

His House, His Temple
Luke 19:45-48

One of the many difficulties that we encounter as we age is that when we have been around for a while we have been able to observe as several generations of culture have come and gone. And along with each of those passing generations of culture, we have been able to see changes and to see undeniable effects taking place within the world around us.

And especially concerning to those of us within the church are those effects that we see taking place within our congregations, and within our church practices,

Sometimes, as we see in the beginning chapter of the Book of Judges, vast changes can take place in only one generation, men and women quickly forgetting the goodness of God and turning to ways and behaviors that violate all that they had known before.

And yes, sometimes those changes can take place more slowly, as we have seen taking place within our modern generations. Influences from the local culture can gradually seep into our thought processes bringing about changes, sometimes very slight changes, but changes nonetheless, changes that no matter how small they might be, seem then always to grow to even bigger changes, changes that eventually corrupt the teachings and the mandates of the scriptures.

Often, the viewpoints and practices within the local culture are so pleasing to our sensibilities that they easily worm their way into and combine with our religious customs and practices, bringing about a whole new, and corrupted form of understanding.

One obvious example of this “blending” of religious beliefs given in our scriptures took place as the twelve tribes of Israel broke apart forming the Northern Kingdom and forming the Samaritan version of the Hebrew religion, a clever blend of cultural influence perverting the commands and the laws of God, but keeping the general ideas of worship practices close enough to satisfy their rational thinking.

And though the exact same kind of cultural blending had not taken place within the mainstream Hebrew religion, other kinds of corrupt changes had nonetheless also seeped into their beliefs and practices.

While yes, the actual laws and Commandments that God had given to Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy had remained the same throughout the centuries, the interpretation and the application and the practice of those Laws and commandments by the Scribes and Pharisees had slowly changed and had morphed into a set of religious traditions and practices that were often far removed from those pure and holy laws and commandments first given by our Lord.

The influences of their own flesh, the ways of the world and the craftiness of the devil had led the Scribes and the Pharisees to make changes in the interpretations of those laws and those commandments, changing them from the simple words given in Deuteronomy chapter 6, over into a fixed system of works and behaviors that God had never intended.

Listen to those simple words about "love" that were given by our Lord in Deuteronomy chapter 6. There we read,

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:5-9)

These are simple words folks, words about loving our Lord and then teaching that love to our children and other people as we encounter them along our way each day.

But sadly, it seems that over time the religious leaders and the religious teachers began to read right on past those first words about "love" and quickly moved on to the next words about "works", "doing" things and adopting behaviors that seemed to fit the requirements of the law, eventually developing a vast system of works, a religion that fit their rational understanding, but far afield from what God intended.

And that was the religion that the Lord Jesus encountered during what is called here, "His Days of Visitation".

Let's pause for a moment and read this passage given in the Book of Luke chapter 19, and we'll talk about it. Here, beginning in verse 45, we read,

⁴⁵ And he (the Lord Jesus) went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought; ⁴⁶ Saying unto them, It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves. ⁴⁷ And he taught daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him, ⁴⁸ And could not find what they might do: for all the people were very attentive to hear him. (Luke 19:45-48)

As you and I make our way through all the many ordinary events and circumstances of our own daily lives, are we not also much like these people that we read about here, most often simply being carried along by the forces of the current that flows all around us, living life by the strength of ethics and principles and good ideas that have been developed by the culture of our day. And sometimes, perhaps too often, that also being true even for the activities that take place within our churches?

But then mysteriously, and thankfully so, for reasons that we might not immediately understand, there are times when our senses are somehow alerted to the possibility that something just might not be right with one or more of those things.

When our hearts are prompted in this way, what is it that is taking place within us? It is this!

In the Book of Romans, we are told that the mind of an unbeliever, our own mind before we received the indwelling Spirit of Christ, an unbelieving person's mind is fully controlled by the desires of the flesh. And in that condition, our flesh is easily influenced and kept in league with the world and its ways, ways that are very mainstream and normal.

And then, added to that, as we call to mind the words of Ephesians 6, we know that,

¹² . . . our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12)

So then, with those powerful forces at work, the weakness of our own flesh and the influences of the spiritual forces of evil, as the culture continues to keep flowing along as it does, is there any wonder that so many, many people and all the many good things of God wander astray.

