



## **Matthew 21:12–13**

12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.  
13 “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

## Reflection

In yesterday's passage when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into commotion. By deliberately riding in on that donkey like one of the conquering kings of old Jesus could not have been any clearer about who he was or what he has come to do. He's set the whole city on edge. The Romans are reaching for their swords, the Jewish religious leaders are plotting to kill him, but both are paralysed by the fear of a popular uprising. So in the shadows they bide their time. But Jesus is no longer in the shadows. And he has only just begun. He's in charge. All this is according to his plan. His royal procession outside the city walls was just a beginning. Next in his sights is the temple. There too there will be no sitting quietly

in a corner.

But before we follow Jesus into the temple courts it is important to come to terms with the scale and importance of the Temple building in Jerusalem. Firstly the scale. The temple was huge, sitting on an enormous raised platform that covered more than one fifth of the city. In our passage today Matthew speaks of the temple courts but he'll often just say the 'temple' – however when he does he'll still be referring to the temple courts and not the temple building, because only priests were able to enter the temple building where the sacrifices were performed. The temple building itself was relatively small, as were its two private courts. The first, inner court was for Jewish males only. The second private court was open to Jew-

ish men, women and children. Surrounding and dwarfing both the temple building and these two inner courts was the huge outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. It was about 13.5 hectares in size, that's 33 acres. This outer court was surrounded by magnificent collonades on all three sides but the south, which was occupied by the enormous Royal Stoa, the entrance building that Jesus enters in our passage today.

The Court of the Gentiles formed the natural meeting place for visitors and locals alike, especially so for the vast numbers of pilgrims that came to Jerusalem during the Passover festival. The collonades provided shaded areas for groups to rest and for teachers to attract a crowd. In the days before the Passover the Royal Stoa housed

a flourishing market where travelling pilgrims could buy animals for sacrifices and also exchange their foreign currency into temple money.

So that's the scale. But what about importance? It's hard to understate the importance of the Temple to Jewish life. If Jerusalem was the centre of Israel's spiritual life and messianic hope then the Temple was at its very heart. The Temple represented the meeting place between God and humankind, the place where heaven and earth intersect; the specific place being the Holy of Holies, the room in the heart of the temple building that even the High Priest could only enter once a year. The Temple, these pilgrimages and the sacrifices that the priests made on behalf of the sins of the people formed central

pillars of Jewish practice in terms of how they related to God.

In today's passage Jesus enters the temple through the Huldah Gate at the southern end of the Temple Mount. He then climbs a series of steps to enter the Royal Stoa. It was a long hall with four rows of forty thick columns supporting the ceiling. It housed a huge market. Pilgrims coming from all over the Mediterranean wouldn't bring animals with them to sacrifice, they'd bring money. You can imagine the animals bleating, the doves cooing in their cages, the clinking of coins as money changers exchanged all manner of foreign coins for local currency. With the population of Jerusalem swelling six-fold and all these people coming to the temple you can only imagine the size and frenzy of the com-

mercial activity.

Enter Jesus meek and mild, and immediately, violently, angrily he begins to upturn, from verse 12,

the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

Cages break open and doves take flight, coins are scattered everywhere, money changers on their hands and knees frantically trying to pick them up. The temple guards, the vast crowds, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, pilgrims from every nation all stunned by the display. No-one moves. All eyes are on Jesus. What authority is this? What presence a man like this commands! Hear the righteous anger,

the power and authority in his voice as he condemns every person in that vast hall by quoting these words of Scripture,

13 “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

No-one can meet his eye. No-one knows quite what to do. Some want to arrest him. They don't dare. Others want to kill him but to do so now would likely mean their own death. Because even those who know only little about him know that this man is a prophet. And even the temple guards freely acknowledge that no-one ever spoke like this man (John 7:46). Jesus stares them all down.



13 “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

As he quotes from Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7 the wisest amongst them are perhaps feeling their heart gripped, after all wasn't the Messiah supposed to come and purify both the Temple in Jerusalem?

Why was Jesus so irate? Two reasons really. The Jewish nation was blessed by God in order to be a blessing the Gentiles (Gen 12:1–3; cf. Zech 8:1–23), to introduce them to God and convert them to Judaism. From the very beginning our faith has always been evangelistic in nature. This was clear from even the Temple building itself with the huge Court of the Gentiles

of such a scale so that people from every nation could come and worship God. But when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem not only has part of the Gentile's worship area been converted into a market, but even worse these zealous pilgrims who've travelled over land and sea are being ripped off by inflated prices and poor exchange rates – in God's very house by God's people in Jerusalem. Certainly enough to drive Jesus to righteous anger.

## **Think & Pray**

Picture this scene in your mind as you reflect back over these two verses for yourself. Jesus is furious at the house of God being turned into a house of profit. Jesus Christ still abominates a prosperity gospel, religion with a profit motive; ATMs in

foyers, Eftpos terminals passed down the aisles and offertories called for two and three times during a church service. All with the subtext that if you are generous with your money then God will rain right back down on you far greater material blessings. Jesus Christ still abominates a prosperity gospel. How dare you make my Father's house a 'den of robbers'?

The money is one thing but I think what angers Jesus even more is the way the place for the Gentiles to worship, those non-Jews who've converted to Judaism, the way their place of worship has been turned into a market place. It's so easy for churches to turn inward isn't it? Instead of being a light to the nations the Jews in Jerusalem were making a buck off the nations. Close today by praying that your

church's number one priority would be taking the gospel to the nations, not being insular and inward, but being open and welcoming. Pray that your church would be actively seeking opportunities to seek and save the lost from your suburb and your city as well as sacrificially supporting the work of the gospel in wider world.