

JESUS AND THE MERCHANTS

John 2:13-16

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

MESSAGE:

It had all started innocently enough. Each year, Jews would come from all over the world to offer sacrifices at the Passover feast in Jerusalem. In order to avoid the hassle of bringing the animals which were to be sacrificed—the oxen and sheep and doves—they would simply buy them after arriving in Jerusalem. Since they came from foreign countries, they also needed moneychangers to convert their foreign currencies into domestic coinage. So the merchants and moneychangers provided a much needed service to the pilgrims, a service which facilitated their worship of Yahweh. Originally, the merchants and moneylenders had set up their booths and stalls at the foot of the walls outside the temple mount, but over time, as they jockeyed with each other for more advantageous positions, they gradually moved up the steps onto the temple mount into the outer courtyard of the temple and were selling their animals and services there. In all probability, it didn't seem harmful or irreverent to them; after all, they were providing a service which enabled the pilgrims to worship at the Passover. What could be wrong with that?

Nevertheless, it enraged Jesus to see them there. The same One who remained calm and acquiescent in the face of insults, abuse, torture and death, flew into a rage when he discovered men doing business in the courtyard of the temple. "*How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!*" Then he physically drove them out of the temple. Why?

Well, the merchants and moneychangers weren't the first to turn God's church into a market. Nor were they the last. Men have a very natural tendency to turn the church into a market because they would rather purchase favors from God than *obey* Him. And if you want to buy things, you go to a market—not a church.

During the Second World War, as the U.S. armed forces in the South Pacific prepared for an invasion of Japan, they built supply depots in the Pacific Islands—the chain of islands that extends from New Zealand to Japan. Many of the aboriginal natives who populated these islands were exposed to civilization for the first time. They saw huge ships land on their shores and discharge white men who built landing strips. Then they saw enormous silver planes swoop down out of the clouds, dump their cargo, and vanish into the sky again. They saw cigarette lighters that made fire appear magically and cameras that made images appear on paper. They watched bulldozers uproot trees and dynamite raise clouds of dirt and rocks into the air. All this seemed miraculous to the natives and they concluded that the white men were gods, gods who flew in from the sky and did miraculous things. When the war was over and the armies had left the

natives built shrines to the “cargo gods.”—life-sized replicas of airplanes where they would assemble and simulate the sounds of aircraft engines in order to entice the white gods to descend from the sky and bring more cargo. The zippo lighters and cameras which were left behind became religious relics which the natives would venerate. They even had a name for their deity: they called him Tom Navy.

Later as civilization began to penetrate these islands, missionaries found that the natives’ fascination with cargo had not diminished. They initially encountered a warm reception from natives who hoped that the missionaries heralded the second coming of the cargo gods. The problem was, they were looking for cargo—not the forgiveness of their sins and so the Gospel seemed of little value to them. Like us, once they became steeped in materialism, they did not easily receive saving truth, because, as Our Savior taught us, *you cannot worship both God and mammon.*

What the aboriginal natives of islands in the South Pacific did is merely a primitive version of how most of humanity worships and has always worshiped: *they turn to God in order to coax favors out of him.* Material blessings, the mitigation of painful circumstances, better relationships with other people, you know the drill. It’s worship for profit and it comes in a thousand varieties, but the bottom line is getting the goods, the cargo if you will, out of God. Worship is a magic ceremony—a sort of extended “abracadabra”—that opens the door to the treasures God has to bestow upon people who ask Him in the right way. And pastors and priests are viewed as brokers of God’s favors rather than as stewards of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Intercession is sought not for the forgiveness of sins, but for more of whatever it is the worshippers want. It’s pagan worship, pure and simple, and it is constantly trying to insinuate itself into the House of God.

Against this kind of worship Our Savior reacted with outrage. *“How dare you turn my Father’s House into a market!”* And He followed up his words with actions, driving the merchants out of the temple courts. He knew, and He wanted his followers—including us—to know, that worship was not given to us so that we might bend God to our purposes and use it to gratify our desires: *“Lord, please do this; God please do that.”* Worship was given so that our sins could be forgiven and our relationship with God restored and preserved. In the first place, if you trust your own sense of what is good for you to be a reliable indicator of what you really need, you are probably wrong. How can a nature which has been bent and twisted by sin possibly know what is good for it? It is only when we strive to act in accordance with God’s desires for us, to align our purposes with His purposes, that we begin to find peace and joy. Second, as long as your opinion of God is based upon His willingness to satisfy your requests, you will be disappointed. God has already given you all you physically need and he is always ready to give you what you need spiritually: the forgiveness of your sins and the promise of eternal life. Besides these blessings, every other blessing pales into insignificance. *“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink!’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matthew 6;31-32)

All the elements of Christian worship—prayer, confession, absolution, the sacraments, Christian fellowship, preaching, Bible study—even tithing—have one goal and that goal is not to procure things from God, but to open ourselves up to Him and allow *Him* to change *us* from rebels into servants. Not to persuade Him to “drop cargo from the sky”

but to yield ourselves up to be convicted, cleansed and sanctified by His Spirit—the Spirit of Truth. As Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes: *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”* (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2)

The merchants and moneychangers in Jerusalem probably didn't think that they were doing anything wrong. Their migration from the streets of Jerusalem up into the temple courts took place over the course of time and probably didn't seem like a big deal. And so it is with our own worship. At our baptism we come to Christ for one reason and one reason only, and that is to have our sins washed away and become a child of God. And, like human children, for awhile that's enough—more than enough. But over time we have a way of turning God from a Forgiver and Sanctifier into a Sugar Daddy—Someone we go to get stuff we want—like a genie who grants our wishes when we rub the lamp with our prayers. And that is not the God of the Bible; that is a god we have created out of our imagination. And any god we create out of our imagination is by definition an imaginary god who can do nothing for us whatsoever. The Bible calls gods like that “idols” that lead us down a path to destruction.

This is why it is so important for us to keep in mind our position in our relationship with God. We are penitents, not traders, beggars not customers. God didn't give us the gifts of prayer and worship so that we could coax favors out of Him; he gave us prayer and worship so that we can thank and praise Him for the forgiveness of our sins. The church is a spiritual hospital, not a shopping mall.

So is it wrong to pray for God to do things in our lives? To heal us from sickness, to alleviate our pain, to save those we love, to ease our financial distress? Not at all. Paul encourages us, *“...by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, [to] take your requests to God...”* But when you do, do so knowing that God will answer your requests in the way that is best for you. It may be “Yes,” it may be “No,” it may be “Not now,” it may be “Never.” But whatever it is, it will be the best possible answer for you because the answer will come from God and God loves you. When we believe this—really, really believe this—we receive a far greater gift than a “Yes” to our requests: we receive peace—the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.