

# Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 7

## CHRIST CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

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### Transcript

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CHAPTER 7

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John 2:12-25

"After this he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples: and they continued there not many days" (John 2:12). This verse comes in as a parenthesis between the two incidents of the Cana marriage-feast and the cleansing the temple. Like everything else in this chapter, it may be studied from a twofold viewpoint, namely, its immediate application and its remote. In both of these applications the reference to Capernaum is the key, and Capernaum stands for two things—Divine favor and Divine judgment; see Matthew 11:23. Taking the immediate application first, this verse tells us that for a short season Israel occupied the position of being in God's peculiar favor. The mother of Jesus (as we saw in our last chapter) stands for the nation of Israel, and particularly for Israel's privileges—for she was the one most honored among women. "His brethren" represents the nation of Israel in unbelief; proof of this is found in John 7:5. "His disciples" were the little remnant in Israel who did believe in Him, see John 2:11. With these, the Lord Jesus went down to Capernaum; but they "continued there not many days." Not for long was Israel to enjoy these special favors of God. Soon Christ would leave them. But this twelfth verse also has a prophetic significance. Its double application being suggested by the twofold meaning of Capernaum. Capernaum, which was exalted to heaven, was to be brought down to hell. Hence the force of "He went down to Capernaum." So it was with the nation of Israel. They had been marvelously favored of God, and they should be as severely punished. They should go down into the place of punishment—for this is what Capernaum speaks of. And this is exactly where the Jews have been all through this Christian dispensation. And how blessed to note that as the mother, brethren, and disciples of Christ (who represented, respectively, the nation of Israel privileged, but unbelieving, and the little remnant who did believe) went down to Capernaum—the place of Divine judgment—that the Lord Jesus went with them. So it has been throughout this Christian dispensation. The Jews have suffered severely, under the chastisements of God, but the Lord had been with them in their dispersion—otherwise they, had been utterly consumed long, long ago. The statement they continued there not many days" is also in perfect keeping with its prophetic significance and application. Only two "days" shall Israel abide in

that place of which Capernaum speaks; on the third "day" they shall be delivered—see Hosea 6:2. Let us now give a brief and simple Analysis of the passage which is to be before us: the Cleansing of the Temple:— 1. The Time of the Cleansing, verse 13. 2. The Need of the Cleansing, verse 14. 3. The Method of Cleansing, verses 15, 16. 4. The Cause of the Cleansing, verse 17. 5. The Jews' demand for a Sign and Christ's reply, verses 18-22. 6. Christ's miracles in Jerusalem and the unsatisfactory result, verses 23, 24. 7. Christ's knowledge of the human heart, verse 25. We shall study this passage in a manner similar to that followed in our exposition of the first half of John 2, considering first, the typical meaning of the cleansing of the Temple; and, second, its practical suggestions. I. The Typical Meaning. The first of the questions which we placed at the end of the last chapter, and which we asked our readers to meditate on in preparation for this, was, "Why is the cleansing of the temple referred to just here?" The careful student will have noticed that in each of the other Gospels, the cleansing of the temple is placed right at the close of our Lord's public ministry, as one of the last things He did before His apprehension. But here, the Holy Spirit has placed Christ's cleansing of the temple almost at the beginning of His public ministry. This has led the majority of the commentators to conclude that these were two totally different occasions and incidents, separated by a space of three years. In support of this conclusion some plausible arguments are advanced, but we are not at all sure of their validity. Personally, we are strongly inclined to believe that what is recorded in Matthew 21:12, 13 is the same incident as is before us here in John 2, and that the Holy Spirit has ignored the chronological order (as is so often the case in the Gospels) for His own good reasons. What these reasons may be we shall suggest below. Before advancing them, let us first state why we regard the cleansing of the temple here in John 2 as being identical with that which is described in Matthew 21:12, 13, and the parallel passages in Mark and Luke. The points of likeness between the two are so striking that unless there is irrefutable evidence that they are separate incidents, it seems to us the most natural and the most obvious thing to regard them as one and the same. We call attention to seven points of resemblance. First, Matthew places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of the Passover week, and John tells us that "the Jews" Passover was at hand (Matthew 2:12). Second, Matthew mentions those that "sold and bought" being in the temple (Matthew 21:12); John says the Lord found in the temple "those that sold oxen," etc. (John 2:14). Third, Matthew refers to the presence of those that "sold doves" (Matthew 21:12); John also speaks of the "doves" (John 2:16). Fourth, Matthew tells us that Christ "overthrew the tables of the money-changers" (Matthew 21:12); John also tells us that Christ "overthrew the tables" (John 2:15). Fifth, Matthew mentions that Christ "cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple" (Matthew 21:12); John declares He "drove them all out of the temple" (John 2:15). Note, in the Greek it is the same word here translated "drove" as is rendered "cast out" in Matthew! Sixth, Matthew declares Christ said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13); John records that the Lord said, "Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise" (John 2:16). We have no doubt that the Lord made both of these statements in the same connection, but John records the one which expressly affirmed His Divine Sonship. In each case Christ declared the temple was God's. Seventh, Matthew records how Christ spent the night in Bethany, and next morning He returned to Jerusalem, and was in the temple teaching, when the chief priests and elders of the people came to Him and said, "By what authority doest thou these things?" (Matthew 21:23). John also records that after Christ had cleansed the temple, the Jews said to Him, "What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?" (John 2:18). If, then, our conclusion be correct, that this cleansing of the Temple occurred at the close of our Lord's ministry, the question returns upon us, Why has the Holy Spirit taken this incident out of its chronological setting and placed it by the side of our Lord's miracle where He changed the water into wine? We believe the answer to this question is not far to seek. We suggest that there was a double reason for placing this incident in juxtaposition with the Cana marriage-feast scene.

