



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Cleansing of the Temple, or the Primacy of the Spiritual”

Matthew 21:12-17

TRANSCRIPT

The passage that we are reading is from Matthew chapter 21 verse 12 through verse 17. The context of this particular passage is the day after the entry of our Lord Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The night of Sunday was spent in Bethany as was also the night of Monday, and this account is of an incident that occurred on the Monday of our Lord’s last week upon the earth when he was here in the flesh. Verse 12 of Matthew chapter 21 continues the account,

“And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, ‘It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves. And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.’ And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the son of David; they were very displeased.”

(This is one of the instances in which I think that the editors of the New Scofield Bible, the text of which I have been reading, did not do a real good job in changing “they were sore displeased” to “very displeased.” The tendencies of editors always is to water down the things that they are editing, and while of course we don’t use the expression any more, I was sore displeased with him, that’s nevertheless a very vivid English expression and expresses the fact that there was a great deal of indignation in the minds and hearts of the chief priests and scribes, and that is exactly what the Greek word really says. They were indignant. And to me, sore displeased, even if we don’t understand it completely, we do get the impression that that is indignation – to be sore displeased with something – so I think, very displeased, is a very bland watering down of the strength of the expression.) These men were indignant at the children who were shouting praises to the king whom they rejected. The 16th verse continues,

“And said unto him, ‘Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise? And he left them, and went out of the city into Bethany; and he lodged there.

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we turn again to Thee with gratitude and thanksgiving that Thou hast in wonderful grace spoken to us through the Scriptures and brought us to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. We thank Thee that as Thou hast said in Thy word, it is not the wealthy, it is not the noble, it is not the mighty who are the objects, generally speaking, of the call of the Holy Spirit, but Thou hast taken the foolish things in order to bring to naught the things that might seem to be mighty in the eyes of men. Thou hast

wonderfully worked in our lives, and Thou hast brought us by Thy grace to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

And we praise Thee and we worship Thee, and we pray O God that our own praises and our own expressions of thanksgiving may bring honor to Thy name. We would, Lord, especially want to always recognize that we are in the family of God by Thy grace. And so may our gratitude be strengthened and deepened as the years go by. We praise Thee, Lord, for all of the blessings of membership in the body of Christ. We thank Thee that we have been redeemed that we have been declared just before Thee. Amazing fact that we are in the family of God and priests of God and have the right of access to Thee through the Lord Jesus our great High Priest.

We praise Thee Lord for all of these great things that are true of those who have been brought to trust in the Lord Jesus, and the blood that was shed for the redemption of sinners. And Lord, if there should be someone in this auditorium who has not yet come to faith in Christ, O God, work in their hearts to that end.

We pray that Thou will bring the knowledge of sin and the knowledge of guilt and condemnation and the desire to be free and to stand before Thee, declared righteous and in communion with the great and eternal triune God.

We pray for our country. We ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon its leadership. We pray that in the providence of God we may have the continued freedom to proclaim the gospel message and we pray for the whole church of the Lord Jesus.

We pray Lord that Thou wilt never allow us to become so circumscribed that our interests are only upon ourselves. We pray that we may remember that we are part of the broad and great work that Thou art doing and that Thou hast been doing down through the centuries. We thank Thee that we are fellow citizens with the great men of the past who have been brought to faith in Christ – not only the biblical heroes, but others after them – and Lord we pray that our interests may be directed toward the whole of the

body. And we pray, Lord, today that the whole of the body of Jesus Christ may be strengthened and built up through the ministry of Thy word.

We pray that the word of God may have an even more important place in our lives than it has at the moment. Wilt Thou create within us the desire to spend time in Thy presence in prayer and supplication and fellowship and communion, and give us Lord great motivation to be in an instrumentality in the dissemination of the word that has come to us. Give us the courage to speak to our friends our relatives and our acquaintances as the occasion arises, and wilt Thou bless the testimony to the salvation of many.

