

John's Gospel - the Cobwebs of Consumerism

by John Vissers

Jesus cleanses the temple to confront sin and corruption, and to remind the people of the true purpose of worship, teaching us to constantly confront sin and seek renewal and cleansing in our lives and in the life of the church.

Duration: 41:41

Scripture: John 2:12-19, John 2:23-25

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the passage in the Bible where Jesus clears the temple. Jesus enters the temple and finds people selling animals for sacrifices. He becomes angry and forcefully drives out the traders, overturning tables and scattering coins. The speaker draws parallels between this event and the corruption in the late medieval church, emphasizing the need for the church today to examine where the sin of the world has encroached upon it. The sermon challenges the church to proclaim the true message of the gospel and not succumb to materialism or a feel-good message.

Transcript

Now, tonight we're continuing in our study of John's Gospel, where we began a few months ago, and we've gotten this far into Chapter 2, and tonight I'd invite you to turn to John Chapter 2, and we're going to read starting at verse 12 through to the end of verse 25, which also happens to be the end of the second chapter. We've been making our way, meandering our way through the Gospel of John, and tonight we come to this important passage in which Jesus clears the temple, cleanses the temple. So let's hear God's word to us, his wholly inspired and infallible word.

After this, he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 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.

To those who sold doves he said, Get these out of here. How dare you turn my father's house into a market. His disciples remembered that it is written, Zeal, for your house will consume me.

Then the Jews demanded of him, What miraculous 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. The Jews replied, It has taken 46 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. While he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.

He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight and may he teach us and instruct us from this passage. Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we thank you for the privilege of gathering for praise this evening.

We thank you for your word which teaches us and instructs us. And we thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit. And we pray tonight that you by your spirit would speak to us through your word.

Make these words real to us so that we not only understand them with our minds, but that we experience the reality of the gospel in our hearts and in our lives. And that we are empowered to be more obedient in our life of discipleship. And so to that end, oh God, we commit our time as we study your word tonight in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Those of you who have ever done extensive cleaning in your house or your apartment, and I hope that's most of you, if in fact not all of you, will know what a nuisance cobwebs can be. Cobwebs are those things that get into the corners.

They form in the corners of your rooms and they gather dust there and the grime and the dirt and the dust. And even the bugs tend to collect there. They're hard to get at.

They're in those hard to get places. And sometimes they're very difficult to clean out. Sometimes they're very difficult to get rid of.

As I was preparing this week, I looked up in the dictionary what the definition of a cobweb was. And there were a number of terms listed there. The one that I found most interesting was this, musty rubbish.

Musty rubbish. But when you clean a house, of course, you have to get rid of the cobwebs. You have to get every corner clean, every nook and cranny cleaned out.

It has to be swept out. And, you know, sometimes the same thing is also true in our lives. The dusty habits that we have collected over a period of time have generated a lot of dust and dirt and grime, which have collected in the corners of our lives.

And we go through periods in our lives sometimes where we need to clean those cobwebs out and, even more importantly, clean what is creating those cobwebs out of our lives. Sometimes our lives need simply to be swept clean. And what is true of our own lives is also true of the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the habits of the world infiltrate and encroach into the Church. And over a period of time, they build up. And the dirt and the grime and the dust and all of that musty rubbish of the world gathers in the corners of the Church.

And the Church sometimes, too, needs to be swept clean. And when that happens, we usually refer to it as renewal. Or we refer to it as revival, God doing a work in our midst.

Well, as we come to our passage this evening, Jesus is cleaning house. Jesus is clearing out the cobwebs, as it were, in the Temple. But, of course, old habits are hard to break.

And change never comes easily. It was the political philosopher Machiavelli who once said, There is nothing more difficult to carry out, or more doubtful of success, or more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. And what Jesus does in this passage is dangerous.

What Jesus does in this passage is doubtful of success, initially. What Jesus does in this passage is difficult to carry out. But it is about cleaning out the cobwebs.

It is about instituting change. It is unexpected. It is unwise in the eyes of the world.

It probably sealed his fate in the eyes of the religious leaders. But it is the beginning of the road that ultimately leads him to the cross of Calvary. It is the beginning of his ministry.

And all of that is taken up in our passage this evening. Now, the passage opens in verse 12. And I want you to notice that the text says that after this, Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers, and it probably refers to some part of the family, his family and his disciples, where they stayed for a few days.

