

The SBJT Sermon: Sovereign in His Temple

Luke 19:45-48

Kent Hughes

Kent Hughes is pastor of The College Church in Wheaton, Wheaton, Illinois, where this message was first preached. He is the author of numerous volumes, including *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, *Disciplines of Grace*, and the extremely popular *Preaching the Word* series. All quoted Scriptures are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

The evidence indicates that the Triumphal Entry and the cleansing of the temple recorded in Luke 19 are of one premeditated fabric. Jesus orchestrated both with an eye to Old Testament Scripture. This is illustrated in the Triumphal Entry by his prescient knowledge of an unriden colt of a donkey in the next town, his regal assurance that its loan would be granted simply by saying "The Lord needs it" (v. 34), and in his royal ride into Jerusalem. All of these acts were a conscious demonstration that he was the Messiah-King prophesied in Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." At his entrance into the city, the crowds understood this messianic act and began to chant lines from the Hallel Psalms, principally: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (v. 38, cf. Ps 118:26).

Every act that Scripture records during Jesus' final days was purposeful; nothing was wasted. The tears he shed over Jerusalem were part of the Father's plan to reveal the heart of the soon-to-be king of all the world. Even the timing of these events was significant, for Passover was the chosen time for the Lamb to die.

We see the same divine control in the subsequent temple cleansing. The verse that the throngs had been chanting to Jesus, "Blessed is the king who comes (*ho*

erchomenos) in the name of the Lord," echoes the question which messengers from John the Baptist had earlier asked Jesus, "Are You the Expected One? (*ho erchomenos*)" (Lk 7:19, NASB). This question about his coming was generated from their knowledge of the famous prophecy of Malachi 3:1: "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty." So we understand that the chant repeated by the joyous crowds "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," is really an answer to the Messianic expectation of Malachi 3:1, which emphasizes that the Lord will *suddenly* come to his temple.¹ This is why Jesus, in conscious prophetic fulfillment, ultimately ends up in the Temple.

Even at the age of twelve, when Jesus' searching parents found him in the temple, Jesus referred to it as his Father's house, saying, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49). Now Jesus establishes himself as sovereign in his Father's house. As Godet observes, "These are the days of the Messiah's sovereignty in his temple."² What is it that the King of the temple does in the first minutes of his announced reign? He purges it of worship abuse. In doing so, he prepares it for his own ministry of preaching. Later, Jesus will take its place when he himself becomes the temple of

his people. It is evident that he is in control of his every action and word.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple (19:45-46)

Action. Luke describes Jesus' famous actions in a notably shortened sentence, "Then he entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling" (v. 45). The commercial abuse of God's house had grown out of the worshipers' need to obtain unblemished animals for sacrifice (cf. Lev 1:3) and the annual requirement that every male Israelite pay a half-shekel temple tax (cf. Ex 30:11-14), which necessitated changing money into the proper currency.

Thus, we implicitly understand that there were exorbitant charges made by money changers and a large traffic in livestock to feed the altars, all at the worshipers' expense (cf. Jn 2:14). Documents record transactions in which three thousand livestock were brought to the temple hill to be sold for offerings.³ In Jesus' day, the middlemen were under the control of the high priest Ananias, whom Josephus cynically called "the great procurer of money" (*Antiquities* 20.205).⁴

A huge religious scam had been going on for years in the temple area, specifically in the Court of the Gentiles, the only place in the temple where a non-Jew could go to pray and meditate. The only place designated for gentile worship had devolved into virtually an open air market and banking establishment.

Into this scene walks the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Malachi's prophetic statement "'suddenly the Lord . . . will come to his temple'" was fulfilled. Mark is more graphic than Luke:

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying

and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. (Mk 11:15-16)

Have you ever seen a table flipped over? This is a violent act. In addition, we see Jesus halting the traffic of those who were using the Court of Gentiles as a shortcut—he "would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts." So much for the one-sided "gentle Jesus, meek and mild."

