

## The Commands of Christ

### Sermon # 29

#### Be a House of Prayer

#### Matthew 21:12-17

Jesus began his ministry at the Passover just as he now ended at a Passover. He is just about to cleanse the Temple just as had done on one other occasion three years earlier recorded in John 2:14-16, *"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!'"*

Now we read in Matthew 21:12-17 how he cleansed the Temple once again and his reasons for doing so.

"Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. (13) And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" (14) Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. (15) But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant (16) and 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 babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?'" (17) Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there."

As we continue our study of Christ's Commands the next command we want to examine is found in the 21:13 here Jesus says, *"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"* The command is found in the phrase *"you have made"* (*polieite*) the command seems to center on what this people have made God's house into.

In verse thirteen Jesus says that they have made the temple into a "den of thieves." I think some times we have gotten the wrong idea here.

What is it that has aroused the anger of the Lord? There are of course several possibilities; First, some have maintained that Jesus was angry because commerce, that there is buying and selling of anything being done in God's house. Some use this verse as a defense of denial of allowing anything, at any time to be sold in the church. Yet the provision of animals for sacrifice was in it's self vital for worship as it existed at that time.

Secondly, some maintain it is not that commerce was being done in the Temple that is the problem but that the people are being “ripped off” in the process. According to Old Testament law, any animal approved by the priests could be offered for sacrifice in the Temple. But the chief priests made certain that animals not bought in one of their franchises would be judged unacceptable. The business enterprises in the outer court came to be known as the “Bazaar of Annas” whose chief priest and associates oversaw the Temple franchises. Merchants would buy the right to sell sacrificial animals, wine, oil or salt, or exchanging money into the proper currency used in the Temple. According to historian Alfred Edersheim, a person would have to pay as much as ten times what an animal normally cost. And when their foreign currency was exchanged they were charged a twenty-five percent fee.

Third, one other possibility is that if we stop to think that the term “A den of thieves” is not where robbery takes place but where the thieves live. The godlessness that in the Temple is not so much that money was exchanged or that doves were sold; but rather that He was distressed that the priests were using their position to make themselves rich.

Fourth, and finally there is one more possibility that I want us to consider that could have made Jesus angry at this situation. We tend to think in terms of a modern church and that all these things were being conducted in some version of the foyer. That all these things were being done in some sort of entry way into the temple proper but this is not the case. All this buying and selling was being done in what was called the outer court but it had another name, the “court of the Gentiles.” It was the only area in the Temple into which a Gentile believer could go to worship. Can you imagine trying to worship in such a place. Let me share with you how Kent Hughes describes the scene as he imagines it, “The noise of this court of the Gentiles was terrific. Merchants shouted from their stalls to the customers, noisy, haggling, pushy pilgrims jostled one another for position. The incredible din was heightened by the constant bawling of livestock, The aroma of the livestock, accentuated by the enclosure, made it like a county fair and the Stock Exchange all rolled into one.” [ R. Kent Hughes. Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior. Vol II ( Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989) p. 87]

In the end it would have to be said that this was a desecration of the Court of the Gentiles and as such was a massive national sin against God and the lost people of the world.

So which of these possibilities is what Jesus was saying about making his house into a “den of thieves.” I don’t know, but I think that it is something that could cause us to take notice and cause us to think about what we do and how we treat God’s house.

Jesus calls for his house to once again be a “house of prayer.” In saying this Jesus is appealing to the Old Testament, this is a quote of Isaiah 56:7. Jesus said that which should be the distinguishing feature of the Lord’s house is prayer. The Temple was to be a place of place of worship and prayer, a place where God’s people could draw close to him in worship. As he in one sense closes down one place of worship he illustrates what the new place of worship, the church is to be like. The distinguishing feature of this place is that it is to be a place of prayer

and worship. Jesus never said, "My house shall be called a place of preaching." Nor did he say, "My house shall be called a house of music or singing." Obviously those things are good and a part of our worship experience but the Lord said, "My house shall be called a place of prayer." And I don't think that he meant by this that prayer was to be a perfunctory thing that we do at the beginning and end of a service.

If you examine the birth of the church in the book of acts you quickly see the vital connection between the church and prayer. In Acts chapter four when the apostles were unjustly arrested, imprisoned, and threatened, they did not lodge a protest; they did not look for some political leverage instead they prayed. The early church had this instinct; when in trouble, pray. When intimidated, pray. When challenged, pray. When persecuted, pray. Acts 4:31 records, "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness."

