

Zealous and Consumed



Gary Wilkerson February 23, 2015

In John 2, Jesus enters the temple for an act that would signal the beginning of his public ministry. (His earlier miracle at Cana, turning water into wine, wasn't a public declaration.) What takes place next is quite dramatic:

"The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. 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. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me'" (John 2:13-17).

What Jesus does here is more than radical. Tell me, if you wanted to announce your ministry, would you go into a megachurch and start turning over tables and driving people away? Jesus was up to more here than just showing his authority. He was demonstrating that he was about to turn things upside down in every way.

This all happened during the Passover season. At the first Passover, Jewish families had to slay a lamb as a ritual sacrifice, draining the blood and applying it on the door frame of their house. The idea was that when the angel of death arrived and saw the blood marking the door, he would pass over that home. It was a symbolic ritual that reenacted God's saving deliverance of Israel from Egypt, when he set his people free from all bondage and slavery.

Now Jesus came on the scene as the Lamb of God whose sacrifice would provide our deliverance from the curse of sin. John the Baptist was aware of this, having already declared of him, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). In less than three years' time, the world would behold Christ's finished work as the sin of all humankind was laid upon him.

Throughout the New Testament Christ's saving work is referred to as having been finished.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross would be sufficient for all time. His saving, forgiving, cleansing power and victory are available to every person in every era, from the most devout believer to the most hardened sinner.

Even as a young boy, I understood my need for Christ's gift of salvation. I also knew that when I accepted Jesus, his saving work on my behalf had been achieved once and for all. It was a momentous event for me. But it didn't take long after that for my anger to erupt at one of my siblings as happens so often among kids. Suddenly, I was aware that I needed Jesus' cleansing blood in my life all over again. I felt utterly lost, wondering whether my salvation was real.

Eventually I learned that I needed not only Christ's salvation but his cleansing power in my life daily. Jesus demonstrated our need at the Last Supper, when he took a towel and basin and began washing his disciples' feet. Peter puzzled over this symbolic act, saying, "Lord, if you're going to wash my feet, why not clean my head too?" Jesus answered in essence, "Peter, you're going to be saved by my blood. But you still live in a dirty world, and as you walk through it you'll get dust on your feet. You're going to need me to wash your feet just as much as your heart."

It's true Jesus has made us new creatures, having justified us once and for all. But as we walk through the mire of a dark and evil world, we can't help picking up flecks of its anger, lust and hardness. Jesus says to us, just as he told Peter, "If your life is going to be pleasing to me, I have to rid you of these things daily."

To walk in his holiness, we have to realize there are things in our lives Jesus wants to drive out. When he ran the moneychangers out of the temple, he was ridding the church of a certain callousness that had overcome them. It wasn't so much the exchange of money that upset Jesus; that practice had existed for years, as a convenience to faithful believers who traveled great distances to Jerusalem. What upset Jesus more was the focus on commerce, which had overtaken people's passion for God. In their hearts, a house of prayer had been turned into a house of trade.

The church today can easily lose its focus in the same way. We are God's temple on earth, our bodies the dwelling place of his Holy Spirit. And there are certain things that don't belong in our temple, things that can overtake our passion for him.

Yet when Jesus began this upheaval, he was overturning more than the moneychangers' trade. He was overturning a religious system that for millennia had relied on animal sacrifices to please God. Christ was stating in essence, "Your relationship to the Father will no longer be based on sacrifices of sheep and goats and doves. It's going to be based on my once-for-all-time sacrifice for you."

That scene in the temple offers an analogy for our time. A lot of congregations today are filled with noise and activity. They have many programs in place, from overseas mission trips to local outreaches to dozens of small fellowship groups. The worship services can be full of bright lights, powerful sound and amazing energy. Yet sometimes amid all this lively activity something is missing at the center: Jesus himself.

I'm not suggesting we start turning over book tables in church foyers. But without Christ as the focus of our activities, our church is dead. No matter how hard we work to do things that serve and honor his name, none of our "sacrifices" in themselves can achieve true kingdom results. From the outside our fellowship may look righteous, but if we don't maintain a focus on Jesus we'll be a church full of dead men's bones.

From Israel's very beginnings, the sacrificial system was meant to be symbolic and secondary.

According to the prophets, God never needed the blood of animals. "I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats... Bring no more vain offerings (Isaiah 1:11, 13). "They sacrifice the flesh and eat it, but the Lord has...no delight in them" (Hosea 8:13, NAS). "For in the day that I brought them out of...Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Jeremiah 7:22).

The system of animal sacrifice was never God's fullest intention to represent his reconciliation with sinful humankind. Like the institution of kings in Israel, it was an imperfect system, yet God allowed it, using it symbolically to point to something higher and better.

He demonstrated this with Abraham. In that ancient time, eastern cultures sacrificed animals and even children to appease their angry gods. When the Lord instructed Abraham to take his son to the mountain to sacrifice him on an altar, Abraham obeyed unquestioningly. That reaction may seem strange to us today, but it suggests a trembling fear that ancient people had toward their gods. When your god spoke, you jumped—otherwise, you might face famine or pestilence. It was fear-based obedience.

But Abraham sensed his God was different. And in truth God was about to show Abraham he wasn't like Moloch, to whom people sacrificed children. When Abraham raised the knife over Isaac, God stopped him. God then provided a ram to be sacrificed. He declared to his servant—and to every believer in every age—"I don't need you to sacrifice for me. I'm going to sacrifice for you." God turned the tables completely, just as Jesus did when he entered the temple.

A "house of trade" mentality infiltrating the church today is the American spirit of consumerism.

There are many voices in our culture urging us to have the best life we possibly could. This concept has translated into the way many Christians approach church. Their idea is for God to bless them with all that they desire in life. But that's not the way God blesses us. Yes, he seeks to serve us for our good—but the name to be lifted up as our

central focus is his, not ours.

As Jesus overturned all those tables he cried out, "Take these things away!" (John 2:16). Likewise today, our temples are to be cleansed of anything that takes the place of his rightful lordship. God sends Jesus to rid us of those things, to prepare room for the things he wants to fill us with. He wants our temple to be once again a house of prayer, faith and kingdom victory.

"His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me'" (John 2:17). When Jesus drove out the moneychangers, his disciples got a picture of what passion for God really looked like. Jesus' actions appeared harsh, but in reality they demonstrated God's loving grace.

A lot of Christians today think of God's grace as excusing passion rather than igniting it. But grace was never meant to leave us in a place of apathy. The opposite is true: When God's grace is applied to our lives, it impassions us with zeal. It makes us more circumspect of heart, more desirous of a clean life, more zealous for the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.

In fact, grace evokes strong emotions. Scripture says that when Jesus' disciples saw their master in action, they "remembered." These devout men had forgotten what zeal for God looked like. Now, as Jesus drove out the moneychangers, their hearts were stirred by the realization, "This is what it means to be consumed with love for God!"

Have you been robbed of your zeal? Has casual Christianity or consumerism overtaken your passion for Jesus? Invite him today to overturn the tables in your heart. May his name rule supreme in your worship, evoking strong emotions. And may he bring to your remembrance the zeal that consumes your heart to serve your great and holy God. Amen!

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