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Ready to Rumble: Extreme Makeover Matthew 21: 12-22

This is the second sermon in our series “Ready to Rumble.” We are looking at the last week of Jesus’ life and we have discovered that there is something very different about him. Up until now, every time Jesus did something miraculous, he gave the same instructions to the people. What was it? “Shhhh!” Even though they wanted to shout about who Jesus was and what he had done, he wouldn’t let them. Why? Because he knew that the religious leaders were out to get him. He didn’t have time for that battle. He had preaching and healing and training to do! He needed to focus on getting his disciples ready for their mission.

But the fight was inevitable. A fight over who had the right to say what God wanted of his people. **Everything** was at stake. And so, when Jesus rode in on that donkey...just like the prophet had predicted...down from the Mt. of Olives...just like the prophet had predicted...the people knew exactly what he was saying. “OK...the king is here. The messiah has come. The gloves are off and I’m ready to rumble.” And things started rumbling.

Look back at verse 10: “**When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’**” Do you see that word, “stirred?” The Greek for that is “seismos.” What does that sound like? Seismic. The translation is “shaken!” When Jesus entered Jerusalem, it was a seismic event that shook the city. Well, we ain’t seen nothing yet! (Read text)

In order to understand this story, you need to know something about the Temple. When the New Testament speaks of “the temple,” it can mean two things: the actual temple building which contained the Holy of Holies. Or it can mean the entire temple area. The temple area consisted of a series of courtyards. The area closest to the building was for priests only; that’s where they performed the sacrifices and other rituals. Then came the Court of the Israelites; Jewish men could get this close to the temple. Then, the Court of the Women. Jewish women could come only this far.

But the largest courtyard surrounded the temple and all the rest of the courts I just described: the Court of the Gentiles. This was as close as non-Jews could get to the actual temple. In fact, a stone fence surrounded the temple area and signs warned gentiles that if they crossed that point, they would be killed. This is a picture of one of the actual signs. [*Fence/warning sign*] Surrounding the Court of the Gentiles was a portico with a roof up by rows of columns. This was where the money changers and vendors set up shop.

Now the Court of the Gentiles was always a crowded place. But this was Passover. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims were in Jerusalem because this was one of the three festivals that Jewish men were required to attend. Which means that the temple courts were packed!

A little more history. Every Jew was required to pay an annual temple tax for the upkeep of the temple. But the tax could only be paid with a certain kind of coin. Since pilgrims traveled from far off and they often arrived with money that had Caesar’s face stamped on it. This was a violation of the second commandment to not make any idols. Obviously, in order to fulfill their temple obligation, pilgrims needed to change their money. And this is where the moneychangers had the worshipers over a barrel. They would charge as much as 2/3 of a day’s wage just to convert the money, in addition to the temple tax which amounted to more than two day’s wages.

Doves were one of the cheapest of sacrificial animals and were slaughtered for rituals of purification. Any dove that was without blemish could be sacrificed, including those that were brought by the worshipers into the temple. The catch was...the temple had animal inspectors. They were the ones who decided if your animal was without blemish or not. And guess what? Outside animals almost never were suitable for sacrifice. But that’s okay; they had acceptable doves for sale inside the temple...for **18 times** what you would pay on the outside.

Do you get the picture? The money-changing and the sale of animals weren’t, in and of themselves, wrong. It could actually have been a service, especially to the pilgrims who arrived with foreign coin and no animals to sacrifice. But the temple authorities had turned that concession into an opportunity to gouge the worshipers. Pilgrims had no choice! If they wanted to worship God, they had to pay extortionate rates to do so!

Pretty bad, right? It gets worse. Guess what they called the area where these vendors set up shop? The Bazaar of Annas. Does that name sound familiar? It should. Annas was the High Priest before whom Jesus appeared on trial. **The family of Annas owned the money-changing and dove-selling concessions!** In other words, the man who was most responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of God’s people...the High Priest of Israel...was the one who was getting rich gouging his people.

