

Cleansing the Corrupt Cathedral

by Mariano Di Gangi

The sermon emphasizes the importance of constant reform and renewal in the church, and the need for individuals to be mindful of their own corruption and seek cleansing and restoration through Christ.

Duration: 30:49

Scripture: John 2:12

Topics: "Correction", "Cleansing", "Church Reform"

Description

Mariano Di Gangi emphasizes the need for cleansing both the church as an institution and individual believers, drawing parallels from Jesus' cleansing of the temple. He highlights how the temple, meant to be a house of prayer, had been corrupted by commercialism and exploitation, reflecting the need for constant reform in the church. Di Gangi warns against heresy, schism, and racism as defilements of the church, urging believers to recognize their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. He calls for repentance and renewal, assuring that Christ can cleanse and restore both the church and individual lives. The sermon concludes with a plea for Jesus to purify and reform His people for His glory.

Transcript

Reading this evening from the Gospel According to John, the second chapter, and beginning at verse 12. Hear the reading of this portion of God's inspired word. After this, he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples.

There they stayed for a few days. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts, he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

So he made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves, he said, get these out of here.

How dare you turn my father's house into a market? His disciples remembered that it is written, zeal for your house will consume me. The text begins with a reference to time. And since I believe that the Holy Spirit guided and guarded the authors of Holy Scripture, that notation of time is of significance.

After this, he went down to Capernaum. After what? After the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. That was the first of the miracles of Jesus.

It was a revelation of his glory, and it confirmed the faith of his followers. After that event in Cana of Galilee, Jesus goes down to the town of Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples. Now, this is not the time or place to get into a long discussion and detailed debate on the identity of those who are here called the brothers of Jesus.

Suffice it to say that there have been three main views held on this subject. The first is that this is really a colloquial expression and it isn't brothers at all, but simply cousins. Others say these were children of Joseph by a previous marriage, and he married Mary when he had been widowed, and these being children of a former marriage are here referred to as the brothers of Jesus.

A third interpretation, and the one that seems to have most scriptural support, is that after Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin by the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, and after she had brought forth her firstborn son, Mary lived with Joseph as his wife in the fullest sense of the word, for marriage is honorable in all, and from that marriage, other brothers and sisters were born to the holy family. And the names of these brothers of Jesus are given in the other gospels. The important thing is not the debate over the identity of the brothers of Jesus, but the certainty that you and I, like those mentioned in the text, are numbered among the disciples of Jesus.

For the true family of Jesus consists in those who know the will of God and do the will of God. These, says Jesus, are my mother, my brothers, and my sisters. And therefore, while we cannot be part of the immediate physical family of Jesus by generation, we can become members of his spiritual family by regeneration, being numbered among the brothers and sisters of our Lord because we are his disciples and we know the will of God and are committed to doing it.

Jesus moves from Cana of Galilee, the wedding scene, to Capernaum, and from Capernaum makes his way to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Jewish Passover. This, of course, was the high point of the Jewish religious year. It was the time when the lamb was slain in sacrifice.

It was the time when bitter herbs were eaten to remind the people of the bitterness of the bondage that they had suffered in the land of Egypt from which the Lord had set them free. It was the time when they ate unleavened bread, bread that had to be eaten before it could be given a chance to rise because it was bread that belonged to a people on the move in a state of pilgrimage if not in utter flight from its oppressors. The sacrificial lamb, the bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, all this would be part of the Passover observance in Jerusalem.

And now we come to the text itself. It's given in story form. It is a narration worth recalling in every detail.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem. He comes to the vast complex of the temple glittering gloriously in the oriental sunlight, and he sees that one area is reserved for the use of the priests of Israel. The priestly section is enclosed.

To the east of the priestly section is the court of the men where they may go to worship. To the east of the court of the men is the court of the women where they may go to worship. And then beyond that, there is a vast space left for Gentiles who, being sick and tired of the idolatry and immorality of their pagan ancestry, look for a loftier, nobler ethic related to the monotheism of the Jews.

