

For Love or Money

[John 2:13-22](#)

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A Sunday school teacher was trying to help the class grasp what it takes for a person to make it into heaven. Testing the children, the teacher said, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?" The children said, "No." "Well, if I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?" The children said, "No." The teacher began to smile, thinking that she was getting through to them. "Well then, if I were kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?" Again they all answered, no. And just as she was bursting with pride for all the great theology she had taught them, "Then, how will I get to heaven?" A five-year-old boy shouted, "You gotta be dead."

Martin Luther said, "I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess." The missionary Jim Elliott said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Alexander Solzhenitzen, the Russian philosopher said, "We always pay dearly for chasing after what is cheap."

In this gospel text, we see the historical tradition of the annual national Independence Day festival. In fact, it's an independence week festival. People from all over the world came to celebrate the independence of Israel from Egypt. In a holiday mood full of celebration, huge crowds gathered to recognize that God had done a marvelous thing in their history and in their lives. The focus was on the worship of God in the temple--that majestic and marvelous place at the top of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. The temple was built with an outside court called the Court of the Gentiles. This was where people who did not know the God of Israel came from around the world to seek God and to become a part of those who believed in the living God of the temple. At the time of Jesus, people from every part of the face of the earth, Jewish and Pagan, would visit this temple to see, not only the marvel of its construction, but the wonder of its people who worshiped there.

The third great temple Herod was building at the time of Jesus was the most magnificent of them all. Solomon had built one and Nehemiah had rebuilt one, but Herod was out-doing them both, building over a period of 84 years. At Jesus' time, the temple was 46 years into construction. At that time it was beautiful to behold. There was a huge economic boom in all of Israel, particularly Jerusalem, because the temple attracted people with money. But there was a problem: the temple had become more about the producing income than about the presence of God. It was more about profit-making than prophet-listening. The high priests brought merchandise sellers into the gentile court, leaving no room for outside gentiles to come in to pray. It was more important from the perspective of the high priests to make money in the gentile court than it was to provide a space for gentiles to come to know the living God. It was about convenience for consumers, particularly those who had the bucks, to have direct access to sacrificial animals, for which they paid the top price. It was also important to have immediate access to those who could change foreign currency for the currency that could be exchanged in the temple itself. It had to be the purest silver coins in order to be acceptable, totally kosher coin.

When all this wealth was put into the temple coffers and into the salaries of temple priests, it also added to Herod's great wealth. And it added to the likelihood of building an even grander temple. In the temple court, the gentiles could be haggling. There might even be some competition between the priests who established this marketplace and the Sanhedrin and Pharisees who believed it sold the temple short. In the midst of all that there was tremendous wealth being made. When Crassus entered Jerusalem to conquer it in 54 AD, he was able to walk away with ten million dollars and not even put a dent in the temple treasury. Jesus came into this and he did not like what he saw. The temple had become a place to make money when it had been intended to be a place to have people experience the love of God, the majesty of the creator.

I heard a story recently about a pastor who was hanging out only with the wealthy in the congregation because he believed it was his job to raise money for the church and as long as he was investing in the wealthy, he could make sure he had direct access to those from whom he could ask for larger sums of money. The general feeling in the rest of the congregation was that the pastor didn't have time for us, we're just ordinary people.

I heard the story of another pastor who was upset because a pastor had followed him into a church that he had started from scratch. He complained: "You turned this church into a place for ordinary people, I intended it to be a church that was saved for executives and the wealthy. You've undermined its original purpose. There are too many poor here now. You've brought in the people that the wealthy don't want to be with."

Martin Luther had an issue that confronted him in the early 16th century with Pope Leo X, who raised funds by selling forgiveness in the form of indulgences. For a fee you could release a deceased relative or friend from hell or purgatory. Hell was more expensive than purgatory. With enough money, you could buy a guarantee on the future of your own availability to get into heaven. These were salvation futures, much better than pork belly futures. Johann Tetzel sold these futures with this little ringing song, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings the soul from purgatory springs." Martin Luther was outraged, so on October 31, 1517, he nailed 95 propositions and protestations against the church on the Wittenburg door.

The prophetic intervention by Jesus is to make one main point: the church should not be a place primarily given to raising money for the profit of the temple, the priests, or any religious leadership. In consistency with the history of the prophets, Jesus said "no" to the leadership of the church who were more preoccupied with budget than they were investing in people or the presence of God in worship. They had turned the gentile court into a place that existed for the purpose of evangelism for bringing in people from the outside to a place that was convenient for those who were already converted to the faith but had the money to invest in the temple.