So, that's the scene. Try to imagine it. Jesus has made a dramatic entrance into Jerusalem. The whole city has been shaken. He arrives outside of the temple walls, crawls off of the donkey, and walks up the stairs. When he arrives in the courtyard, he pauses...looks around...and he starts to steam. The disciples are backing away from him because they've never seen Jesus like this. And then...something just bursts inside of him. He rushes over to the nearest money table...puts both hands underneath and flips it over. Sends the money flying! Sends the money-changers flying. Can you imagine? There were thousands in that courtyard. And only one very angry Jesus. But that mass of people was tripping over each other trying to get out of his way.

So lesson number 1: **Don't you dare exploit the people who are turning to you to find God.** Don't you dare. That's what made Jesus furious. The temple rulers had a monopoly on worship. These poor people had no choice. There was no competition. They couldn't say, "Let's go over to the temple in Jericho instead." No...if you wanted to worship the God of Abraham, this was the only choice. And the temple authorities...right up to and including the high priest himself...used this monopoly to gouge the worshippers; they exploited them for their own financial gain.

The harsh warning to me as the Senior Pastor and to our staff and to our elders is this: when people come through these doors, broken, hurting, longing to find and worship God, don't you dare take advantage of them. Don't you dare exploit them. Financially...or in any other way.

One of the obvious issues this raises is this: should we be selling stuff in church? Should we be selling Bibles and tickets in the back? Is it okay to sell lattes at He Brews? This is a question we have often asked ourselves. Some have criticized Chapel Hill by saying, "You have to pay for everything here." Well...that's not really true. You don't have to pay to come and worship or go to Sunday school. We don't have a temple tax. You didn't have to pay for Nehemiah Project or for Oxford Northwest. You don't even have to pay for coffee...if you don't mind drinking plain old coffee instead of a triple mocha.

But here's the deal. There's no such thing as free coffee. It costs the church \$8,400 a year for "free" coffee. But we offer it to help people feel welcomed because Jesus is welcoming to all, especially to those who are far off.

On the other hand we do charge for lattes, because it doesn't seem reasonable to us to pay for them out of the offerings of God's people. And we charge for Couple's Life because the materials cost something; and we charge for Upward basketball for the same reason. Hundreds of people give hundred of hours to children in that ministry, but we couldn't pay for the uniforms from the church budget without cutting another ministry to do so.

In other words...we try to find a balance between being hospitable and being inappropriately generous with your donations. But we do not enrich ourselves on your purchases and we do not prevent someone from worshiping God because they can't afford to pay their own way. And God help us if we ever do. And...in a society like ours, we must continue to examine our practices again and again to make sure that the corrosive habits of our commercial culture don't leak into our church. And we do.

Back to the story. Jesus has turned everything upside down and chased the people away. But not all of them. There were some who weren't afraid of Jesus at all. Who? The blind and the lame. They weren't scared. In fact, Matthew says they came right up to him. And he healed them. Right there in the temple. Cool, huh? Well...here's something even cooler? **They weren't supposed to be there.** They were considered unclean. The blind and the lame and the rest of that society's misfits were not welcome in the temple! But that day, Matthew tells us, they followed Jesus right on inside. That day they **were** welcome...and Jesus healed them.

And you know who else weren't welcome in the temple? Kids! The temple was for adults! Children were barely to be seen in Jewish culture...and certainly not heard. But these little rug rats were also part of the crowd that followed Jesus into the temple... did you see that in the story? Children...along with the lame and the blind and maybe every other unclean, inappropriate, unwelcome, outcast who had no business being in the Pharisee's temple... but who had **every** business being in the temple of the King. And when they saw Jesus heal those guys...they couldn't keep quiet. The kids just broke out in pure praise! "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

And how did the religious authorities respond to all of this? Not well. They saw Jesus doing these "wonderful things"—that's how Matthew describes them—but they didn't think it was wonderful at all. And they listened to the praise of the children...but didn't exactly join in the chorus, did they? How does the text describe them? **Indignant.** That is actually a lousy translation. The Greek says that they were "incensed!" Incensed that Jesus had messed with their business, incensed that he had allowed unclean folks inside, incensed that he had healed them, incensed that he allowed children to actually be heard and recognized as human beings.