These are proselytes and God-fearers who, having abandoned the ways of the heathen, are enamored of the Jehovah of the Old Testament and are looking for an experience of relationship with him. That outer court is reserved for Gentile seekers after the God of Israel. But what does Jesus find when he comes to the court of the Gentiles? What he finds is a smelly, filthy stockyard.

What he finds is a frenzy of activity like panic selling and buying on the floor of a stock exchange. What he finds is a busy, buzzing bazaar. How did this happen? That an area reserved for Gentiles who were seekers after the God of Israel should be so profaned? Well, what happened was that people would come from great distances to worship at Jerusalem.

You couldn't expect them to bring an ox or a lamb or sheep or doves from a great distance, and so it was more convenient for them to buy their animals right on location to be offered in sacrifice. These religious pilgrims came from all over the Roman Empire, for the Passover feast was one of the three where every male should make an effort to get to Jerusalem. And they came with coinage from Rome, money from Greece, currency from Egypt, and from Syria.

And this was not acceptable to pay the temple tax, so you bought your animals on location rather than bring them from a distance, and you had to translate your currency in coins that would be acceptable to pay your tax in the temple. Now a crafty high priest who had been deposed for being so unscrupulous, so greedy and vindictive, still managed, like some Israeli godfather, to pull the strings of all these priestly puppets, and he ran what was known as the Bazaar of the Sons of Annas. He had a monopoly on the temple business, and he exploited the religious sensibilities of those who came from afar to worship Jehovah.

And you can imagine the haggling and the bargaining and the cursing and swearing that would go on as people sought to get a better deal or felt they had been cheated. And Jesus comes into that situation, and he takes cords that are found on the spot and binds them together into a scourge, and he takes an action that surprises everybody. With awesome majesty, armed with the integrity of his righteousness, with an indignation that burns within him, resenting what is wrong and wanting to redress it by replacing it with what is right, he storms into the midst of those who are buying and selling and trading in currency and in livestock, overturns their tables, sends the money rolling all over the pavement floor, turns the animals loose, and with the energy of a righteous indignation strikes fear into the hearts of those men.

And he goes to those who were selling doves and says, clear that stuff out of here. How dare you turn my father's house into a common marketplace. There's a world of significance in that phrase, my father's house.

In the third chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, there's a reference to Moses, who was a faithful servant in the house of God. But there's also a reference to Jesus, who is not merely a faithful servant in the house of God, but who is a son, the son of God, and has a commanding authority in the affairs of his people. And when Jesus says, you dare not do this to my father's house, he is exercising his prerogative as the divine son of God authorized to keep it clean.

But more than that, he is the father's beloved son. And he not only has authority as the unique son of God, he has affection for his father's glory, and he will not have it trampled into the earth by those who exploit and those who cheat. And so it is that with affection for his father, with authority in the affairs of his people, Jesus takes hold of the situation and sends them scattering in every direction.

And then the disciples recalled what was written in the Old Testament. Digging back into the 69th Psalm and the 9th verse, where the author speaks about being consumed, about being burned up, about being aglow with holy indignation over the house of God and the way that men have abused it, profaned it, and polluted it. Why is it that there wasn't any resistance against Jesus for doing this? Well, for one thing, his action took them completely by surprise because nobody, as far as we know, had dared to challenge the status quo and had dared to have a frontal attack on these vested, greedy interests.

He took them by surprise. They couldn't organize resistance to him, and before they could think of doing it, it was over in confusion. But more than that, he had the support of the common people who had felt gouged and cheated by the priestly aristocracy.

And far from condemning him or opposing him for doing something sacrilegious, they must have applauded him with enthusiasm on that day. Now remember, according to the way that John tells this story, it happened right after the performance of the first miracle of Jesus, and therefore it took place right at the beginning of our Lord's ministry on earth. When you turn to what are called the synoptic gospels, when you turn to Matthew 21 or Mark 11 or Luke 19, you will find that the cleansing of the temple took place, according to these authors, not at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus but right on the eve of his arrest and betrayal and crucifixion.