We ask Thy blessing on the outreach of the chapel in its ministry through the tapes and over the radio and especially in the lives of the individuals.

We pray for the sick. We ask Lord that Thou will continue to strengthen them and encourage them. We know there are many disappointments, many discouragements when we are sick, and we ask, O God, that through Thy word Thy wilt encourage and strengthen and if it should please Thee, give healing Lord. We remember particularly these that are listed in the calendry of concern. O God, minister to them. Glorify Thy name through their lives we pray. We commit this meeting to Thee and the meetings that follow today.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for the exposition today is, “The Cleansing of the Temple, or the Primacy of the Spiritual.” In your Bible reading, you may remember that the cleansing of the temple that is recorded in Matthew chapter 21 and Mark 11 and Luke 19 is the second cleansing of the temple in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. This particular incident is one that has very significant importance for us in connection with biblical prophecy as well as in connection with the doctrine of the Christian life.

For example, having just undergone the untriumphal ministry and having gone out to Bethany, the Lord Jesus comes back into the city on Monday and immediately goes to

the temple in order to claim his right as king. The city has welcomed him with the most anticlimactic expression I think that one can find in the New Testament: “this is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee,” failing to realize that by saying something like this they were putting our Lord Jesus in the company of the prophets of the Old Testament period, whereas he was really the Messiah the Son of God and the person before whom they should have fallen down in worship and praise.

So while it may seem at first glance to be an expression of high regard for the Lord Jesus, it was just the opposite. It’s no wonder that the Lord Jesus wept over the city as he did the day before had made his way toward Jerusalem. Three times, the Lord Jesus wept in his ministry. He wept by the side of the grave of Lazarus over the domestic sorrow that the death had caused, and then also no doubt over the ravages of sin in human nature. And then he wept over human guilt in the Garden of Gethsemane. Incidentally, the gospels do not say that he wept – it’s the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews who says that he wept with strong crying and tears. Evidently the writer of that epistle was able to get hold of some tradition concerning the ministry of the Lord Jesus that was not incorporated in the synoptic or Johannean gospels. But he wept then over human guilt and also [indistinct] the necessity of the atoning death that followed.

But when he came in his triumphal entry to the peak of the mountain and looked out over the city and began to weep, he was weeping over the national unbelief of Israel, the nation for whom he had come and to whom he had come he knew by divine foresight was going to reject him. But nevertheless he must carry out his ministry, and he must make his claims even though they will not be accepted. And so on Monday he comes to the temple to cleanse it, because of the desecration that was going on, as his first official act as king. One of the students of the life of Christ has called this the final judicial sentence. It was as Messiah that he had come to the city of Jerusalem at his untriumphal entry, and it is as Messiah the King that he enters into the temple on Monday. So as I say he solemnly claim came to claim his right.

“The Cleansing of the Temple, or the Primacy of the Spiritual” by S. Lewis Johnson
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Now this incident also has some very important significance for us in the realm of our Christian living.

Now we have in the case of our Lord’s driving the money changers and the sellers of the sacrifices out of the temple an exhibition of his retributive judgment – a retributive judgment that finds its ultimate expression at his second advent, and it I think its ultimate description in the words of the Book of Revelation: the wrath of the lamb. We see here just a kind of small foreshadowing of what it means to be the object of divine wrath. But it illustrates a great deal more than just that, and I think the important thing about it is that it beautifully expresses the views that the Lord Jesus had of the primacy of the spiritual over everything else.

Hugh McIntosh, who was Professor of Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh in a past generation of the 20th Century, has said that, “Lack of indignation at wickedness is a sign not of a poor nature only but a positive unlikeness to Jesus Christ,” and that’s true. The person who cannot be truly – I don’t mean ostensibly only – but truly disturbed at wickedness is a person who does not have a nature like Christ. It’s evident that in his case the sight of the desecration of the temple of God provoked in him the anticipations of the wrath of God. As a matter of fact, if the Lord Jesus had dallied with sin in any way, he could not have been our Savior. He could not have been a person who went to the cross as the pure and sinless Son of God and died for us who are sinners, and so he must express in his own person and being the hostility to sin that is provoked in a holy God. So I’m delighted when I see statements like this because it illustrates the fact that our Lord Jesus is what our sacrifice must be: the holy Son of God.

