

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL CLEANSING" (John 2:13-22)

6.28.20

INTRODUCTION

Remember back to your days in school, coming into a new grade after summer vacation? Especially in a subject like math, there was always a time of review - going over what had been taught previously, understanding that that was the foundation for what you would be learning in this new year.

We're kind of going to be doing some of the same thing in this series looking at our "Radical Rabbi," Jesus of Nazareth. In many ways, He did somewhat the same thing - teaching and then building off of that teaching, or maybe a miracle, to reveal something further about the life He was presenting.

So, in doing that, we will be continually going back to two fundamental concepts to be our "building blocks" as we go deeper into the life and ministry of Jesus Christ:

- 1) Jesus' ministry is all about the "kingdom of heaven." It is coming, He said, and part of His mission was to prepare people - including us - for the requirements of citizenship in that kingdom; and
- 2) Jesus' ministry is meant to be an example of a life lived for the glory of God. That was His sole purpose - that all He did would accomplish glory for God. By extension, we are called to live that same kind of life - that everything that we do, everything we say, every attitude we reflect, would be an action, a word, an attitude that reflect glory to God. The necessary question we need to carry with us every moment of every day is this: Is what I am doing, or saying, or thinking a glory to God? Another way to ask it: Would God see this action, or this word, or this attitude of mine in His Son? If Jesus wouldn't translate any of those things as a glory to God, then why should I let any of those things show up in my life?

We will be moving forward with those two fundamentals constantly guiding and refining our paths. And now, before we head into this week's story, let's start with a **moment of prayer**.

TEXT (John 2:13-22)

After this [Jesus] went down to Capernaum with His mother and brothers and His disciples. There they stayed for a few days - John 2:12.

This is simply a transition statement that John is using to flow his narrative from one event to the next. The "after this" to which John refers is the wedding in Cana where Jesus had, as His first sign of who He was, changed water into wine. Going "up" or "down" in Jewish literature did not mean traveling north ("up") or south ("down") like it would for us, but rather a change in elevation. Because Cana sat at a higher elevation than did Capernaum, to go from Cana to Capernaum would very literally have meant going "down." Incidentally, Cana was roughly 16 miles from Capernaum, which was situated on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem -John 2:13.

The distance from Capernaum to Jerusalem is just under 80 miles, meaning a walk of considerable time and energy. But the Passover was one of three major Jewish observances that all adult Jews had initially been required to **attend** - meaning, in many cases, undertaking lengthy pilgrimages to be able to be onsite in Jerusalem to celebrate - the other two observances being Pentecost (celebrating the harvest) and Ingathering (bringing the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord). By this time, Passover had become the one pilgrimage that virtually all Jews made sure to make. And Jewish law reckoned adulthood happening at 13 years of age, so the expectation of attendance in Jerusalem would have meant huge crowds; in fact, it has been estimated that the population of Jerusalem would have been increased by 10 times its normal size during the time of Passover, keeping in mind that Jews would not just be arriving from different parts of Palestine but in fact from all over the Roman Empire, all over the Mediterranean basin, as well.

Now just for reference, Passover happened in the spring of the year - during the Jewish month of Nisan (a 30-day timeframe which corresponds with the end of March and the beginning of April on our calendars). And, as we already mentioned, even though Jesus was coming from the northern part of the country, He (and everybody else) would have been going "up" to Jerusalem as a reflection of its geographic height as compared to virtually every place else in Israel.

Now the temple to which Jesus was heading can be kind of thought of as Temple 3.0. The original temple, the Temple of Solomon, was completed in about 960 BC. It was destroyed by Babylonian forces under King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC during their final incursion against the nation of Judah. Some 50 years later, after the Persian king Darius allowed some exiles to return to Jerusalem, the temple was reconstructed under Zerubbabel, who was the governor of Judah at the time. This is the reconstruction of Jerusalem and its temple recorded in the OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah. As the temple's foundation was being laid, according to Ezra, for those who remembered Solomon's glorious temple: ***[M]any of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid - Ezra 3:12.*** This version was completed in 516 BC and existed in that form until 20 BC. That's when King Herod, the Idumean ruler who had been appointed to rule Judea by Roman authorities, undertook the task of renovating the temple, in good part to win the favor of the Jews, who largely despised him and his rule. This renovation, still ongoing when Jesus was ministering, would continue until 64 AD. When completed, it actually took up 15% of the total area of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the completed temple would only last another six years, until 70 AD, when Roman forces under Titus destroyed it, along with the rest of Jerusalem. This was the destruction Jesus foretold when He had said to His disciples: ***"Do you see all these great buildings? ...Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down"- Jesus Christ, Mark 13:2.*** That temple still lays in ruins; it has never been rebuilt.