Now, the after this refers to what has taken place earlier in chapter 2, that is, the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. And we looked at that passage last Sunday evening. And you'll remember that there was this wonderful celebration in Cana of Galilee, and at some point in the wedding celebration, in the ceremony, or in the feast that followed, in the celebration that followed, they ran out of wine.

And here Jesus intervenes, and he intervened by performing his first miracle, that is, turning water into wine. And last week we talked a little bit about what that miracle was all about. And at the end of that passage in verse 11, we saw that this was the first of his miraculous signs.

This was an act which revealed his glory. This was an act which uncovered and revealed and manifested the transforming power of Jesus. It pointed to the fact that he had come to change things, that a new order was about to be initiated and instituted, that things would never be the same again.

His ministry was beginning. And then after the stopover in Capernaum, the text says, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And it was almost time for the Passover feast.

That's what the text introduces us to. And people from all over the countryside would have been making their way to Jerusalem, would have been making their way through Jerusalem to the Temple in order to celebrate the feast of the Passover. But, as we begin to discover, this was not going to be any ordinary day.

Because when Jesus arrived at the Temple, Jesus does not like what he sees. And in fact, the rest of the passage then is taken up with a description of Jesus' action and the interpretation of that action and the unfolding of that action in our passage this evening. And that's what we want to look at.

And what we want to ask is, what happened when Jesus cleared the Temple? What was going on here? What is really at stake? And what does this teach us about our own lives? What does this teach us about

the Church of Jesus Christ today? What does it mean to understand this story and to apply it as God's people in our lives today? So let's look at the passage with those introductory comments before us. First of all, I want us to notice in verses 12 to 17 that we're given a very clear account of what Jesus does. He goes in and he clears the Temple.

Now when Jesus arrived, when Jesus entered the Temple, what he found initially, what he found first, were some men selling cattle and sheep and doves. And these were animals that were being sold for the sacrifices. Now as people made their way into Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, some of them would have brought their own sacrificial animals with them.

Some would have brought doves, some would have brought lambs, others would have brought cattle. And so they would have made their way into Jerusalem and up toward the Temple, carrying or leading their own sacrifices. But for those, perhaps, who came a great distance, for those who did not bring their own sacrifices, they would be able to purchase the required sacrifices, the sacrificial birds and the animals, after they arrived at the Temple.

In other words, it was a service which was provided for pilgrims. It was a convenience. And as Jesus entered into the Temple, the first thing he saw were these stalls, these tables set up, these places set up in the Temple court for the sale of these sacrificial animals.

Jesus also, as he entered the Temple, the Temple court, found others sitting at tables exchanging money. Now, the money changers exchanged the everyday currency that people would have been carrying into currency that was acceptable for the Temple offerings. You see, the Roman coins that they would have used for everyday currency would have carried with them, would have borne, as it were, the images and the inscriptions of Caesar.

And this would have been considered idolatrous, and so they weren't able to use that money, that currency, to buy the sacrifices that they needed in order to celebrate the Passover feast. Because this money bore inscriptions giving honor and glory to Caesar, giving allegiance to Rome. And so the job of the money changers was to take that Roman currency and exchange it into a currency that could be used to pay the Temple tax, to pay the Temple offerings, and also to purchase the other things that were necessary.

And what happens then? Well, Jesus' response takes everyone by surprise. Because what he does is he takes some cords and he binds them together somehow, or holds them in his hands, and he makes a whip out of cords, and he forces the traders and their animals out of the Temple area. And it says that he threw the coins of the money changers all over the place, he overturned their tables, he demanded that those who were selling the doves get out.

And what you have here is a picture of an angry Jesus. Jesus is expressing his indignation, his wrath, his judgment. He will not stand idly by while the things of God his Father, while the things of the house of worship, while the things of the Lord are being trampled on.

He will not watch the house of his Father being desecrated. And of course, what you have here is a picture of Jesus which makes some of us feel very uncomfortable. We're comfortable with a Jesus who is meek.

We're comfortable with a Jesus who is mild. We're comfortable with a Jesus who gently comes alongside of us to comfort us and to guide us. But here we have a picture of Jesus expressing wrath, anger,

righteous indignation.

Well, why was Jesus so upset? Well, it may be obvious in some ways, but in other ways, we also need to understand what's in the background here. We need to understand that the merchants and the money changers had set up their stalls, had set up their tables in the inner court. And this was the court of the Gentiles.

This was the place where the Gentiles were permitted to come. That's as far as they were allowed to go into the temple, and this would be their place of prayer. This would be the place where they could come to honor God, to worship, to pray, to offer their sacrifices.

