

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 3 - INDIGNATION

TEXT: MATTHEW 21:12-17 (ESV)



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Monday Morning

In this series we are tracing our way through the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry from Palm Sunday up through His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Our text today, as best as I can tell, took place on Monday morning, right after Jesus cursed the fig tree—which we examined in the previous study. Jesus had assured His disciples that no one takes His life from Him, but that He lays it down of His own accord, and that He alone has the authority to do this, and to take it up again. The fact that He did take it up again on Easter Morning is the foundation on which Christianity is built.

In the spring as Easter approaches, we'll study His resurrection in greater detail, but in this study we are focusing on this claim that His life was not taken but laid down. How did He go about this? In the days leading up to His arrest, He put Himself directly in the path those who wanted Him dead, those who didn't know their plot to kill Him was, in fact, part of God's plan to glorify His Son by raising Him from the dead. (Rom 6:4) Today's text recounts one of the most volatile examples of this we find.

I am a young pastor. Whenever I prepare a new series, I'm usually studying texts I've not yet preached on. Invariably I'll get a few sermons in before some central themes emerge. The study of God's Word is a process of discovery—one I love. As a church, for better or worse we all get to share in that process together as I study, learn and write. This series is no exception. I went into this confident we'd see from His word the purpose behind Jesus' path to the cross. But three weeks in, I'm seeing not only the intentionality of Jesus, but also His fearlessness and strength. Beloved, if Christ is your Savior, know this—He is the bravest, strongest, most compassionate person who ever lived, and today's text is another example of the clarity and strength behind His mission to secure your salvation by dying in your place and rising, defeating Death's claim over you.

Matthew 21:12-17

¹²Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, ¹⁶and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" ¹⁷And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

The Indignation of Jesus

This is not the first time Jesus cleansed the temple. (See also, Jn 2) He'd done it once before near the start of His earthly ministry. That time, no one really knew all that much about Him. But now His reputation precedes Him. His movements are being monitored closely, so when He enters the temple area, it does not escape the recognition of the temple officials. They're watching to see what He will do, hoping He'll do something to incriminate and isolate Himself in such a way that His arrest will appear in every way justified, and thus met with no opposition.

He enters the area of the temple known as the Court of the Gentiles—the outer perimeter surrounding the Holy Place. This court was open to visitors from all nations, and was where sojourners and God-fearing gentiles would come for worship—fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that the temple would "be called a house of prayer for all the nations." (Isa 56:7)

This part of the temple was meant to be a place where Jews and non-Jews alike could come from all over the world to worship, but it had taken on a dual purpose. It had become a market for meeting the Old Testament sacrificial necessities. This place once designated for worship had been converted to a noisy, cluttered center of commerce where pigeons, lambs and calves could be purchased by those who were seeking to make an offering which required them. This market was sanctioned and overseen by the temple authorities. The thinking was that for the traveler coming from a distance to worship, he would have difficulty bringing His own pigeons or calves, so the temple provided this service where they could buy them upon arrival. It was a pragmatic solution to the problem of worship.

Jesus entered the Court of the Gentiles and began to physically dismantle the marketplace. He opened coops, unlatched gates, turned the cashiers' tables on their sides, scattering their coins across the stone floor. And as He did, He said, "No! It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers!'" The statement packed a punch, especially for the leadership who heard Him. He quoted their own prophet Isaiah against them, accusing them of profaning the house of God.

It was an indictment followed by action—a living parable. He made a mess of the place while insisting He was cleaning it up. He broke the furniture while claiming He was restoring order. He was indignant. This is not how worship was supposed to be. This is not how God's people were supposed to be led. So Jesus objected. What are we to make of this? Three things we need to keep in view as we seek to understand Jesus' response.

1. This was a premeditated action, not an eruption of blind anger. Jesus had been around this temple many times. He'd already "cleansed" it in this way once before. (Jn 2) And He'd been in this very place as recently as yesterday. So nothing of what He saw was a surprise. He did what He meant to do.
2. Jesus wasn't lashing out at Gentiles but at the entire religious system and its participants. He drove out "all who sold and bought in the temple." His actions declared that what was happening in the temple, regardless of what the people thought, was not worship. What was meant to be a house of prayer had become a den of robbers. What exactly was

being stolen? Though there probably was some measure of taking advantage of foreigners through price-gouging, I believe the far worse crime here was stealing authentic worship by presenting The Great I AM as little more than any foreign god who demanded tribute in exchange for prosperity. This was *not* the God Who called them, but it was the God the leaders offered the people, and it was the God the people were seeking to appease. The 2nd Person of the Trinity stood in their midst and called it the lie that it was.

3. In this premeditated objection to the temple system, Jesus set Himself up as One with the authority to pass such a judgment. He declared the worship practices of the people unacceptable in the sight of God, as One assuming He was completely in the right. When that first table landed upside-down on that ancient floor, Jesus, by that action, declared there was something greater in Jerusalem than the temple, and someone with more authority than all the temple rulers.