Now the reason that he did this is, because as I say, he was coming to claim his rights and the temple was the possession of the king. It was the place where true worship should be offered to God and in the kingdom, the king is also the God and the worship is the worship of the king. It was his place. As a matter of fact, in a moment he will call it, “my house.” And so he comes to claim his house and in the light of the

wickedness that was going on in it, well, it expresses, I say, the fact that he thinks that it is most important if a nation or if a church or if a spiritual body or even if an individual who claims to be or to possess the temple of God is not holy at it or their central place, there is no hope for divine fruitfulness and divine usefulness. And so our Lord goes immediately to the temple. seeing the wickedness there. casts the men out in order to stress the fact that it is the spiritual that is the preeminent thing.

Now that is very important and has many different applications and in a moment we’ll talk about some of them, but these I think are the two important truths of this passage. They have to do with prophecy. The king claims his rights as king in his temple, and he also expresses in it his view that the spiritual takes precedence over everything else.

The Lord Jesus, after Palm Sunday, had spent the night in Bethany in the home, let us say though we’re not certain, of Lazarus and Mary and Martha. Isn’t it interesting that whenever they are mentioned, it is in a favorable light? The Lord Jesus was not received in Jerusalem, but he always had a welcome in the little village of Bethany, and so he went out. Perhaps he did not stay in their home; it’s possible he stayed out on the hills as was his custom frequently. But he spent the night in Bethany, and the next day he suddenly comes to his temple as Malachi had prophesied.

Now that’s not the full fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi, for in Malachi that ultimately has reference to the second advent of the Lord Jesus, but this is in anticipation of it. He suddenly comes to his temple as the messenger of the covenant. And we read in verse 12, Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple.

To understand what was going on in the temple and therefore to appreciate more the thing that the Lord Jesus did, it’s necessary for us to review some of the practices of the Jews at this time. In the temple area – and this probably took place in the broadest part of the temple area, that which was called the court of the Gentiles – incidentally,

there were courts of the Israelites into which Israelites could go, there were courts of the women, and then there were courts into which the women could not go, and there was the court of the priests into which the Israelites could not go if they were not priests, so there were various of the temple area – this was, undoubtedly was the court of the Gentiles.

Now it was the time of the Passover, and this was the greatest feast in Israel so that hundreds of thousands of people had come to the city of Jerusalem. Last Sunday I mentioned that it has been estimated a few years after this that as many as two and a half people came to Jerusalem at this time. Now Jerusalem was a very small city, perhaps fifty to a hundred thousand, so you can see that this was a vast multitude that had come to the city. It was the custom to celebrate the Passover together. It was a season in which all of the Israelites gathered together and had good fellowship coming from places that were far distant, and so when they came, they naturally had to have their animals for sacrifice.

Now the sacrifices were the sacrifices of the lambs and also of the pigeons. It would be possible for a person to bring his own animal, but that would be a great deal of difficulty and unnecessary, because animals could be bought in the city of Jerusalem, but unfortunately, if you wanted to bring your lamb, you had to have that lamb approved by the inspector before it could be sacrificed, and the inspectors had an unhappy way of approving only those lambs that had been bought in the temple area.

And furthermore they charged exorbitant prices for this. For example if you were a poor person and you could not offer a lamb, and you wanted to offer some pigeons, two pigeons ordinarily cost about five cents in our money. But at this time, they cost four dollars which was a fairly good profit: five cents to four dollars. Furthermore, every Israelite had to pay a half shekel tax to the sanctuary for their annual dues, so to speak. This was part of the support of the Levitical ritual.

