

“Dead Religion”
Matthew 22:12-22
March 31, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

With his entry on Palm Sunday, the King of the nation of Israel is now in the capital city of the nation, Jerusalem. Upon his arrival, Jesus finds that not everything is as it should be. Kings are not editorialists who merely write about the way things should be. They act and they act decisively to put things right. Finally, Israel is getting the kind of Messiah they have always wanted. So the expectation for Jesus is that now he will act to expel the pagan Gentiles from Israel, especially the occupying Romans. This expectation was fueled by the conviction that the biggest thing needing to be put right in Israel was its occupation by the Romans. Apparently, Jesus doesn't agree, because that's not the action he takes. This cleansing of the temple is as close to a violent act as we are going to see of Jesus, though it seems to be violence against furniture rather than people. But Jesus' actions are against the religious leaders of the nation, not the Gentiles. In fact, he acts on behalf of Gentiles. In short, King Jesus is acting against dead religion among the Jews rather than paganism among the Gentiles.

Let's define dead religion. It is simply the outward appearance of devotion to God with no corresponding inner reality. It is the fig tree that appears later in this passage, a tree that appears to be healthy but which lacks fruit. Or as Jesus will say in a couple of chapters, it is the whitewashed tomb. It looks good on the outside but is full of death, rot and stink on the inside. It is the person who equates lots of church activity with love for God, while the heart actually remains cold toward God. In a word, it is the hypocrite who lacks love. Jesus comes in his kingly role and acts decisively against this enemy of dead religion.

I. Dead Religion Exorcised – v. 12-13

When we see the word “exorcism,” we normally think of Jesus casting out demons. The identical word is used here of Jesus' actions to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple. Jesus is acting like he owns this temple. These are the actions of an owner who has lent his house to someone, only to return and find that they have turned the house into something completely opposed to the intention of the owner. Imagine you rent out your house and return to find it occupied by a drug ring that is destroying the neighborhood. Jesus acts like an owner because he is the owner. The temple is God's house, his dwelling place with man, and Jesus once again is claiming unambiguously to be God.

What is it that bothered him so much about this activity in the temple? His efforts were directed at the moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. These were merchants who provided a service to the many pilgrims who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. The moneychangers would exchange coins with pagan imagery on them for coins that were acceptable for temple offerings. The sellers of animals offered a reasonable service to these pilgrims, saving them from having to bring their animals with them from a great distance, perhaps even risking injury to the animal in the process, which would make it unacceptable for sacrifice. Jesus doesn't seem to be objecting to the commerce itself, but to the location of it within the temple.

An understanding of the arrangement of the temple will help us understand this passage. Think of the temple as a series of rectangular courtyards and buildings, moving from an outward courtyard to an inner one. The outermost courtyard was where people met and rabbis taught. The next one in was called the court of the Gentiles, because this was as far as Gentiles were permitted to go in the temple. Next came the court of the women, the limit permitted of Jewish women. The next court was the court of Jewish men, then courts for the priests. Finally, there was the innermost court called the "Holy of Holies," reserved for the high priest. All the activity of money-changing and animal selling was being conducted in the court of the Gentiles, making it impossible for the Gentiles to worship God there. Jesus' house was being misused. His intention all along was that the Gentile nations would see the beauty of Israel's God by the love, justice and righteousness exhibited by his people, and that they would come to investigate this God. They would come naturally to the central place of worship in the capital city, and there they would call upon him. But that purpose now is thwarted by this other purpose to which it was devoted.

This would be like a church today setting apart a room for nursing mothers. But then the church decides they want a coffee bar and the room for nursing mothers is the best place, so that's where the coffee bar goes. They reason that only a few ladies will be displaced by the removal of the room for nursing mothers, while everyone will benefit from a coffee bar. So the nursing mothers will just have to figure out something else. That's essentially the message given to the Gentiles here, and Jesus will not have it.

Israel's religion excluded Gentiles because they were out of touch with the heart of God. It was a dead, lifeless religion, and Jesus condemns it in quite strong language. Note the contrast between a den of robbers and a house of prayer. **"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."** It is hard to imagine two things more unlike one another. A robbers' den is where the thieves congregate, where they feel safe and where they share their trade secrets with one another in order to help one another become better at stealing from others. They had turned the temple, intended by God as this beautiful house of prayer for outsiders as well as

insiders, into a hideout for thieves. They were robbing Gentiles of the opportunity to come to faith in the true God.

Does the church still have a problem with this dead religion, with the result that people get excluded? Anne Rice is the author of the Vampire Chronicles, and she became a Christian as an adult. Several years after her conversion, she wrote these words:

For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.

While I can't agree with her decision, I can't argue with her characterization of much of Christ's Church. When we are not walking by faith in the power of the Spirit, we become those who repel others from the life of Christ by our dead religion. Contrast that with these beautiful words from another Christian author, Madeleine L'Engle. "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." The next verses of our passage show us the lovely light of Jesus.

II. Dead Religion Cured – v. 14-17

Jesus' actions in these verses show what God has in mind for true religion. **"And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them"** (v. 14). God intended that when people come to him, they experience restoration. Children were also in the temple, crying out **"Hosanna to the Son of David!"** "Hosanna" means "save us." They were praising Jesus, referring to him as the Son of David, which is a clear reference to the Messiah. Further, they were looking to him for salvation. When the religious leaders observed all this, they wanted Jesus to put a stop to it. Instead, he does what is equivalent to attempting to put out a fire by pouring gasoline on it. Quoting from Psalm 8, he says that the worship of these children is appropriate because worship is due to God.

