



Jesus: In The Temple

If we were all sitting in our churches, what would God do if he walked among us right now? How many places claim identity, relationship and sponsorship to his name that would cause him to respond with anger, and perhaps even with violence?

If you've been reading these lessons from my web site in the order they're listed, then we've been walking together with Jesus as he walked among us. This is lesson three in the series, and I purposely placed it in this order, immediately after the time he encountered the adulterous woman with the crowd who wanted to stone her, and showed his desire to give mercy and forgiveness; his immeasurable love for even the worst sinner, and his intolerance for hateful, judgmental, and hypocritical attitudes.

In this lesson we go with Jesus into the temple so we can see the contrast of how God responds in some unusual circumstances. This setting is found in Matthew 21, beginning at the moment when Jesus was riding the donkey into the city of Jerusalem.

Mat 21:6 The disciples went, and did just as Jesus commanded them,

Mat 21:7 and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their clothes on them; and he sat on them.

Mat 21:8 A very great multitude spread their clothes on the road. Others cut branches from the trees, and spread them on the road.

Mat 21:9 The multitudes who went before him, and who followed kept shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Mat 21:10 When he had come into Jerusalem, all the city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?"

Mat 21:11 The multitudes said, "This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

Mat 21:12 Jesus entered into the temple of God, and drove out all of those who sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the money changers' tables and the seats of those who sold the doves.

Mat 21:13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers!"

Mat 21:14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.

Mat 21:15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children who were crying in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the son of David!" they were indignant,

Mat 21:16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes. Did you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing babies you have perfected praise?'"

Mat 21:17 He left them, and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

Now, let's face it, it is so much easier to talk about Jesus expressing the compassion, mercy and forgiveness of God than it is to ever broach the subject of God getting mad. But there are moments, there are places, and there are times when what we will experience from God is not tenderness but anger. You can actually tick God off, but it may surprise you where it actually happens.

You would think it would've happened with the adulterous woman, wouldn't you? I mean isn't that what we always hear about God, that he's so focused that his real ambition is to get sin out of our lives? Yet what we saw was that when this adulterous woman was thrown in front of Jesus he wasn't angry at all! Well... at least not at the woman. In fact he did everything he could to create an environment where she could find safety, compassion and mercy in the presence of God. So, if that kind of sin didn't anger God then maybe he would never get angry.

I would think that if Jesus was every going to be provoked to real anger, and perhaps even violence, it would be at the cross, or somewhere close, like with what happened to him starting in the garden when the mob came and took him captive. After all, it only got worse from there. I mean if someone spits in your face, or slaps you, or lies about you, or takes a whip and beats you until you bleed profusely, wouldn't you get upset?

Personally, I'd have gotten major upset long before it got into the physically painful stuff. You spit on me, if its an accident, well, okay I can handle that. If its on purpose I'm not going to be happy. You start slapping me around we're going to have issues, but if you start beating me and drawing blood it's going to get really physical between us.

But here Jesus is, absolutely brutalized and hanging on the cross, and what does he say? "God forgive them because they don't know what they're doing." From my human side, that doesn't make any sense to me. I'd expect him to say, "They know exactly what they're doing God. Nail'em!" But that's what I would do, and maybe you would too. But not Jesus. If Jesus isn't moved to violence and anger at the cross, wouldn't you think he'd be above ever getting ticked off?

But here he is, mad as fire. He's so upset and so incensed he's throwing chairs and turning over tables! Jesus moves in violence in this moment. He starts destroying things and throwing their material and wares, and releasing their animals they were selling. And when they try to grab their stuff he stops them and intimidates them physically until they have to leave without their money and merchandise.

This is not what you would expect from Jesus in the temple. You would expect that when Jesus went to the temple it would be a perfect fit. Have you ever been tired from a long day at work or from a tough day at school, or whatever it may be? And there's this place where you live that's just really comfortable, like your favorite recliner that you've sat in for a long, long time, and the cushions have just formed perfectly to your body? Someplace where you can just chill and relax and feel really comfortable. You'd expect the temple to be that kind of place for God; the temple would be the "divine lay-z-boy". A place where Jesus could just fit and rest, but Jesus does **not** fit into the temple.

I wonder how many times God just doesn't fit into our religion. How many times are we just fooling ourselves into thinking that what we're doing really invites God into our presence and brings God any pleasure at all?

Jesus goes into the temple and begins kicking out, throwing out, the money changers. And what we find is that the religious leaders of Jesus' time chose to keep the temple of God rather than the God of the temple. I wonder how many of us, by the choices we make in our lives, choose our own self-designed religions that are really empty and meaningless rather than to allow God to disrupt our lives, and turn everything upside down, to change our lives to actually bring pleasure to God himself?

