



Meditation— Matthew 21.¹²⁻¹⁶

¹²And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, ¹³and said unto them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called the house of prayer;' but ye have made it a den of thieves."

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them. ¹⁵And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David;" they were sore displeased, ¹⁶And said unto him, "Hearest thou what these say?"

And Jesus saith unto them, "Yea; have ye never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?'"

I remember learning about the infamous "Hole in the Wall" located in northern Wyoming. For half a century, American outlaws used it to escape arrest and punishment for their criminal behavior—Kid Curry, Black Jack Ketchum, the Logan brothers, Butch Cassidy, and Sundance Kid among them. So, I was intrigued by Jesus' charge that Jewish leaders had turned the temple of his day into a "den of thieves," a place the "religious" went to hide their criminal behavior and hide from the consequences. The intrigue grew with the realization that Jeremiah had delivered the exact same charge some 600 years earlier.

"Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?"¹

Immediately before this condemning question, Jeremiah issued this stark warning:

"Trust ye not in lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, *are* these.'

"For if ye throughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye throughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; *if* ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

"Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are delivered to do all these abominations?"²

Jeremiah witnessed unjust and cruel treatment of people outside the temple and saw it as inconsistent and

¹ Jeremiah 7.¹¹

² Jeremiah 7.⁵⁻¹⁰

contradictory to the supposed holiness of the Lord's house. Indeed injustice and cruelty toward others defiled the temple.

Like Jeremiah, all the Hebrew prophets were often ambivalent to skeptical about the temple. It seemed to them that ordinances, scrupulously conducted inside the temple, often overshadowed and even replaced moral and godly behavior outside the temple.

Criticism such as Jesus' and Jeremiah's is not restricted to Jewish temples. It would seem that such sham religion is not uncommon. Religious peoples of all sorts and sects run afoul of the law and use their temples, synagogues, sanctuaries, churches, chapels, and meeting houses as places of ill repute. In fact, it might be as common as not. Claiming insight into our day and our religious culture, Mormon, who lived on the other side of the world a millennium after Jeremiah and nearly half a millennium after Jesus, complained,

“Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God?”³

We should note the common element to the criticism: money. The priesthood used the temple to make money—and money, according to false religions of all times and places, is a window into one's “righteousness,” with the righteous being wealthier than the “wicked.

Today, we often adorn our places of worship with ill-gotten and vainly spent cash as a vain attempt to hide a multitude of sins outside our places of worship. The temple is, then, in Jesus' view indicative of an immoral society that attempts to hide its immorality through vain religious show. It is also indicative of a society whose immorality so often takes the form of insatiable economic lusts that lead to injustice. As usual, the insatiable economic lusts cause a devaluing of others, putting economic gain over individual needs and personal dignity.

This is seen in today's reading by the apparent contempt that religious leaders show toward the “blind and the lame” and their enthusiasm for Jesus and his good news: “Tell these people to shut up!” But, it is in these very people, whom they wish to silence—the “blind,” the “lame,” and all other vulnerable populations—that a “pure religion” would be most interested and concerned to serve, rather than the financial interests of a religious/ political elite.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple reminds us of the need to forsake our self-made Holes in the Wall, confess our sins committed outside the temple rather than boast of our “righteousness” inside the temple, and alter our attitudes and behaviors toward the vulnerable. The Lent and Easter Season is a good time to allow Jesus entrance into our temple and cleanse us of all sham religion that puts legalistic concerns and actions above the needs of others, especially the vulnerable.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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³ Mormon 8.³⁵⁻³⁸