Notice the two groups singled out here who show the purpose of the temple: the disabled and children. Both groups were excluded from the full rights of temple worship. But through Jesus, both groups are singled out for benefit, becoming the fulfillment of what the temple was always intended to be. The tabernacle or temple in the Old Testament is God's dwelling with man. It is God establishing a beachhead in his program to redeem the world. It is carving out a little piece of heaven, saying in effect, "This is what I had in mind all along:

sweet fellowship with me.” Fellowship with God doesn’t diminish life, it fulfills it. Jesus shows that here by his curing of the disabled and by his encouragement of the children’s worship.

We learn something here about fighting back against dead religion. We must come to see ourselves as like these disabled and children. By nature we are ineligible for fellowship with God. But Jesus has shown us mercy and called us to come near. We come to him as unworthy children and disabled people. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is our temple. We don’t clean up ourselves in order to enter the temple; we enter the temple in order to get cleaned up. Do these words of Brennen Manning ring true to you?

I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged. I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.

Dead religion is cured as we take ourselves, these bundles of paradox, to Jesus for his healing touch upon us.

III. Dead Religion Cursed – v. 18-22

On the next morning after the temple incident, Jesus is returning to Jerusalem and sees a fig tree that, by outward appearance, looks healthy. He is hungry and expects to find some early, green fruit. Fully-ripened figs wouldn’t normally be expected at this time of year, but those who were really hungry would sometimes eat the early, still-green fruit. That is what Jesus is expecting to find, but finds no fruit at all. He then curses the tree, saying, **“May no fruit ever come from you again!”** The fig tree then withered immediately.

The cursing of the fig tree, as I read this passage, belongs with the temple cleansing. It is a lived parable of the state of dead religion in Israel at this time. The point is that Israel is like this unfruitful fig tree. On the outside, it looks to have life. But where it really counts, the production of fruit, such as loving the Gentile outsiders and welcoming them into the temple, they have been barren.

There are many miracles of judgment in the Old Testament, but all of Jesus’ miracles, until this moment, have been miracles of healing and restoration. So we would expect the disciples to ask Jesus why he cursed the tree. Instead, they ask how he did it. Presumably, they want to do the same. Jesus answers the *how* question they asked, but also the *why* question they didn’t ask. His answer is one of the most misunderstood statements in Matthew. **“Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this**

mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (v. 21-22).

The common misunderstanding of this passage is to read it as saying that we can have anything we ask for if we just believe enough. So if a person doesn’t get what they ask for, they focus on the condition “if you have faith,” thinking that their faith must be lacking. That soon gets rejiggered into an emphasis on positive thinking. We tell ourselves, “Think positive thoughts,” or “picture this good thing happening.” The result of all this is that we come to have faith in faith rather than faith in Christ.

So how is this passage rightly understood? We must understand two things: what Jesus means by “this mountain” and what he means by the condition of faith. Let’s start with the mountain. Many people read this verse as if Jesus is saying, “if you say to any mountain...” But that is not what it says. Jesus said, “If you say to *this* mountain....” What mountain? The mountain on which the temple was residing. Jesus was talking about the mountain of dead religion, religion that is as fruitless as the fig tree he had just cursed.

When Jesus says, “If you have faith,” we must understand faith as the Bible speaks of it. The important thing about faith is always its object. As I have said many times, the object of our faith is more important than the size of our faith. Jesus said that mustard seed size is enough as long as it is faith in Jesus. So to have faith without doubt, as Jesus speaks of it here, is not the power of positive thinking. It’s not faith in faith. It is faith in Jesus. What that looks like is to say, “Jesus, I have no ability to produce fruit. Apart from you, I have no love for you or anyone else. The best I can do is to pretend to love. Move this mountain of dead religion in my heart. Throw it into the sea.” Jesus promises he will do so.

CONCLUSION:

In order to help our faith, let me remind you that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament temple. The temple is the place where sacrifice was made for sin. Jesus is the sacrifice for our sin. There is a wonderful time jump that has taken place through Jesus. The great judgment has been moved from the future to the past. All who are in Christ have been judged already in Christ. So now let me invite you to pray that God would throw that mountain of dead religion in your heart into the sea. Ask him for a love for God, for your brothers and sisters in Christ, and for those now apart from Christ.

Small Group Discussion Questions Matthew 21:12-22

1. Compare and contrast true religion and dead religion. What are the marks of each? How would you know if you are in a dead church?
2. Review the following two statements from two authors:
Anne Rice statement: “For those who care, and I understand if you don’t: Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to ‘belong’ to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I’ve tried. I’ve failed. I’m an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.”
Madeline L’Engle statement: “We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”
As you reflect on these two statements, what would say are the two or three most important things you can do to help your church community from dead religion?
3. The temple is the dwelling place of God on the earth. It is where God meets with his people. In the New Testament, the church is God’s temple. We are to make room for people, welcoming them just as we have been welcomed by Christ. The error Jesus rebuked here was one of not welcoming the Gentiles, turning the court of the Gentiles into something other than a house of prayer. What are some applications of this in our culture? In other words, what are some of the ways today’s church (whether AVPC or others), fail to welcome people? Are there specific things we could do to better welcome people?
4. Jesus said that they had made the temple into a “den of robbers.” Obviously, they did not set about to do so, but that’s what ended up happening. They were robbing the Gentiles of the opportunity to meet with God. If they didn’t do that intentionally, how do you think it happened, and how can we guard against the same happening to our church?
5. Jesus engaged in two temple activities as a way of affirming the appropriateness of these activities. He healed the blind and the lame and he received the praise of children. What are some ways we can be more welcoming to the disabled and to children?
6. Jesus says that we are to have faith and not doubt (v. 21). Are there different kinds of doubt? What are some acceptable doubts? What are unacceptable doubts?