A place of prayer. And so this place of prayer was being usurped, being desecrated. Furthermore, the sale of the animals, the exchange of the currency, this kind of activity was unprecedented.

And it should not have been carried out in the inner court. It was contrary to temple practice. And if the animals got loose, they would have desecrated the sanctuary.

And finally, I want us to notice as well that it represented the encroachment of commercial and market forces into the temple. The forces of the world upon the house of worship. In the background to all of this, there was a feud that was going on between the Sanhedrin and the high priests over which group of merchants should be permitted to sell their wares, to set up tables, be permitted to, in fact, do what they were doing.

And everyone was trying to cut a deal, as it were, in order to get a piece of the action. As one of the commentators puts it, it was widely known that the system had been corrupted, that the concessions had become merely a means of making money and had debased the temple into a commercial venture. Unjust commissions were being collected, the bribing of priests was common practice, and many other abuses were present.

So you need to understand, as Jesus comes into this temple, what is he confronted by? He's confronted by ruthless competition, he's confronted by chaos and confusion, he's confronted by everything that seems to militate against the worship of God in the house of the Lord, everything that seems to undercut the very thing that the temple is supposed to stand for. The people were not being treated as worshipers, they were being treated as consumers. The temple had turned into a market, they were being sold salvation.

Things had to be changed. Things had to be cleaned out. Things had to be turned upside down.

And the religious leaders and the people had to be reminded what temple worship was really all about. It says in verse 17 that the disciples later remembered the words of Psalm 69, verse 9, zeal for your house will consume me. And they take these words to be prophetic.

They take these words to be pointing forward to the fulfillment of what the Messiah is doing. Jesus is now fulfilling these words. And also if you go back into the Old Testament, to Zechariah chapter 14, you'll see there are prophecies that when the day of the Lord comes, the house of the Lord will be cleansed, the house of the Lord will be cleaned, the cobwebs will be cleared out, and a new day will have arrived.

And so in a very real sense, as Jesus undertakes to cleanse the temple, as Jesus undertakes to clear the temple, it is the announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand. Now I want to suggest to you, if we just

pause here for a moment and think about how this applies to our own day, to the church, to our own lives, that there's some important lessons and some important applications that we need to reflect upon. Because what Jesus confronted in the temple in John chapter 2 is something that always threatens, something that always confronts the people of God.

Because we're always threatened by the temptation to turn the house of God into something which it is not. We are always in danger of trampling on the things of God. And sometimes we even do it with good intentions.

We think somehow that we're helping. We want to help people or we want to make things more convenient, but sometimes we end up, in fact, undercutting the very gospel of Jesus in which we believe. I can't help but read this passage and reflect on it and think about the late medieval period in the life of the church.

If you think about the period leading up to the Reformation, the late medieval church had allowed itself to be overtaken by the superstition and sin of the world. And by the time, as most of you know, Martin Luther arrived on the scene, priests were selling salvation, selling indulgences and lining their own pockets with the proceeds of that which they were selling. A very corrupt time in the life and in the history of the church.

And when you read what was going on in the late 15th, early 16th century, it horrifies you. But someone came along and cleaned out the sin of the world from the church. When we think about the evangelical church today, we need to ask ourselves, where has the sin of the world encroached upon the church today? Are we, for example, sometimes in danger of proclaiming a feel-good message, which I would describe a message of self-indulgences, rather than the message of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the living God? Have we allowed materialism to encroach into the life of the church? Do we back away from what the message of the gospel is in any way? Have we allowed the world to overtake us? Do we seek the mind of Christ, or do we think by the patterns of the world? In what ways do we allow the sin, the dirt, the grime, the dust of the world to make cobwebs in the life of the church? You see, this passage reminds us that the problem is not simply out there in the world, but the problem is in our midst, wherever we've allowed the church of Jesus Christ to be overrun by the world.

In my own devotions recently, I've been reading some prayers by Soren Kierkegaard from the 19th century as part of a guide to my own prayer time. I came to this prayer on Friday, and I thought it was quite providential that this should be the prayer I prayed Friday morning as part of my prayer time. O God, Kierkegaard prays, there are in the outside world so many things which would turn us from thee.

That is why we enter into thy house. But even here there is sometimes a misleading security, as if all danger and all terror were far away. Here, where the supreme danger is to be confronted, that of sin, and the supreme terror, the passion and death of Christ.

