

A summary of John 2:13-25 (Nov.16, 2017)

1. Jesus made a scourge of cords and drove out those in the temple who were selling oxen, sheep and doves, and poured out the changers' money and overthrew the money changers' tables (John 2:14-16). Why? In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 14:24-26, there is a precedent for the selling and buying of animals. Those who lived too far from Jerusalem may have found it impractical to bring sheep or oxen or wine or oil or grain all the way. They were therefore allowed to convert their offering to money, come to Jerusalem, and then purchase what they wanted to offer from the sellers of these animals. If then God allowed this practice, why did Jesus take such drastic exception and exact severe punishment on the perpetrators?
2. Several reasons can be offered: one is that the the selling and buying were being carried out in the outer court of the temple, and actually should have been conducted outside the temple. That is why in the other accounts in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), each time, Jesus refers to His Father's house as a house of prayer, indicating that as soon as people entered into the temple, they immediately began a process of coming to God through the offerings they already had in their hand, having taken care of the obtaining of the animals beforehand. Hence Jesus' severe reaction.
3. Another reason that commentators offer is that the sellers were overcharging the worshipers and cheating them. This deduction may be supported by the explanation offered by Jesus in the synoptic gospels that they had made the temple into a house or den of thieves or robbers. In addition, the Gentiles were allowed to enter into the outer court of the temple to worship, borne out by Jesus' statement in Mark's gospel only that His house was a house of prayer for all nations. Therefore, the act of selling constituted a double offense: one of taking advantage of fellow brothers and sisters by overcharging, and one of shaming the testimony of God before the nations or Gentiles. Instead of being a testimony to the world and bringing Gentiles to God, they were robbing the Lord's house. See also Exodus 30:13-15. Any time we withhold an offering from the Lord, or offer something poor (when we have something better), we are cheating the Lord and the saints (see Malachi 1:6-14).
4. This is on the physical level. However, Jesus' action and His subsequent words are words of revelation to His disciples. The first two words in Greek that are used for "temple" in John 2:14-15 denote "a sacred place" or "sacred precincts," referring to the entire temple, whereas the words in Greek used in John 2:19 and 20 denote "dwell." Jesus, when referring to the temple in His rebuke to the sellers and money changers, does not use the word "temple" but rather the word "Father's house" and "My house" (in the other three Gospels). In Greek, the word for "house" means "dwelling."
5. To apply this, the Lord wants to transfer us from the physical temple to a spiritual dwelling, the body of Christ. We are the dwelling place of God in spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22). Our spirit and heart must be pure for the Lord. Is our heart really a holy temple or house for the Lord? For example, I may go to the Lord's day meeting. Do I go to satisfy some kind of religious requirement, to satisfy my conscience? Do I go just to meet some saints whom I know? Or do I go to worship the Lord? The fact that I go means that some percent of my being wants to worship the Lord. I have some desire, but may not be that pure. I have believed in the Lord (John 2:23), but can the Lord commit or entrust Himself to me (2:24)? The Lord does not like mixture. We are not that pure. We may be pure or in spirit when we praise the Lord, but not so pure, or in our flesh, otherwise.
6. Another application, somewhat on the physical level, is that we use the saints or the church for physical gain, for example, selling insurance or gaining some material profit at the expense of the saints. However, this is not limited to physical gain, but can extend to spiritual gain. For example, I may render some help to some saints, or some saints may appreciate some kind of sharing. Am I satisfied? Am I settled? Am I comfortable? This was the condition of the money changers and the sellers. They had set up shop and were immovable. We may be immovable in our self-satisfaction. The Lord needs to deal with us in a specific way. He will weave a cluster of small cords or rushes or weeds to make a scourge (a Roman form of punishment), to drive out, one by one, the impure motives and self-congratulatory assessment that we may have of our labor and exercise in the church life. Such a dealing may be painful and involve suffering, but it is a process by which the Lord cleanses and purifies us, working in us with our cooperation, our emptying and our denying of ourselves.
7. Such a scourging process is something done by the Lord to us, and not by us to others! We may look at other brothers and sisters and notice a lack or some kind of impurity. It is not up to us to weave a scourge to exact discipline! Here, we can learn a lesson from Jesus' reaction in another story in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 3:5, Jesus, in response to the condemning religious people who were judging His healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, looked at them with anger, but at the same time grieved at the hardness of their heart. It is very difficult for us to have both reactions. Often, we only have anger towards the saints. Can we learn to pray for the saints, grieving for them? Such an exercise may save us from an impetuous rebuke in an outbreak of unmitigated anger, into a prayerful covering of the saints in their weakness.
8. Jesus therefore is bringing His disciples from a physical to a spiritual plane. The word of revelation can only be understood in resurrection (John 2:22). We need to be in spirit and in the house of God, with the brothers and sisters, to remember the words that the Lord has spoken to us. Then we may receive a little bit of revelation to enable us to live a life that can be the dwelling place of God in spirit.