

Sermon Series Four: Believe and Live
(The Gospel of John: Signs of the Messiah - 1:1-12:50)

John 2:13-22
False Religion

Imagine if you came to church during the biggest event of the church year and someone was playing a game on their iPhone, someone else was working away on their computer or someone was talking on their cell phone the whole way through the service. You might wonder, “What kind of religion is this? Are they really Christian? Am I really in church?” Passover was the most important feast in the Jewish year. By the time of Christ, it had become a major spring festival. To prepare for Passover, they would repair the roads for the great influx of people and whitewash the tombs so nobody would accidentally touch them & defile themselves. Homes would be cleaned, cooking utensils washed, and the house was searched to make sure no leaven was found. Those living in Jerusalem were expected to put up guests. People in Jerusalem usually dressed up in their best clothes, as if they were getting ready for a journey or going to a wedding. It was the time when they celebrated their dramatic deliverance from bondage in Egypt on the night of the Exodus, when the death angel passed over the firstborn in homes whose doorpost had been marked with blood. This is the first of three Passover celebrations in the book of John. But as Jesus arrives at the temple, all around him are evidences of a Jewish religion in decline. They certainly are filled up with religion, with pomp and circumstance, but they knew little of authentic faith in God. Indeed, as the story unfolds, we find four characteristics of false religion - a religion they had become:

I. False Religion Excludes (2:13-14).

¹³ *The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.* ¹⁴ *In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.*

The Greek term for “temple” here is important because it denotes the area surrounding the temple as opposed to the temple building proper. In the present instance, this refers to the outermost court, the court of the Gentiles. There is a great injustice going on here. Gentiles are being barred from the inner court of the temple. This is especially troubling since these merchants and moneychangers are disrupting and keeping non-Jewish God fearers from worship in the only place that was open to them. This was insensitive at best and evidence of religious arrogance at worst. Isaiah 56:7 says, “*These (the Gentiles) I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*”

Sadly the church of Jesus Christ does this today. There are only “certain people” that are welcome in many of our services. Often our attitude towards the homeless, the “sinners,” the long-haired hippie types, and even the illegal immigrants is one of exclusion. We are not so happy to include them in our services. Our attitude towards them is sometimes similar to the Jewish attitude that all Gentiles were “pigs.” But God longs to see people of all types and especially lost people being included in our services.

II. False Religion Commercializes (2:15-17).

¹⁵ *And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.* ¹⁶ *And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.”* ¹⁷ *His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*

Two groups of people are portrayed as the targets of Jesus anger. They are the moneychangers and the merchants. Jesus unleashes his fury on them because they are defiling the pure worship of God. Now it is important to realize that the sale of sacrificial animals rendered a valuable service to those who travelled to the Passover from far away and enabled them to buy the animals they needed on-site rather than to have to lead or carry them for long distances. Cattle and sheep were needed for various kinds of offerings and doves (pigeons) required for the purification of women, the poor and the ceremonial cleansing of certain kinds of skin diseases. The moneychangers also rendered a service since many of the visitors to Jerusalem had to exchange their currency for local currency. The only acceptable coinage of was Tyrian coins since they were made of pure silver.

Why then did Jesus react so sharply? Why did he use the whip? And why did he seemingly drive both people and animals out of the temple? And he did this all without a word of warning. **First**, we have already discussed the primary reason of excluding and disrupting Gentile worship. **Second**, these merchants were also robbing the people with inflated prices for their services and the temple establishment had amassed excessive wealth in Jesus’ day. They were all part of a religious system which exploited the poor for the purported goal of beautifying and administering the affairs of the temple. **Third**, some scholars suggest that many believed the daily whole offering, which was financed by the temple tax, provided atonement and expiation of sin.

Jesus is red hot with anger! In effect, he is saying “How dare you! This temple is a sacred place because of its relationship to the God of Israel. It is God’s house. How can you profane it by making it little more than a marketplace?” Jesus denounces this trade because it is dishonest, corrupt, but most importantly, because it exists there at all. Many Jews in that day believed that tradesmen and merchants should not enter the temple at all! Why? Because they were driven by dishonesty

and lust for wealth. They could hardly be sincere God-fearing people. Jesus' temple action should have reminded them of Zachariah's prophecy that "*on that day there will no longer be merchants in the house of the Lord Almighty*" (Zechariah 14:21) or the words of Jeremiah, "*Has this house, which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes?*" (Jeremiah 7:11) It also should have brought to mind the words of Malachi that on the coming day of judgment, "*suddenly the Lord... Will come to his temple,*" so that people may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord (3:1, 3).

Later, his disciples would come to understand the gravity and power of the prophet's words "*Zeal for your house will consume me* (Psalm 69:9). Jesus' consuming passionate zeal for the house of God would eventually literally consume him. It would lead to his death in order to bring life and righteousness and the purity of true worship to the world - to the house of God.