Knowing these things to be true, we as believers, you and I, need always to remain humble and sensitive and ever alert to the warnings given by the Holy Spirit, else we also will be naively carried away from the simple basics of "love" and good behaviors that our Lord speaks about in these gospels, out into what these scriptures call "strange doctrines".

But how can that actually take place, and especially within the church setting? Again, as we just read from Ephesians 6, the "forces of evil" truly are always at work all around us all of the time, and yes, even within the walls of our churches.

Beneath the surface of our conscious reality, those "spiritual forces of evil" are continually, reaching into what would otherwise be pure and righteous efforts and behaviors making them corrupt and unholy.

And those "spiritual forces of evil" use people, common, ordinary people, people like you and me. And they will often even use our intellectual rationale to accomplish their purposes.

I am reminded of some of the events within C. S. Lewis's book, "Screwtape Letters". You might recall that in that book Uncle Screwtape was a high ranking demon within the government of satan. And he was assigned to mentor his nephew Wormwood, an apprentice demon, who had been assigned to tend to and to tempt a particular man.

And Wormwood, through the advice and tutoring of his uncle Screwtape kept the man's life in disarray. But then at one point, the man got out of Wormwood's control and the man became a Christian.

After an appropriate amount of criticism of his young apprentice, Screwtape said to him, "Well, you have lost him, but now let's concentrate on ruining his life

as a Christian, and in particular, let's use him to wrongly influence his Christian friends".

I know that that book is a fantasy, and we don't really know what takes place in the world of demons, but I would think that such schemes and wiles as this come very close. There is a continual under-swell of turmoil and corruption that is generated by the demonic world. And they use us people, in the visible world, to do their daily bidding.

Here in this passage that we'll study today, we find an excellent example of where people, most likely naively so, have introduced "strange doctrines" into the church of Jesus' day, bringing about beliefs and rituals that God never intended.

Consider for a moment what has brought about the circumstance within this temple of God that we read about here in today's passage.

Simple convenience and expedience seem to be the weapons of choice to corrupt what was intended to be humble worship of God, the bringing of sacrifices and offerings into the temple as a part of the people's repentance for sin.

But very cleverly, the opportunity was seized upon by a combination of fleshly greed and then no doubt aided by those "spiritual forces of evil" spoken about there in Ephesians chapter 6, so that, what was supposed to be a God-honoring sacrament was turned into a mockery. And God's house was turned from a "house of prayer" into a "den of thieves".

Ordinary people, having been moved by the Spirit of God to confess and repent of their sins, were drawn to the temple to find relief and cleansing. And for that, they would need sacrifices and offerings to present before God.

But many of those people were not farmers who would have sheep or goats. Some of them were businessmen who had no ready availability to acceptable sacrificial animals. And also, some of the people were just too poor to raise grain and flocks of pigeons.

And when it came to paying their tithe, foreign money was not permissible within the temple.

So, no doubt, all of those complications kept the temple leaders in a quandary as to how to carry forward with many of the ordinary activities of the temple.

So, though we are not told it directly, we can assume they were lulled into using their intellect, their logic to solve their dilemma.

And if those folks then were anything like some of the “Stewardship Committees” in today’s churches, they probably had some planning meetings, generously accepting everyone’s input. And then, without realizing how corrupt and misguided their solutions would turn out to be, they developed the system that we see in place as Jesus entered the temple, the Religious Leaders inviting sellers and traders of sacrificial animals and grain, along with the money changers to come in and to set up their tables and provide all those needful services right there within the Temple walls.

It probably seemed so very logical and needful and convenient, ways and means to help fellow Jewish believers to get their sacrifices, their offerings and their tithes done properly.

And yes, in every venue of life, whether in the church or outside of it, there will always be people who are looking for a way to make a profit. Merchants will be merchants.

And again, it almost seems right to go ahead and include them in the process. And besides that, all of these secular things were appropriately kept in the outer courts of the temple so that they would not really corrupt the really holy parts of the temple, especially the Holy of Holies.

So again, it really, logically seemed to be a good idea, helpful and accommodating.

But, with all of those excuses being made, the whole process that was taking place was miserably flawed and corrupt. And Jesus made that very, very clear by His response.

May I repeat something that I have often said to you, and that is, human logic, your logic, my logic must be guarded carefully, especially the mindset we call “common sense”. Things and ways and people and circumstances that can seem so right at a given moment can be utterly corrupt.

