

## Cleaning House!

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John 2:13-22

During the American Revolution the British Troops captured Boston and occupied the city for ten months. War brings out the best and worst in people, and the British were no exception. They took over churches and schools and used them for barracks and singled out the Old South Church for special treatment. They ripped out the pews and balconies and used them for firewood, and put tons of sand and gravel in the sanctuary, converting it to a riding school for a British cavalry regiment. This was, after all, where the Boston Tea Party began.

But the British served liquor instead of tea, and they also tore down the parsonage and burned it for fuel. As if that weren't enough, they burned the minister's library of early colonial life to keep warm. As you might expect, the members of the church and the whole city were *outraged* at such a *desecration* of a house of worship.<sup>1</sup>

### I

Now, maybe you have a glimpse into why Jesus was so upset when he went into the temple in Jerusalem and found moneychangers and vendors selling pigeons, lambs, and cows in God's house. Now, as you know, Jesus was a kind, loving, and peaceful man. So he had several *options* open to him. He could have politely requested a meeting with the directors of the associations of moneychangers and livestock sellers and asked them to cease and desist. Or he could have gone home and composed a measured, but firm letter to the editor of the Jerusalem post to correct this infraction – but not this day. He was so *outraged* that he made a whip and drove the animals out, overturning the trading tables. I can imagine that all *heck* broke loose that day. These people had

crossed the line, and Jesus was as mad as *heaven* and wasn't going to take it any more. They had turned his Father's house of worship into a house of trade.

Now to be fair, those businesses served a useful purpose for the temple. During Passover tens of thousands of foreign Jews were in town and needed their money changed into the local currency in order to buy their animals for sacrifice in the temple. So, these business people were providing a vital service. However, they didn't need to set up shop inside the temple walls. There was plenty of room outside the walls for their business dealings.

So Jesus, sounding like an Old Testament prophet, exhibited *righteous indignation*, using a little *tough love* to clean house. After this unscheduled spring cleaning, the temple leaders asked him by what authority he had done this, and in good rabbinic fashion Jesus redirected the conversation by suggesting that if they tore down the temple, he would raise it up in three days. They didn't know whether this was blasphemy or just plain foolishness; it had taken Israel 46 years to build the temple. Three days was preposterous! But once again Jesus and his critics were talking past each other, like two ships passing at night. They were talking *bricks and mortar*, and Jesus was referring to his *own body* and how it would be raised in three days after his crucifixion. "Oh, Mom and Dad; you just don't get it!" How many times have we said or heard that?

## II

We all have our *limits*, I suppose; and Jesus discovered his when he walked into the temple that day. But did Jesus sin? Sure, what he did was out of character, but did he cross the line? Did he resort to *violence* to make his point? I don't think so. Both the Old and New Testaments say "be *angry*, but sin not." This implies that anger in itself is not a sin. Anger is an appropriate emotional response when we see injustice or wrongdoing. It is the heart and mind refusing to accept cruel and unfair treatment of other human beings. So if someone lunges toward a loved one with a weapon,

our gut response is to tackle and subdue that person with all our strength, even using deadly force if that will save a life. And we believe that to be good and moral act on our part. If we extrapolate to a national level, when the allied forces tried to stop the Third Reich in World War II, they were engaging in a necessary and just war to stop a madman from conquering Europe. German pastors and theologians in Germany plotted to kill Hitler, on the grounds that they would be saving many lives. Among them was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who paid for that act with his life. Yet, today he is considered close to a saint for this brave act.

So, no, I don't think Jesus *sinned* that day when he drove people who were profaning and desecrating God's house of prayer for personal gain. He was *angry*; but he did not *sin*. He was just cleaning up God's house and being very urgent and firm about it. I suspect that a lot of people there that day privately cheered Jesus' act, for they in their heart of hearts had known all along that God's house was not to be used as a market place.

What does Jesus have to teach us today? I think that he might be trying to teach us that we have *profaned* our world today. I don't mean you; I know I'm preaching to the choir – not that choir, they don't listen to what I say anyway. But our culture has abandoned most forms of manners and decorum that used to be common place. If you watch old movies, it is striking to see how formally people dressed then. People used to wear suits and ties to professional baseball games in the 30's and 40's. I have an old faded black and white photograph of my grandfather sitting in a small row boat dressed in a three piece suit and a neck tie with a fishing pole in his hand. I can remember getting dressed up to get on an airplane in the sixties. And most church ushers would send you home to change clothes if you didn't wear a coat and a tie or a dress in the fifties and sixties. My! How things have changed.

### III

But it runs much *deeper* than that. There has been a steady *coarsening* of our culture in the past 30 years. Turn on the television or go to a movie and most of what you see is violence, sex, greed, and conspicuous consumption. *Basic respect* for human dignity is no longer the norm. Just ask teachers; they will tell you. And this is what Jesus encountered when he entered the temple during Passover. The Temple was God's house; it represented his earthly dwelling place; and it was built for worship, not for business and commerce. It should be treated with *reverence* and *respect*. So Jesus took the bull by the horns and cleaned house. It needed cleaning.

As I was trying to find an appropriate end to this sermon yesterday, after having the wind knocked out of my sails by Florida State, I came across a wonderful story (In Wayne Dyer's *The Power of Intention*) that captures the essence of the Gospel Jesus came to teach us. A father and his young son with a learning disability were walking through a park one day and came upon a baseball game. The father impulsively asked his son named Shaya if he wanted to play and Shaya said yes. The father knew that this would help Shaya feel like he belonged. The father asked one of the players on the field if Shaya could play in the game. The player looked at his team mates who all just shrugged, so he decided to make an executive decision. "Sure, why not. It is the eighth inning and we are losing by six runs." Shaya's face lit up, and the father was ecstatic.

So they gave Shaya a glove and sent him to center field. The losing team managed to score three more runs and found themselves in the bottom of the ninth with bases loaded, two outs, and it was Shaya's turn to bat. Would the losing team let Shaya bat and ruin their chances at winning? To the father's *surprise* they let Shaya have a bat. The pitcher took two steps toward the plate and lobbed the first pitch so Shaya could hit it. But he swung and missed. Obviously he had never swung a bat before. A team mate came to the plate and showed him how to swing and then the two

of them together held the bat and when the pitcher threw the second pitch they managed to hit a soft grounder to the pitcher. The pitcher had plenty of time to throw Shaya out at first, but instead he threw a high arcing pitch well over the first baseman's head out into right field.

Everyone started yelling, "Run to first, Shaya, run to first!" So Shaya ran to first base, for the first time in his life. When the right fielder got the ball, aware now of the pitcher's intention, instead of throwing Shaya out at second, he threw the ball over the third baseman's head. Shaya stopped at second, but the opposing shortstop came over and took him by the hand and headed him toward third base. As the tying run rounded third and headed for home, all the players on the field were running behind Shaya as he rounded third, shouting, "Run Shaya, run!" When he crossed home plate for the winning run, all 18 players hoisted Shaya on their shoulders and cheered madly for their new "hero" who had just hit a "grand slam" to win the game. It was an *amazing* sight.

As Shaya's father told this story at a fundraising dinner for a school for learning-disabled students, with tears streaming down his face he said, "That day those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection." And so can we, if we let the love of God into our hearts and into our lives. Let us pray.

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<sup>1</sup>*And Plead for the Rights of All*, Ola Elizabeth Winslow, Nimrod Press, Boston, 1970, pp. 111 -114

