



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Zeal for His House

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ MARCH 3, 2024

In the spirit of this Lenten season, I confess to you that our Scripture passage for today has become something very, very personal to me through the years because there have been times especially after I became a Christian when the good Lord needed to come into my heart and turn over some tables. I'll be reading from the Gospel of John chapter 2 beginning at the 13th verse.

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. ¹⁵ When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. ¹⁶ And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" ¹⁷ Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house [L](#)has eaten Me up."

¹⁸ So the Jews answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

²⁰ Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three

days?"

²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²²Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

²³Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all *men*, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

John 2:13-25 (NKJV)

From my observation, our Lord Jesus seems most often to be portrayed as a kind, sweet, gentle, loving man which He was and still is. One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus is by an old Scottish preacher named Samuel Rutherford who often preached about the "Loveliness of Christ." We picture Jesus as the Good Shepherd with a lamb in His arms or carrying one on His shoulders; talking with sinners, or perhaps surrounded by children whom He dearly loved; or reaching out to heal someone. Some people prefer the beloved picture of a laughing Jesus or pictures depicting Him in His glory.

However, today we see another side of Him. We see a John Wayne-like tough guy who admonishes people very severely, chases them away with a whip and even turns over furniture. Quite a change from the kind and loving Jesus found in our Sunday school books, is it not? What are we to glean from this scene in the Gospel of John?

In one sense, we can see that this is consistent with how God reveals Himself in Scripture. On one hand, God is the God

that is portrayed in the beloved 23rd Psalm, but He is also the God who thunders at Israel and eventually everyone else going back to Adam. God is a God of justice and holiness who categorically hates sin and will not tolerate it. Friends, if we do not grasp this side of One Almighty God, we will not truly embrace our need for a Savior. From what were we saved? Do we appreciate that we need to be saved? Do we truly recognize the risk of eternal peril?

Fortunately, praise God, He also reveals Himself as a God of love, His most outstanding characteristic. With the advent of Jesus, we see what God Himself did about our sin problem. In the Gospel message, we see that we are truly saved, and new life is ours in the present day and throughout eternity. Rather than facing a God of vengeance as when we were lost in sin, fleeing toward the bleeding lamb, He has become our God of peace. We can look up into His face and see Him smiling over us and saying, “Your sins and your iniquities I remember no more!” This is the Lord's doing.

Yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as disciples of Jesus, we still strive for holiness. Because we are saved Jesus has become our greatest love. Hopefully, singing the opening hymn, “O, How I Love Jesus” resonated in your heart. Yes, above all things it is our Savior whom we adore and love more than anything or anyone else. It is not that we love others less but that we just love Him much more. As disciples of Jesus, we want nothing more than to conform to the image of God's Son. Jesus taught us that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments. We must be sure that we understand this distinction: our efforts toward holiness are the *result* of salvation, not the *cause* of salvation. We don't have to try to win “brownie points” to satisfy God because we cannot satisfy His justice.

It saddens me that when I talk to some Christians as it seems they are still stuck in the Old Testament covenant. They are still anxious about whether they are good enough to get into heaven. I have news for you—we aren't! We depend entirely on Christ and His righteousness to satisfy God. A born-again change of heart results in the good fruit for which Jesus is looking. God is not satisfied by us; He is satisfied by Jesus. It is in His blood, and it is called *grace*.

While this is true, I have learned how much work the Holy Spirit needed to do with my soul and how much I have changed from years past as I continue life's journey. What we see in the Gospel of John is something that the good Lord taught me and continues to teach me: some things are simply not acceptable! They arouse God's anger, and there is no compromise. The good news is that He Himself is going to come and do something about it. That is why the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts. One of the reasons is to bring us more and more to holiness, and that transformation is the work of the Spirit.

The prophet Malachi gives us some guidance on how we might understand our Scripture passage for this morning. In Malachi 3:1 he said,

“Behold, I send My messenger,
And he will prepare the way before Me.
And the LORD, whom you seek,
Will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant,
In whom you delight.
Behold, He is coming,”
Says the LORD of hosts.