Was John mistaken? Were Matthew, Mark, and Luke in error? How could they do such a thing? One puts it at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, the other puts it as a contributing factor to the rage of the aristocracy and his crucifixion. They separate the incident by three years. The matter is resolved when we remember that the cleansing of the temple was not a permanent act.

It had to be done over and over again every time that it reached the level of being a stench in the nostrils of a holy God. And that is why the Protestant Reformers adopted as their motto in Latin that the church must not only be reformata but reformanda. The church must not only be reformed but it must constantly be reformed to come back to where it ought to be in keeping with the standard of a holy God.

And you find that the second cleansing of the temple deals with the corruption that had begun to gather in the intervening years after that primary cleansing in the second chapter of John. As a matter of fact, you find some interesting biblical quotations that are added at the second cleansing of the temple that show the matter to have gone further. They quote it from Isaiah 56 and from Jeremiah 7. My Father's house shall be a house of prayer for all people.

It must be open to Gentiles as well as Jews. By having this market in the midst, by having this buying and selling, you distract those who would worship and make it impossible for them to have a quiet moment with God. And what God intended to be a house of prayer for all nations, you have turned into a den of thieves.

This time they did organize resistance to Jesus. And the cleansing of the temple, which was a blow at the vested interests of those who profited and racketeered out of religion, became a contributing factor to their heated animosity and to his being crucified. What these two stories tell us from the beginning of his ministry and the climax of his ministry is that the prophecy of the ancient Hebrew prophet Malachi has certainly come to pass and has been fulfilled in Jesus.

The Lord said through the prophet Malachi that the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and who shall abide the day of his coming for he is like a refiner's fire. He did it at the first cleansing of the

temple. He did it at the last, even if it would cost him his very life.

So much for the narration of the story as it's given in John chapter 2 and repeated because of the second cleansing recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. If we stopped there, we would be like those who from a balcony look down on the scene in the street below. Interesting, but it doesn't affect us.

We've got to pass from narration to application and that is where the matter becomes rather uneasy. This event and what it teaches can be applied to the church as an institution. Why? Because the church is the temple of God in our time.

The literal temple fell prey to the hordes of Rome in 70 A.D. and was destroyed. But the Lord Jesus Christ is rebuilding his temple and in Ephesians chapter 2 we are told that the temple of God is built up of living stones built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles with Christ Jesus himself as the chief and uniting cornerstone to be the habitation of God who by his Holy Spirit indwells the temple that is the church. And yet that temple can be desecrated and that institution can be defiled and history shows how repeatedly the church instead of being reformed has become deformed.

Deformed and defiled by what? By several things. For example, harassing. After the medieval era it became fashionable to encourage people to think that while Jesus Christ had done a great deal for their salvation we by our own merits and efforts had to add to the work of Jesus Christ to help earn our salvation.

That was a corruption of the gospel. It was a desecration that needed to be made clean. People were encouraged to think that by paying money they could purchase indulgences which would give them the remission of the penalty due to their sins for sins of the past, for sins of today and for sins that they might yet commit.

And that too was a gross corruption of the gospel that needed to be corrected. In our day there is desecration and defilement of the church which is the temple of God. When you have bishops who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus, when you have theologians who deny the miraculous conception of Jesus who was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, when you've got theologians who deny that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, when you have those who deny the authority and inspiration and the supremacy of Scripture as our standard for faith and morals, heresy defiles the institutional church, the temple of God.

And so does schism. For it is the will of the king and head of the church that his people dwell together in unity. And when there is loveless separation and when there is a fragmentation of fellowship because somebody's ego gets bruised, that is an offense against the unity of the church and it defiles the temple of the living God.