Now you could do this ahead of time – just like we buy our license plates in Texas – you could buy them at various places in the land several months ahead of time,

but if you waited until the last minute the only place you could by them was in Jerusalem. And then of course you had to change your money into the money that they accepted and they didn’t accept everybody’s money. They accepted the money of Tyre, because Tyre’s money had a great deal of silver in it, and was recognized as being very good currency. Certain other types of currency they accepted, but even then they had to transfer that into the money of the Israelites, which they alone accepted as valid. So in the course of the changing of the money they also made unusual profit.

Furthermore if you wanted to pay a half shekel, and you gave a shekel for change they charged you extra for giving a larger piece of money than you should have. So it’s no wonder then that this was called “the bazaars of the sons of Annas,” who was the High Priest. The priests had a hand in this. They had a good thing going. They worked with the money changers and with the sellers of the animals and each took a cut of what was paid in by the people of the land. The temple had become one scholar has said a meeting place of scamps.

Now we are inclined to look at this and say, well isn’t it wonderful we are we are living in enlightened the enlightened days of Christianity, and this does not go on with us, and weren’t the Jews bad in doing what they did. Israel Abrahams, who was a well known Jewish scholar has commented on this, he says that, “Christians too often forget that while this was going on in the temple area, there were many godly Jews who did come there to exercise their privilege as an Israelite and to truly worship Jehovah.” He said, “hen Jesus overturned the money changers and ejected the sellers of doves from the temple he did a service to Judaism. But we must remember that not everybody there was like the money changers and the sellers of the animals.”

And then he went on to say, he said, “Last year I was in Jerusalem on Easter and along the façade of the Church of Holy Sepulcher,” this Jewish scholar said, “I saw the stalls of the vendors of sacred relics of painted beads, and inscribed ribbons of colored canels, of gilded crucifixes and of bottles of water from the River Jordan.” He said, “There

these Christians babbled and swayed and bargained a crowd of buyers and sellers in front of the church sacred to the memory of Jesus. Would I thought that Jesus were to come again to overthrow these false services servants of his even as he overthrew his false brothers in Israel long ago.”

Now there are instances in which in our own Christian church we are doing the same kind of thing as the Jews were doing, and we often say isn’t it wonderful we are not as the Jews, while we hypocritically do the equivalent in the Christian church.

Well then we read that the Lord Jesus entered into this desecrated temple area, and he threw out all that sold and bought in the temple. Now how did he do that? Someone has suggested he did it because the people gave him popular support. There is no evidence of that at all from the context. In fact, the context seems to suggest that it was the power of the character of the Lord Jesus that probably lies behind the power that enabled him to do this.

Now if you’ll think for just a moment at what our Lord did both here and in the first cleansing of the temple, I’m sure you’ll be amazed. Can you imagine one man entering into a vast area such as the temple area which no doubt had many money changers, many places marked “change” over them. You’ve seen them all over the world as you’ve traveled. That type of thing. Many of them and many stalls where Jewish men were seeking to make an exorbitant profit over the sale of the doves and animals, and the inspectors standing around, and the chief priests and scribes participating in this too. Can you imagine one man entering into a temple area where these men were seeking to continue to make this exorbitant profit from, well, really the stench of ill gotten gains – can you imagine one man entering into this and driving them all out, if it was not by virtue of supernatural power?

I cannot possibly imagine this taking place were it not for the fact that there was something about the majesty about the Lord Jesus that suggested the majesty of the eternal God that enabled him to accomplish this task. It’s almost as if there was given

through him an overwhelming sense of the dignity of his character. There was almost a lifting of the veil of his humanity so that there came forth something of the majesty of deity.

