

TEMPEST IN THE TEMPLE

MATTHEW 21:12-17

There is a natural tendency for followers of Jesus to assume that their Lord and Savior shares their opinions, perspectives, conclusions, political persuasions, and theological interpretations. That is because we inadvertently assume that our own personal views are correct and so, of course, Jesus endorses them, for they are His views as well, so we think. Therefore, when we encounter people who think differently than us or who disagree with us, we assume that Jesus takes sides and that He is obviously on our side.

Ironically, that is true even with regard to other Christ followers—our brothers and sisters in Christ—who don't agree with our views or who hold differing views. We tend to think, "Too bad they've gotten on the wrong side of Jesus on this matter. He must be disappointed in their incorrect judgments and conclusions. And though I know He is merciful and that they will still go to heaven, I'd hate to be them on the Day of Judgment when it will be revealed that they were wrong about such and such."

But assuming that Jesus thinks like us, or that He has the same opinions and judgments as us, is like believing that Albert Einstein has the same opinions and judgments as a chimpanzee. Assuming that Jesus is on our side when we disagree with someone is an indication that we don't really know Him very well.

There is an interesting story in the Book of Joshua. The people of Israel had recently crossed the Jordan river and begun taking possession of the Promised Land. Jericho was next on the list of cities to conquer, and early one morning Joshua, the leader of Israel's army, ventured out to do some reconnaissance. While surveying the territory around Jericho, he unexpectedly encountered a person who was dressed for battle with a drawn sword in his hand. It startled Joshua and made him wonder what this warrior was doing in the vicinity. So, he asked him, "*Are you for us or for our enemies?*" (5:13). That seems like a logical question. When you are preparing for battle and you encounter a stranger with a drawn sword, the question, "Whose side are you on?" is more natural and logical than even "Who are you?"

But the warrior's response does *not* seem to be natural or logical. **Verse 14**, "*Neither,*" *he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come."* By the way, I believe this was none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. This is what theologians call a *Christophany*—a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. This was the Son of God taking on the form of a warrior and revealing Himself to Joshua.

One of my reasons for believing this is because of Joshua's response of worship (which the warrior welcomed) and also because of what He instructed Joshua to do. We read, "*Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked Him, "What message does my Lord have for His servant?"*"

¹⁵ *The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

Ground becomes holy not because a created being stands on it, but because God Himself is present. But the point I want to illustrate from this passage has to do with what the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua in verse 14. When Joshua asked Him, "Who's side are you on?" He said, "Neither!" What does that mean? It would seem that if He was God and Joshua was the leader of God's people and the battle they were about to fight was a battle that God told them to fight, you would expect this warrior to say, "I'm on *your* side!"

Instead, He says, "*Neither. But as commander of the army of the LORD, I have now*

come.” Which suggests that He was telling Joshua, “Look, the question of whose side I am on is the wrong question. I did not come to take sides; I came to take over!”

That is an important theological principle. God does not take sides with *us*, because that would indicate that the circumstances or the conflict or the battle is about us, and what we want or what we are trying to do. But it is *not* about us. It’s about Him! It’s His story. He doesn’t take sides with us; we take sides with Him...or not. And there is an important distinction.

That principle is illustrated all throughout Scripture, including the passage we are going to look at today in Matthew 21. It is an event that takes place during what we now call Holy Week. On Sunday Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, escorted by an enthusiastic throng of pilgrims who shouted praises and gave Him the royal treatment. No doubt, many of those pilgrims anticipated that after entering Jerusalem Jesus would establish His political headquarters and start His messianic reign, thus confirming that God was, indeed, on their side.

Instead, we are told that after this triumphal entry Jesus retraced His steps back to Bethany, where, presumably, He spent the night at the home of His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

The next day Jesus returned to Jerusalem, where we read in **verses 12-13**, ¹² *And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.* ¹³ *He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”*

What a contrast to the upbeat, celebratory spirit of the previous day! His appearance on Sunday had heightened expectations of a pro-Jewish, nationalist revolt against Rome. “Here comes Israel’s anticipated Deliverer who will direct His fury against our oppressor and release us from the Emperor’s shackles!”

Instead, Jesus directs His fury at the very heart of the nation of *Israel*—the Temple—and wreaks havoc there by driving out sellers and buyers and overturning the tables and chairs of those who were responsible for the administrations of temple worship. And Jesus’ aggressive, violent actions, in contrast to the previous day’s peaceful celebration, shocked those who witnessed it.

But there were good reasons for Jesus doing what He did. First, just like the triumphal entry, this event was also prophesied in the Old Testament. God predicted four hundred years earlier through His prophet Malachi, “...*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.* ² *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 (Malachi 3:1b-2)*

Malachi predicted that God’s messenger, Messiah, was going to suddenly show up at the temple, not as an ally, but as an adversary. He will be angry, and He will come in purifying judgment. What was going on in the temple that caused Jesus to fulfill this prophecy? Allow me a few moments to explain some things about temple protocols and procedures in the first century that will help us understand the context for Jesus’ reaction. When Matthew tells us that Jesus “entered the temple,” it means that He entered the temple precincts. The temple precincts included the court of the Gentiles (that area beyond which Gentiles could not go), the court of the women (beyond which women could not go), the court of Israel (beyond which laymen could not go), the sanctuary (beyond which priests could not go), and the holy of holies. The traders would have been at work in the outermost court—the court of the

Gentiles (Morris, PNTC).

