



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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When Jesus Cleans House
John 2:13-22

This is *not* the picture of Jesus we like to see. Despite the efforts of some scholars and preachers to paint the picture otherwise, this is not “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” This is Jesus with fire in his eyes! The great late fourth and early fifth century Christian scholar Jerome put it this way: “A certain fiery and starry light shone from his eyes and the majesty of the Godhead gleamed in His face.”¹

This is Jesus *cleaning house*!

Since the last half of the twentieth century, North American Christianity has so emphasized the *love of God* shown in Christ that it seems we have forgotten about the *wrath of God*, also seen in Christ in passages like this one. We want to limit God's wrath to the Old Testament, and maybe even try to explain it away there.

Try doing that with John! The same John that wrote John 3:16—“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”²—gave us this story at the end of John 2! And at the end of John 3, he emphatically stated that “whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him” (3:36)! And whether it was written by John the Apostle (whom this Gospel is attributed to) or another John associated with him, God's wrath is very evident throughout the book of Revelation. When Jesus returns in glory in Revelation 19, he comes in John's vision as a conquering warrior on a white stallion with fire in his eyes and a sharp sword coming from his mouth to slay those who despite repeated opportunities to repent have refused him!

Somehow this picture of Jesus cleaning house disturbs us, doesn't it? It's not how we're used to thinking about him. It's hard for us to think of him as becoming this *angry*, of resorting to what could be considered somewhat *violent* behavior. Lest we try to gloss over it or explain it away, that's exactly how some of the church fathers like Augustine and Chrysostom understood it.³ Maybe it should make us wonder if we ought to be taking this Christianity business more seriously!

¹ Cited in A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. V (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the SBC, 1932), 39.

² From the *King James Version*; unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this sermon are from the *New International Version*.

³ Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, N.T. Vol. IVA (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 102.

Now we're not talking here about a temper tantrum or a fit of rage. This was a display of justified divine anger!

Look at what happened.

Jesus in the temple

The Jewish Passover was approaching, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. While he was there, he went to the temple.

Now the temple area had several courts. The large outer court was known as the Court of the Gentiles. It was a part of the temple where anyone who wanted to worship the God of Israel—like those called “God-fearers” in the book of Acts, Gentiles who adhered to the principles of the Jewish faith but had not yet fully converted to Judaism.

Scholars tell us that many Jews visiting the temple at Passover took this opportunity to pay the Jewish annual half-shekel tax on men who were twenty years old or older. Only Tyrian coins were accepted for this purpose, partly because its silver content was exceptionally pure, but more importantly because Roman money bore the images of their rulers and claims to those rulers' divinity.⁴ So people had to exchange the Roman coins they would usually use for these Tyrian coins. An exchange business grew up around this need, and these exchange agents could charge a commission of up to twelve and a half percent (12.5%)!⁵

There were other entrepreneurs as well. Since people came to the festivals from all over the Greco-Roman world, they couldn't very well bring their animal sacrifices with them. But they could bring their money! So some smart people had seen the opportunity to sell animals for sacrifice, sometimes at exorbitant prices—supply and demand, you know.

Now of course on the surface, it looked like all this was done to make it possible for people coming from a distance to worship at the temple.

To make it more convenient, these traders and merchants set up shop in the outer court of the temple. It was the common area, the most accessible, and with plenty of room. Made sense, didn't it? They were providing a needed service in the name of helping people worship God, and it was convenient to boot!

But Jesus didn't see it that way! He saw it for what it really was—they had turned his Father's house into a market! And he was angry!

In fact, he was so angry that he found some kind of cords lying around, plaited them into a small whip, and began driving the merchants along with their sheep and cattle out of the temple area.

Then he poured out the moneychangers coins and turned over their tables. He told the ones selling doves to take their birds and get out, and said, “Stop making My Father's house a place of business” (2:16, NASB).

His disciples were so struck by his actions that they remembered the words of Psalm 69:9—“Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Now some translations of this passage, like the *New International Version*, translate it that Jesus drove out the animals, not the people. But others, like the *New American Standard Bible*, the *Revised Standard Version*, and the *King James Version* translate it that he drove both the merchants and their animals out. It seems to me that this is more consistent with the sense of the

⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Second Edition, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 38.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 74.

passage as a whole, especially since it wasn't the merchants who questioned Jesus about his authority to do this, but the Jewish leaders.

They asked him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (2:18).

Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (2:19).

They scoffed at him, thinking he was talking about the material temple. But John tells us that he was talking about his own body, and that after his resurrection, his disciples understood what he had meant.

