



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1286-60
Luke 19:45-48
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April 23, 2006

Protecting Holy Space

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Life in the Mitchell household has changed quite a bit in the last couple of months. It's hard to even express how much better things are. It wasn't more than about two months ago that every night our house was invaded by the enemy—solicitors! Nightly, we were invaded by phone calls from complete strangers trying every trick in the book to get us to listen to their sales pitch. Of course, the worst of it came at the dinner hour, when we were trying to eek out one hour of sacred time and space for our family. Someone told us that if we just tell them to “take us off of your call list” that they wouldn't call back, but that hardly put a dent in the amount of calls. We couldn't just take the phone off the hook, because two of our kids live out of state and we don't want to miss their calls. Finally, someone told us about the national no-call registry. It sounded too good to be true, but it worked. We went online, filled out a form, and within a week 99% of those aggravating phone calls were gone. It was a miracle! Finally, some peace and quiet. Now I'm begging for phone calls at dinner time! Not really!

Isn't it true that sometimes you need to protect certain times and places from being bombarded by commercialism and marketing and just senseless noise? We live in an age where all space and time are overrun by what is commercial. Turn on the television to watch a show and you're bombarded with commercials. Go to a restaurant to eat a meal and you're surrounded by a bank of television monitors. Turn on your computer to work and you're drowned by an invasion of trivia on the web. Drive down the freeway and you're distracted by billboard after billboard, some of them with flashing lights; others flashing more than lights. It's out of control!

The sad thing is it can even happen in those places and times that we most need to protect. Places that ought to be sacred and holy. Places that ought to be reserved for God and for things of the soul are often ravaged by profane propaganda.

Would you believe that Jesus dealt with this very issue? Two weeks ago in our study of the gospel of Luke we saw that as Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time he wept over it because they would soon suffer the consequences of rejecting him. He said, “**Your enemies will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation**” (Luke 19:44).

I. Jesus cleanses the Temple and restores it to its proper function.

A. Jesus cleanses the Temple: With the very next stroke of his pen, Luke says Jesus entered the Temple in Jerusalem. He describes Jesus' famous actions in a very concise way. “**Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling...**” (19:45).

Why did Jesus do this? Commercialism had invaded the house of God. It had all started with good intentions. People who came to worship needed to buy unblemished animals that were declared clean by priests for sacrifice. There were lambs and fowl everywhere. Records exist of transactions in which 3,000 livestock were brought to the Temple hill to be sold. This would have been like the county fair in Turlock! Imagine the noise. Imagine the smell. On top of that, there were moneychangers, because the Temple tax could only be made in local currency so foreign money had to be exchanged.

By the way, this would have all been taking place in an area called the Court of the Gentiles. Mark's gospel says that Jesus “**overturned the tables of the moneychangers and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts**” (Mark 11:16). So they were in this outer court that was as far as any non-Jew was allowed to venture inside the walls. It was in this area that Jesus cleans house! He flips tables and drives all of the sellers out.

Can you imagine what this was like? Imagine someone barging into our church here this morning. He comes in during the offering and grabs hold of the baskets full of money and hurls them everywhere. Imagine him walking up to the tables in the lobby and flipping them over. Imagine him taking a guitar and swinging it like an ax over the piano and breaking it in two. Imagine him picking up my pulpit and throwing it into the crowd. Imagine him locking those doors so no one could come in or get out during the service. How would you react to all of that?

But Jesus doesn't stop there. His shocking actions give way to mighty, prophetic words. Look what he says. “**...saying to them, 'It is written, "AND MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER," but you have made it a ROBBERS' DEN'**” (v. 46). Jesus quotes two OT prophets. The first is Isaiah. The interesting thing is that

he quotes from a passage in which Isaiah is speaking of gentiles who will come to the temple to seek the Lord and to pray. God said through Isaiah, **“Even those (gentiles) I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples”** (Is. 56:6,7).

This goes way back to when Solomon dedicated the temple. Solomon prayed that this temple would be used to draw gentiles to the Lord. He prayed, **“As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name... when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel...”** (1 Kings 8:41-43 NIV).

The temple was not just for the Jews, it was for all people. Seekers would visit and come to know the Lord! A big part of what made Jesus so angry is that all of this commercialism was keeping these seekers from that very thing. They came to pray; instead, they got swindled!

That’s what Jesus says next: **“you’ve made it a robbers’ den.”** The money changing and selling were ripping people off. The amount of the temple tax was one-half shekel. If you didn’t have the right currency the moneychangers would exchange it for you—like changing pesos into dollars. But there was a surplus charge added to the exchange. And if you didn’t have the exact change, there was a surplus charge on top of that. So the moneychangers were cleaning up. People were coming to Jerusalem from all parts of the world, where different types of currency was used, and seeking the Lord, and they had to pay huge exchange rates.