Moneychangers performed a useful, even a necessary function because worshipers came with a variety of currency from all over the world. However, it was required that all offerings be made exclusively in Tyrian coinage (coins from Tyre), probably because Tyrian coins were so reliable. Tyre was the most important international trade center in the world at the time, and businessmen insisted that their coins be precise in their weight and in the amount of silver or gold contained in them. So Tyrian coins became the world standard for reliability. Thus, temple worshipers in Jerusalem had to pay their temple tax and purchase their animals for sacrifice in Tyrian currency, which they could get from the moneychangers at the temple (Morris).

Conveniently, after pilgrims exchanged their money, they could pay their temple tax and purchase animals for sacrifice in stalls that were set up in the Gentile court near the money-changer tables. Obviously, it was not practical for pilgrims coming from long distances to bring their beasts or birds with them. And it was a hassle to purchase these animals across town and have to carry them bawling and squawking to the temple. So, sellers of sacrificial animals set up their stalls in the court of the Gentiles so that worshippers could immediately enter the inner court where these skittish animals would be slaughtered and sacrificed. It was efficient and convenient.

It is in this area of the temple precincts that Jesus single-handedly threw out the traders and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of the dove sellers, putting an abrupt end to their commercial activity. It has often been suggested that Jesus did this because they were exploiting the poor and lining their greedy pockets. Certainly, such practices did exist at the time.

But Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was directing His anger toward *both* sellers and buyers, which suggests that He opposed the practice of doing business in the temple precincts. That's because this commercial activity was thoroughly incongruent with the purpose of the temple and was a distraction to prayer and worship. Jesus said, "*It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer...'*" which is a direct quote from Isaiah (56:7). That statement in Isaiah contains the phrase, "for all people," and in Mark's Gospel account of this story, He includes this phrase in Jesus' quote (11:17).

Because the outer court was for Gentiles, Jews may have considered it to be the least sacred place in the temple precincts, and therefore, the safest to conduct their business, for they certainly viewed Gentiles as less holy than Jews. But the Gentile court, which God Himself designed, was certainly sacred to God, whose eternal plan was to ultimately allow Gentiles to be insiders of His grace and inheritors of His salvation.

Using the outer court for trading meant that if a Gentile came to the temple to pray, the only place He could do it was in the middle of a busy bazaar. And while Israelites could go into the inner courts, they had to pass through the bizarre, and there is little doubt that the noise from the traders would penetrate the inner courts enough to interfere with quiet worship (Morris).

Quiet, undistracted prayer and worship is essential for authentic communion with God, and it angered Jesus that authentic worship was being hindered or marginalized. It angered Him that Gentiles and other worshipers were being treated inconsiderately and disrespectfully. Furthermore, the very act of buying and selling suggests that someone is profiting from the business. And profiting from other worshipers on the temple grounds is incongruent with the God who dwells on those grounds. That is why Jesus quotes Jeremiah when He accuses the temple merchants of turning His Father's house into a robber's den.

Undoubtedly greed and profit were motivations in the minds of many merchants, which is incompatible with true worship.

Incidentally, by doing what He did, Jesus fulfilled another Old Testament prophecy that a day would come when “there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 14:21).

What can we learn from Jesus’ actions in the temple? First, I would suggest to you that Jesus was very deliberate in what He did. It wasn’t that He woke up on the wrong side of the bed that morning and then happened to walk by the temple and saw some things that irritated Him, and because He was grumpy, He lost His composure. No, He deliberately went to the temple that day for at least three reasons:

First, to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Mal. 3:1-2; Zech. 14:27) that predicted God’s messenger would come to the temple in judgment, and that He would purify the temple. This was not something the average Jew, and certainly not the typical Jewish leader, associated with Messiah’s arrival. Remember, they thought Messiah would be a Jewish nationalist—what today we might call a *Zionist*. They thought there would be full cooperation and a seamless transition between the contemporary Jewish leaders (who saw themselves as the custodians of Jewish religion and tradition) and the Messiah, whom they assumed shared their opinions, perspectives, conclusions, and convictions. To put it simply, they thought Messiah would be on their side.

This notion of Messiah coming in judgment, not just on Israel’s oppressors, but on them—God’s covenant people—was not on their radar. And again, I would suggest to you that it is because there is a natural tendency for devout people to think that God thinks like them, and that their views are God’s views. But that simply is not true. It has never been true. God said through Isaiah, “*As high as the heavens are above the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isa. 55:9).

When Jesus went to the temple on that Monday during Holy Week, He didn’t come to take sides; He came to take over!