Now, Jesus *is* the meekest, gentlest person who ever lived. He said, "...for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29), and "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Meekness is not weakness, though. It is, rather, strength under control. Meekness has the strength not to defend oneself, which Jesus exemplified when he went to the Cross. Yet, a person of meekness will boldly defend others. Here Jesus stood up in defense of the holiness of God the Father.

Words. Jesus' mighty actions were paired with mighty prophetic words in verse 46, where he offers two brief quotations from the Old Testament. The first is from Isaiah 56:7: "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be a house of prayer" (v. 46a). In the context of Isaiah 56, the meaning is, "My house will be a house of prayer for the gentiles."

This harks back to Solomon's dedication of the Temple, as recorded in 1 Kings 8. On that day, amid great celebrating, the empty Temple received the Ark of the Covenant into the Most Holy Place and "when the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the

LORD filled his temple” (vv. 10-11). After blessing the people, Solomon spread out his hands toward heaven and offered his great dedicatory prayer, in which he prays for the gentiles:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name. (vv. 41-43)

Solomon urges God to hear when gentiles are magnetized by God’s great works and pray toward the temple. From its beginning, the temple was to be used for gentile evangelism.

Hear what God says about foreigners and the temple in Isaiah 56: “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree’” (56:3). No one is to be excluded from God’s people by ancestry (the foreigner) or by defect (the eunuch). All will be received if they come. The Lord promises concerning such people:

And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. (vv. 6, 7)

Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord by personal decision (cf. Ru 1:16-18, 2:11-12; 2 Sa 15:19-22) are received into the spiritual community. Note the progression towards intimacy with God: to *the place* where God is found (“my holy mountain”); to his *presence* (“my house of prayer”); and to *acceptance* (“my altar”).⁵ This great welcome to foreigners was not a concession, but a fulfillment of Solomon’s prayer and a picture of what the Lord’s house was always meant to be.

When Jesus drove the corrupted clerics from the Court of Gentiles, his actions made a powerful statement. His declaration, “My house will be a house of prayer,” reminded his hearers that gentiles were not excluded from the grace of God. Later, his crucifixion and resurrection unified Jews and gentiles. Thus, Paul accurately summarized Jesus’ life and work when he wrote:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:11-13)

Jesus quotes Jeremiah 7:11 when he says, “‘but you have made it a “den of robbers”’” (v. 46b). This echoes Jeremiah’s famous Temple speech, which addresses the people of Israel who have embraced wickedness as a way of life. Despite their unfaithfulness, they imagine the Lord will protect them because of their membership in the nation of Israel and their posses-

sion of the temple. Jeremiah's warning is that destruction of the temple is coming.

To paint the scene, imagine Jeremiah standing in front of the doors of Solomon's temple with the huge free standing pillars Jakin and Boaz symbolizing God's power on either side (cf. 2 Ch 3:15-17; 1 Ki 7:15-22). Jeremiah speaks to the approaching worshippers:

Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!'" (Jer 7:2b-4)

Jeremiah warned that the Israelites had misplaced their confidence if they believed that they would be saved and protected because the temple was in their midst. Rather, the Lord guarantees that safety is a delusion for those who have turned the temple into a robber's den:

'Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching!' declares the LORD. (vv. Jer 7:9-11)

The robber-worshippers are standing in harm's way. Do they doubt it? To prove his point, Jeremiah relays God's reminder of the earlier results of similar action: "'Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel'" (v. 12, NIV). Shiloh

was where the tabernacle of God once was, but in Jeremiah's time it was completely obliterated!⁶

That was the situation in Jeremiah's time, and it had not changed in Jesus' time. Jesus predicts that the temple will be destroyed, not only because it has failed in its function as a house of prayer but because the people who worshipped there were corrupt. What fools we are today if we imagine that our association with the things of God—thoughts like "This is the house of the Lord... These are God's people... This is the covenant community..."—what fools we are if we think this makes us safe. Paul's later warning to the Jews is a warning to every Christian:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Ro 2:28, 29)

Jesus Appropriates the Temple (19:47-48)

Why is it that Jesus was allowed to take the actions he did in the temple? It was the hand of God the Father that enabled Jesus to cleanse the temple. What else would have kept the Roman garrison from intervening? Whatever the reasons, a glorious scene overtook the Court of the Gentiles. The tables were righted, but no money changed hands; the bawling livestock and fluttering birds were gone; commerce ceased. For a brief span of several days Jesus was sovereign in his Father's house. The temple was his.