Today we see commercialism and materialism infecting and polluting the church of Jesus Christ. In some ways we see this directly with bingo and raffles that go on in some churches. We must ask ourselves if the local church building should be used as a vehicle for commerce and financial profit. We certainly see it in the way that the "god of money" and the "health and wealth" gospel has taken over our lives. Even our worship is often about what will make us feel good instead of a single-minded focus on bringing praise and thanksgiving and adoration and surrender to God. Many churches are consumed with the beauty of their buildings instead of the beauty of their hearts. As one theologian has said, the spirituality of our materialistic church members is often a mile wide and an inch deep.

III. False Religion Challenges Christ's Authority (2:18)

¹⁸ *So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"*

It was common for people to ask for proof of a prophet's divine legitimacy. Beyond this, the Messiah was expected to perform signs or miracles. But the Jews are in actuality questioning Christ's authority. Who did he think he was? They are demanding a miraculous sign to authenticate his status and prove his right to take such action. By the end of the chapter it is clear that the Jews, meaning Jewish leaders, are highly skeptical if not downright dismissive of his claim to Messiahship. What gives him the right to destroy their temple and raise it up again?

False religion is one thing, but false religion in God's house is another. We see the authority of Christ challenged in many ways in our society and even in Christ's church. Some religions today are becoming comfortable with things that Christ declared to be sinful: a brand-new definition of marriage, the belief that there are errors in Scripture, the belief that there are many ways to heaven, a soft attitude toward lust, retaliation by taking churches to court, etc.

IV. False Religion Misunderstands Christ's mission (2:19-22)

¹⁹ *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."*²⁰ *The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple and will you raise it up in three days?"*²¹ *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*²² *When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*

To them, Jesus' words are mysterious if not downright appalling. He has just told them to destroy the temple, that is, the sanctuary. And he will rebuild it in three days. They reply that the sanctuary has finally been completed. Why would he want it destroyed? Further, both Zechariah and Jeremiah (Zechariah 6:12-13; Jeremiah 33:15) prophesied that a "righteous branch" or the Messiah would flourish, branch out and rebuild the Temple of the Lord. If he was making a messianic claim, then he better be able to back it up. But they completely misunderstood what Christ was saying because they misunderstood that the Messiah would be both a suffering servant and a coming King. They ignored the passages which taught that the cross would lead to the placing of the crown.

Jesus was actually speaking of a very important event that must come first before his kingly millennial reign. They would "destroy this temple," his earthly body, and in three days Jesus would raise it up again. Jesus would repeatedly predict his death and subsequent resurrection after three days. Not only did they not understand this, but they did not understand that the human body of Jesus was the place where a unique manifestation (incarnation) of God had taken place and consequently he had become the only true temple, the only center of true worship. After the resurrection, the disciples would remember these words and would fully and completely believe them.

Many today completely misunderstand Christ's mission. Indeed a great number of churches see it as some form of social justice, as the laying out of an ethical system of living, or as fulfilled in giving to the poor. Many see Christ as a radical revolutionary or one who will usher in the new Utopia. Now certainly there are aspects of these in his mission, but Christ came to live the perfect life for all mankind, to die a satisfying death for all mankind, to be raised from the dead for our justification.

Conclusion

False religion excludes and false religion commercializes. False religion challenges Christ's authority and also misunderstands his mission. But did you notice that near the beginning of this passage and at the end of it, there is a reference to the Scriptures. The answer to not being deceived by false religion is to know the Scriptures. But today, as it was then, many do not want to study or listen to the Scriptures. There are certain things that the Scripture tells us that we do not want to be told. They would be too inconvenient, too upsetting, too exacting. The

readjustment that they would demand would be too painful. So many either ignore, seek to eradicate or change the Scriptures.

On November 9, 1938, Nazi forces smashed windows and set fire to 1,400 synagogues all across Germany and Austria and destroyed thousands of Torah scrolls. Many of the acts demolishing the scrolls were deliberately made a public spectacle. In one small town, the scrolls were sent rolling down a street as Hitler Youth on bicycles rode over them. In Berlin, the scrolls were burned in a major public square. As Torah scrolls burned in a synagogue's yard in Düsseldorf, German men, some wearing the robes of the rabbis and cantors, danced around the fire. It became known as the "Night of Broken Glass," or *Kristallnacht* in German. The passionate hatred was intense and pervasive. But for the Nazis, it was also purposeful. In his book, *A World Without Jews*, professor Alon Confino argues that in order for the Nazi imagination to flourish they had to cut themselves off from everything Jewish, including the Hebrew Scriptures. The symbolic, very public act of burning the Old Testament scrolls would liberate Germany from the constraints of Judeo-Christian morals, ethics, and beliefs. Dr. Confino writes, "[Burning the Hebrew Bible scrolls] ... was a project to construct a new German Christianity that would owe nothing to the Jews and to other Christian Europeans. The enslavement of Europeans [to the Nazi's worldview] ... depended on the destruction of the Jews first."

Although you certainly are not trying to destroy or rid yourself of the Bible, what is stopping you from daily pouring over its pages? Those million other things you have got to do only matter in the few short years you've got here. The transformation, the life, the comfort, the direction, the hope the Bible brings will affect you for all eternity. What kind of religion are you living out each day?