

# Zeal for the House of the Lord!

Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-25 (ESV)

December 17, 2006

“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” “Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Do you hear? We hear the whip. We hear the oxen and sheep, as well as those selling them. We hear the money changers, as well as their spilling coins and overturned tables. We hear the pigeons, as well as those who sold them. We hear the people. But do we hear Jesus?

“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” We are familiar with taking these things away. We are familiar with not making the temple a house of trade. But are we familiar with, and do we hear, the one who thus enters the temple and calls upon the very God of Israel as “my Father”? “My Father!” Can you imagine? The Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, “I AM WHO I AM,” the God of the Exodus, the God of the covenant, the God of justice, the God of righteousness, this God Jesus calls upon as “my Father.” “My Father!” And from that moment, the temple was forever changed.

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6 (ESV))

This is a story about Christmas!

“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” After the whip fell silent, after the livestock was gone, after the last coin rolled to a stop, these words reverberated through the massive, stone temple: My Father! My Father! My Father! Do we hear that? No one had ever said that before. No one since has been able to say that.

For Jesus to call upon God as his Father was to say as simply as possible that he was the Son of God. For the first time, for the only time, once and for all, God himself had come to be with us in the person of his son. That is why we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The age of the prophets had ended. The age of the apostles

was about to begin. All of history swung decisively and irreversibly from one age into the next. The expectations of the centuries past had been fulfilled. The centuries of the future would be filled with remembrance. “The hopes and fears of all the years” were met in him. Thus proper worship would no longer be restricted to the temple. True worship would instead forever be focused on our one Lord Jesus Christ:

...the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. (The Nicene Creed)

Thanks be to God!

Thus it is the case that Jesus did far more than cleanse the temple. He occupied the temple. He took over the temple. He possessed the temple. And he replaced the temple with himself. For centuries, the temple and its various predecessors had been known as the house of the Lord. But from this time on, it would be known that God is present to the world in Jesus Christ. For centuries, the temple had been the place of making sacrifices to restore oneself to right relationship with God. Now Jesus Christ was making the ultimate, complete, and perfect sacrifice himself that would not only end all other temple sacrifice but would alone restore humanity to right relationship with God. Jesus took possession of, and thereby signaled the end of, the entire temple and all it stood for, with all of its worship and with all of its sacrifice. From then on, he would be the only temple of the Lord.

Of course, there was a price to pay for all of this. “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Thus it had been written in Psalm 69:9, and the disciples remembered that when they saw it come true in Jesus. “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This verse is usually taken to mean that it was his zeal for his Father’s house which led Jesus to cleanse the temple, and surely that is true. He was filled not so much with anger as with holiness, righteousness, energy, and passion. At the same time, surely it is also true that it was his zeal for his Father’s house, indeed his zeal for his Father, that consumed Jesus entirely across the course of his life. He was completely devoted to God. He was completely filled with God. He was completely dedicated to God’s will. He completely fulfilled God’s commandments. His zeal consumed him until there was nothing left. He gave his life for his Father. He came to earth to give his life for us.

Already here at the beginning of the gospel Jesus knew that. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” They thought he was still talking about the old temple of stone. But the “My Father” had already been spoken. Jesus had already made the transition out of the old world and into the new world. He was no longer talking about the old temple of stone. He was talking about the new temple of his body crucified and resurrected. He was talking about the new reality of life eternal. He was talking about the new worship of God that would be offered around the world in and through his name. He was talking about redemption and salvation: “Peace on earth, good will to men, From heaven’s all-gracious King.”

This was not inexpensive. It was not easy. It was not something insignificant or incidental. It is not to be taken lightly. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came here to us and suffered the loss of all things for us and for our sake. We dare not neglect, ignore, or belittle this. It was by his death and resurrection alone that Jesus restored us to right relationship with God and therefore to right relationship with each other. Thanks be to God!

It was a long time later, only after his crucifixion and resurrection, that his disciples remembered all of this and remembered what he had said. It was a long time later, only after his crucifixion and resurrection, that his disciples began to understand and to believe both the Scripture of God and also the word that Jesus had spoken. Still today, we cannot understand who Jesus is or what he is about except in terms of his crucifixion and resurrection. Only from this perspective do these words of his make any sense at all: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” In his death on the cross, Jesus was the last, final, complete and perfect sacrifice that restored us to right relationship with God. That ended the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. In his resurrection from the dead, Jesus became the new temple of God, the new center of right worship, no longer geographically limited to the city of Jerusalem but instead accessible in the spirit from anywhere in the world.

How are these ancient affirmations and accomplishments of continuing interest, significance, and importance to us today? To say that Jesus is the Son of God may not have the impact on us that it once had on the world. In this person, in this human being, we have not only a window through which to look at God and to look at heaven, and we have not only a door through which to go to God and to go to heaven, but also we actually have the only vital, living link between God and ourselves, the mediator between the Creator and the creatures, the one who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Perhaps we could elaborate upon this to say that Jesus is the center of all meaning to life and is the source of all that is good. The quest for meaning is an important one for us. In the midst of boredom, confusion, or loss, we want to know

about meaning. Jesus shows us that the meaning of life is to be found not in acquiring things for ourselves but in receiving what he has done for us. The meaning of life is to be found not in acquiring things for ourselves but in pouring ourselves out for others even as he did for us. To grasp life is to lose it. To pour out life for others is to gain it. Christ has given himself for us in order that we might live. The very meaning of our lives is that we are the ones for whom Christ has died, and therefore we are to live as Christ would have us live.

As we are restored to right relationship with God, we, too, are filled with zeal for the right worship of God. It is important for us to realize and to remember that we are not the Son of God. It would not be appropriate for us to make a whip and to cleanse the temple the way he did. Some things are appropriate to him as Lord that are not appropriate to us as disciples and followers. But it is appropriate that here we realize that we have to do, every moment of every day, with the living and almighty God, creator and redeemer of the universe. It is God with whom we have to do, not simply our neighbor. It is God with whom we have to do, not simply our spouse or our children. It is God with whom we have to do, not simply our boss. And it is God with whom we have to do, not simply some country preacher, in Sunday morning worship.

Thus there is a sense of awe and reverence that is appropriate before the majesty of God. When we come to worship God, we are not dealing with the mundane, the humdrum, or the realities of everydayness. We are dealing with fire and spirit, life and breath, joy and love, majesty and holiness. So this is not a marketplace. It is not a place for conducting the everyday business of buying and selling, no matter how good and important such buying and selling might be in and of themselves. Instead, we gather here for the worship of the Lord God Almighty, the Father of Jesus Christ.

That is also to say that we are here today both to remember and thus also to believe. As we read and so hear the ancient word of the Scripture of God, it becomes the present word of the living God even to us today. And as we proclaim and so remember all that Jesus did for us, we believe the good news of Christmas that he is the Son of God, and in so believing we receive eternal life.

Mild he lays his glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth. (“Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”)

“Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”  
Do you hear what Jesus is saying? The Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and

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earth, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, “I AM WHO I AM,” the God of the Exodus, the God of the covenant, the God of justice, the God of righteousness, this God Jesus calls upon as “my Father.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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