Jesus cleaned house

Jesus cleared the outer court—the Court of the Gentiles. He cleared it of activity that not only defiled it *in the name of* helping people to worship, but actually *blocked the way* for many who came to worship!

Jesus cleaned his Father's house of abuses and obstacles—abuses for personal gain in the name of religion and obstacles that prevented others from coming to God.

There's an important distinction in the language John uses about the temple here. He uses the Greek word *hierón* to describe the temple as a whole—not only the original temple plan (the vestibule, the holy place, and the holy of holies), but the various surrounding courts of Israel, Women, and the Gentiles, and all the buildings connected with the temple proper that Herod the Great and his successors had added and were still adding in Jesus' day. Remember, it was from the court of the Gentiles that Jesus drove the moneychangers and the sacrificial brokers with their sheep and cattle and birds.

But when he says to the Jewish leaders, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," John uses the Greek word *naós*, which describes the innermost part of a temple. In the case of the Jewish temple, it's the word used for the temple proper—the vestibule, the holy place, and the holy of holies. It could be translated *sanctuary*. It's where God dwells on earth.

Jesus, of course, was speaking of his own body! Though they might destroy it, he would rise. After he was raised, his disciples finally understood that this was what he was talking about that day.

And he still does . . .

When we read further over into the New Testament, especially Paul's letters, we see this connection between body and temple. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul asks the Corinthians:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

In other words, as believers, as followers of Jesus, there is a sense in which our physical bodies are a temple of the Spirit—where God dwells on earth, because the Spirit dwells *in us*. Guess which word Paul uses here—*naós*, sanctuary.

Paul also makes this body-temple connection in another way, too. He frequently uses the body metaphor for *the church*, God's people in the New Testament, the gathered followers of Jesus who are bound together in him. He uses this image, for instance, in Ephesians 1:22-23 and 4:1-16, and implies it in Ephesians 2 as he writes about how in Christ, God is making one new

man in Christ out of Jews and Gentiles who believe, having reconciled both into one body through the cross (Ephesians 2:14-18).

And then he shifts the metaphor, saying that Gentiles are

no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

A holy *temple* . . . in which *God lives* by his Spirit. And which word did Paul use? You guessed it—*naós*.

So, Jesus described his own body as a temple, the place where God was dwelling while he was here on earth. And since his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the New Testament describes both the church as a whole and the physical body of the individual believer as a temple of the Holy Spirit—God's empowering presence, through whom both the Father and the Son are in us and among us.

I think that forces us to ask some hard questions.

First, if Jesus was so angered and moved to such action by what he saw in the outermost court of the temple complex, the *hierón*, how do you think he would have responded if such things were going on in the sanctuary itself, the *naós*? Do you think he would have tolerated it? Or would he have responded even more strongly?

Now as I said earlier, this is not the picture of Jesus we like to see. This is not “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” This is Jesus with fire in his eyes! This is Jesus cleaning house! This is Jesus moved to righteous indignation, Jesus with a whip in his hand, driving out cattle and sheep and those who sold them, telling those selling doves to take their birds and leave, and turning tables over! Not a temper tantrum or a fit of rage, but a display of justified divine anger! If this was his response to this misuse of the outer court of the Gentiles, what would he have done about the sanctuary?

That leads to the second question—or really a cluster of questions.

Where is his sanctuary now? According to what we see in Paul's letters, isn't it us? Isn't it us corporately as the body of Christ? Isn't it us individually as followers of Jesus?

When we see Jesus like this about the material temple, does it stop and make us think? *What if Jesus came to his temple to clean house today?*

Let's be painfully honest here for a few minutes. Let's put aside our religious masks and our legalistic checklists. Let's come clean with God and with each other.

If Jesus were to come to clean house today, what would he drive out? What would he get rid of?

What would he drive out of the church throughout the world? Corruption? Divisions?

What would he drive out of the church in North America? Greed? Corruption? Immorality? Arrogant self-sufficiency?

Let's bring it down a little closer. What if Jesus came to this local expression of his church known as the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church to clean house? What would he drive out?

Pride? Divisiveness? Complacency? Idolatry? The things that not only defile his holy habitation, but block the way of those who may not be like us who would come to Christ?

And what about us individually? What would Jesus drive out? Self-centeredness and self-will? An unforgiving spirit? Some attitude that needs changing? Immorality or some other sinful behavior we need to leave off? Some addiction we need to confront? Brokenness in some relationship?

Jesus can clean house in two ways. He can do it gently by his gracious washing in his blood as we yield to him in repentance.

Or he can do in the wrath of his righteous anger.

The fact is, the choice is ours.

Because one way or another, in his time and way, *Jesus will clean his Father's house!*

†MEG