And we must be especially careful as it relates to our worship of God. May I caution us that God really does have some very clear-cut and yes, very “rigid” guidelines regarding our worship of Him!

I am reminded again of the old Tom T. Hall song, “Me and Jesus got our own Thing Goin”. Folks, that can really be so, but it also can be really flawed thinking, as flawed as this theology being applied here in this temple.

Again, we must guard our ideas and understanding about God very carefully. We need always to diligently search these scriptures, seeking to find His guidance and His direction on all matters. And that is especially so regarding matters of the church.

And may I say that it must begin within the confines of our own personal relationship with our Lord! We are told clearly that as believers our soul is also very much a Temple of God. And in the quietness of our own interactions with Him, do we desire to always remain Holy.

Are we ready to listen to His “still small voice”? Are we humble? Are we seeking to know His will and His ways for our lives and for the lives of those with whom we have to do?

Do we regard Him as holy, really holy? By that I mean, with His presence living within us, do we take Him places and involve ourselves and Him in things that our Holy God should not be participating in? Do our eyes look at things that His eyes should not be looking at?

And when His Spirit pricks our conscience, are we willing to quickly turn away from the thing we are doing and to repent of that thing's influence upon us?

Folks, when we receive Christ as our Savior and Lord, we really do become the Temple of His Holy Spirit and He really is present within us for every moment forward. He is in us and we walk with Him in His kingdom.

For many of us within our churches today, we are closer than we have ever been to actually being with Christ in heaven. And what will that be like?

I have tried to imagine how I will act when I stand before God in His kingdom. In the song, "I Can Only Imagine", the singer contemplates, "will I shout hallelujah, to my knees will I fall, will I sing for you Jesus, will I be able to speak at all, I can only imagine." And folks, what will it be like for you and for me when we see Him face to face? I can only imagine!

But oh dear Christian, we must begin now, in our living years. You and I must do as the Lord Jesus did that day. We need to get about cleansing the two most obvious "temples" that we have spoken about today! So, bear with me as I say again some of the things we have just said about these "Temples."

First, our church truly is a temple of God. And while we don't do most of the things that the temples of Jesus' day did, our church should still be regarded by each of us as a very special place of God.

And within its structure, and especially within its practices, God must be held in the highest of honor and praise. Each of us must be diligent to not bring sinful ways and practices within its walls.

The Deacons and Elders are especially charged with the responsibility of keeping all the things that we do within the church "Holy" before God.

But may I say also that each of us as members are responsible to never bring wrong behaviors and doctrines and teachings into our church. And further, if you see anything that brings questions to your minds, you need to ask the church leaders for the scriptural basis behind the thing in question.

For the sake of God our Father, we really should have the same mind as Christ Jesus and we should honor our "gathering place of worship", our "temple", and we should keep it holy.

As for the "other temple" that these scriptures speak about, you and I who have received Christ as Savior and Lord truly are "Temples of the Living God".

In Christ, our bodies, our hearts, our minds, our souls, our spirits actually have become a temple of the Living God! Those words in 2 Corinthians chapter 6,

¹⁶ . . . For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be

My people." ¹⁷ Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." ¹⁸ "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:16-18)

With this as the expectation that Christ has of you and me, should we not welcome Him to do as He did in this temple that we read about here in today's passage? Should we not allow Him full reign, to cleanse us, His temple, to drive out the habits and the customs of this world, the flesh and the devil that have taken up residence within us.

Should we not be willing for Him to search every corner of our heart, our soul, our mind and our spirit, to examine us and reveal to us if the ways of our culture have slithered their way into our lives, our behaviors, our habits, the way we dress, the manner with which we interact with other people, our conversations with them, the way we conduct our family and our business affairs, our witness and our behavior both in and out of the church setting. And then to use whatever means necessary to rid us, to cleanse us of any sin that might be in us.

Should our temple not be a continual "House of Prayer", always praying and asking our Lord to,

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

²⁴ And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

Dear Christian, we truly are a temple, a sanctuary of God, and we must rejoice in that truth. And we must welcome the cleansing hand of Christ to come in and make us new every morning.

May we close with those words of our Lord given in Psalm 139 where the Psalmist says,

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

²⁴ And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

Pray with me.