

## **Luke 19:45-48**

### **Confrontation in the Temple**

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question, “what is the chief end of man?” The answer is unforgettable. The chief end of man “is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Essentially, people have but one job. We were created to bring glory to God. Therefore, everything we do ought to aim toward that end, and nothing ought to be done without the consideration of the question “does this bring glory to God?” foremost in our minds.

At this point in Luke’s gospel, we find ourselves with Jesus in Jerusalem during Passion Week. He had triumphantly entered the city, and the crowds had grown to thousands. He had been proclaimed the true king of Israel. After making His way with the throngs of people through the east gate of the city, Jesus, “came into the temple” (Mark 11:11). The shouting must have been deafening. The anticipation of what Jesus would do next was unbearable. But the occasion was anticlimactic, for “after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late” (Mark 11:11).

What happened? Probably, Jesus was simply exhausted. Not only had the journey of the last few days been arduous, making His way from Jericho into Jerusalem, but the unavoidable reality of the crucifixion must have weighed on Him. He had needed to deal with the crowds; He had wept bitterly over what He saw in Jerusalem’s future. He was emotionally and physically spent and needed to be prepared for what lay ahead. So, naturally, He sought out some old friends. Bethany, it must be remembered was the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Here, Jesus could rest, relax, and make the necessary preparations for the upcoming week.

There were some practical reasons for returning to Bethany as well. This was the Passover. Jerusalem was crowded beyond what it could bear. Historians estimate that, in the first century, more than one million people would make their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. The inns were filled to capacity. Friends and relatives had opened their homes. Local synagogues took in whatever travellers they could house. Some wealthy Jews, fortunate enough to possess homes in the countryside, were sought out to provide lodging for the many pilgrims. No room was left uninhabited, and many must have been crowded with several occupants.

But still that was not enough. Jerusalem became a tent city during Passover. Thousands of people simply set up temporary dwellings along the roads, in the fields, and wherever else they could. The hills, covered with the fabrics of these travelers, gave testimony to the overcrowded conditions of the city. Jewish law required that, in order to celebrate Passover, participants needed to spend the previous night in Jerusalem. Since this had proved impossible to either comply with or enforce, the law had been modified to include as part of the city of Jerusalem much of the surrounding countryside. Other religious laws were altered to allow for exceptions to travel restrictions. A million people overwhelmed all the resources of the region and put a great strain on everything from supplies of fresh water to people’s nerves.

One final point of introduction. This account is not the same as that recorded by John in his gospel. That narrative, found in John 2:13-17, occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The account recorded here in

Luke occurs during Passion Week. The parallel accounts for this encounter at the temple are found in Matthew 21:12-17 and Mark 11:15-19.

### **What Jesus Saw**

As Jesus returned to Jerusalem the following morning, the crowds must have once again simmered with anticipation. Having scouted the area the day before, surely Jesus was ready to make His move this day. What were His objectives? Would He set out straight for the home of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and compel that unwanted foreign usurper to turn the reigns of power over to the rightful King of the Jews? Would He make His way with His men toward the Roman garrison at Fort Antonia and force a military showdown with the troops there? Surely recognizing the thousands of people supporting Jesus, the garrison would quickly capitulate. Then Jesus could consolidate power, raise an army, and be in complete control of Jerusalem and the surrounding region before word got out and the Romans were prepared to counterattack. Then, sensing that the fight would not be worth the effort, Rome would negotiate an arrangement whereby only token acknowledgement of imperial rule (and, of course, a few tax dollars) would be required to maintain the independence of Israel. It was all coming together perfectly.

But that was not Jesus' plan. He headed not for the home of Rome's local political leader, nor for the encampment of that leader's military muscle. Instead, Jesus headed to the temple. He had planned a confrontation to be sure, but it was not to be with pagan and idolatrous Gentiles. He planned to confront the Jews. His objective was not to challenge the political authority, but the religious authority. It was not those who represented Rome that Jesus had a problem with, it was those who represented Yahweh. The relationship Jesus concerned Himself with was not that between Israel and Rome, but between Israel and God. He was moved to act not against the oppression of Roman oppression, but against the sins of the Jews.

He had made this point before. Three years earlier, at the very commencement of His earthly ministry, Jesus had celebrated Passover in Jerusalem.

“<sup>13</sup>The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; <sup>16</sup>and to those who were selling the doves He said, “take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business” (John 2:13-16).