To me, it reminds me of the incident when the soldiers came in the Garden of Gethsemane to take the Lord Jesus with Judas the Betrayer, and they came up to him asked and he asked them whom they were seeking. They said, Jesus of Nazareth. He said I am. And I think we probably should add, he – I am he. But when he said that the soldiers went back and fell to the ground. Again there was a lifting of the veil of his humanity so there was something of the overwhelming majesty of his person that came through, and these Roman soldiers found themselves groveling in the dust, and he had only spoken a word. So it was this, I think that enabled him to cast them all out. I’m sure there must have been fear and awe on the part of those who stood about wondering what had happened that this man was able to accomplish this.

Now he said unto them, as he did this, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves.” Now we don’t have time to turn back to the passages from which our Lord quotes, but what he does is take a passage from Isaiah chapter 56 and verse 7 in which the prophet, speaking of the kingdom age that is the future, comments upon the fact that the house of the Lord – the temple – is to be a place in which there is deliverance for the peoples of Israel and also for those who were not of Israel as well. My house shall be called the house of prayer, and then he cites from Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 11 in which Jeremiah has the little expression “den of thieves,” and he puts them together saying, my house shall be called the house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves.

Now Jeremiah’s passage is particularly thrilling because it so beautifully touches this incident here. Both of them have to do with the kingdom days, but Jeremiah speaks out of the context of the religious revival unto Josiah, and the people were now going back into the temple, and there was a great deal of activity of a religious nature in the

temple in Jerusalem. In fact Jeremiah says, they were speaking lying words as they came in the temple. He said what they were saying was as they were carrying out their worship in the temple area, they were saying the temple of Jehovah – as they looked about on the beautiful buildings – the temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah are these, and taking great pride in their possessions of the temple buildings, but yet at the same time being men characterized by oppression and distortion and evil. They were making as if they were carrying out truly the worship of the Lord. That’s what our Lord refers to when he says my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you just as in the days of Jeremiah, you’ve made it a den of robbers.

You see how our Lord regards inconsistency and hypocrisy in spiritual things? You know you can be just a hypocritical in Believers Chapel as you can in any place in this whole universe. You can come in and sit and look so pious in the pew. I have a good friend who likes to say, you look so pious, and I’m just wondering if you can lie in other ways too. [Laughter] But it is very easy for us in spiritual things to play the hypocrite and this is what our Lord has in mind. What I love about the Bible is the fact that it speaks so directly. It does not speak to business men and call dishonesty business acumen. It calls it dishonesty. And in the statements of holy Scripture, there is always this directness, this absence of false tact, false courtesy speaking directly to the points at issue. You’ve made it a den of thieves.

Now as he drove them out, we read in the 14th verse, “And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.” Now we pass here in almost a moment from the temple as a place of hypocrisy and sin and desecration to a place where for once it is what it is supposed to be – the house of prayer. Incidentally, I should have commented on this by applying this. You know, the Bible tells us that the church of Jesus Christ is the temple of God. That’s one of the figures of the church. It’s a figure of the whole church. That is, not this congregation only ,but all the congregations, Christian

congregations, for one great temple of the Lord—people who name the name of Jehovah who worship this triune God.

But also the Bible speaks of the local congregation as being the temple of the Lord. It’s one of the figures of the local church. We are a temple of Jehovah. The reason that it is called or the local church is called a temple is because it is there that true worship should be carried out in this age. And the Bible also speaks about individuals as being the temples of the Holy Spirit – our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. The reason for that—the reason for that figure is that there should be true worship within our own bodies. So the application of the things that our Lord is doing here applies not only to the church as a whole but to the local church, and even to the individual Christian’s body.

It’s possible to desecrate the place from which true worship should proceed by the things that we do. It is possible to be just as wicked as these Jews were by using the body that God has given us for purposes that are contrary to the teaching of his word. The Reformers laid a great deal of stress upon this in that they took up the question of the sale of indulgences in the churches and made a great issue over the fact that the church of Jesus Christ speaking, broadly the church in that day, had sinned against God by carrying on this ungodly practice which should not be carried on in the church of the Lord Jesus.

