

## Good News for the Oppressed

[John 2:13-22](#)

Good News for the Distressed

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Before I offer the Word, I want to thank dozens of you for sending cards, recognizing that this past week my family was in great sorrow at the loss of my wife's mother. I feel as if I have spent most of the last week on an airplane, first going to Houston for denominational meetings and then to California for the memorial service. It is a wonderful thing to know that there are many people praying for you when you are in grief; that is one of the great gifts of the church. So on behalf of my wife and my two daughters, I want to say thank you for your prayers and support, for joining with me in this time of loss.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you are purifying your church, your people, and this world. We pray that the purity you give to us by the power of your Spirit will begin first with us, and ripple out to the rest of the world. Make us to know you, the one who is pure, that our lives might be transformed by the goodness of your word and presence, so that we might bring that goodness of who you are to a world that is crying out for help. Now may your word purify us for that purpose and mission. In Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

In thinking about the nature of oppression, I remember my two older brothers. When I was born, they were five and seven years old. By the time I was old enough to be aware of what was going on, I realized that the axis of evil was preparing for my demise. They gathered together on many occasions to plan for things that would do me significant damage. Children, if you have older brothers and sisters, I understand. If you are an older brother or sister, be nice to your younger brothers and sisters. It is not good for children to oppress their younger brothers and sisters. However, later on I grew up to be much taller and much larger than either one of them, and God's revenge was imminent. So there is a solution, in the long run, to oppression.

Oppression is simply the reality that some people use their position, their power, and their privilege to do harm to others — to press them down so that they cannot rise up to where God wants them to be. Oppression is the unjust exercise of authority. It occurs whenever someone who has clout disables the other person, who does not have clout, from gaining position, power, and authority — from having even their basic rights met. It is a sense of heaviness that pervades a system when literally dozens, hundreds, if not thousands, and millions of people cannot attain what God has given them the ability to attain. It happens in families; it happens in churches; it happens in governments; it happens around the world.

Jesus knew that oppression was a significant part of life. He came to set the captives free, and to destroy those who would oppress others. Jesus knew there would be those around him who would take power over him, who would press in upon him and try to confine his actions and his deeds — who would try to manipulate, or threaten and intimidate him; who would, in a sense, coerce and make life tough. The gospel of John begins clearly with Jesus' very present knowledge that what he did was being watched by a number of powerful people who did not like the results. Oppression is a part of what crucified Jesus. Oppression is the reality of what does damage to people in all sorts of ways, particularly to children and those who are weak in their cultural status. People with power abuse those who do not have it. How often do we see, in the news, actions of oppression that have robbed many people of the goodness of life—whether it is the powerful of Enron, or the very weak children who are enslaved to abuse and to sexual acts in other parts of the world.

There is oppression everywhere today. To say that, somehow, oppression is not a part of contemporary reality, is to miss the reality in which we currently live. Governments steal money; religious leaders demand that people lay down their lives to kill others. Political power is used to enforce genocide; there is sexual harassment in the marketplace; there is physical abuse in homes; and there is even religious abuse among people who do not agree with others about their patterns of faith and doctrine.

Oppression reigned during the time of Jesus, and reigns today. In fact, Jesus, by many and perhaps most, would be considered a person of weakness when it comes to intervening with oppression. This is the one occasion, however, when Jesus takes dramatic action to say "No" to oppression. He takes a whip that he has personally put together, to drive people out of the temple courts who were abusing their commercial basis and partnership with the church, to rob people of what rightfully belonged to them and to manipulate their lives. It is a confluence of oppression by Herod, who was building the temple; by Caiaphas who was the chief manager, leader and high priest of the temple; the priests; the Roman government; the merchants, and the bankers. They were, all together, making life difficult for people—right in the face of the sanctuary and the walls of prayer. There was a flagrant abuse of people, of power, and of the misuse of influence to gain affluence for a few, and to oppress many people. People would walk into the temple courts with an expectation of silence and prayer; but, instead, the prayers of the people were drowned out in a noisy marketplace of people exchanging money and selling animals for sacrifice.