You see, as we come to the house of God, we realize that this is a place where, in fact, our sin, as we confess our sin before a holy God, as we plead before Jesus, as we come and seek his forgiveness and his renewal and his cleansing power, that this is a place not where sin ought to encroach, but where sin is confronted, where sin is dealt with in our own lives and in the life of God's people. I'm excited about the future of this congregation as we pray for its renewal, as we see what God is doing in our midst, as we look forward to God's blessing in our midst, and as we just behold the beauty of the thing that the Lord has been doing in our midst over the past number of months or so. But part of that, as we move forward into the future, as we seek the mind of Christ, is that the Lord may want to clean out those areas of our life as a

people of God which do not honor him, which does not, in fact, reflect the reality of who God has called us to be as his people, as a people of worship and praise.

Jesus wants to cleanse and renew us, to clear out of our lives everything that is not in line with his Father's will. But there's more. Notice then what happens.

The encounter takes a turn. Because what happens is that the religious leaders, of course, are a little upset by what they see, by what they hear, they're baffled. The action of Jesus seems to have been accepted, perhaps even welcomed.

It may well be that the people who are weary of fighting their way through the temple, the people who have to bear the burden of all that was going on in this inner temple court, are glad, in fact, that someone has come along and done something about it. And the fact that Jesus was able to get away with this at all probably reflects the fact that the ordinary people supported what he was doing, perhaps even applauded what he was doing as he cleansed the temple. But the religious leaders, notice what they do.

They want to know the basis of his authority. Could he prove that he has the authority to do this by demonstrating his authority in the performance of a miraculous sign? Now, some of the religious leaders, no doubt, were threatened by what Jesus did, but not all of them. Because if you remember what I said a few minutes ago, if there was all this chaos, all this confusion, all of this competition in, in fact, the distribution and the handing out of who was going to be able to do what, some of the religious leaders, those who were on the losing side of all of that, may have stood back and may have applauded.

They may well have thought that this is great, they're getting finally what they deserve. And other religious leaders would have known that the purification of the temple was prophesied in the Old Testament. But all of this is going on, and the overriding question becomes, who is this person who is doing this? Whether you're for it or against it, you want to know whether, in fact, the person doing this has authority to do it.

Even more, whether this possibly could be the Messiah. Whether this is the one prophesied in the Old Testament who indeed will clean the house of the Lord, the temple. And Jesus answers with a very enigmatic statement.

He says, destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days. Now these words are both incomprehensible, but they're also unforgettable. Because this was not, in fact, the reply that the religious leaders expected it was not a reply that they understood and it's no doubt, it was no doubt the case that they probably now thought they had a lunatic on their hands.

I mean, the temple had originally been built by Solomon in 950 BC. It had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC when the people of Israel were taken into exile. It had taken 46 years to rebuild the temple, just the main structure of the temple.

And, in fact, it was still in the process of being rebuilt in the first century. And here Jesus is saying, I'm going to be able to rebuild this temple in three days if you tear it down. And this is an answer to their request that he perform a miraculous sign.

And Jesus, of course, was giving them a miraculous sign, but it was not the miraculous sign that they were looking for. And the text says, later the disciples remembered he was speaking about himself. He was speaking about his own body.

He was speaking about the cross. He was speaking about the resurrection. You see, Jesus is saying in a very real sense, I am the temple.

I am the one now in whom you find the presence of God as a reality. I am the one in whom the glory of God is revealed. And surely, unless this were true, they did have a lunatic.

They did have an egomaniac on their hands. But Jesus is beginning to unfold the reality of his mission, his ministry, his death, his resurrection before them. You see, the whole episode is not simply about an earthly temple.

It's not simply about cleaning the house of the early temple, but it is pointing to the fact that there is now a new temple in their midst, the person of Jesus Christ. This passage is about his identity and his mission. It's an important reminder to all of us that the Christian faith, when all is said and done, is not about a particular church, a particular building, a particular place where people come to worship as important and as significant as all of that is to all of us.

And for some of you, of course, this building, this particular building, is so much beloved as a place where you come to worship. But we always need to be reminded that Christian faith is rooted not in bricks and mortar. It is rooted in the reality of the person of Jesus.

It is rooted in the reality of his death upon the cross for us. It is rooted in the reality of his resurrection on our behalf. He is the cornerstone and the capstone not only of our church, but of our faith and of our lives.

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone, chosen of the Lord and precious, binding all the church in one, holy Zion's help forever and her confidence alone. Whatever we are, whoever we are, whatever we become, whoever we become, as believers in Jesus Christ, Christ must be at the center. Our passion must be for Jesus in our lives individually and in our lives together as the people of God.