The temple served as a stage for the presentation of Jesus' Messianic mission.⁷ It was in the Holy Place, next to the Holy

of Holies, that the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist (Lk 1:11-20). It was in the courts of the temple that the aged Simeon took baby Jesus in his arms and praised God: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Lk 2:29-32).

It was in the temple that Jesus first voiced his messianic consciousness (2:49). It was on the highest point in the temple that Satan tempted him to prematurely reveal his discipleship, "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here" (4:9).

After cleansing the temple, Jesus possessed it as a place to teach. As John Nolland suggests, "Jesus, in conscious fulfillment of Mal 3: 1-2, is coming as Lord to his temple to purge like a refiner's fire (notably in Luke, Jesus at this point 'takes possession' of the temple as the 'schoolroom' [perhaps royal chapel] where he teaches)."⁸

From this point through the events recorded to the end of chapter twenty-one, the temple serves as Jesus' pulpit. As Luke records, "Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words" (vv. 47, 48).

Jesus' teaching at the temple becomes a part of his daily routine: "Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple" (Lk 21:37-38).

His temporary appropriation of the

temple and exposition from within the temple's walls were one vast Messianic act. His use of the temple was the last and ultimate glory of the temple. As Jesus would predict to his disciples as they admired the temple, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down" (21:6). Reigning sovereign in his Father's house, Jesus preached as prophet and judge.

Jesus Succeeds the Temple

Jesus would soon be rejected, and ejected from the Temple. He prophesied this even as he taught in the temple: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone" (20:17, cf. Ps 118:22). Jesus would become the cornerstone of God's temple, but not the temple of religious Judaism.

From the onset the temple had been the locus of God's dwelling among his people, but Jesus' death and resurrection changed that. Before his crucifixion, Jesus challenged, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn 2: 19). His opponents thought he was speaking of the bricks and mortar of Herod's temple. John records, though, that he was referring to his own body as the temple. The disciples would later understand this statement in light of the resurrection (2:22).⁹ For the Apostle John the true temple of God is the bodily presence of Jesus. John explains, "The Word was made flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14). Literally, the Greek translates "our *tabernacle* among us." John saw Jesus as resembling the precursor to the temple, the wilderness tabernacle. Jesus was the temple, because he was God dwelling among us.¹⁰

In his great sermon before the Sanhedrin preceding his stoning, Stephen spoke of the

impermanence of both the tabernacle and the temple (Ac 7:44-47), and then declared, "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (v. 48).

For Paul, all believers become members of the heavenly temple by virtue of their importance in Christ—"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22, cf. vv. 14-22).

In Revelation 21:3 we see the future form of the temple: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'" In Revelation 21:22-24, we find the temple replaced: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring the splendor into it."

Jesus Messiah is everything the temple ever was or signified.

He is the *presence* of God. "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9). "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3a).

He is God and *access* to God. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

He is our atoning *sacrifice*. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pe 2:24).

He is our *mediator*. "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us,

has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6: 19-20).

He is our *standing*. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro 8:38-39).

Jesus is everything! Jesus is everything! Jesus is everything! May this realization grow and grow until the reality bursts full in eternity. He cleansed the temple for us. He commandeered the temple for us. He is the temple for us.

Jesus is everything!

ENDNOTES

¹ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, II* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 1246.

² Frederick Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 233.

³ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (London: InterVarsity, 1993) 467.

⁶ Theo Laetsch, *Bible Commentary: Jeremiah* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965) 96.

⁷ E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 230.

⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34, Vol. 2* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 935.

⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (New South Wales, Australia: Lancer, 1992) 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98