The same kind of thing was happening with the sacrifices. Jewish law required that the animals be spotless and without blemish. There was a priest on hand to inspect each animal to make sure they were suitable for sacrifice. If you brought a dove that was bought outside the temple gates, it wouldn’t pass inspection. So you had to buy it at the temple. And guess what? Those temple doves were very expensive. It’s like the movie theaters that won’t let you bring in your own candy, and then they charge you \$4 for a candy bar. The merchants in the temple had the same racket. The result was that sincere people who just wanted to worship God were being forced to pay through the nose.

This is why Jesus calls it “a robbers’ den.” He quotes from the prophet Jeremiah where he lambasted the Jewish people because, while they

offered sacrifices to God, their hearts were far from him. Jeremiah stood on the steps of the Temple and thundered, **“Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ — that you may do all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” declares the LORD**” (Jer. 7:9-11).

B. Jesus takes over the Temple: So Jesus cleanses the temple of all these abuses; he clears sacred space so all people can come and pray. But that’s not all he does. Look at vv. 47–48. **“And He was teaching daily in the temple; but the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him, and they could not find anything that they might do, for all the people were hanging on to every word He said.”**

The bawling livestock and the fluttering birds are gone, and commerce has ceased. Then Jesus takes over. The temple is his! He holds court in his Father’s house. This took place for several days. Later, in chapter 21, Luke says during the day he would teach in the temple, but at night he would go out and sleep on the Mt. of Olives. And all the people would get up early in the morning to come to Him in the temple to listen to him (Luke 21:37,38).

The temple had always played an important part in his life. It was in the courts of the temple that old Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and blessed him and praised God (2:29-32). It was in the temple that Mary and Joseph found the twelve year old Jesus after losing him for three days, and he said to them, **“Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”** (2:49). And it was on the highest point in the temple that Satan tempted him to jump and prove his Messiahship (4:9).

And now, after cleansing the temple, he possesses it and uses it as his pulpit. Wouldn’t you love to have been there for that class? It’s clear that Jesus sees this as not only a place of prayer, but a place where his word can be heard. Worship includes both. John Stott says, “Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the Word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced. Indeed, it is their unnatural divorce which accounts for the low levels of so much contemporary worship. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor. And our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the word of God is expounded in its fulness and the congregation begins to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe and joyful wonder before his throne. And it is preaching which accomplishes this.”

That’s what Jesus did, and people loved it. They hung on every word. But the religious leaders were deeply offended. His taking over the temple was like a stick of dynamite in his relationship with them. Defiling the temple

was one offense that the Romans allowed the Jews to execute the death penalty. So Luke says they tried to destroy him, but they couldn't because he was so popular with the people. Unlike Jesus, these leaders were the consummate politicians, always licking their finger and sticking it in the air to see which way the wind was blowing.

II. Protecting worship as holy time and space.

As we look at Jesus in this whole scene in the Temple, there are a few things that are very clear.

First, he saw this as a place where ALL people could come and pray and hear the word of God. It was sacred space, not just for Jews, but for all those who were curious or seeking answers. It's interesting because earlier Jesus predicted the temple's destruction, which literally happened in A.D. 70. You see, Jesus also saw beyond the temple. When Jesus disputed with the Jews about his first cleansing of the temple, he said, **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"** (Jn 2:19). The Jews could only think of brick and mortar, but Jesus was referring to his own body (v.21). When Jesus rose from the dead his disciples understood what he meant—that the true temple of God was the presence of Jesus. That's what John meant when he said, **"The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us"** (Jn 1:14). Jesus was the temple because he was the dwelling of God with us. That's why in the book of Revelation, John talks about heaven, saying, **"And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple"** (Rev. 21:22). Where Jesus is, that's the temple!

The apostle Paul takes this a step further. He says to one of the churches, **"Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"** (1Cor. 3:16). Because Jesus is in our midst, we're the temple of God. He says the same thing to individual believers: **"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in you"** (1Cor. 6:19). Wherever the Spirit of Jesus is, that's the temple of God.

And Jesus was willing to take severe measures to protect that sacred space. Wherever that is, in the heart of an individual believer, or in the gathering of God's people in homes or a building like this, it's a sacred place that Jesus will fiercely protect for worship and prayer and to hear the word of God. He'll do whatever it takes to keep it that. This story assumes that it's possible for even the best intentions to crowd out that from taking place and corrupting worship. That's why after reminding the Corinthians that they're the temple of God, he says, **"If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are"** (1Cor. 3:17).

Finally, it's clear that some people loved this, but others resented it. There are those who have a vested interest in commercializing worship. Like the ones in this story, they're usually a part of the religious establishment.

They have much to lose if someone like Jesus comes along and shuts their work down. Meanwhile, true seekers are coming to the temple and looking for that holy space where they can talk to God and hear his word. So worship must be fiercely protected as a holy time and place where all God's people can pray and hear God's word.