First, it furnished added proof of the abject failure of Judaism; second, it completed the prophetic picture of Christ in the Millennium which John 2 supplies. We shall enlarge upon each of these points below. In the previous chapters we have pointed out how that in the opening portion of John's Gospel two things are noticed repeatedly—the setting aside of Judaism, and the turning away from it to Christ. This was emphasized at some length in our last chapter, where we showed that the giving out of the wine at the Cana marriage-feast, and the presence of the six waterpots of stone standing there empty, symbolized the spiritual condition of Israel at that time—they had lost the joy of their espousals and were devoid of spiritual life. In the passage which is now before us, an even darker picture still is presented to view. Here all figures and symbols are dropped, and the miserable state of Judaism is made known in pointed and plain terms. Up to this stage, Israel's miserable condition spiritually, had been expressed by negatives; the Messiah was there in their midst, but, said His forerunner to the Jerusalem embassy, Him "ye know not" (John 1:26); so, again, in the first part of chapter 2, "They have no wine" (John 2:3). But here, in the second half of John 2, the positive evil which existed is fully exposed—the temple was profaned. "And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem" (John 2:13). Here is the first key to that which follows. The "Lord's passover" (Ex. 12:11) had degenerated into "the passover of the Jews." But this is not the particular point upon which we would now dwell. What we would call attention to, particularly, is the time-mark given here. Two things are linked together; the passover and the cleansing of the temple. Now the reader will recall at once, that one of the express requirements of God in connection with the observance of the passover was, that all leaven must be rigidly excluded from the houses of His people. The passover was a busy time for every Jewish family: each home was subject to a rigorous examination, lest ceremonial defilement, in the form of leaven, should be found therein. "No leaven in your houses" was the requirement of the Law. Now the center of Israel's ceremonial purity was the temple, the Father's House. Israel gloried in the temple, for it was one of the chief things which marked them off from all other nations, as the favored people of God. What other race of people could speak of Jehovah dwelling in their midst? And now Jehovah Himself was there, incarnate. And what a sight met His eye! The House of prayer had become a house of merchandise; the holy place of worship was now "a den of thieves." Behold here the light shining in the darkness and exposing the real nature of things. No doubt the custodians of the temple would have stood ready to excuse this reproach upon God's honor. They would have argued that these money changers and cattle dealers, in the temple courts, were there as a convenience to those who came to the temple to worship. But Christ lays bare their real motive. "Den of thieves" tells us that the love of money, covetousness, lay at the bottom of it all. And what is "covetousness?" What is the Divine symbol for it? Let us turn the light of Scripture on these questions. Notice carefully what is said in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8. Writing to the Corinthian believers, the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul says, "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." To what was he referring here under the figure of "leaven?" Mark what follows: "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolators" (verses 9, 10). Leaven, then, here refers (among other things) to covetousness, extortion and idolatry. Now go back again to John 2. The feast of the passover was at hand, when all leaven must be removed from Israel's dwellings. And there in the temple, were the cattle dealers and moneychangers, actuated by covetousness and practicing extortion. What horrible desecration was this! Leaven in the temple of God! But let us turn on the light of one more passage. In Colossians 3:5 we read, "covetousness, which is idolatry." Ah, does not this reveal the emptiness of Israel's boast! The nation prided itself upon its