Jesus says "No" to oppression. The act of driving out those who would sell the sacrificial animals and exchange money was a dramatic act that caught peoples' attention. In fact, the suggestion here, by omission, is that the people probably totally enjoyed Jesus' action, including the Pharisees. For you see, the Pharisees did not get along with Caiaphas. There was a political embattlement between the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees. The Pharisees probably quietly enjoyed Jesus' movement here, to do what they did not have the courage to do in public. It may be one of the reasons why Nicodemus decided to go visit Jesus at night and have a conversation with him—because he was really very thrilled with Jesus' action in the temple courts.

However, let us get something very straight today: the signs that Jesus did, including the driving out of the moneychangers and those who sold sacrificial animals, are signs. It is not the ultimate purpose of why Jesus came. The signs that Jesus did all pointed to the ultimate purpose. Jesus could have done many other dramatic signs, but this is the only dramatic sign where he says, in a sense,

"No" to social oppression. The sign always points to the permanent solution. Jesus makes very clear, at the end of this text, that the permanent solution is the rebuilding of his temple—his body—when he is killed and lifted up from the grave after three days. It is not about temples, or stained glass, or organs, or pulpits, or pews, or buildings. Ultimately Jesus says that these are signs to the greater reality. And the greater reality is that the temple of God dwells with us in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul goes on to say that you, with your bodies, are the temples of the Holy Spirit—the temple where God dwells in your being, in your presence, in your relationships. The signs always point to the reality of God's presence among us in Jesus. Jesus says "No" to oppression as a sign so that we will catch very clearly the ultimate purpose—that oppression grows from within us to manipulate those around us. Jesus is saying: unless your temple is purified and cleansed, you will continue to abuse other people in your life. The Pharisees and the people loved the sign. But Jesus knew, as reflected in the verses immediately after this text, that those same people, together with the Pharisees, would become fickle in their relationship to Jesus when he stopped doing the signs and started preaching the Good News. Jesus would not, and could not, trust them, because he knew that people, in their hearts, would turn away from him when they weren't getting what they needed or wanted. The gospel of John is very clear that Jesus, at a crucial moment in time, turned to people who had been following him by the thousands —people whom he had fed, for whom he had turned the water into wine, whom he had healed, and people who had followed him to get more of what he could give to them, and what they were hungering for. Jesus said, "You are following me because of the signs, and not because of who I am. Eat my body and drink my blood." That was enough to drive most of them away. 'We thought, Lord, that you were going to restore the kingdom, but now you're talking about cannibalistic images. This is not what we had in mind.'

There are two difficulties that tend to take place among people with organized religious faith. The first is to treat the acts of justice and the signs of Jesus as the most important things. This thinking asserts that the greatest act that Jesus could perform was to drive out the injustice from the temple. This is a temptation, on the part of the liberal side of religion, to focus on the acts of Jesus. But Jesus says, according to John, that these are simply signs of a greater reality. On the other side, there is a temptation, on the part of the conservative side of religion, in the following of Jesus, to believe that signs mean absolutely nothing and that personal faith in Jesus Christ, is everything: 'So let's get right to it. Jesus died for our sins. Do you believe that? You're saved, and that's enough. Let's live life as we normally would; the signs are irrelevant.'

Both of those are wrong. In the evangelical tradition, as part of this church's stand in the Presbyterian reformed tradition, we believe that the ultimate act of Jesus laying down his life for those who are hurting and oppressed, to die for us, is illustrated by the signs. The great sacrificial act of Jesus leads the people of God to continue doing the signs of Jesus. Therefore, social justice is always connected to the saving grace and action of Jesus in his death and resurrection. Let us not lose sight of the life and death of Jesus in pursuit of the sign. Let us not release hold of the person of Jesus to engage the act of Jesus. At the same time, let us not become so preoccupied with Jesus' death and resurrection that we forget that we have a responsibility to do justice, to walk humbly, and be righteous in the sight of God.