I love the way the Lord supports the things that he does, too. He says, “it is written.” It is written. You know, the eye of the local church, the eye of the individual, the eye of the church as a whole should always be upon what does the word of God say. That is the final test for all that we do, all that we think. Is it in accordance with holy Scripture. That’s the reason why we exhort one another to read and study holy Scripture. It stands written, the Lord Jesus said. In matters of question, the church’s eye is always to be upon the word of God.

Now I said he called it my house. You know, when he cleansed the temple the first time in the Gospel of John chapter 2 is the account, he says, “Make not my Father’s

house a house of merchandise.” Notice he spoke of the house as being his Father’s house there, but here he speaks of it as his house, taking those words from Isaiah and making them his own. He solemnly confesses his deity and also his kingship. It’s my house. All of these are implicit affirmations of the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Now having cast them out, we read of the healing of the blind and lame. That’s what the king ordinarily should be expected to do. So while some were expelled, others are welcomed. Incidentally, he didn’t say now come back some other time, but in this one brief moment he responded to the needs of the people who had true needs in the temple, and the temple became a place of worship and praise.

Now the chief priests were not too happy about this, and you’ve learned in reading the New Testament no doubt, to when you find the expression the chief priests and the scribes then trouble is near at hand. And so we read, and when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, hosanna to the son of David; they were very displeased. Think of the irony of the situation. Here are men who are blasphemous in that they do not respond to the second person of the trinity, speaking of him as a blasphemer. They themselves are blasphemous. They are murderous because they would love better than anything else to have his neck, which they are able to accomplish later on.

They are resentful of little children who march around the temple area shouting out Hosanna to the son of David. These little children—who the day before, no doubt, had heard the provincials, who were his friends as he made his way into the city saying hosanna to the son of David, hosanna in the highest, just as little children do, repeat the things that their parents were saying—these children locked their arms according to Toussaud the painter. He painted a picture of it as they locked their arms and marched around the temple shouting out, hosanna to the son of David. And here are the priests: murderers, blasphemers, resentful.

What do they prefer? Why they prefer the disorder. They prefer the desecration. They prefer the haggling. They prefer they prefer this ill-gotten gain. They prefer all of the wickedness of what was going on in that temple to little children singing purely praise to the Lord Jesus Christ. You know this illustrates for us, I think, a great deal about what children are really able to feel. There are some people who say that children cannot come to repentance and faith. I think that’s a great mistake. It’s true there are many children who do not, and one’s parent, the parents of children should be very careful about these experiences.

But I know from my own experience that children can experience true repentance. I can remember times when my own children have become convinced of their own sin and have fled to me. I remember one particular instance in which my daughter fled to me and fell over my chest – I was lying on the bed at the time – and wept and sobbed tears of repentance over something that she was accused of having done. I know that children can truly repent. I don’t know of many adults who weep and sob tears of repentance over their sin. I’m not suggesting that that’s always the sign of true repentance, incidentally. But children can feel true repentance, and children also can feel and can know what it is to have faith in God.

My wife and I made a trip to Birmingham on Monday because her mother and my mother-in-law was very well, and we were not sure how well she was going to be, and so we flew over on Monday morning and came back on Tuesday morning for a brief visit, primarily to visit her in the hospital. As we walked into the hospital room, she was feeling much better, and I began to look around the room, and I noticed on the wall there was some art work. Now my granddaughter is constantly making artwork and sending it through the mail to us, and I recognized immediately the artist [laughter], and I was very interested in what was on it and this picture had been put on the side of the wall in the hospital room with Scotch tape about this big, and it was something like, we love you Nanny, we are praying that you will be better, we hope you will be better and so on.

And then in addition to that there was a chair that was drawn, which she had drawn, and the figure of a person kneeling down on the chair, obviously, praying evidently in her own room—she prays at home down in front of a chair—and then off to the side drawn just like a cartoon was the subject of the prayer, O God help Nanny. Help her to get well. Please God—big letters—please God. Well now, that’s an expression of faith. Children can repent and children can believe, and we’re not to think of these children as simply repeating things that didn’t really mean something to them.