Strangely enough, Jesus quotes a scripture and says, "My house will be called a house of prayer...". Now some people will take this and say, "Aha, see, whenever Christians are together; whenever we're in God's house, we're supposed to be praying!" But, if you come to that conclusion, you're **almost** right, but almost right can be very wrong.

You see, what Jesus is doing is pointing back to Isaiah 56. Now remember that back in Jesus time they didn't have references. They couldn't say, "turn back to Psalms 42", and people could grab their bibles and turn there and read it. Someone would just quote a scripture and you had to know where to find it. That is really knowing scripture! Today, you could say, turn to Isaiah 56, and most professional Christians, even with our modern day reference system, wouldn't have any idea where to find it. Hence the need in many updated churches to have a screen at the front, large enough for everyone to see, that shows the scripture being read.

Anyway, I just happened to be thinking about that and thought I'd mention it. So now let's take a look at Isaiah 56.

Isaiah 56:3 Neither let the **foreigner**, who has joined himself to Yahweh, speak, saying, "Yahweh will surely separate me from his people;" neither let the **eunuch** say, "Behold, I am a dry tree."

(Notice in this that God is pointing us to the foreigner, the outsider who is not an Israelite by birth. This theme is repeated several times here.)

Isaiah 56:4 For thus says Yahweh, "To the **eunuchs** who keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant:

Isaiah 56:5 to them I will give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name better than of sons and of daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 56:6 Also the **foreigners** who join themselves to Yahweh, to minister to him, and to love the name of Yahweh, to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath from profaning it, and holds fast my covenant;

Isaiah 56:7 even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my **house of prayer**: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted on my altar; for **my house shall be called a house of prayer** for all peoples."

It doesn't just end there. Jesus is driving us to the heart and core of God. What Jesus is pointing to is that they had given up something so valuable that they had forgotten it. The temple of God was supposed to be a house of prayer for all the peoples of the earth; not just the Israelite. It was never intended to be a place where God was held captive and people had to buy God's love, grace, and forgiveness. It was not supposed to be a prison, but a portal into the presence of the creator of the universe. They didn't even know what they'd lost.

One of America's favorite past times is garage sales; selling our junk to other people. I'm not sure why we do this. The stuff we would throw away we sell to other people, and they actually buy it. And the stuff somebody else would dump, we buy. Maybe some of the fun is pricing things you know are worth nothing, or at least almost nothing and seeing how much you can get for it. You can tell people you made a killing because people came and bought your trash. Personally, I'm addicted to garage sales, as much as I hate to admit it. I've gotten some pretty neat junk at garage sales. Makes good filler for my storage units.

What would happen if you sold some piece of junk for five dollars and later you found out it was an antique worth a million? Wouldn't that drive you crazy to know that it was in your hands for a while, maybe even for years and you just dumped it because you didn't understand the value of something? Sometimes we demean the value of things and place value on things that are meaningless. What is it about us that we will actually value junk instead of those things that are priceless?

So, let me tell you what was happening in the temple. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law, these religious leaders, thought they'd created the scam of a lifetime! "You cannot get access to God unless you buy your way in through us! So you have to buy your dove here, pick up your spiritual merchandise over there. You can't access God without us." To fill their pockets with more money, they would take a percentage of the profit of the merchants who were allowed to sell wares within the temple walls. The people who needed something for a sacrifice for their sins or some other requirement of the law, would just purchase it right there in the temple, go through the required rituals, and the Pharisees, Scribes and other hierarchy would just pocket the profit they made from this very convenient arrangement.

This event makes some people ask, "Then why do churches sell coffee and books and stuff?" It's not the same deal. There's a disclaimer; you don't need any of this. There's

nothing we can sell you that will get you to God. Access to God is free, already paid for by Jesus Christ.

But what these guys were doing was retailing God's forgiveness, compassion and mercy. And what they'd lost was the presence of God in their midst. What they'd forgotten was that the temple was supposed to be this mysterious intersection between heaven and earth, eternity and history, and people were supposed to enter this temple to come into the presence of the creator of the universe! And all the nations of the earth were to come here and find God.

Now, I want to go back to II Chronicles 6, because here is where the first temple was dedicated by a guy named Solomon. In this area of the Bible Solomon is lifting up a prayer to God during the dedication of the temple, and I want you to see what he says. Remember, the temple was this amazing, majestic, God designed place that was one of the marvels of the world!

Take a look at verses 32 and 33, and see the words of Solomon as he dedicated the temple.

2Chronicles 6:32 Moreover concerning the **foreigner**, who is not of your people Israel, when he shall come **from a far country** for your great name's sake, and your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm; when they shall come and pray toward this house:

2Chronicles 6:33 then **hear from heaven, even from your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you for; that all the peoples of the earth may know your name, and fear you**, as does your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by your name.