This messenger who prepared the way proved to be John

the Baptist and when John the Baptist came what did he call the people to do? He called them to confess, to repent, and to prepare their hearts for the Messiah's coming. We must understand that the word translated in the Bible as "confess" as when we confess our sins, literally means to "say the same thing." You might wonder what it has to do with confession—it means that when we talk about our sins, we talk about them the same way God does. Often when people identify their sins, they try to make excuses and say, "Well you know, I'm only human"...or..."Everybody does it"...or..."It was a weak moment..." Is that the way God talks about our sins? If we were to talk about them the way He does, our natural response would be, "Oh, I hate that! I hate it when that happens! I hate that it's a part of my life. It pierces my soul when I encounter my own sin and I don't want it to be a part of my life anymore!"

That's followed by repentance, which literally means "to turn around." It means if I'm walking toward sin, to repent I must turn my back on it and head toward Jesus. I must let go of anything that might be offensive to the Messiah. But even that is not enough because if it were we would have no need for the Messiah and we would just stop with John the Baptist. We still must rely on *Him*, and out of discipleship to Him it is well for us to examine ourselves regularly.

Every morning, I get up very, very early and spend at least two hours immersed in my devotions. I am not trying to my boasting here; I do this because I *need* to be fed by the Word of God. I kneel before His mercy and pray that God will continue to work in me. We must be willing to be honest with God and with ourselves. This can be hard; it has been hard for me—but not anymore. It doesn't need to be hard because a great step in

my heart and soul, and my spiritual life has been the realization that we do not need to be afraid to confess and repent. After all, the One who is our judge is also the One who died for us. This eliminates all hesitation to be honest with ourselves and with Him.

Malachi prophesied that the Lord, the Messiah for whom they had been waiting, would suddenly appear in His Temple. And unannounced, Jesus made His presence known. What did Malachi say that He would do?

“But who can endure the day of His coming?

And who can stand when He appears?

For He is like a refiner’s fire

And like launderers’ soap.

³ He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver;

He will purify the sons of Levi,

And purge them as gold and silver,

That they may offer to the LORD

An offering in righteousness.

Malachi 3:2-3

He is going to bring Reformation; He is going to be like a refiner's fire. He came to change hearts. He was even going to purify the Temple leadership, the sons of Levi, so they could serve in righteousness. And sure enough, today we read of Jesus’ appearance in the Temple. What did He find when he got there? Not what He should have found.

There is a familiar beloved image of Jesus knocking on a door—the door of our hearts. What does He find when He knocks on that door? What does He find when we let Him in? John 2:14 tells us: *“And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business.”* This was the first time Jesus cleansed the Temple. He cleansed

it again in the last week of His life before His crucifixion. Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it clear that in the Temple there were a lot of “shifty” things going on with the buying and selling. Those involved were profiting from the animals supposedly acceptable for sacrifice. They were exchanging foreign currency for the local currency so travelers could pay the temple tax and they were making a huge profit. By contrast, the Apostle John focused on the fact that this activity was diverting attention from the true purpose of Temple worship.

It is important to recognize this because in our lives many, many things divert our attention from committed discipleship to Jesus Christ. There are priorities, habits, bad attitudes, and all kinds of things in our lives that get in the way just as was happening in the Temple. Their attention was not being focused on God but on all the buying and selling. As we just read, in response Jesus took some of the straps being used to bring in the animals, wound them into a whips, and started chasing both the men and the animals out. He went to the moneychangers and turned their tables over. Referring to Psalm 69 John continued in verse 17, *“Then His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Your house has **eaten Me up**’”* or as some translations say, “consumes me.”

Even today we use the phrase “Something is eating at me.” That is what was happening to Jesus. He came into His house and saw what was going on and it was eating at Him. But notice that even amid all this zeal, Jesus still showed a measure of discretion. He drove them out *with* their animals so that they could retain them. He didn’t open the dove’s cages and shoo them away. He did pour the coins out, but they could be picked up again. Jesus intended to clearly send a message, not to destroy them or deprive them of their property.