I heard of a little child who was invited to go to a prayer meeting for rain, and she took her umbrella. [Laughter] So here are little children expressing in a very simple way their faith in the Lord Jesus. Hosanna to the son of David. Hosanna to the son of David, no doubt having seen the healing of the blind and the lame and having become enough acquainted with the Lord Jesus to know this about him.

But we read that the chief priests come to the Lord Jesus and say to him, don’t you hear what these kids are saying? They’re making noise in the temple of God. These foolish sounds—they’re disturbing everybody by shouting, hosanna to the son of David. So they prefer all of that haggling and disorder and desecration to the praises of the children. Incidentally, no doubt, they said, you know it’s not proper at a time such as this to make noise in the temple, and I imagine that there are people who say it’s really not proper in a church meeting to ever say hallelujah or ever to say praise the Lord.

Now I’m not suggesting that we make this congregation a noisy place. I think a great deal of this, in fact almost all of it that I know about, is not really so true. We often think, you know, that decorum is the most important thing, but there should be an opportunity in our Christian experience and there should be a freedom to express the things that really mean something to us. And there are occasions, even though they may be very rare, in which it is proper to express thanksgiving and gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done. Now that’s a great deal for an old Presbyterian to say, but I do mean it. I think that it is valid.

And when these kids marched around in that temple, it was probably the first time in a long time that it was truly a house of prayer and praise. Well, he turns to them and he says, “Have ye never read?” Now if there were any people who prided themselves on reading Scripture, it was the chief priests and scribes. They were the ones above all people who read the Scriptures. It is so ironic for our Lord to turn to them; it would be just like someone who was an ordinary member of Believers Chapel turning to a man who was a professor of New Testament at a theological seminary—supposedly sound and conservative—and said, are you acquainted with such and such a passage of Scripture? Incidentally, you might find they weren’t, too. [Laughter]

But anyway, these were the men who spent their whole time studying Scripture and our Lord says, haven’t you read? It’s so obvious they don’t understand what they had been reading. It’s possible to be a student of Scripture and constantly teach the word, that is this Bible, these books constantly teach them and not really understand them. How true that is. Have you never read? He cites the passage which he applies from the 8th Psalm, a Messianic Psalm in which the principal point of it is that God loves to frustrate the wise and noble and the mighty. That is, those who think they are wise and noble and mighty, by taking the outcasts and blessing them.

It’s what Paul was talking about in 1st Corinthians chapter 1, when in about verse 26 and 27, speaking to the Corinthians he says, “Brethren you see your calling, how that not many wise, not many noble, not many well born, are called, but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.” And he had chosen these little children through whom he could work in order to confound these wise and mighty scholars of the Bible who because of their wickedness were blind to the truths of the word of God.

Well let me close by saying it’s obvious that the great lesson that emerges, that touches Christian life, is the primacy of the spiritual. If wickedness exists in the central

place – whether it be in the central place of the individual or in the central place of the local church or in the central place of the church of Jesus Christ – it is impossible for God to do his work of usefulness and fruitfulness through us, and so our Lord speaks directly to that.

You know this is illustrated I think in a strange incident that occurred in the life of our Lord recorded in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of John. I think I have enough time to take a look at it briefly. But in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus, in the presence of the Greeks and others, expresses some opinions and finally turning toward that which will ultimately take place in Gethsemane, he says in the 27th verse of chapter 12, “Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say, Father save me from this hour? But for this cause came I unto this hour Father glorify Thy name.” Then came there a voice from heaven saying I have both glorified it and will glorify it again. Now notice the response. The people therefore that stood by and heard it said it thundered, and then there were others who said an angel spoke to him, and then the Lord Jesus spoke and said, “This voice came not because of me but for your sakes; now as the judgment of this world now shall the prince of this world be cast out, and if I be lifted up from the earth I will draw all men unto me.” This he said, signifying the death by which he should die. Isn’t it striking? Three interpretations of what happened.

