

A Spiritual House Cleaning.

Text: Matt 21:12-22

Suggested Hymns:

192, 503, 504, 186, 514

- 1) Requires That All Hearts Be Cleansed
From Sham And Doubt
- 2) Requires That All Of Us With Genuine Faith
Offer Our Lord Sincere Praise

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 21:12-22, ¹² *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.*

¹⁸ *Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.* ¹⁹ *And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.*

²⁰ *And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?"* ²¹ *So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done.* ²² *"And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Each spring it is customary in our homes to have what we term a thorough spring cleaning. It is much more than the regular daily dusting and weekly cleaning each house receives. Part of the spring cleaning may include the cleaning of the wallpaper, the repainting of walls and ceilings, the re-varnishing of the woodwork, the cleaning of drapes and curtains, rugs and carpets, and many other things too numerous to mention.

While the normal family routine is thereby interrupted, nonetheless, when all the work is finished, everyone is delighted with the results and appreciates the newness and freshness of a thoroughly cleaned house.

In the text for today we have the account of the second effort of our Lord to cleanse the Temple. Our Lord was not satisfied merely to rid the Temple of many things which were a hindrance to the proper worship of God, but was concerned that His people likewise cleanse their hearts, lips, and hands and rededicate them to His service.

Today our Saviour appears before us once more. As He examines our hearts, lips, and hands, He calls for *A Spiritual House Cleaning*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. A Spiritual House Cleaning Requires That All Hearts Be Cleansed From Sham And Doubt

On Palm Sunday of that first Holy Week our Lord made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the King of love and peace. You will remember how the multitudes welcomed Him with joy, honouring Him by spreading their outer garments in the way before Him, by waving palm branches, and by continually singing, "*Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' Hosanna in the highest!*"¹ All of this must have filled our Lord with holy joy.

Jesus ended His ride before the Temple, entered into its courts, and saw the crowds coming for worship. He also observed some things that were not entirely to His liking; but since it was now later in the day, He retired with His disciples to Bethany, where He spent the night.

The Reason for the Curse on the Fig Tree

While there was much in the Temple that pleased Jesus, there were also other things which caused Him much concern. There were matters that needed immediate attention and correction so that the Temple might serve its purpose as the house of God. Undoubtedly these matters occupied His thoughts through the night.

Very early the next morning Jesus set out once again for the Temple. On the way He saw a fig tree covered with leaves. He thought that He would find fruit on it but was very disappointed to see that it was barren. With a mighty word He condemned it: ***“Let no fruit grow on you ever again.”***

Lest anyone get the impression that our Lord was destroying the property of another, let it be said that this tree was growing alongside the road. It belonged to no one in particular and was used by any passer-by.

Why the harsh word which destroyed the tree? Fig trees in the Holy Land ordinarily bear three crops annually. The strange thing about them is that the fruit always appears before the foliage. Therefore it was natural that our Lord might expect to find fruit on this tree, since it was growing in a favoured spot and had much foliage. This tree, then, was actually a deceiver. His mighty word killed that tree because of its deception.

The Sham and Pretence of the Worshipers

How like that tree were some of the worshippers at the Temple! When our Lord came into the court of the Gentiles, He was filled with indignation. Our text says, ¹² ***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.’”***

Note well, our Lord was not opposed to the buying and selling of animals for the sacrifices, nor was He against the exchange of money, but He did not want this barter in the Temple courts. It plainly disturbed the worshipers in that court, for how could there be any kind of reverent worship with a market place in full swing?

The Temple was a sacred place of worship, not a place to sell animals. From His remark, “*you have made it a ‘den of thieves,’*” we become aware of the fact that much worse things had grown out of this commerce. Those who sanctioned all these things in the Temple were robbing God of the praise and honour due to Him.

A den of robbers is a place where robbers take refuge, where they feel secure. In Israel at that time there were altogether too many who felt that if they bought their animals in the Temple and paid their Temple tax, they had done their full duty toward God.

They felt that if they went through these outward motions of worship, all their sins and guilt would be taken away. Their worship, then, was nothing more than sham and pretence.

Illustrating this fact even more clearly is the action of the leading priests and scribes. They did not dare to lay a hand on Jesus, but they criticised Him for permitting the children to sing another hymn to Him. These children began where they had left off singing on Sunday by repeating, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*”

This the priests called a disturbance, and they asked Jesus to put a stop to it. Mind you, they could not find any disturbance in the bleating of the animals, nor the voices becoming louder as the trade became brisker, but the singing of a hymn of praise was too much. It showed that their hearts were far from the Lord. Surely, they were as the barren fig tree, hypocrites to the core.

What of Our Worship?

The Lord Jesus has come into His Temple once again this morning. He is here among us to check how His people worship Him. What does He find?

As He searches our hearts, it maybe possible that He is finding some in the seats because it is merely their habit to be in church. There is nothing wrong with the habit, but our Lord wants worshipers, not just people taking up space in the seats. Coming to church, and coming to church to worship, are two entirely different things.

Then there maybe some people who say within themselves that the sermon is about things which they have heard before, that there is nothing new to learn.

For others, of course, it is too long, too uninteresting; so their minds wander here and there on a variety of subjects.

Or maybe it is that we sat up too late last night watching TV or listening to the radio, and we cannot properly give our attention to worship.

Then there maybe those who feel that the Lord should be flattered because they are in church. Never forget, the Lord, not the pastor, knows whether our worship is a sham and pretence.