monotheism—they worshipped not the many gods of the heathen. The Jews boasted that they were free from idolatry. Yet idolatry—"covetousness"—was the very thing the Son of God found in His Father's House. Note again, the force of 1 Corinthians 5:10, covetousness, extortion, and idolatry are the three things there mentioned under the symbol of "leaven." Here, then, is the first reason why the Holy Spirit has placed this incident just where He has in this Gospel. It furnishes a striking climax to what has gone before. Put together these three things, and see what a glaring picture they give us of Judaism: first, a blinded priesthood (John 1:19-26); second, a joyless nation (no "wine," John 2:3); third, a desecrated temple. (John 2:16). We turn now to consider II. The Practical Lessons. 1. We see here the holy zeal of Christ for the Father's house. "Worshippers coming from remote parts of the Holy Land, found it a convenience to be able to purchase on the spot the animals used in sacrifice. Traders were not slow to supply this demand, and vying with one another they crept nearer and nearer to the sacred precincts, until some, under pretense of driving in an animal for sacrifice, made a sale within the outer court. This court had an area of about 14 acres, and was separated from the inner court by a wall breast high, and bearing intimations which forbade the encroachment of Gentiles on pain of death. Round this outer court ran marble colonnades, richly ornamented and supported by four rows of pillars, and roofed with cedar, affording ample shade to the traders. "There were not only cattle-dealers and sellers of doves, but also money-changers; for every Jew had to pay to the Temple treasury an annual tax of half a shekel, and this tax could be paid only in sacred currency. No foreign coin, with its emblem of submission to an alien king, was allowed to pollute the Temple. Thus there came to be need of money-changers, not only for the Jew who had come up to the feast from a remote part of the empire, but even for the inhabitants of Palestine, as the Roman coinage had displaced the shekel in ordinary use. "Cattle-dealers and money-changers have always been notorious for making more than their own out of their bargains, and facts enough are on record to justify our Lord calling this particular market 'a den of thieves.' The poor were shamefully cheated, and the worship of God was hindered and impoverished instead of being facilitated and enriched. The worshipper who came to the temple seeking quiet and fellowship with God had to push his way through the touts of the dealers, and have his devotional temper dissipated by the wrangling and shouting of a cattlemarket. Yet although many must have lamented this, no one had been bold enough to rebuke and abolish the glaring profanation" (Dr. Dods). But the Lord Jesus Christ could not suffer His Father's house to be reproached thus. Zeal for God consumes Him and without hesitation He cleanses the temple of those who defiled it. 2. "And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables" (John 2:15). How this brings out the Deity of Christ! First, He identifies Himself with the temple, terming it "My Father's house," and thus affirming His Divine Sonship. This was something which none other had dreamed of doing. Neither Moses, Solomon nor Ezra, ever termed the tabernacle or the temple his "Father's house." Christ alone could do this. Again; mark the result of His interference. One man, single handed, takes a whip and the whole crowd flees in fear before Him. Ah, this was no mere man. It was the terror of God that had fallen upon them. 3. This incident brings before us a side of Christ's character which is almost universally ignored today. We think of the Lord Jesus as the gentle and compassionate One. And such He was, and still is. But this is not all He is. God is Light as well as Love. God is inflexibly righteous as well as infinitely gracious. God is holy as well as merciful. And we do well to remind ourselves of this. Scripture declares "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," as all who defy Him will yet discover. Scripture speaks of "the wrath of the lamb," and our lesson furnishes us with a solemn illustration of this. The unresisting money-changers and cattle-dealers, fleeing in terror before His flashing eye and upraised hand, give warning of what shall happen when the wicked stand before the throne of His judgment. 4. This incident rebukes the present-day desecration of the house of prayer. If the holy anger of