Jesus shut up the Pharisees as he often did by quoting scripture to them...scripture they should have known about. In Psalm 8 where God **welcomes** the praise of children. But in Luke's version of this, Jesus goes even further. When the Pharisees tell Jesus to quiet the people he replies, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

This part of the story really hit me. Those of you who know me well know that Sunday worship attendance is a big deal to me. If it is up, I am happy. If it is down, I am concerned. And much of our worship staff conversation on Tuesdays centers around this question, honestly: “What can we do to convince more people to come and worship God?” That sounds a little crass but, really, that’s what it comes down to. How can we persuade more people to come to worship on Sunday morning and hear the Good News about Jesus instead of doing something else?

Here’s what this passage reminds me: **we do God no favors by worshiping him.** You are doing God no favors by worshiping him. God doesn’t need your worship. He doesn’t need my worship. He enjoys it when we offer it...but he doesn’t need it. And...he will receive it. Because if we don’t worship God, the stones themselves will cry out in worship...creation will praise him. God delights in the praises of his people...and we were created to worship; we need to do it. But if we choose to withhold our worship, choose to play hard to get on Sunday mornings, choose to create an increasingly long list of what must be provided---what kind of music, what kind of liturgy, what kind of time frame--- before we are willing to grace God with the pleasure of our company...well, we might be surprised to hear Jesus say, “Hey...you’re not doing many any favors by worshiping me. If you won’t do it, I’ve got boulders that can fill the position. I welcome your worship, I delight in your worship...but I don’t need your worship.”

Here’s the other thing I learn about worship from this passage. Jesus delights in welcoming the outsiders, the outcasts, the voiceless, the imperfect...and if any of his proper, churchgoing, religious folks stand in the way of that...he will turn them upside down!

Chapel Hill is situated in a place where appearance matters. I want to be a church that ministers to those who appear to have it all together. I also want us to be a church that ministers to those whose needs are more obvious. Because here’s the deal—no matter what it looks like on the outside, every one of us is broken, hurting and imperfect. No matter what we drive, no matter where we live, no matter whether we move around on two legs, one leg, or wheels...every one of us belongs in the temple of the King and needs his touch.

When Jesus made his way into Jerusalem that day he shook things up and turned things over. I suppose the proper response to this passage would be a prayer we probably don’t want to pray: “Lord Jesus...what do you want to shake up in me...in my family...in our church? Lord Jesus, what is it in my life that you want to turn upside down?” For the last three years or so, our church has been going through a season of shaking and flipping. It is hard. And it is good because it means that we still matter to the Lord and his work. I would say that those same three years have been a season of shaking and flipping for me, personally. Very unsettling at times. Very disturbing. Sometimes depressing. But instead of running away, I’ve tried to follow the example of those folks that the society of the time called unworthy. I’ve tried to move closer to Jesus. Because whatever he’s shaken loose or flipped over in my life...he knows what he’s doing and he’s the only one that can make it right. I want that in my life. I want that in our church. How about you?

Sermon Discussion Questions

- 1-This is the most angry we ever see Jesus. Does the idea of an angry Jesus disturb you? Why or why not?
- 2-The Synoptics place the cleansing of the temple in the last week of Jesus’ public ministry. John’s gospel places it at the very start, in chapter 2. If there was only one such event—as Pastor Mark suggests—why did John give this event such non-chronological priority?
- 3-Arising out of Jesus’ comments that, “even the stones themselves will cry out,” what did Pastor Mark mean when he said, “We are doing God no favors by worshiping him!”? What might this passage teach us about our own attitude to the worship of God?
- 4-In these two stories, how are the temple and the fig tree similar? How does the fig tree story speak to our lives as followers of Christ? How is it similar to Jesus’ teaching in John 15?