From the triumphal entry to the cursing of the fig tree to now this, Jesus presents Himself as having unparalleled authority and an inscrutable perspective on what God expects and how His people are missing it. What are they missing? *Him*. Most either fail or refuse to see their Messiah has come. For those who do see Him this way, they're more excited about what He might deliver them from—Rome—than what He might deliver them to—intimacy with God. His mission in these days before His arrest is to clarify for all that He accepts the title of Messiah.

The Joy of the Sick and Young

Remembering one of the themes running through this part of the Gospel is the fearless tenacity of Jesus, here we see Him do something most of us would never have the courage to do. If you mustered the courage to take this stand, what would you do once the demonstration was over? For most of us, we'd want to get out of there as soon as possible. Enough already.

But after dismantling the system for the afternoon, Jesus stays and presides as priest over the lame and the blind, healing them to their wonder and joy. This is unique to Jesus. No matter which religious leader you look at across history, Jesus was alone in the frequency and veracity of healing miracles. No one before or since has done this. And when you look at those miracles, it wasn't like He was making colds go away. He took the *blind* and the *lame*—those beyond any physician's help—and reversed what was otherwise indisputably irreversible. No one was coming to God the Father but through Him that day.

The people were overjoyed. Lives were changing. Everyone whispered, "*It's Him, that man who rode on the donkey yesterday, the One Who raised Lazarus of Bethany from the dead!*" And the children, probably picking up on the cues of the excited adults around them, remembered what people sang the day before, and they sang it again; "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" which meant, "*Come save us, Son of our Greatest King. Prince, assume your throne and become our King and deliver us from all others.*"

The Indignation of the Priests

The young and sick came to the temple to be in the presence of Jesus. The children wanted to watch this priest work. The sick hoped to feel the touch of God through this man with authority in His voice and fire in His belly. And they did. But disciples, the sick and the lame weren't Jesus' only audience. Every eye was on Him now. The temple authorities were embarrassed and equally indignant. Who does this man think He is?

The chief priests and the scribes were not know for getting along with each other or working together harmoniously. But in response to Jesus, they became unified in their indignation. They insisted Jesus take responsibility for the situation and silence the kingly praise coming His way. "*Do you hear what they're saying?*" Jesus' reply was a terse, strong, "Yes." He heard them. And He knew what the chief priests and scribes inferred. For Jesus to let these people praise Him in this way was to accept praise that belonged only to God. Jesus walked a fine line toward blasphemy, and He needed to end it and right away.

How did Jesus respond after acknowledging He knew full well what the people meant by their praise? He quoted scripture again, this time from Psalm 8, "*Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise!'*" You could have heard a pin drop. It was as though this was the moment the entire day had been building up to—*this* exchange.

That Psalm clearly spoke of praise directed to God. It said God had prepared praise for *Himself* out of the mouths of children, but here Jesus said these children in the temple were fulfilling that prophecy. He put Himself on the level with God. Here, in a way none of the religious leaders would have misunderstood, Jesus claimed to be God! Anyone who wondered who Jesus thought He was just found out from the man Himself.

Worshipful Vs. Worshipper

After this, Jesus and His disciples went back across the valley to Lazarus' house, where they were lodging during the Passover Week. But He left everyone then, as well as all of us now, with a lot to think about when it comes to worship. Worship tells the truth about what we really think of God. What about you?

There is a huge difference in the way people approach God in this text. Many came to meet the sacrificial obligations He delineated in His word. If your sacrifice required a pigeon, you bought a pigeon and gave it to the priest who offered it on your behalf. There was a system; things you were supposed to do. When they were done, you had worshipped. There was little to distinguish this from their pagan neighbors who followed similar guidelines for shoveling meat into the bellies of their gods.

But when the blind and lame come to Jesus, they come hoping He might change their lives. Being blind and lame, there is little they can do when they come to Him. They're there not hoping He'll grade them. They're hoping He'll heal them. They're not hoping He'll approve of their presence there. They're hoping they'll enter into His presence, and as a result their lives will never be the same. Can you see the differences in approach?

Doing worshipful activities and being a *worshipper* are not the same. Which describes you? When you prepare for church, what's the goal? Be on time? Do what's asked of you? Or do you think of yourself as a worshipper—someone joining with the rest of God's people to meet with Him? His word tells us this is what we are, but hardly any of us see ourselves this way.

Oh, that we would think of ourselves as worshippers—not just as people coming to do worshipful things! May we banish any notion of trying to engage in a marketplace of merit before Him by coming here! Do we recognize who our audience is every time we gather in His name? Christ is among us! He is here! And He's not here simply to oversee our conduct and make sure we do all the things we're supposed to do. He is here to meet with us! He has never missed a Sunday. My prayer is that as often as we are here, we would never miss a Sunday either by mistaking doing worshipful things with being a worshipper.