the Lord Jesus was stirred when He beheld the profanation of that House which was to be a "house of prayer," if the idolatrous commercialization of it caused Him to cleanse it in such a drastic manner, how must He now regard many of the edifices which have been consecrated to His name! How tragically does history repeat itself. The things which are now done in so many church-houses—the ice cream suppers, the bazaars, the moving picture shows and other forms of entertainment—what are these but idolatrous commercialization of these "houses of prayer." No wonder that such places are devoid of spirituality and strangers to the power of God. The Lord will not tolerate an unholy mixture of worldly things with spiritual.

5. One of the questions we drew up at the close of the last chapter was, "Why did not Christ drive out the 'doves'?" The answer to this is found in Isaiah 52:13, where God through His prophet, declared of the Messiah then to come, "Behold, my servant shall deal prudently." The "prudence" of Christ was strikingly evidenced by His mode of procedure on this occasion of the cleansing of the temple. The attentive reader will observe that He distinguished, carefully, between the different objects of His displeasure. The oxen and sheep He drove out, and these were in no danger of being lost by this treatment. The money of the changers He threw on the ground, and this could be easily picked up again and carried away. The doves He simply ordered to be taken away: had He done more with them, they might have flown away, and been lost to their owners. Thus, the perfect One combined wisdom with zeal. How differently would Moses or Elijah have acted under similar circumstances. But even in His anger Christ deals in prudence. Christ rebuked all, yet none were really injured, and nothing was lost. O that we may learn of Him Who has left us such a perfect example.

6. "Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign showest thou unto us seeing that thou doest these things?" (John 2:18). This demand for a "sign" evidenced their blindness, and gave proof of what the Baptist had said—"There standeth one among you whom ye know not" (John 1:26). To have given them a sign, would only have been to confirm them in their unbelief. Men who could desecrate God's house as they had, men who were utterly devoid of any sense of what was due Jehovah, were judicially blinded, and Christ treats them accordingly: "Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (verse 19). He spoke in language which was quite unintelligible to them. "Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But He spake of the temple of his body" (John 2:20, 21). But why should the Lord express Himself in such ambiguous terms? Because, as He Himself said on another occasion, "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). Yet, in reality, our Lord's reply to these Jews was much to the point. In raising Himself from the dead He would furnish the final proof that He was God manifest in flesh, and if God, then the One Who possessed the unequivocal right to cleanse the defiled temple which bore His name. It is very significant to compare these words of Christ here with what we find in Matthew 21:24-27, spoken, we doubt not, on the same occasion. When challenged as to His authority, Matthew tells us He appealed to the witness of His forerunner, which was primarily designed for the Jews after the flesh. But John mentions our Lord's appeal to His own resurrection, because this demonstrated His Deity, and has an evidential value for the whole household of faith.