I love that statement by the 19th century missionary leader, Henry Martin, who after he went to India on his first visit, on his first tour of duty, made this comment in his diary. He said, I could not endure existence if Jesus Christ were not glorified. Can you say that tonight? Is that the heartbeat which is driving you? Is that the passion of your life? I could not endure existence if Jesus Christ were not glorified.

That ought to be what drives us as God's people. And then finally, notice that our passage concludes with a rather startling observation. It says many people saw the miraculous signs Jesus was doing in Jerusalem and believed in his name, but he would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.

He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. The New International Version, the New International Translation of the Bible, doesn't quite get the full force of what this text is communicating, because the word for believe in verse 23 is in fact the same root word for the word trust in verse 24. They're basically the same.

And you could put it this way. It might read many believed in his name, but Jesus did not believe in them. Or many trusted in his name, but Jesus would not entrust himself to them.

Or many had faith in Jesus, but Jesus did not have faith in them. And why? The text says because he knew their hearts. He knew what was in their hearts.

He knew how fickle and frail their faith really was. You see, people were responding to Jesus because they liked what they saw. They thought Jesus was on their side.

They were attracted to Jesus. He was doing miracles. He seemed to be someone who understood their plight, their side of things.

But Jesus knew that most of them would not be there when it really mattered, when it came time to go to the cross. He knew that their faith was frail and fickle and fleeting, that it would not, in fact, last, that it would not endure. And later in John's Gospel, a number of times we see when Jesus starts to give some hard teaching about going to the cross, about the mission that he has to endure, about the fact that those who are going to follow him have to realize that it's going to involve costly commitment, sacrificial commitment, sacrifice, and even, indeed, sometimes suffering.

It says in one place that those who followed him, those who had been following him, followed him no longer. And I referred to that earlier in this series as one of the saddest verses in all of John's Gospel. You see, as long as Jesus met their needs, as long as Jesus performed miraculous signs which impressed them, which even somehow helped them, as long as Jesus was the Messiah who conformed to their image of what they thought a Messiah ought to be, of what they thought a Savior could be, as long as they could package Jesus and hold him up tight themselves, Jesus was okay.

But as soon as Jesus began to challenge their stereotypes, as soon as Jesus began to push at the edges of their lives, as soon as Jesus made clear that his claim upon their lives was not simply as a miracle worker, but as a Savior and as a Lord, then those who had believed in him didn't believe in him any longer. And that's why in this text it says that Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew what was in the heart. You see, this passage tonight leaves us with a very profound, but at the same time a very uncomfortable question.

Most preachers end their sermons with this question, some kind of an invitation like this, Do you believe in Jesus? But this passage ends with a question that is quite different. Does Jesus believe in you? Is Jesus willing to entrust himself to you? Does Jesus believe in me? Would Jesus entrust himself to me? Would Jesus have faith in my life when he looks into my life and he sees the cobwebs, and not only the cobwebs that I'm unwilling to clean out, but even the things that have created those cobwebs, I'm unwilling to let them go from the depths of my heart. Is Jesus willing to entrust himself to me? You see, I want to tell you tonight that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that he went to a cross, and he was raised from the dead because he wants to entrust himself to you, because he loves you.

But first you have to allow him to come and to do in your life what he did in that temple 2,000 years ago. And if we want to experience the renewing and reviving power of God's spirit, the presence of Jesus in our midst, then we need to invite Jesus to come and do in our midst as a congregation of God's people what he did in that temple 2,000 years ago. Clear out all the chaos, all the confusion, all the dirt and the grime and the sin and the encroachment of the world, and experience his cleansing, his judging, but ultimately his saving power.

That's what the gospel is all about. That's what this passage is about. Won't you trust him so that he may entrust himself to you? Let's pray together.

Lord, as we think about our own lives, we realize that there's so much that we try to hide from you, that we try to hide from each other, that we try to hide even from ourselves. And Lord, you want to come into our

lives and not just sort of in a superficial way clean things out, but cleanse us and clear out everything that so militates against your kingdom. And Lord, whatever that is in our lives tonight, whatever that is in my life, Lord Jesus, give me the kind of faith that I would be willing to entrust my life to you so that indeed I might experience the fact of your faith, of your belief, of your trust as you come and cleanse and renew and empower.

So, Lord Jesus, do your work in our midst, we pray. Amen.

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