Then, as now, Jesus had been concerned about the quality and intent of worship. That concern developed into a theme He presented throughout His ministry. When speaking with a Samaritan woman at a well outside her city, Jesus had emphasized that geography was not the key element of worship, but the heart,

“<sup>19</sup>The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.’ <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation

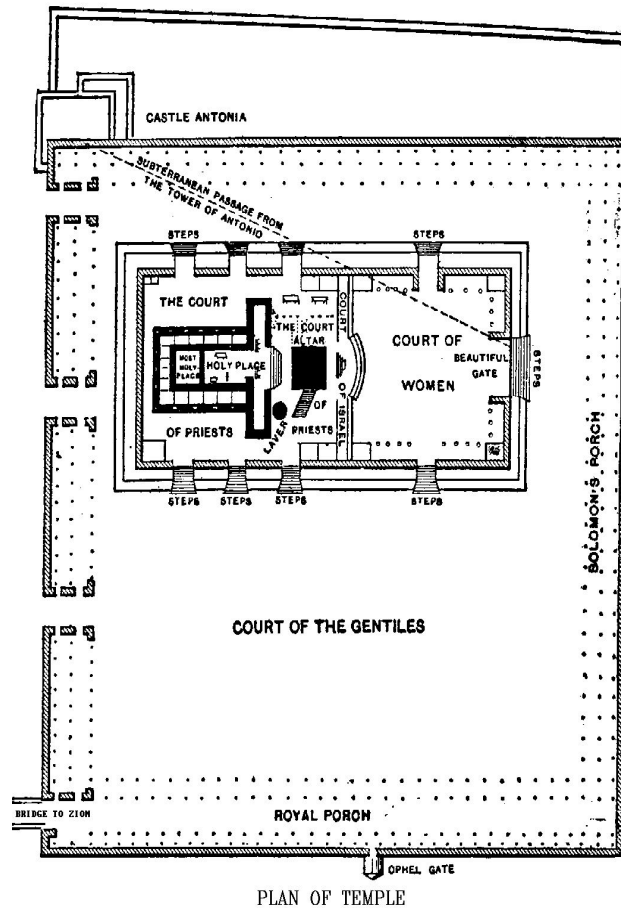
is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers” (John 4:19-23).

Luke wrote that “Jesus entered the temple” (v. 45). The words used, *hieros*, means the temple grounds in general, and not necessarily the temple building itself. Herod had rebuilt the temple much larger than that built under the kingship of Solomon. Ancient measure of scale are notoriously difficult to assert with precision, so it is impossible to know exactly, but best estimates are that the entire enclosed area of the temple was some 172,000 square yards (or about 34 football fields) and could hold 100,000 people.

The temple area Jesus entered first was the Court of the Gentiles. It was called such, because for a Gentile to move beyond that area was to incur the penalty of death. Through the Beautiful Gate was the Court of the Women, an area that marked their limits of intimacy with God. Only Jewish men could enter beyond Nicanor’s Gate (its bronze doors so large and heavy that twenty men were required to open and close them). From this Court of the Israelites, people could see into the Court of the Priests and perhaps by squeezing their way to the front, could witness the sacrifices being made.

But Jesus never made it that far. He stopped upon entering in the Court of the Gentiles. The scene was just as it had been the day before. Remember that according to the account in Mark, the evening before Jesus had entered the temple area, looked about briefly and then returned to Bethany. Though He had been disturbed, even offended, by what He saw, His fatigue compelled Him to wait until He was refreshed before He faced the crowds of merchants and the priests who supported them.

Now He had returned. A good meal, a good night's rest, and we can safely assume a good time of prayer with His Heavenly Father, had given Him strength and clarity of thought. He was ready. Think of the scene He saw. Think of what Jesus heard and smelled. There was a marketplace mentality. Tens of thousands of people shouted, elbowed, and bargained their way about. I think of an overcrowded swap meet on a hot Sunday afternoon. There were birds, sheep, and even oxen for sale. Imagine the mess.



The event was known as the Bazaar of Annas, so named after a greedy high priest who had made the event infamous. He no longer ruled the temple, though his son Caiaphas did, and between the two of them the temple business boomed. A person could, of course, bring their own animal for the priest to sacrifice, but there was no guarantee that the priests would find the animal acceptable for offering. In fact, the priests were discouraged from doing so, as there was no profit in that for them and they had paid Annas and Caiaphas for the right to sell to merchants and shepherds the exclusive opportunity to market their own flocks and herds.

So, with no other options, many people simply bought their sacrificial animal from one of these preferred sellers. There were money changers available to help visitors from far away (and those who were unwary) in obtaining the proper currency, since the temple tax could be paid only with Jewish or Tyrian coins. Naturally they too required a charge for their services - usually 12.5%. It was all business, and it was a thriving business during Passover.

To Jesus, it was noisy, it was smelly, and it was definitely not worship. Prayers could not be heard over the vigorous bargaining between buyer and seller. Praise could not be sung over the bleating of sheep and goats, or the cooing of doves and pigeons. This was like the last few days before Christmas at the mall. It may have been good for the economy, but it had nothing to do with the worship of God.

### **What Jesus Did**

Jesus had a plan. He was not out of control or angry beyond the boundaries of His righteousness. Nevertheless, He “began to drive out those who were selling” (v. 45). Matthew and Mark give us more details. Mark wrote that “He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple” (Mark 11:16). Matthew informed the reader that Jesus “overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves” (Matthew 21:12). So this was not a quiet chat. This was not an attempt at finding common ground. Jesus exerted His divine authority to set things right.

