

“Jesus Cleans House”

It's time to clean house. I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that way from time to time. As busy lives go on, dust, dirt, papers, and all sorts of other stuff just seem to accumulate and pile up. At least for me, there comes a time when a major cleanup is needed. It isn't always that a major catastrophe causes the mess, or that everything piles up at one time. Little by little the mess grows and you barely even notice it for a while, and then...it's time to clean house. Call it a spring cleaning. Call it a home makeover. Whatever you call it, it means taking stock of the situation and making the changes necessary to bring everything in order.

It was time to clean house for Jesus in our sermon text. I think you can find many similarities between the cleaning house situation I just described and the one that Jesus faced. As we think about that house cleaning, we'll receive some encouragement for our own spiritual house cleaning as well.

This account took place fairly early on in the ministry of Jesus. John describes how this event followed shortly after Jesus' first miracle, when he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana. From there, Jesus and his disciples spent a few days in Capernaum. After that, they made their way to Jerusalem.

They were headed to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Passover. The Passover was the highest festival of the Old Testament. It commemorated how God had rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt. God had sent plagues against the Egyptians who were enslaving them. Specifically, the Passover recalled the tenth and final plague, when the angel of death took the lives of all of the firstborn in Egypt. But God kept his people safe from the angel of death as they followed his command to sacrifice a lamb and to paint its blood on the doorframes of their houses. This plague was finally enough to convince the leader of Egypt that he ought to let the Israelites leave.

God had commanded that the Israelites remember this event and commemorate it each year. In recalling it and speaking about it, they would be encouraged. Just as God had once rescued the people from Egypt, so he would continue to be with them and to protect them. Ultimately, this rescue also pointed to an even greater rescue.

Celebrating the Passover took Jesus to Jerusalem and to the Temple. This special building was the place where God met with his people. The Temple and its furnishings demonstrated that God was with his people. It was a place where they could offer sacrifices as God instructed. It was a place of prayer and for teaching as well.

But the Temple needed cleaning. As he walked in the Temple courts, Jesus saw people selling cattle, sheep, and doves. There were also those who changed money. They converted foreign money from the pilgrims into local Jewish currency, that which was required for paying the Temple Tax. At first glance, these were useful services, and they may have started out as nothing more. People needed the animals in order to offer sacrifices. They needed the proper coins for paying their tax and making their offerings. And traveling vast distances sometimes meant that they couldn't bring what they needed.

But even if these businesses had started from good intention, problems had developed. There were the abuses of taking advantage of these pilgrims. The sellers knew that their coins and animals were needed by the worshippers, and they had the market right there. They could raise the prices and still make their sales. I've heard it compared to the food vendors at a sporting event. Just think about how much it costs to buy a hot dog and a soda or beer at the stadium, when the same food would be available in the store a couple blocks away for so much less.

But that wasn't the only issue, and wasn't the most significant either. The result of all of these merchants peddling their wares in the Temple was that the true purpose of the Temple was being obscured. The true worship of God was the very purpose of the Temple, but that worship was being overshadowed by the merchants and animals. People who were to be worshipping were being distracted by everything else. The Temple truly looked like a market and not like a place of worship and prayer.

So Jesus fashioned a whip and used it to drive the merchants out of the Temple. The animals were sent scattering, tables were overturned, and coins rolled along the floor. The Temple was the house of Jesus' Father, and he was going to make that point. He was going to curb those abuses. This story doesn't reveal the always-smiling Jesus that so many people like to picture. Jesus is serious. He is serious about sin and its consequences, and he is serious about the worship of God. At this moment, he made it very clear that he was serious about cleaning up what was wrong.

And we ought to take this reaction of Jesus to heart. Jesus' concern for true and heartfelt worship of God leads us to be careful not to allow distractions to get in the way or to let anything compromise our worship and God's Word that is at the center of it. We are right to be careful that we don't allow fundraising or social activity to become our main focus at church.

But this house cleaning also reminds us that we need to be careful not to allow sins to permeate our lives. Remember that the Bible teaches that we are God's temple and that through faith he lives in us. And yet, we each have a sinful nature against which we need to struggle. Over time, if we are not careful and diligent, sins start to accumulate. Things that we once would have recognized as out of place we hardly notice anymore. We stop thinking carefully about what movies would be appropriate to watch or what internet sites to visit. We can become careless in the way that we use our time, or in how we treat the people around us. And we're tempted to look at our own lives and even though we see these issues, to gloss over them, to say that they are no big deal. But Jesus looks at them differently. He takes them seriously.

Jesus' disciples even remembered a Psalm about the Messiah and recognized that Jesus was showing himself as the Messiah by taking these issues as seriously as he did. Others at the Temple that day didn't recognize Jesus in this way at all. They asked him to prove that he had authority to do what he did. They asked that he give them a sign. Do a miracle if you are really God's representative.

So Jesus did. Well, he didn't do a miracle then and there. He promised a miracle. He said, **"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"** This was Jesus' promise to do what he had come to do. He was going to die because he was so serious about sin and so serious about cleaning it out of people's lives. But even though he would die, Jesus would live again in just three days. He would prove that he has power over death.

And that is one of the reasons that Jesus wanted true worship to go on unhindered. It was because true worship points to Jesus. Jesus wanted the Passover to be celebrated as God intended because it pointed to him as the true Passover lamb. He wanted sacrifices conducted reverently in the Temple because they pointed to him as the final, once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

And that is how Jesus truly cleans house. He takes the punishment that sins deserve. He forgives them by nailing them to the cross. He dies because of them and rises to life because they are forgiven.

Which brings us back to our cleaning house in our own lives. Clearly we do not make those efforts so that God will love us. We make the efforts because God does love us and has demonstrated it so clearly in so many ways. As his own dear forgiven children he invites us to respond to his love by living lives that line up with his commands. A wonderful house-cleaning exercise is to look again at those Ten Commandments that we read earlier. Maybe you've also reviewed their deeper meanings in a confirmation class at some point. Take a look and see. Use them to show you where messes have accumulated and where cleaning needs to be prioritized.

And worship God, not because he has made some law about it or set it as a requirement, but because we need God's Word, and we meet God there for our strengthening and comfort and encouragement.

The season of Lent is the perfect time for this sort of house-cleaning. Each year this season of repentance reminds us to take that closer look and to see things the way our Savior does. It invites us to look both at ourselves personally and at the work we do corporately as a church. And it does so with Easter in mind. Just as Jesus promised, he raised up the temple of his body in three days. That is our assurance and our hope. It is the reason for us to look to Jesus to clean our hearts, to clean his house, where he lives with us.

The Text: John 2:13–22 (NIV84)

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

²⁰ The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² 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.