Now hear this carefully: all positive signs of justice in the world point to the full nature and power of the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus said, "If you tear down this temple, I will rebuild it in three days," he was saying that every sign that ever happens for social justice, for righteousness to take place in the world, is a reflection, ultimately, that God is, in Jesus Christ, dying and being raised from the dead. Even people who do not know it are living into the pattern of Jesus when they do justice —when they say "No" to oppression. The acts always point to the Actor. The engagement of action always points to the embrace of the person of Jesus. The morality that we have and practice is always based upon the relationship we have with the living Christ. The temporary signs that we do always point to the permanent reality that Jesus has died and is risen, and will continue to reign forever.

The driving out of demons was a sign that Jesus was willing to lay down his life for those who had demonic expectations and killed him. The temple, in all of its glory, was to point to Jesus in all of his humility. The ritual lambs were to come to a culmination and consummation in the Lamb of God. The water used in baptism is to turn into the new wine of the Spirit that empowers people to do Jesus' action in the world. The fickleness of humanity gives way to the finality of Jesus' power and presence. All acts of justice point to the life of Jesus, and to his death and resurrection.

There are some reflections Felix Mendelssohn wrote on the powerful organ composition that Johann Sebastian Bach composed, regarding the Toccata in F, which William Neil will play at the end of the service. It reflects some of Mendelssohn's understanding about Bach and what his music did, as a sign to Jesus. This particular piece of music is full of wonderful columns and flying buttresses of sound. It is a huge temple of majesty to God. But Bach, himself, did not believe that the music itself was the act of salvation. He believed that every piece of music pointed as a sign to his savior, Jesus Christ; to his suffering, dying and resurrection. The music points to the majesty of the Lamb. It does not point to the organ... the organist... the sanctuary... or the performance. We, as human beings, struggle with this because we like to see things look great, sound great, and be great. But every one of those great actions is to call attention to a greater Lord who makes it possible for those things to happen.

John Woolman, a Quaker who lived in the 18th century, led the Quaker gatherings of people in many parts of the country, to resist slavery—to say "No" to the oppression that was permeating the colonies. Compassion, courage, tenderness, and firmness came together in John Woolman. His concept of social righteousness and justice in society was built upon his understanding of Jesus as the savior of the world. And so, to the yearly meeting in Philadelphia in 1758, he said:

"My mind is led to consider the purity of the divine being, and on the justice of his judgment. And herein my soul is covered with awfulness that many slaves on this continent are oppressed and their cries have entered into the ears of the Most High God. Should we wait for some extraordinary means to bring about their deliverance, and neglect to do our duty in the firmness and constancy of God? Absolutely not. Based upon the majesty and presence of God, who loves us, let us free the slaves."

He understood that the investment in the presence of God in Jesus Christ would lead to the doing of signs that released people from oppression. So let us, today, follow the Signer and not the sign. Let us follow the Maker, and not the miracle. Let us follow the Actor, and not the act. Let us do the acts of justice because Jesus has loved us and laid down his life for us, and we are willing to lay down

our lives for those who are in trouble.

That is the nature of the gospel. It is good news for the oppressed. It is good news for all of us who are oppressed in heart: that Jesus would come in to us and release us from that pain, so that we do not turn and do painful damage to those around us. Jesus changes us from the inside out, so that oppression will not reign in the world. That is the good news of the gospel.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, may we come to know you deeply and love you greatly. May we invest fully in your powerful presence, and may you lead us carefully into signs that say that your kingdom is come—that we live the life that already reflects the goodness of who you are, and anticipates, finally, the fullness of who you are to become. Lord Jesus Christ, may you help us to be good news, and to bring good news, to those who are oppressed. Let us lay down our lives, as you have laid down your life for us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.