

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁴¹ And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." ⁴⁵ And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, ⁴⁶ saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." ⁴⁷ And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, ⁴⁸ but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

This idea of selling wares in the church being something not in keeping with God's will can come to a head in the church. I can remember a time when the parochial school wanted to have SCRIP for sale in the narthex after the worship services. In case you don't know, SCRIP is where schools and other organizations in the church are able to purchase gift cards and gift certificates at a discounted price, and then sell them to the general public, and pocket the difference for their own use. Well, some folks had a problem with this practice, and how it seemed to fly in the face of Jesus' demand that there not be buying and selling within the church; that it was a disgrace to not have the house of God be a house of prayer, but instead be a cave of robbers. So, it was decided to move the cash box and the SCRIP cards to

the trunk of our treasurer's car! This way it was outside of the church itself, but they would still be able to capitalize on the sales. When winter came, it was decided that the sales could happen in the church office, with the door closed, and that this would be separate from the church itself. I even heard folks say that this way people would be able to proceed out of the church without being tempted to buy, or they could turn into the office and make their purchases/donations.

While this might be construed today as making a mountain out of a molehill, it was a big deal for the folks in that congregation. They were sincerely concerned that they were not obeying the letter of the law, but they weren't as concerned about the spirit of the law, in the end. There were many other instances of breaking the Law of God that they weren't concerned about; to elevate this to the point of influencing behavior in such a noticeable way was a symptom of a bigger problem.

It all turns on how we interpret Jesus' reaction to selling in the temple, rather than in the marketplace. What was He really upset about – the selling, or the fraudulent tactics they were using? Was there some broader and more applicable purpose behind his strong, even violent, reaction? As we delve into this narrative, we'll see that there's much more here than meets the eye – Jesus was concerned that the people weren't interpreting the signs of His coming correctly, and didn't believe anymore that the Savior was the only way to heaven. They thought that they could somehow keep the Law of God perfectly, and get into heavenly glory that way. Jesus disabused them of this false thinking, in a way that certainly got press coverage!

Let's give some background here – why were the merchants selling things in the temple at all? Folks would come from far and wide to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover. They had all different kinds of currency from the lands from which they came, they spoke a number of different languages, and they needed to trade in their money for the coin of the realm. It wasn't practical for them to bring an animal for the sacrifice that was required, so after changing in their money for local currency, they then had to purchase the animal that they would then sacrifice. At first, this was done away from the

temple, out in the city, but then one of the sellers decided to make it a “one-stop shop” and set up business in the temple. That doesn’t sound so bad, right? It’s just making things more convenient; besides, it was a necessary service, right?

The problem was – there were no safeguards to make sure that people were getting a fair deal; in fact, the moneychangers were able to pocket a huge commission off of the last-minute, “I need it now” money conversion. Just like the tax collectors, who were despised because they were crooked, so were these moneychangers. They were giving the temple a bad name – it was “sanctioned” by them because it was in the building – they were tacit participants in dishonest activity. Further, the sellers were taking advantage of people by charging way more than market value for the animals that were going to be sacrificed – just like the gas prices are higher at the stations that are near the airport for people having to refuel before returning rental cars! Jesus was upset mostly because of the dishonest activity of the moneychangers, AND that it was happening in the temple. The temple was supposed to be space set apart for worship of God. We tell the children today that they are to behave in the house of God, they aren’t to run or make loud noise in the nave or the chancel of the church, because it is sacred space, set apart to do the things of God here. In Jesus’ day, it had been corrupted, defiled, treated like any other gathering space for people to do what they had to do in order to satisfy the Law

This was part of a wider problem, that we see in the first part of our chosen text for this morning. Jesus was weeping over the city of Jerusalem – again showing His human, but sinless, emotions and in this case, righteous sorrow. They had scorned the prophets, had not listened to the predictions that without repentance they would be destroyed, and that there had to come a punishment to wake them up from their spiritual slumber. They desired peace from their earthly enemies, the Romans. That’s what a lot of people thought that Jesus had come to do – to set up an earthly kingdom, and establish His rule here on earth. Even the apostles falsely thought this up until the point of His ascension.

What they didn't realize was that the peace that God talks about through the Old Testament Scriptures doesn't have to do with the absence of war in this world, but rather peace between mankind and God. This peace was destroyed in the Garden of Eden – no longer could man walk in the garden in the cool of the day with God – man was now sinful and unclean in thought, word and deed. The only way for peace to be restored was for the Savior to come, suffer and die, and rise again, for the sins of the world. They didn't remember this, and thought that their sacrifices of bulls and goats would be enough to atone for their sins. THAT'S why Jesus was so upset with the selling going on in the temple – the belief of the people of what those offerings would do for them. What they really needed was the peace that is beyond understanding, that they would only get through His life, death and resurrection

Because they didn't get it, there would be a punishment – the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the destruction of anything that got in the way of their belief in the true God and His alien, outside action on behalf of His people. It would only be a generation later, in 70 AD, that the entire city would be leveled by the Romans – Jesus' prophesy here was one that had a short-term fulfillment. But, there was also a long-term fulfillment – at the end of time, this world, and all that is in it, will pass away. There's no middle ground – we're not just going to rot in the ground, and lay there forever. When death comes, eternity will be spent either in heaven or in hell.