Remember that there were literally tens of thousands of people around. Hundreds of these were actively involved, and financially invested, in the business of Passover. Those people had the support of both the religious and political authorities. And Jesus had with Him perhaps the disciples and some other followers, but they could hardly have presented themselves as a formidable body of men. Fishermen do not usually intimidate the masses.

Yet Jesus was undeterred. He shoved over tables and sent money flying. He knocked over chairs. He physically pushed people out of the courtyard. At first, people must have wondered Who this belligerent man was. Perhaps He was some disgruntled victim of a money changers extortion or a dissatisfied customer who had purchased an unsatisfactory animal. But soon they understood that this was not about a transaction gone bad, this was about right worship in the temple of God.

### **What Jesus Said**

Jesus’ motives were made clear by what He said, or probably shouted. Over the noise of the crowds Jesus was heard to say “it is written, ‘and My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a robbers’ den” (v. 46).

Jesus quoted Scripture. He made it clear that His anger was not based on simply a personal preference but on the Word of God. The quotation was from the great prophet Isaiah. Jesus sought to demonstrate that there was an expectation that the temple would be a dignified place of worship for all who called on the name of the Lord.

“Even those I will bring to My holy mountain  
And make them joyful in My house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar;  
For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples” (Isaiah 56:7).

Indeed, even before the temple had been built, its idea was present in the minds of the Jews. In his meditations, David pondered the dwelling place of God,

“One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:  
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the Lord  
And to meditate in His temple” (Psalm 27:4)

“How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to You  
To dwell in Your courts.  
We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,  
Your holy temple” (Psalm 65:4).

And when finally constructed under the leadership of David’s son Solomon, the temple had been expected to be a permanent place of worship of the One True God. Though acknowledging that He was not limited by space, the people considered the temple as the place of God. It was a sanctuary and a place of communion. When Solomon dedicated the first temple he prayed,

“<sup>27</sup>But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! <sup>28</sup>Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today; <sup>29</sup>that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place” (1 Kings 8:27-29).

Jesus paralleled His use of Isaiah with a passage from the prophet Jeremiah. During a time when Israel oppressed aliens, broke the commandments, and in general avoided all things associated with the true worship of Yahweh, the people continued to offer worship in the temple, as if such rituals, or even the geography of the building itself offered some sort of talisman against the vengeance of God. God would have none of that.

“<sup>8</sup>Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. <sup>9</sup>Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, <sup>10</sup>then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘we are delivered!’ - that you may do all these abominations? <sup>11</sup>Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 7:8-11).

The phrase “den of thieves” could actually be translated ‘cave’ and was a clear reference to the many caves of Judea where robbers secluded themselves from the authorities as they waited to prey on unwary travellers. Jesus made it clear that those bandits were no different from the merchants, money changers, and priests who took advantage of the high holy day of Passover to exploit the crowds for their own personal gain.

### **What Jesus Continued to Do**

But Jesus was not only concerned with the moment. He had less than one week to live, and He was not about to waste it on the unrepentant. Therefore, He spent His last few days “teaching daily in the temple” (v. 47). The specifics of His teaching were what Luke will elaborate on in the next two chapters of his gospel account, and we will discuss them in that context. Suffice it to say here that Jesus preached what He had always preached - the kingdom of God and how to attain it. He preached the gospel of salvation.

Matthew’s account noted that during this last week He also continued to heal the sick, as “the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them” (Matthew 21:14). Hoping perhaps to gain some alms from the worshippers at the temple, they instead went away healed physically and spiritually. Naturally, none of these events endeared Jesus to the religious leadership. Matthew recorded that “they became indignant” (Matthew 21:15). Mark perhaps captured their motivation better when he wrote that “they were afraid of Him” (Mark 11:18).

Therefore, “<sup>47</sup>the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him, <sup>48</sup>and they could not find anything that they might do, for all the people were hanging on to every word He said.” (v. 47-48). Though His actions upset the religious leadership so much that they waited for an opportunity to kill Him, Jesus taught in the temple daily. His authority was so unmistakable that people gathered in such numbers that the authorities were prevented from challenging Him.

We do not know the effects of Jesus’ attempt to clear the temple. Did the people continue to go about their business once the commotion had died down? Did they simply move their carts and animals to another location, outside the temple grounds and conduct business there? It seems unlikely that there was a general revival or spiritual renewal in Israel. But that was not the point. Jesus had come into the temple to establish both His authority there and to preach about right worship. We know from history that most people do not often listen to such authority. But as children of God, we are not most people.

### **Takeaways**

Neither hypocrisy nor half-heartedness has a place in true worship. Jesus punished violently the degradation of religion. Jesus emphatically rebuked hypocrisy in the context of worship. Therefore, we should take seriously and reverently our time before God. Whether it be in corporate worship on Sunday, a Bible study during the week, or in our own private devotions, we must remember to give God our best. Inattentiveness, laziness, or the perfunctory performance of a ritual are not acceptable.