If there are any such people here, and I pray that there are none, then let them give heed to our Lord's warning and not to be as the barren fig tree.

There is, however, another matter which causes the Lord grief, and that applies to all of us. It is this, that we, the Lord's people, do not have the faith and confidence in His ability to do what we ask of Him. In our text we read, "*if you have faith and do not doubt.*" Such a statement causes us all to blush with shame.

How often, when we pray, we put a big question mark behind our petitions, as though God could not do these things for us! Or how often do we doubt that He will help when He delays an answer to our prayer! To doubt God, to doubt His Word, to doubt any gracious promise whatever, is the biggest insult we can offer the Lord. We need to change in this respect. The Lord is not mincing words as He warns us.

Therefore, since we are still living in the time of grace, let us say what we mean, and mean what we say, when we pray in the offertory in the Service with Holy Communion, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*"

This is the time for spiritual house cleaning. This is the time to rid ourselves of the filth of sham and hypocrisy. Let us come before Him with genuine penitence and ask Him to cleanse us thoroughly from all sin. Cleansed from sin and filled with genuine faith, we shall offer Him proper praise in our worship and in our daily lives.

**2. A Spiritual House Cleaning
Requires That All Of Us With Genuine Faith
Offer Our Lord Sincere Praise**

Whenever house cleaning takes place, it is not enough merely to remove the dirt. For example, after the dirt is removed from the furniture, the housewife usually applies furniture polish to it and then rubs it well so that it shines.

It is not enough that the drapes or curtains be cleaned. They must be properly ironed or pressed before they are hung in place. These and many other things make a home sparkle. Is it not equally true that when this hard work is finished, all of us try a little harder to keep the home neat so that we may enjoy it more?

The Right Conduct in God's House

Our Lord showed the people that certain standards were to be observed in their worship at the Temple. *'My house shall be called a house of prayer.'* This means that the Temple was set aside to be God's house and therefore was to be a place of sincere worship.

It is a sacred and holy place, where God dwells among His people in His holiness and majesty, coming to them with grace and truth. What makes a church truly beautiful in God's eyes is that the worshipers treasure the Gospel and recognise the scene of its proclamation as God's house.

God's people should know that they are in the presence of God where His Word is proclaimed and are to conduct themselves accordingly. Thus, and only thus, would God bless them.

Blessings to Be Found in God's House

First among those blessings is that God would forgive us our sins. This gives us glad hearts, for when God's people ask humbly for forgiveness in God's house, God always says, as we read in Matthew 9:2, *"Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."* With the assurance of full and free forgiveness, every believer is ready to accept and believe the wonderful truths which God would impart from His Word.

Only in this way can we know the joy of His salvation. When the time comes to pray with and for one another, it is the prayer which our Lord wishes to hear from us. A heart filled with genuine faith would pray in this way.

We must not doubt, but believe that the Lord not only could, but also would fulfil all that we ask or desire. And our lips are to be used for singing the praise

of God in majestic hymns. Our singing is not to be merely the singing of words or a melody but the music of our hearts. Hearts and lips dedicated to God fashions hands that God could also use in His service.

Jesus' mighty and loving hands healed the lame and the blind before those worshippers that very day. Every worshipper's hands were to be God's hands, doing the things God gave them to do cheerfully and gladly. These were the things that would make the Temple a place of which they would always say with the Psalmist, ⁸ ***LORD, I have loved the habitation of Your house, And the place where Your glory dwells.***²

Examining Our Worship Habits

A Christian young man once remarked: *“My Christianity is the suit I wear all the time. During the week, in spite of my best efforts, it becomes soiled. On Sunday I come to God's house to have it cleaned and pressed.”* That is a unique way of expressing the benefits of proper worship, but it shows us clearly that this young man really was getting the most out of his hour with God in God's house.

Let us examine our worship habits. I pray that we find the holy joy that we all can have by spending this hour with our God. It is foolish to speak of having joy in our worship so long as we are burdened by sin. All of us are. The world, being what it is and making life on earth difficult, only adds to our burdens, worries, and cares.

There are some who may say that we should forget our worries, at least put them behind us when we come to God's house. They are wrong. This is just the place to which to bring them and where to share them with the Lord.

When we enter church, it would be well if all of us were to spend a few moments in prayer with our God, ***“casting all our cares upon Him, for He cares for us.”***³ Only God can provide the right solution for all our difficulties and problems. Only God can help us to do His will. Then, like the children in our text, let us sing and make melody to the Lord.

There maybe some people who think that their voice is not good enough for singing in church. Let me remind you that your voice is the one which God gave you, and, believe me, God is well satisfied to have you use it to sing His praise. Sing with your heart and lips.

Listen devoutly to the message that is proclaimed. The pastor is God's messenger to you. The message he speaks is a message from God for him, as much as it is for you. Do you offer the Lord also the sacrifice of your hands in the regular offering and during the entire week in Christian service to your fellow man?

Let your hands be hands that are working for the Lord constantly. Thus we shall worship the Lord constantly. If this be the spiritual house cleaning that takes place in us regularly each week, then I know that a genuine faith will live in our hearts and will be demonstrated effectively always in our daily lives.

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,⁴

From Thy house when I return,
May my heart within me burn,
And at evening let me say,
'I have walked with God today'. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 21:9

² Psalm 26:8

³ 1 Peter 5:7

⁴ Hymn 504