The moneychangers in the temple – they were an example of the corruption that was completely destroying the faith of the children of Israel. They were going through the motions of keeping the outward law of the Old Testament, but had lost their perspective to realize that sacrificing bulls and goats pointed ahead to the supreme sacrifice of the Savior that was to come. The only way for sin to be atoned for is for there to be a death, and only the death of the Son of God Himself would allow the sacrificial Lamb to rise again on the third day, and have his death count for all men, and not just for Himself. Jesus was weeping for the corruption of the city of Israel; how bad things had gotten; how

much the people had been led astray by the false prophets and false shepherd, who were only looking out for their own skins and their own reputations.

Let's follow the series of events here – Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and how bad things had gotten. Then He cleansed the temple of the moneychangers, the most obvious example of the corruption. What did He do next? He taught the people – He didn't just give up on them, or write them off, or send an angel from heaven to completely destroy them. He could have done all of these things. He had a right to bring in another destruction like the flood in Noah's time – after all, He promised not to destroy the whole earth with flood waters again, but He didn't rule out destroying a particular city with another catastrophe!

He taught the people – how? Daily in the temple – He established a relationship with them, earned their trust, started with elementary teachings, and then moved on to the things that were more difficult. He didn't just say that they were dumb for missing the prophesy, evil for bringing in corruption, and start over with another group of people. He recognized that they were sheep without a shepherd, and had a heart for teaching them the things that they needed to know

Now, we know that this didn't last a long time – after all, this happened just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. We know that just five days after His entry into Jerusalem, He would be killed on the cross of Calvary. However, they hung on His every word – that's why His enemies weren't able to arrest Him just yet, or stop Him from teaching in the temple, because the folks wanted to hear what He had to say. If you think there were crowds at the Sermon on the Mount, that were measured in the thousands, I think we're led to believe that this was even more well-attended, and that those who were there were completely enamored with what Jesus was saying. The Holy Spirit worked in their hearts to make the people receptive to His teaching – they were a “captive audience”. This time, not being forced to lose money on currency exchange and buying sacrifices.

Rather, they were captivated by His teaching, because He was teaching like one with authority, rather than the rabbis, who didn't have this certainty and power

What did He teach them? We aren't told specifically, but we can assume that He taught them that the sacrifices they were so eager to offer in the temple would soon be coming to an end – the supreme sacrifice of Himself was soon to occur. That's what He did – He freed His people from looking forward, and supplied them with an objective event in time that caused their sins to be forgiven.

Starting with John the Baptist, who told the people that He was the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world, He explained that the entire Old Testament pointed to Him

Whatever it was that He was teaching, it was upsetting to the chief priests and the scribes – probably because He was telling the masses that the religious leaders had gotten it wrong. He was calling them out for preaching the letter of the Law, when it was the spirit of the Law that was important. The reason that we keep the Law of God is not because we fear His wrath if we transgress it at one point. He already knows we are sinners, poor and helpless to save ourselves. The point of the Law is to guide our Christian living, to do what God likes and avoid what He hates, all because of our love for Him and our desire to spread His love to the nations. The motivation for the Law of God is different – not fear, but love – and He was making that clear to the people.

I had a student when I used to teach religious classes in the parochial school, to seventh and eighth graders, who was enamored with this text. He seemed to take every opportunity to bring it up in class, over and over again. He was entranced with the idea that Jesus wasn't like a common misconception of Him holds, that He was always gentle and meek and mild, and never had a problem with anyone. I think it was a comfort to this one student because He was one of the hooligans in my class! To have a Savior that deals with the same anger problems as us, yet did not sin, is reassuring. Combine this with the foibles of the disciples, like impetuous Peter and doubting Thomas, and you have a Savior that can sympathize with our weaknesses. But, we ought not see this narrative, where Jesus

shows His human side, as a failing on His part. There is such a thing as righteous anger – times where drastic, even violent, action is justified. We know that Jesus exhibited many human emotions while He walked this earth, yet He never sinned even once. Here, we see that He wept, He turned over tables, He did things that we wouldn't expect Him to do – all for the purpose of exposing the corruption that was happening in the temple of the Lord.

It's also interesting that the next thing He did, after rectifying the situation in the temple, was He gathered the people around Him to teach them. He wanted them to understand why He did what He was doing, which was to preach and exhibit the pure Gospel, instead of the false and corrupted substitution that the religious leaders were offering. That's the most important task of the church, even today – to teach. Get the people to come and listen to pure teaching and right explanation of the things of God. Break down the walls that stop people from coming to listen, by the Holy Spirit causing people to ignore the foibles of us earthly teachers, and listen to the message that the representative of God in this place is trying to proclaim. We all have our limitations, and excel in some things and not others. But, the pure Gospel message that we proclaim is perfect, and is in line with God's will to preach and teach. As Luther said many times, the church is not only a reading-house, it's also a mouth-house – it's where the pure Word is taught and spoken, and the Sacraments are rightly administered to the mouths of those who repent and believe the Good News.

Even though it reads today as if Jesus kind of lost His cool in this passage, that couldn't be further from the intended point of the pericope. Jesus cannot stand sin; it cannot exist in His perfect presence. He finally reached the point that drastic, eye-catching action was needed to shock the people out of their false belief and misguided hope. Once that spectacle was completed, the air was cleared to sit down and instruct the people in the things of God, and what had been presented wrongly to them for years and generation. Does the world in which we live and work need an eye-opening event to wake us up? Maybe. Thanks be to God that He's in control of this, as He's in control of everything in our world.

All we can do is continue to be faithful, to preach and teach and administer according to His institution. The Holy Spirit will do the rest. We are urged to trust the Spirit, that He is the promised Counselor, that has come after Jesus, to testify to Him, and to cause us to believe and stay believing to all eternity. Thanks be to God that He doesn't give up on us, but comes to us and does what is necessary for us. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.