In the temple courts He found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money - John 2:14

Bible historians are pretty sure that these business ventures were taking place in what was called the "Court of the Gentiles," a designated area on the temple grounds (think of a campus) but outside the area of the temple courts. This was a specific area where non-Jews (either Gentile converts to Judaism or, at the very least, Gentile believers in the one true God) could come and pray. There was a low wall called a "soreg" that surrounded the main area of the temple. There are thought to have been 13 points of entry along the soreg, but Gentiles were forbidden to go beyond the bounds of this wall to enter any of the temple courts - under penalty of death.

Now, there were two practical reasons why the business of selling animals and exchanging money even existed:

- 1) Regarding the selling of animals, as part of the Passover observance, an almost unfathomable number of animals would be sacrificed in the temple. In order to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, many people were coming from very long distances, making it relatively impractical for them to bring the required animals necessary for sacrifice with them. As a result, they needed to be able to purchase sacrificial animals once they got to Jerusalem. And additionally, the Mosaic Law required that the animals sacrificed be without defect - without spot or blemish, literally as perfect as possible. This would have been exceedingly difficult to maintain for the length of the journey which some pilgrims had to endure simply to get to Jerusalem. The temple courts seemed like the obvious place to establish this market.
- 2) Regarding the moneychangers, all Jewish males age 20 and above were required to pay a temple tax. Now particularly for those Jews coming from foreign lands, the currency with which they traveled would likely have had the faces of foreign rulers - for instance, the likeness of Rome's emperor at the time - on the coins. Jews would have considered this idolatry and would have made any coins with such images a blasphemy to make its way into the Temple funds. Only Jewish currency could be received. Therefore, to satisfy the required payment of the Temple tax, travelers from foreign countries would have to exchange the money they brought with them into the appropriate Jewish currency.
- 3) Now because both of these commodities - animals for sacrifice and the appropriate currency for paying the temple tax - were considered absolute necessities for worship, the merchants providing these services could charge virtually whatever they wanted.

So as Jesus enters into the temple compound, what He finds are not people overwhelmed by being in a place dedicated to the glory of the God of Israel, but rather what people have allowed this holy place to become: a stockyard and marketplace. So instead of the smell of incense and the sounds of people in prayer and worship, you had instead the smell and filth of barnyards, and the sounds of haggling and arguing over prices - not to mention the ongoing monetary exchange rates being debated without break as the coins tumbled and rolled loudly across the exchange tables. And this was happening in the only worship and prayer area to which non-Jews had access. This was their temple. And as Jesus saw what had become of this holy place, He was filled with a righteous, divine and unmitigated fury.

So He (Jesus) made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables - John 2:15.

Now with all the animals that had been brought into that space, there were undoubtedly pieces of rope laying around, which the Lord fashioned into a whip, and proceeded to clear out not only the merchandise but the merchants as well. The Greek tells us in no uncertain terms that Jesus applied His whip, His scourge, to everything in front of Him - the merchants and the animals. He likely also applied His whip to the tables of the moneychangers before angrily overturning them.

Now keep in mind that, at least outwardly, this is only one single, solitary guy causing all this commotion - one guy against all these merchants, merchants who have paid for the right to conduct their business in this space. The "powers-that-be" have granted them this permission. As a result, there is almost unlimited possibilities for profits here. And now this guy who most people had still never seen before or heard about is tearing the place apart. And yet, nobody organizes their numbers and decides to go after Him. Instead, they all get out of His way as soon as possible. Obviously, this was more than the force of an ordinary guy. This was the divine force and passion of the Son of God - a force and passion that made offenders run away with no thought to retaliate.

To those who sold doves He said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning My Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me"- John 2:16-17 (quoting Psalm 69:9).

And the rampage continues. Now the doves were the ordained sacrifice for the poorest of people; remember that Joseph and Mary had purchased doves for their sacrifice at the temple upon presenting the baby Jesus to be circumcised. They would have been kept in crates until they were sold. So, part of who Jesus is speaking to at this moment are those who are there to sell doves to those worshipers who needed them.

And the Greek implies that, even though these activities are actively taking place, Jesus is commanding them to stop, to be done immediately. In other words, "This stops now!"