The Bible translator J.B. Phillips, after completing his work on the translation of Acts wrote in his 1955 preface, "It is impossible to spend several months in close study of the remarkable short... without being profoundly stirred and to be honest, disturbed. The reader is stirred because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The newborn church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money, influence nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ.... Yet we cannot help feeling disturbed as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle bound by over organization. These men did not make 'acts of faith' they believed; they did not 'say their prayers,' they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit they were open on the God-ward side in a way that is almost unknown today."

I want to share story of the power of prayer which Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, relates in his book, "Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire." It's lengthy but I think it is worth it. He writes, "Our oldest daughter, Chrissy, had been a model child growing up. But around the age of sixteen she started to stray.... Chrissy not only drew away from us, but also away from God. In time, she even left our home. There were many nights when we had no idea where she was. As the situation grew more serious, I tried everything. I begged, I pleaded, I scolded, I argued.... nothing worked. ... Then one November, I was alone in Florida when I received a call from a minister whom I had persuaded Chrissy to talk to. 'Jim,' he said, 'I love you and your wife but the truth of the matter is, Chrissy's going to have to do what Chrissy's going to do. You really don't have much choice, now that she's eighteen. She's determined. You're going have to accept whatever she decides. I hung up the phone. Something very deep within me began to cry out. 'Never! I will never accept Chrissy being way from you, Lord!' I knew that if she continued on the present path, there would be nothing but destruction awaiting her. .... There came a divine showdown. God strongly impressed on me to stop crying, screaming or talking to

anyone else about Chrissy. I was to converse with no but God. .... I was just to believe and obey... I began to pray with an intensity and growing faith as never before. Whatever the bad news I would receive about Chrissy, I kept interceding.... Carol and I endured the Christmas season with real sadness... February came. One cold Tuesday night during the prayer meeting, I talked from Acts 4 about the church boldly calling on God in the face of persecution. We entered into a time of prayer... and an usher handed me a note. A young woman whom I felt to be spiritually sensitive had written, 'Pastor Cymbala, I feel impressed that we should stop the meeting and all pray for your daughter. I hesitated. Was it right to change the flow of the service... yet something in the note seemed to ring true. In a few minutes I picked up the microphone and told the congregation what had just happened. 'The truth of the matter,' I said, 'is that my daughter is very far from God these days. She thinks up is down, and down is up; dark is light and light is dark. But I know God can break through to her, and so I am going to ask Pastor Boekstaff to lead us in praying for Chrissy. Let's all join hands across the sanctuary.

....To describe what happened in the next few minutes, I can only employ a metaphor: the church became a labor room. The sounds of women giving birth is not pleasant, but the results are wonderful... There arose a groaning ... a sense of determination, as if to say, 'Satan, you will not have this girl. Take your hands off her - she is coming back. I was overwhelmed. The force of that vast throng calling on God almost literally knocked me over.

When I got home that evening... I told my wife, 'It's over!' 'What over,' she wondered. 'Its over with Chrissy.'

.... Thirty-two hours later on Thursday morning, as I was shaving, Carol suddenly burst through the door, her eyes wide. 'Go downstairs!' she blurted. 'Chrissy's here.' 'Chrissy's here.' 'Yes! Go down!' 'But Carol - I -' 'Just go down,' she urged. 'Its you that she want to see.' ... I headed down the stairs my heart pounding. ... I saw my daughter on the kitchen floor, rocking on her hands and knees sobbing.... She grabbed my pants leg and began to pour her anguish. 'Daddy - Daddy - I've sinned against God. I've sinned against myself. I've sinned against you and Mommy. Please forgive me.'

... She suddenly drew back. 'Daddy,' she said with a start, 'who was praying for me? Who was praying for me?' .... 'What do you mean Chrissy?' 'On Tuesday night, Daddy who was praying for me?' ... 'In the middle of he night, God woke and showed me I was headed for the abyss. There was no bottom to it - it scared me to death. I was so frightened. I realized how hard I had been, how wrong, how rebellious. But at the same time, it was like God wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. He kept me from sliding any further as he said, 'I love you!' 'Daddy, tell me the truth - who was praying for me Tuesday night.' I looked into her bloodshot eyes, and once again I recognized the daughter we had rised.

[Jim Cymbala. Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) pp. 60-64]

God's house is to be called a house of prayer. To be a house of Prayer, we must be people of prayer and to be people of prayer we must

1. Pray in accordance with God's will.

We must desire God's will in our lives more than our own will. Jesus provides the supreme example in his prayer in Gethsemane where he boldly states, "Not my will, but your will be done."

2. Pray confidently.

When Christians pray in Jesus' name we can be confident that our prayers will be answered if they are compatible with his will. There are some things Christians should not ask for and some things that God will not give us. Consequently we may receive answers we do not want and find things we are not looking for.

3. Pray with a Forgiving Spirit.

We have animosity with others it will hinder *our prayers*.