There he is again, there she is again, the foreigner, the stranger, the outsider, the person who is not a native Israelite from anywhere and everywhere around the earth. His prayer is not about God's people, but about those who are **not yet** God's people. **Here** is what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had lost. This is what they'd thrown away and given up, to gain so little that they thought was so valuable.

The Temple of God was supposed to be this magnetic place where all the peoples of the earth, who were desperately searching for God, who had prayed to their false gods, who cried out to their idols, and were desperately searching for hope and meaning and life, and they would finally turn and think, "Maybe the God of Israel is really God. Maybe if we turn to his temple and cry out there, maybe God will hear us."

And the defining marker that this temple was actually a place where God met men was that the foreigner, the alien, the stranger, the outsider could have their prayers answered by the living God himself. Now, here's a thought. If the purpose of the temple was inadequately described by saying it was a house of prayer, but was a house of prayer for all nations; if Jesus could see what was lost, is it possible we've lost something we do NOT see?

I hear Christians all the time say, “Oh, that was such great worship. That was such a meaningful and refreshing sermon. God just really spoke to me.” You see, a lot of us are just Christian consumers. We come and we experience God, and we think that if we have this great, compelling, and inspiring experience with God that we’ve entered the absolute consummate experience of worship. But I want to tell you, that is still **far short** of God’s purpose for worship. Is it possible that you and I have **never** experienced **genuine**, real communion with God at the deepest, most consummate level until we have used our lives to bring someone who’s looking for God into the presence of God and allowed them to experience life in him? Something changes in your life when it becomes more important to you that others find God than even yourself finding and knowing God.

There are churches now that are including things like artistry, actually painting, and dancing, and showing special videos and poetry reading in their services. Unfortunately there are also those who complain about the changes, and wonder if the church is becoming an entertainment theater rather than a house of worship. What I’ve found out, though, is that the people who hated these changes the most are the very ones who absolutely NEVER bring anyone without God into the church. But those people who could see the advantages, who deeply appreciated the changes were the ones who took advantage of what the church was offering and brought in people who didn’t know God, but who desperately needed him in their lives. Every time their church community changed to make God more accessible to people who were so far away from God, they experienced worship differently.

The temple was never properly used because they never developed the heart of God for the foreigner, the alien, the stranger, the outsider, or the outcast. And there is no true, genuine, communal worship when we’re only about ourselves; if our hearts are not broken for those who have not yet found God.

So Jesus throws out the money changers, then he heals the sick. He touches the blind and the lame who were there and he heals them.

Do you attend a church where, right in the middle of the service, they have a welcome or greeting time? I’ve attended many churches that do that, and the one I attend now does that. It seems to be a ritual many Christian churches go through, especially those with perhaps less than two hundred members. The pastor would say, “Let’s all greet each other.” And BOOM, all the insiders would start greeting each other. They would immediately find people they know and rush over to them and shake their hands. It is so friendly, and so intimate; but not for the guests.

I keep seeing the people who are not part of the “inside” crowd, who stand there looking around, paralyzed, realizing they don’t know anyone, and it shows because almost nobody seems to see them there. What I see is all the well-meaning followers of Christ actually reach over the guests to greet each other!

People think it’s a great time of fellowship, but NOT for the guests! Have you ever walked in on somebody who was making out? You know, it’s really intimate, but you

really feel like you shouldn't be there? Okay, maybe there's a better metaphor for this issue, but here's the point. There's something wrong when our best community isolates the outsider. Real community creates inclusivity, warmth, accessibility, compassion, friendship for the person farthest out; not just for those closest in.

It's interesting that Jesus then healed the lame and the blind there in the temple. They would have normally been ignored, because the religious leaders didn't really care about the hurting and the broken, but they were very, very interested in the money changers. Do you remember a couple of times when Jesus would have conversations with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and they would ask him if it's right to heal on the Sabbath, like in the following scripture?

Mat 12:10 And behold there was a man with a withered hand. They asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?" that they might accuse him.

Do you know what's funny about that? The Pharisees couldn't heal anyone. I mean, they couldn't even heal on a Tuesday, much less on a Sabbath. It's like they were saying, "We heal openly on Thursday, and it's two healings for the price of one on Friday, but the Sabbath... well... we're torn on that issue." It wasn't like that. They couldn't heal on any day of the week, so the whole conversation was mute. Jesus could've looked at them and said, "You've got to be kidding, right? This isn't a problem for you."

But Jesus could heal at all times; he could change lives every moment. He always longed to touch people and make their lives different. And he healed on the Sabbath because he pressed them against their hypocrisy. He made it clear to them it was always right to help others, to do good, to serve a broken and lost world. The Sabbath was never meant to be an excuse to ignore those who need God.