Notice how often in the New Testament Scriptures an appeal is made to the oneness that we have in Jesus Christ and how we ought to seek the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, knowing that the venting of one's spleen and the fragmentation of the fellowship defile the church of the living God. And what about racism? For too long the churches that should have been the vanguard in the matter of racial justice have not been the lead engine but the unwilling caboose dragged along and after society has exposed the sin of racism, the churches have gotten on board as well. How dare churches exclude those whom God invites and God accepts? Discrimination on grounds of race or culture are totally contrary to the will of Him who says, Whosoever will may come, I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.

Heresy, schism, and racism defile the church of the living God. And we have the warning given by the apostle in 1 Corinthians 3, Know ye not that ye are the temple of the living God? Whoever defiles, desecrates, or destroys this temple God will inevitably and finally destroy him. And so where there is error, there must be repentance.

And what is crooked must be made straight. And what is deformed must become reformed according to the straight-edge standard of the word of God. The text is certainly applicable to the church as an institution, for it is the temple of the living God in which His Holy Spirit chooses to dwell.

But you know this applies not only to the church as an institution. It applies to Christians as individuals. And my sure ground for saying that is found again in 1 Corinthians 6, where in verses 19 and 20, the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians and the Holy Spirit, through that scripture, speaks to us in the 20th century and says, Know ye not that your body is meant to be the temple of the Holy Spirit? Don't you know that the Spirit of God dwells in you and would make each of you a sacred shrine for the glory of God? Not only are you indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but you have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus.

You belong to Him. You are a temple that is to be totally devoted to Him. And if you fail to do that, you have defiled and desecrated the shrine that belongs to Him alone.

How can the individual defile and desecrate God's temple within? Obviously, if we take the literal context of 1 Corinthians 6, verses 19 and 20, it is by the matter of immorality. When people let their sexual behavior be guided by sly fraud, when people let their sexual relationships be dominated by the world instead of the Word, the individual who should be a shrine of the Holy Spirit is defiled and desecrated and in need of being cleansed. Beyond immorality, there is the matter of idolatry.

The temple is made for one God alone, and we have no right whatsoever, God forbid, our daring and audacity to deal in terms of a pantheon where alongside of the true and living God, others are put within the shrine that should be reserved for Him alone. Idolatry, like immorality, desecrates and defiles the temple, and that kind of corruption calls for the cleansing that Christ alone can give. Have you ever thought of the matter of insincerity in worship as a defilement of the temple of God? Read at your leisure the tail end of Malachi chapter 1, where the prophet speaks for God and says, Oh, that the doors of the temple would be shut so that the travesty would no longer continue, of people going to God and professing to worship Him with their lips and with their bodily posture and even with their uplifted hands and their bent knees, and yet they offer to God bread that is polluted, and they offer to God sacrificial animals that are filled with every blemish and every defect.

Failing to give God our best, giving God that which is the leftovers, offering to Him that which is blemished and defective, insincerity in worship is not only displeasing but disgusting to the Lord because it defiles the temple that should be consecrated to Him alone. And this, too, calls for repentance and reform and renewal. The wonder and the warmth of the gospel is this, that when the church as an institution recognizes its frailty and its fallibility and turns to Christ, Christ will make it clean.

The wonder and the beauty of the gospel is that when we as individuals are conscious of the taint in our lives that keeps us from being what we ought to be, the shrine of the Holy Spirit, the place where Jesus rules alone, and we are aware of this and we turn to Him with repentant hearts, He will not only hear our cry but cleanse our corruption and make us what we ought to be. Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Let us pray. Lord, come to us.

Come to us as the one who cannot tolerate corruption. Come to us as the one who is willing to cleanse us, to wash us, to make us pure within. Lord Jesus Christ, do not give up upon the church as an institution.

Do not give up on us as individuals, but draw near with your cleansing power and make us what we ought to be. We ask it for your own glory. Amen.

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