So Jesus drove out the cattle and sheep with a whip. He overturned the tables of the money exchangers, he scattered the money all over the ground, and he told the dove sellers to get out of the court. And I think it is particularly poignant that the dove sellers were selling for profit because doves were for the poor who could not afford the normal sacrifices.

Jesus had a passion to restore the right purpose to the temple, and that passion was to create a place for worship of God—to focus on the great majesty of the creator who is Lord of all things—to value people, particularly those who are trying to discover who God is. Jesus told the church leaders to create some space in this court so these outsiders can come in and find me. To bring all nations to care for the poor, to reach out to outsiders, not just to create a marketplace for insiders. To use the space and the facilities for the purpose it was originally created. To focus on the living God.

God is more important than wealth. Worship is more important than net worth. Service is more important than sales. Evangelism exists over the entertainment. Presence is over products, and humanity is more important than things. Sacrifice is more important than success. Giving and receiving is more valuable than buying and selling. Relationships are what we should be investing in, not just deals. Majesty over material things, grace over greed. The salvation of people should take precedence over the salvaging of the buildings. The naves that exist in the church should be space for the redemption of the naïve who do not know God. The transepts are space to see people who are transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. The chancels do not cancel out concern for the poor. The pews are made for people, instead of the people being made for pews. Just take a look at me; I don't fit in those pews. That's why I'm up here (only kidding). The stained glass windows do not replace the hunger to see people with stained sins being changed. We should not be driven by the agenda to jettison our preoccupation with agape, the love of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we gain the world and lose our souls.

I first started out in a Presbyterian church where an unbelievable thing happened: There were many people walking in who had not visited the church before. They came in and found their places in the sanctuary. I could tell we were in trouble when one couple sat where a person had been sitting for thirty years. And sure enough, that woman came right down the aisle at the beginning of worship, and she saw the couple seated where she normally sits, and she said, "You're in my pew. You can't do that; I've been sitting in that pew for 30 years. That's my pew, you have to get up and go!" And the visitors got up and left and as far as I could tell, never came back. It's hard to believe that people take such an ownership for the facility and the space that there is no room to reach out to new people.

A church split recently after building a brand new, gorgeous sanctuary. All this investment of money, time, design, and preparation, and underneath that growing conflicts in the congregation where people didn't talk to each other. Finally, the pastor was asked to leave after 23 years. They were more interested in the building than in the relationships in the presence of God.

Jesus' focus is very clear—we are not focused on the building and this temple. In concern for the viability and longevity of the temple, Jesus calls attention to his body as the dwelling place of God. If you destroy this temple, I will build it again in three days. Let us not be so preoccupied with our temple that we are willing to kill the Lord in order to keep the temple. That's what happened to Jesus. Let us not be so jealous of our budget that we lose our passion to be zealous for human beings. Let us not gain the world and lose our eternal souls. Let us not restore the facilities at the expense of reviving the people.

My dad learned this message the hard way as he was starting a new business when I was young. He was working 18-hour days. He became exhausted, making too many mistakes, behind in his schedule, and yet he knew he had to work harder. The harder he worked, the worse things got in the business. Finally one night late, he heard a voice from God, clear as a bell: Why are you working so hard, John? If you'd just give this business to me, focus on my presence, and do the work I've given you to do, this business will prosper. But if you keep working and denying my presence, your family, and the church's presence in your life, the business will fail. Fortunately, my dad listened and saved all our lives. Not because he was focused on money, but because he heard the voice of God, and he listened.

This is a call today to keep our priorities straight. The temple is to serve the Lord. Money is for ministry, as we heard from Gabe today. The place of God's presence should not be driven by marketplace values but market values should be driven by the Kingdom of God agenda, by love and grace. The salvation of people is more important than the salvaging of buildings. There is a place for beautiful space. It is good that we have buildings like this, but they are to call people into God's presence. They are to help people experience the love of Jesus Christ. There is gorgeous architecture to call people to things that are beyond them in terms of mystery and majesty. There is abundant parking so people have the space to come and be welcomed, embraced, and hear the good news of Jesus Christ. It is a place to serve God, a place to develop in every way that we can all of our gifts and our abilities to do God's work in this world. We are here to invest in children, youth, families, in people who have very little in life. We are here to invest in humanity, because God loves them. We are to invest in the love of God.

So today, we hear Jesus' invitation to rearrange our priorities, to be good stewards of what God has given to us and to focus on the importance of God's presence in worship and the ministry of God's people to reach out and love our neighbors. Worship is about the presence of God in Jesus Christ, not about the preservation of the temple. So let us invest our money, ourselves, our gifts in the priority of the service of Jesus Christ. And may all the things God has given to us be taken care because we kept our priorities straight to see salvation come to this world. Amen.