And then, on top of all the other "first impressions" He is making, He gives His first public acknowledgement of who He truly is, when He refers to the temple as ***My Father's house***. If in fact this temple is God's house of worship, then Jesus is unapologetically declaring Himself to be the Son of God. It is a striking validation, not only of who He is but what He is doing. In that culture, a son would have complete authority, in the name of his father, to take care of the affairs of his father's house. That is exactly what Jesus is doing here: He is exercising the rights of the Son in His Father's house!

And, in so doing, He is establishing beyond doubt the expectations His Father has for this house of His: prayer, worship, seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and relationship - all for the glory of the Master of this house. This barnyard bazaar is only about greed and gain and profit - all of which has nothing to do with the purpose of this place. So, take it out of here, all of it ...and don't you dare bring any of it back!

The Jews then responded to Him, "What sign can You show us to prove Your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple He had spoken of was His body. After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken - John 2:18-22.

Now one thing that had been noticeable in all of this chaos is that there had been no show of imperial forces - no intervention by any Roman troops. Judea had rightly earned a reputation as being an extremely difficult and even hostile place to govern. And a lot of that difficulty stemmed from the religious extremism of many of the people so, to keep an eye on and allow for a quick response to even the slightest hint of trouble, right there adjacent to the temple grounds was the Fortress of Antonia - the symbol of Roman power where between 360-480 well-armed Roman troops were stationed. It had been built by Herod the Great during his great temple renovation, and it was named for his Roman patron, Marc Antony. It would have seemed to the casual observer that the ruckus Jesus was creating was exactly the kind of thing that the nearby Roman soldiers would have been keen to investigate, but we have no record of any such intervention by anybody in authority - until these verses that imply that Jewish leadership became involved.

Essentially upon arriving, they ask Jesus, "So just who do You think You are to do this? What gives You the right to even dare do this?" They don't really expect any reply to their answer because they are convinced that they are in fact the only valid representatives of God - not this nobody from wherever. But in answer to their question, Jesus does indeed give them an answer, a "sign," for what gives Him the authority to have done such things: *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*

I'm sure the leaders glanced at each other with looks that declared, "What in the world is this idiot talking about?" And then they tried to retrieve Him from whatever fantasy He was riding, reminding Him that the temple reconstruction, in which midst they were presently standing, had been taking 46 years - and counting - just to get to where it was now. And you think you can take this down and build it back up in three measly days? I'm sure following their answer, they walked away, probably shaking their heads and wondering when some solid treatments for mental illness might be more readily available.

But they missed the meaning of what Jesus said - not to mention the second reference to His being divine. Only a God could rise from the dead - and Jesus was declaring in no uncertain terms that He was that God, and that He would one day rise from the dead, providing a completely certain, undeniable sign that He would from that day forward be presenting a new temple, a better temple, one by which the Spirit of God dwelled within every believer. And, in fact, after this had happened three years later, the disciples remembered back to this conversation, realizing that this had been simply another confirmation of who Jesus was, and why He came.

ANALYSIS

So why did Jesus get so angry when He saw the animals and the moneychangers? Weren't

they just providing necessary services to people who needed them? Well, this is what Jesus saw:

- 1) Jesus saw a designated worship area being overrun by a "farmers market" and "bankers bazaar." That was the designated area for worshipers of God who could not get into the temple area itself because they weren't Jews. With the noise and the smell, not to mention the crowd of customers, Gentiles were squeezed out of their opportunity to come into fellowship with God - a fellowship they obviously desired merely by the fact they were there.
- 2) Jesus saw the temple area grossly reduced from "relationship" - fellowship with God - to "religion" - the means of worship becoming more important than the worship itself. And with the noise and smell being produced by this enterprise, any sense of worship, of being in the very presence of God, was greatly compromised. And obviously the temple was being compromised as well, from being a meeting place with God to being a marketplace for men.
- 3) Most of all, we cannot forget what happened at the dedication of the first temple - Solomon's temple: ***When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "He is good; His love endures forever." Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord - II Chronicles 7:1-4.*** When that happened, Jesus was there. He didn't just know about that glory; He was that glory. When people prayed, from wherever they were, in the direction of the temple, Jesus was in that relationship. With all God had promised through Solomon to dwell in the midst of the nation of Israel, Jesus was making that promise. Jesus knew what the temple had been, and how much it meant to His Father.
- 4) Jesus also knew the tragedy to the unique relationship God had with His "chosen people" when they chose to devote themselves to other gods, false gods, of the people of the nations around them. Jesus was there when God had said through Moses: ***"[T]hese people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake Me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide My face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?' And I will certainly hide My face in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods"*** - ***God speaking, Deuteronomy 31:16b-18.*** And that ominous promise came to pass, as Ezekiel 10-11 records, of God's spirit departing slowly but surely from the temple itself, the temple grounds, the city of Jerusalem and, finally, from a mountain east of Jerusalem, returning to heaven. Jesus was there, for all of it. Now God's spirit

had finally returned, in the person of Jesus, tasked with reinstating relationship. Everything about this "bank and barnyard" threatened to distract and disrupt any relational possibilities, totally blaspheming the only purpose this temple had.