I mention this because sometimes with the best of intentions even Christians, in their zeal, can do people more harm than good. Misplaced zeal can sabotage our efforts rather than obtain the desired result. What we must do in our zeal for the truth and the Lord is always check our motivation when we are sharing that truth. Is it an inordinate need to be right? Are we trying to prevail or to defeat and exact vengeance on someone? Do we presume to inflict comeuppance? Or out of love for the person do we want to be an instrument in bringing reform for their well-being? Do we want to contribute to their being better, to build them up? You see friends, as much as we want to, we do not have the authority to turn over other people's tables; that's for the Lord to do. Yes, we are called to witness, but we are called to witness and speak the truth in love.

Paul said in Ephesians 4:15, “...*speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head—Christ.*” Yes, we witness to others, but we must use wisdom, patience, and discernment in how we share. We must speak the truth, not water it down or sugarcoat it but do it in love, to build the person up not because we need to be right, but rather we need to be faithful to the truth and to share love with the person we hope to impact because Jesus loved them first.

Speaking of authority, that's exactly what the Temple leadership effectively asked Jesus, “By what right do you do this? Show us a sign. Who are you to come to the Temple and cause this commotion?” Remember Malachi said that the Lord would come to *His* house, and this is Jesus' house, so He has every right to protect it and to do with it as He pleases. But friends, the most important line in the entire passage was John 2:19 (NIV) when they asked for a sign and “*Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it*

up.'” How could He rebuild it in three days? It had taken 46 years to renovate it, how could He rebuild it in 3 days? John clarified the response as he continued in verse 21, “*But the temple he had spoken of was his body.*” He was telling them that the day would come when the Temple would no longer be necessary because His crucifixion would be the sacrifice for all sin.

Now my friends, do you believe this? Do you believe this enough that you live by it or do past sins continue to weigh on your heart and plague your spirit? Regret, remorse, and guilt initially are good because they eventually lead to repentance, but we are not meant or required to remain stuck there. We are given the gift of Resurrection life. The Gospel message is that we are free! Confession and repentance are necessary to internalize the truth that God hates sin. Yes, we should tremble before God's justice because we know a price needs to be paid, but the Good News is that the price has been paid!

Why do we continue to pound nails into Jesus' hands by holding on to sin? He has already died for them. From the cross, He declared, “*It is finished*” (John 19:30). He accomplished what He had come to accomplish. If we choose to hold on to guilt for past sins, we are telling ourselves and God that we do not believe the truth of the cross; that Jesus' sacrifice was not effective and not sufficient. Even the disciples who were not always the quickest students got the point. Later John said he and the other disciples remembered what He had said to them. At last, they connected the dots. Have you connected the dots?

Why is this story significant for us beyond simply being an interesting and dramatic scene in Jesus' ministry? It is because the New Testament teaches that we are God's temple. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians

3:16-17,

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

We are called to submit to the Holy Spirit and He will sweep away all the dross left in our hearts from the refiner's fire. The Spirit Himself will live there. That is why Paul could say, "*... it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" (Gal 2:20). Jesus cleansed the temple twice because cleansing is not a one-time thing. Repentance must be a regular part of our spiritual life.

The final verses emphasize the fact that we cannot hide from God. He knows better than we do what is in our hearts. He saw that many believed because of the signs He gave. He knows whether we have a true and total commitment to Him or are simply impressed by His miracles. He knows what is in our hearts. What Jesus wants is transformed hearts which starts with being honest with ourselves and with Him.

The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:8-9,

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This helps us fulfill the truth revealed by Jesus in the Beatitudes: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*" (Matt 5:6), and "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Matt 5:6). None of this is our doing.

The prophet Ezekiel said, "*I will take the heart of stone out of*

your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:26). Christians often say, "I gave my heart to Jesus." We don't give our hearts to Jesus! What does He want with our old sinful, filthy hearts? He gives us a new heart that makes us capable of loving Jesus and each other as He loved us. Lean on Him. Take His hand. By His blood, He makes us holy.

Friends, this Lenten season is a wonderful opportunity to look deep inside yourselves and discover what is there and who is there. Through prayer, devotion, study of God's Word, worship, and abiding with Jesus in quiet reflection have you let Jesus in to sweep out the temple of your heart? If not, what are you waiting for? ■