Isn't it odd that when we come to church we feel that we are validated and justified not to think about people who don't know God. Because, after all, this is for us; this is our time. Is it possible that, if it's God's time, it's when our concern for the outsider should be at the optimum, not at a minimum?

And, of course, then after he heals, they saw this incredible miracle, this wonderful thing, and it says that after the Pharisees and teachers of the Law saw the wonderful things he did, and the children shouting in the temple, they became indignant! It angered them! "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. And Jesus said, "Yes. Have you never read the scriptures..." That was sort of an insult, by the way. He looked at the religious leaders and basically said, "Hey, by the way, have you ever checked out the scriptures? 'cause it says this..." So he continued, "From the lips of infants and children you have ordained praise."

Here's the irony of the picture. Before Jesus gets to the temple the people are celebrating Jesus. "Hosanna, hosanna! You are the hope and salvation of the world!" And as he's finishing in the temple the children are saying, "Hosanna, hosanna to the son of David." But while he's in the temple the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are saying, "You're kind of bothering us. You're in the way."

So, again, you find it reinforced that those who are truly religious, but empty, always choose the temple of God, but reject God in the temple. And I wonder how many of us become indignant when Jesus begins to invade our space, and turn everything upside down? When you begin to deal with who Jesus is, when we begin to hear Jesus speak into our lives, if it upsets you, you might want to check to see if you have found that which is genuine, because the religious become indignant, but the genuine become elated when Jesus is in the room. And I love that the children didn't know any better than to give thanks to God. Jesus said that unless we become as little children we will not see the kingdom.

I think this is something we need to pull back to. You know that in most churches it's the oldest Christians who decide how you conduct the worship service. I mean, the kind of music you sing, how you dress, the language you use. The culture is shaped by the older people and not the younger people, yet what you find in the scriptures is that the children had the best connection to what worship was all about.

When I was raising my children, I remember seeing them in their rooms playing church, and worshipping God in their own ways, and actually being very sincere because it was obvious they enjoyed that. I remember praying that I hope when they're grown up they wouldn't be teaching Sunday School some time and say, "Do you see this verse, you must take up your cross daily? That means you have to go to church." What a terrible thing to happen that people would feel almost like church is a punishment.

I never wanted this to be a painful experience for them. I believe that when there is true worship, there's a celebration that happens in the heart of the innocent. Hands go up in praise, feet move in place as they dance to the rhythm of the music in praise to God, bodies sway as they pray and rejoice before God, and they shout, "hallelujah and amen" as the messages are given. In the young and authentic there is something raw, something real that God really loves and enjoys.

There's a church in California that has several congregations throughout the city, and one of them actually meets in a night club. When they were beginning their first service in that location, they handed out some 3x5 cards and let the people ask any question they wanted. The very first question the pastor got was, "What's a church doing in a night club?"

His response was, "I know what **we're** doing here. What are **you** doing here?"

I agree with that response because, listen to this. Wherever God is, that place is holy no matter where that might be, but wherever God is **NOT** is not holy, no matter how nice it may be, or how much stained glass there may be there, with the crosses and baptisteries and fellowship halls, and padded pews. But wherever God **IS**, that is sacred no matter what else is in the room.

Jesus left the temple, and the Pharisees and teachers of the Law never even noticed God was gone. Wherever Jesus goes, that is holy ground. What you see is that when Jesus was in the temple he was so loving, and patient, and merciful, and forgiving of sinners, but so intolerant of hypocrisy and religion. And perhaps the real measure of the genuineness of our community and our worship is that the foreigner, the stranger, the alien, the outsider, and the outcast, who's not a part of our community ... yet ... finds us as a place where maybe God can find them as they search for him.

Because, you see, the temple was supposed to be that place where those who were seeking for God could find the God who was seeking for them. But the Pharisees lost what was most valuable. So whatever church you go to, no matter where you come together to worship, that is holy, sacred ground when you invite God to be there with you. He invites you to come together so all the nations can come to him.

And our longing shouldn't be that God would answer our prayers. After all, how much more do we need from God? Don't most of us have enough? If we don't, isn't it because of our own inactions or wrong actions? Our prayers should be that God would answer the prayers of those who do not yet know him, so that they CAN come to believe and to know that his name is properly carried there where you meet, because your church should be the place where heaven and earth intersect, where eternity and history meet together, where God and humanity commune, and people are forever changed.

Jesus, God, walked among us, and in anger and violence he demanded that the temple remember what it was for. And, since they rejected God in the temple, God rejected the temple of God and destroyed it. Now he entrusts that privilege to us.

What will we do with it?