One of them: it thundered. Another: an angel has spoken to him. And the third, our Lord’s interpretation is: I must go to the cross and die. How true that is. When spiritual things take place, we have always these three interpretations. We have the interpretation of the utterly blind man who doesn’t understand what happened at all. He knows something happened but he cannot understand it. He says it thundered. And then there is the one who understands a little something but not the essential thing, and finally the true interpretation.

You can look at almost anything and see that. Look at nature. Some look at nature and say, well, what we have is the operation of natural law. This is the product

of evolution. The Grand Canyon is a cosmic accident to them. Sunsets are purely physical and nothing more. They hear only thunder. And then there are those who find that earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. But the Christian with the light of divine revelation sees the creation as groaning and travailing together in pain until the day of the kingdom when it is released and enters into the freedom of the sons of God.

Well, take the Bible. The Bible stands with open pages before the whole of this universe and people all over the world are able to look at a Bible. Some hear only Sunday: it’s just a book like any other book. Others believe that it’s inspired, like Shakespeare was inspired, and they see some remarkable things about it. They even preach from it they open up the Bible and take texts from it, but they don’t think the Bible is the word of God. And then there are those who find in it the voice of God through his word.

Well, take Christ. There are these different interpretations of Jesus Christ. Some look at him and they see only thunder. He’s just another man like anyone else. Or perhaps others say he was inspired; he was one of the greatest of men maybe the greatest religious man who ever lived. And then there are some who by the light of the Holy Spirit have come to the understanding of the fact that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and they fall down before him as Thomas did and say, my Lord and my God. They’ve been brought to the true interpretation. Nothing could be worse than the blindness of these religious leaders who hear only thunder when some of the great things of human experience are happening.

The thing that our Lord spoke about of course was the desecration of the temple of God, and I say again as I close simply this, that it is possible for us to desecrate the presence of God in our lives by putting other things before the primary thing which is the worship of the living God through Jesus Christ. It’s possible for us today to introduce into our own being as believers contending things and thus instead of our bodies being the

place of worship and praise primarily, they are primarily instruments by which we are engaged in enlarging our bank accounts or other issues, other activities that are less than the highest, and I think the Lord Jesus speaks directly to that in this statement. Make not my father’s house a house of merchandise; let it not be a den of robbers and thieves, but let it be what it should be a house of prayer. May the Lord enable us as Christians to hear and respond and pray that, O Father, make not the house of the Holy Spirit a house of merchandise, but make it truly a house of prayer.

Now for those who do not have our Lord Jesus Christ as their own Savior, you do not have the Holy Spirit within your body. Your body itself is not a temple of God. What you need is to come to realize the Lord Jesus is the Savior who has died for sinners that you may have everlasting life, and your body may become the temple of the Holy Spirit through faith in him who loved sinners and gave himself for them. So if you feel your guilt and condemnation, the salvation of God through Jesus Christ may be yours today by simply bowing in your heart before him and thanking him for that which he has done for sinners through Christ. If you’ve been brought to the place where you know you’re a sinner and under divine condemnation, it’s obvious that God the Holy Spirit has been working. Why don’t you respond? Come to Him. Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing to enter this building as a person under divine condemnation, to leave justified, declared righteous, a member of the family of God, a priest of God able to approach him, cleansed from all of the guilt of sin. May God help you to respond. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father we are so grateful to Thee for these wonderful incidents in the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that so beautifully illustrate the one great thing that lay upon his heart: this one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind and pressing forward to the things that are before, I pursue after the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. May the ambition of the apostle be our own ambition, that Christ may truly be first in our lives and that our business and our family and our hobbies

“The Cleansing of the Temple, or the Primacy of the Spiritual” by S. Lewis Johnson
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and all of our other interests may be subordinate to that one great passion for Thy
presence and Thy worship. Now may grace mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.