Which brings me to the second reason Jesus deliberately went to the temple that day. He went there to establish His authority. I like the way one Bible scholar explained His actions in the temple. “It is the sequel to and culmination of the deliberately symbolic entry to the city; we see now how the Messiah stakes His claim in the central shrine of His people” (Morris).

You may know that this was not the only time that Jesus got angry and aggressive in the temple. John tells us that He did something similar early in His ministry, only on that occasion He made a whip and began driving out sheep, oxen, and pigeons. Yet I find it interesting that in both incidents no one tried to stop Him. He was not restrained or arrested by the temple police. No one said to Him, “Hey, who do you think you are and what do you think you’re doing?” It was almost as if the people instinctively knew that He was right, and that He had the moral authority to do what He did.

Then, finally, Jesus deliberately went to the temple and did what He did in order to defend His Father’s honor. John tells us that after Jesus had driven out the animals and overturned the tables of the moneychangers that He and the other disciples remembered a statement in Psalm 69 in which David said, “Zeal for your house will consume me!” (69:9).

That does not mean that Jesus was passionate about the stones, or the architecture, or the furniture, or anything about the building itself. This is a reference to His passion for the One who inhabited the building. It was the One for whom the building was dedicated and the One who revealed Himself and imparted His grace and forgiveness to those who visited that building.

The reason Jesus was so passionate is because the most important thing to Jesus was His Father's honor. And He simply would not stand for anything that would diminish or dilute that honor.

Jesus was not (and is not) opposed to efficiency or practicality or convenience or even commercial activity for that matter. He is opposed to anything that diminishes or dilutes His Father's honor. And He will take whatever measures to make sure that it does not happen.

In this case it was very obvious to Jesus, even if it was not to others, that this marketplace and all its trappings were preventing people from truly and sincerely communing with God. It was an enormous distraction to their worship. It was disruptive. Most of all it trivialized God.

Trivializing God is not the same as rebellion, but it is every bit as offensive. We trivialize God when we do things, even well-intentioned things, without considering His holiness and majesty and glory. We trivialize God when we determine the protocol for coming into His presence rather than following His instructions. We trivialize God when we are so concerned with making our worship convenient or efficient that we forget that worship is not about us, but God. We trivialize God when our worship is more of a performance or procedure in which we go through the motions, than it is a truthful encounter with God that compels us to fall on our faces, or repent of our sin, or give Him our hearts, or cry out "holy, holy, holy."

There are few things more offensive to Jesus than when we trivialize His Father. Which is why Jesus would not stand by and let this go. He had to act. His Father's honor was at stake. This temple court bizarre was a travesty to Jesus. It was morally outrageous. And He felt He had a moral obligation to right this wrong.

I am not going to have time to address the other things that happened in the temple that day. Jesus healed the blind and the lame who came to Him. Jesus was praised by children, which annoyed the chief priests and scribes to no end. These are incidents and conversations that are worth exploring, but we don't have time today.

I do want to close by attempting to clarify something that is often misunderstood in this passage. Jesus got angry—really angry. So angry that He got aggressive and even violent. I have no trouble reconciling in my mind Jesus' intense anger with His sinlessness. I believe His anger was righteous anger, the kind that God feels toward sin and wrongdoing, and the kind that emanates from His holy character.

But I do want to caution you: Don't try this at home! Don't assume that because Jesus got really angry that it's okay for you to get really angry. Don't assume that when you do get angry that your anger is *righteous* anger like Jesus'. There may be occasions when you or I have righteous anger, but it is probably rarer than we think, and we need to be very careful in not assuming that it is. Our anger is almost always tainted with something that comes from our flesh—our old sin nature. Like pride, selfishness, resentment, or fear.

I have heard Christians compare the storming of the capitol on January 5 to Jesus' storming of the temple during Holy Week and justifying the actions of the protestors by saying that it was the result of righteous anger. No, it is not.

I have also heard Christians compare their angst to the wearing of masks and social distancing during the Corona Virus pandemic to Jesus' angst in the temple during Holy Week. No, it is not.

Most of our anger is unrighteous anger, and we do ourselves and Jesus and those who observe our attitudes and actions a great disservice when we suggest otherwise. Jesus' anger emanated from His passion for His Father's honor and glory. If we get angry for the same reason, may God preside over our anger and use it to communicate His heart and His

Tempest in the Temple Matthew 21:12-17

Main Idea: Jesus creates a storm in the Temple by His aggressive and passive behavior and gets positive and negative reactions.

Jesus confronts greed in the Temple (12-13)

Jesus' aggression (12)

He drove out the buyers and sellers

He overturned tables of money-changers and pigeon-sellers

Jesus' rebuke

"This is God's House!"

"Your greed is shameful!"

The public confronts Greatness in the Temple (14-17)

The blind and lame are healed (14)

Children shout praises (15)

Pharisees react with indignation (15-17)

They remain unconvinced by Jesus' miracles

They criticize Jesus' for condoning the children

Application:

A passion for His Father's honor

An unwillingness to take sides