7. Another of the questions asked at the close of the previous chapter was "Did the Lord's own disciples believe in the promise of His resurrection?" The answer is, No, they did not. The evidence for this is conclusive. The death of the Savior shattered their hopes. Instead of remaining in Jerusalem till the third day, eagerly awaiting His resurrection they retired to their homes. When Mary Magdalene went to tell His disciples that she had seen the risen Christ, they "believed not" (Mark 16:11). When the two disciples returned from Emmaus and reported unto the others how the Savior had appeared unto them and had walked with them, we are told, "neither believed they them" (Mark 16:13). The testimony of these eyewitnesses seemed to them as idle tales (Luke 24:11). But how is this to be explained? How can we account for the persistent unbelief of these disciples? Ah, is not

the answer to be found in the Lord's teaching in the Parable of the Sower? Does He not there warn us, that the great Enemy of souls comes and catches away the "seed" sown! And this is what had taken place with these disciples. They had heard the Savior say He would raise up the temple of His body in three days, but instead of treasuring up this precious promise in their hearts, and being comforted by it, they had, through their unbelief, allowed the Devil to snatch it away. Their unbelief, we say, for in verse 22 we are told, "When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this unto them; and they believed the Scriptures, and the word which Jesus had said." It was not until after He had risen that they "remembered" and "believed" the word which Jesus had said. And what was it that enabled them to "remember" it then? Ah, do we not recall what Christ had said to them on the eve of His crucifixion, "But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26). What a striking and beautiful illustration of this is given us here in John 2:22! 8. "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all" (John 2:23, 24). What a word is this! How it evidences human depravity! Fallen man is a creature that God will not trust. In Eden Adam showed that man after the flesh is not to be trusted. The Law had proved him still unworthy of the confidence of God. And now this same character is stamped upon him by the Lord Jesus Himself. As another has said, "Man's affections may be stirred, man's intelligence informed, man's conscience convicted; but still God cannot trust him." (J. E. B.). Man in the flesh is condemned. Only a new creation avails before God. Man must be "born again." 9. "Jesus did not commit himself unto them" (verse 24). The Lord's example here is a warning for us. We do well to remember that all is not gold that glitters. It is not wise to trust in appearances of friendliness on short acquaintance. The discreet man will be kind to all, but intimate with few. The late Bishop Ryle has some practical counsels to offer on this point. Among other things he said, "Learn not to place yourself rashly in the power of others. Study to develop a wise and a happy moderation between universal suspiciousness and that of making yourself the sport and prey of every pretender and hypocrite." 10. "Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man" (John 2:24, 25). Here we are shown the Savior's perfect knowledge of the human heart. These men could not impose upon the Son of God. He knew that they were only "stony ground" hearers, and therefore, not to be depended upon. They were only intellectually convinced. Our Lord clearly discerned this. He knew that their profession was not from the heart. And reading thus their hearts He manifested His omniscience. The force of what is said in these closing words of John 2 will be made more evident if we compare them with 1 Kings 8:39: "Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and forgive whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of all men.)" It only remains for us to point out how that there is a series of most striking contrasts between the two incidents recorded in the first and second parts of this chapter—the making of water into wine at the Cana marriage-feast, and the cleansing of the Temple. 1. In the one we have a festive gathering; in the other a scene of Divine judgment. 2. To the former the Lord Jesus was invited; in the later He took the initiative Himself. 3. In the former case He employed human instruments; in the latter He acted all alone. 4. In the former He supplied the wine; in the latter He emptied the temple. 5. In the former, His fact of making the wine was commended; in the cleansing of the temple, He was challenged. 6. In the former Christ pointed forward to His death (John 2:4); in the latter He pointed forward to His resurrection (John 2:19, 21). 7. In the former He "manifested forth his glory" (John 2:11); in the latter He manifested His "zeal" for His Father's House (John 2:17). Let the student prayerfully study and meditate upon the following questions in preparation for the next lesson, when we shall give an exposition of the first portion of John 3. 1. Why is Nicodemus referred to in this connection? verse 1. 2. Why are we

told he came to Jesus "by night?" verse 2. 3. Was Nicodemus' conclusion justifiable? verse 2. 4. Why cannot a man "see" the kingdom of God except he be "born again?" verse 3. 5. What did Nicodemus' ignorance demonstrate? verse 4. 6. What does "born of water" mean? verse 5. 7. In what other ways is the blowing of the Wind analogous with the activities of the Holy Spirit in regeneration? verse 8.

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