APPLICATION

Now, 2,000 years later, what is there for us in this story? Actually, quite a bit. Jesus had an expectation of what coming to the temple should mean. When God filled Solomon's temple with His glory, it created an incredibly vivid picture of what it meant to be in the very presence of God - finite human beings graciously welcomed into the presence of an almighty, infinite, incomprehensible God. That should be our expectation, too - that, before or beyond anything else, coming to church on Sunday (or any other time) should be a time of great spiritual excitement as we gather as a body to be in the presence of that same God. So, what should that look like?

We could talk about many things, but they would all need to be boiled down to one thing: Awe - being "wowed" by God. It begs a very basic question: Are we in awe of God? Does being with God, being in His presence, "wow" us?

It is a question worth considering. What Sundays at their most basic are our collective coming together into the presence of Almighty God - our Master, our Creator, our gracious Redeemer, our Father. That sounds like a pretty big deal, so big that maybe it requires some planning, you know, some preparation. I mean, think about it: We watch sports teams prepare for opponents before they play. We prepare for a meeting before we get there. Political opponents prepare for a debate before it begins. How do we as a people prepare to meet God when we come together to worship?

You see, what got Jesus so worked up in this ministry moment of His is that that marketplace that had been set up made the temple a whole lot less awesome and a whole lot more common and ordinary because it took attention away from the glory of God, and how overwhelming being in His presence should be. Jesus had seen glory in the temple, and this was not that! And just because people thought it OK to have such things going on in such a holy place, that doesn't mean it was OK, nor does it mean that, over time, the purpose of the temple had somehow changed. It had always been and would always be intended to reflect the awesomeness of God, and the overwhelming meaning of being in His presence. It'd kinda be like putting a Wal-Mart inside the Vatican. Those two just don't belong together.

For Jesus, there was nothing more important than reflecting and communicating the awesome glory of God. And anything less, He was coming after. The stakes were too high to just let God be viewed in casual, common terms. There is nothing common or ordinary about God. He is awesome! He is "wow!"

Wanna try something that may help you understand the awesomeness of God, the graciousness of God and the love of God all at once? It's easy; just do this one thing: Think of all the things you could do without God, all the things you could do without God sustaining your life. Just take a moment and think about that list. You got anything on it?

There's nothing on mine, because I have learned in no uncertain terms that I need God for everything. And the fact that He loves me so much that He provides me everything - that's awesome; that's "wow!"

CONCLUSION

A couple of final things as we close:

- 1) You know, from the first time I came here, I have loved this building. But this building doesn't mean anything unless the awesomeness, the "wow" of God, is what people see here and find here and come to know here. This building, for all its beauty and function and all the rest of it, is a means to an end: the end being presenting God through Jesus Christ to anybody and everybody who needs Him. Period.
- 2) If you're a Christian, then your body is a temple, and the spirit of God is dwelling within you. Let's face it; that's pretty "wow" right there. The God of creation, who put the entire universe together, is dwelling inside everybody who has surrendered their lives to Him through Jesus Christ. That should inspire the same level of awe, of "wow," as any trip made to a house of worship. And Christians of all people should be willing to do anything, say anything, or surrender everything, simply because Christians have the blessing of insight into just how far God's amazing grace has gone for them.

That's the awe that we need to spread in our world. That's the "wow" that we should be excited and passionate and even desperate to share to all those around us. If we are truly living in awe of God, literally everything should take a backseat to working for the Kingdom. The things we do in this life, our careers, whatever they may be, are simply the platforms from which we are invited to share our stories about the awesome God who saved us and keeps us and is preparing for us in His home in heaven.

Does God "wow" you? Is that what people see when they see you - somebody who is living a life overwhelmed by God? Is God the most exciting, breathtaking, beautiful truth you know? Don't keep that stuff to yourself. There's a whole world increasingly desperate and needy to be "wowed" by the same God who has "wowed" us. Let's pray!