III. Twenty-first century applications: protecting holy space.

This is true for us. It's true for us as a church body as we gather weekly for worship, or even as we gather in our small groups throughout the week. We're God's temple. The Holy Spirit of Jesus dwells here among us. We're here to worship. We're here to connect with God through prayer and hearing his word. This is sacred time and space. But what can happen if we're not careful is that, little by little, commercialism and propaganda can creep in and take over.

We can become market driven. We want people to attend our retreats. We want people to come to our classes. We want people to read our books. It costs a little money to do these things, but we're just trying to cover our costs, right? So we market these things. And they're good things, like the sacrifices were good things. But in trying to sell the good things we crowd out the most important thing, like helping people really connect with God. We have to be careful about an evangelical subculture that is market driven. Evangelical publishing houses, record labels, WWJD bracelets and t-shirts have become multibillion dollar enterprises. We think we're being relevant, but who is really listening?

Bob Shaw is a reporter for the Minnesota Tribune. He recently wrote an article that's a good example of what I'm talking about. Let me read from parts of it:

If popularity is next to godliness, Eagle Brook Church is the holiest place in Minnesota. It became the state's largest this month, with weekly attendance of 8,000. And that's without the cup holders. The new \$24 million building is designed to make worship as comfortable as possible, and movie-theater-style cup holders soon might draw even more people. "We're having a little trouble with the cup-holder supplier," said the director of operations. "Overall, it is going remarkably well. We are on a strong growth curve."

Shaw reflects on this and says, *"Critics of megachurches say high-volume big-box religion cheapens the value of worship because it appeals to the consumer culture. Instead of being quiet places of prayer and reflection, megachurches mimic the architecture and noise of malls, theaters and sports arenas. But megachurch leaders say the style isn't important — it's the message, and preaching to empty*

pews doesn't accomplish anything. They say millions have found megachurches an alternative to stuffy, traditional churches. Being un-churchy is exactly the point of Eagle Brook. First-timers could be excused for thinking they were in a mall or a high school, with bright, open spaces and a lack of religious decoration. "That's our cafe on the left," said one leader. Next to Cafe 5000 is the religious bookstore. Next to that is the Box Office, offering tickets for events aimed at nonmembers. Inside, the sanctuary looks like a large theater, with comfortable movie-style seats with armrests. The razzle-dazzle services include comedy sketches, and rock music from an 11-piece band. There are no pews, no Bibles, no hymnals, no stained-glass windows. Which brings us to the cup holders. "Our little coffee shop is humming on Sunday mornings," he said. "It's a huge hit." But we figured it was difficult to stand, sit or praise the Lord with your hands in the air while worrying about dumping a hot latte onto fellow Christians. So we decided to add cup holders — anything to boost their reputation for putting people at ease. "You can't underestimate the value of energy and buzz," he said. "Those things bring people through the door."

Now, I have to admit, I'm a little torn about using this example, because in some ways this sounds a little like us. We don't have pews, hymnbooks or stained glass. And the idea of thinking about how to build bridges with our culture is a good one. There is nothing sacred about pews, or stained glass, or even about a certain style of music that was popular in the 1800's. But at what point do we go too far in our efforts to be relevant and when does this backfire? People from our culture often come to church because they're fed up with the commercialism of our culture, but then they find us trying to be just like the culture. Something is wrong there. It's a good thing to tear down religious barriers, but let's be careful that we don't lose the very things that people really hunger for—and that's a real relationship with Jesus.

I heard a story about a pastor who ran into a homeless alcoholic in front of his church and gave him a \$20 bill. The man gave the money back to him and said, "I've been outside your church every week now for a month listening to you talk about God and Jesus Christ. I only want to know more about Jesus; I don't want your money." All the pastor wanted to do was give the man some money and send him away. He certainly didn't want him in his church. He was so different than everybody else inside. Or was he?

It's possible for us that in trying to build bridges we're giving people \$20 bills rather than Jesus! This carries over into our individual lives as

well. Remember, not only is the body of believers the temple of God but so are we as individual believers. What is it in our own lives that we have to do to protect holy space and holy time for worship, prayer and hearing God speak? What do we have to get rid of? Jesus got physical about this. He used force. Ignore the phone. Turn off the computer or the TV or the Walkman or the iPod.

In 1961 A.W. Tozer wrote a classic little book called, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. In the preface he tells why he wrote the book: "With the loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine presence. We've lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, 'Be still and know that I am God,' mean nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshipper...of the twentieth century."

The only time when Jesus got physically violent in the gospels was when holy time and space was overrun and desecrated. That ought to tell us something about how important this is. So let's do the same. Let's protect our worship as a holy time and place where we and all people can pray and hear God's word.

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