

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 21:12-17
“A House of Prayer”

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Matthew 21:12-17

Verse 12

Jesus entered the temple area 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.

- These events happened on the day of the triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. See exegetical notes for Matthew 21:1-11. After riding into the city in triumph to the shouts of the welcoming crowds, Jesus went to the Temple.
- Jesus entered the outer court of the Temple, the court of the Gentiles. Non-Jews were forbidden from entering the other parts of the Temple. This outer court, the court of the Gentiles, was the only place in God’s house that was open to non-Jews. In Jesus’ day the outer court of the Temple was an enormous area covering acres of space.
- In the outer court of the Temple were “money changers” and the sellers on certain kinds on animals. The “money changers” were there because certain offerings could only be made in certain types of currency. Therefore, people coming to the Temple would need to exchange their native currency for the acceptable currency required in the Temple. This was because many coins bore the faces of foreign gods. These graven images were forbidden in the Temple of God. The sellers of animals were there because certain sacrifices required certain animals that met particular standards. Doves were required in particular sacrifices according to the Old Testament. Therefore, as a convenience to the people, these animals were on sale in the outer court of the Temple.
- When Jesus entered the Temple, the presence of the “money changers” and the animal sellers upset him so much that he turned over the tables in their particular places of business.

Verse 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.’”

- The quotation comes from Isaiah 56:7 and/or Jeremiah 7:11. In these places God declares that his house will be “a house of prayer for all nations.” The only part of his house that could be entered by non-Jews, those from other nations, was the outer court and prayer was not happening there.
- The phrase, “a den of robbers” catches Jesus’ true offense at the situation. The money changers charged a fee for exchanging coins into acceptable currency for Temple. This fee was exorbitantly high. Thus, they were cheating the people. The same thing was true for the animal sellers. The fees they charged for the animals they sold were very high. Thus they, too, were cheating the people. Jesus’ objection was not to the offering of these services as a service to the people. His objection was to the way the authorities used these services to cheat the very people they were intended to service. That God’s servants were abusing God’s people in this way before those who were not God’s people, in the court of the Gentiles, made the activity even more offensive. To the Gentiles, God’s house would not even appear to be a “house of prayer.” Instead it would appear to be a place where God’s people cheated God’s people, a “den of robbers.”

Verse 14

The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.”

- This, also, probably happened in the court of the Gentiles. Imagine how differently visitors to God’s house would react to this activity and that provided by the “money changers” and animal sellers. Jesus demonstrated what a “house of prayer” would look like.

Verse 15

But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they were indignant.

- Apparently, Jesus’ presence in the Temple caused quite a stir. The overturning of the tables, the healings, and the children who carried the excitement of the Triumphal entry into the Temple Courts by continuing to shout the Messianic greeting to Jesus (see Matthew 21:9) caught the attention of the Temple authorities. However they were not happy with what they saw. Instead they were indignant,

disgusted with this display. They considered what Jesus had done, and the crowd's reaction to it, to be totally inappropriate.

Verse 16

“Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise,?’”

- The authorities object particularly to the praise of the children because the title they were ascribing to Jesus was Messianic. To them, it was inappropriate for Jesus to accept this praise because they did not believe him to be what the children were calling him and what he was, Israel's Messiah.
- Jesus responded to the concern by quoting Psalm 8:2 to them.

Verse 17

And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

- Each night of Holy Week, Jesus apparently left Jerusalem and traveled the two miles over the Mount of Olives to the little village of Bethany where his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. This then marks the end of the first day of Holy Week when Jesus left the city for Bethany.

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