone. This has become too important. I want you to commit to this*. You know he is the owner when the Spirit is at work — refining you, naming things to let go of, things to embrace, wounds that need healing, dreams to pursue.

What It Means: Jesus Is a Refiner of What He Owns

Just as Jesus was zealous for the temple of the Lord — for the courts of God, for the removal of distraction, for purity and holiness — he has that same zeal for your life. What consumes Jesus now is the purity and holiness of *your* life. He is committed to it. He is consumed by it.

This is why he is the refiner. Just as a refiner uses a furnace to create heat so that the pure and impure can no longer live comfortably together but must separate, Jesus as refiner places heat upon your life — a condition, a situation, a trial, a season — where your love for God and your love for other things can no longer quietly coexist. You are forced to choose between the holy and the unholy, between the pure and the dross.

Think of it this way. You have a great job, great benefits — but now your employer is demanding that you do things that compromise your convictions. That is the fire. What do you do? Up to now, there was no conflict. Your love for God and your love of security lived together well enough. But now the heat is on, and as you respond in obedience to God, that dross begins to fall away.

Or consider this: you are in an important relationship, and there is a great deal of conflict. Pride and anger are rising to the surface. What do you do? How do you respond? Conflict causes a lot of dross to bubble up. What you choose in that moment — whether to seek to understand, to serve, to forgive, or to speak the truth — that is a part of the refining.

Or perhaps something you have wanted your whole life is simply not going to happen. A desire, a love, an expectation, a dream is dying. There is a choice before you: do you submit to the Lord and remain faithful to where God has placed you — a location, a marriage, a job, a ministry — or do you go and pursue what you know is contrary to God's leading? As you say yes to God, the dross of the heart falls away.

If Jesus is the owner of your life, he is going to seek the purity of your heart. Which means you will often find yourself in some kind of furnace. Some of you may be in it right now. Some may have just come out of one. But here is what you can hold onto: Jesus is passionate. He has a zeal — a zealousness — *for you*.

He is the refiner. You are the gold. You are precious in his sight. He is the jeweler, and you are the diamond. He looks at you and puts you through a refining fire — not for your misery, but for your joy. He is saying: *I cannot wait to see you bright and shining, set in your proper place. I know what you can be. Choose me when you are in that furnace, and I guarantee you that what drops off — the pride, the arrogance, the greed, the selfishness, the anxiety, the fear, the worry — what drops off of you is only the cancer that has been making you sick. It is only the distraction that has been keeping you from hearing my voice.*

Jesus is the refiner. He is zealous for you.