

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

²⁰ The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

How Real is Your Faith?

How real is your faith? That might seem like a funny question. After all, you’re here. You could’ve slept in. You could’ve worked an extra shift. You could’ve used this time to get caught up on the housecleaning or some project you want to get done. But you’re here today. Doesn’t that mean that your faith is real? Well, you tell me. How real does it feel? In the Bible we see people pack up and move to the other side of the world for their faith. We see them suffer persecution and even die for their faith. We see people giving all they have to live on to the Lord. You regularly hear me tell you that God should come first in your life. Well, does that happen? Or do my words just make you feel more and more guilty? Or is this a question that you don’t think about at all? This morning we have before us a jarring incident from the life of Christ and we want to use it to examine our own hearts. So **how real is your faith?**

I.

What thing in your life will give you the answer to that question? I think most people’s first thought is how you live. And the Bible does use that standard. **How real is your faith? Well, how complete is your Christian life?** That may be a hard question to answer. Obviously, if you’re openly living in sin, your Christian life is in serious jeopardy. But I don’t expect that to be true about you. Until you prove me wrong, I assume that you are living a Christian life on a day to day basis. But that life has to be more than what people see when they look at us. That was the issue that led to this dramatic incident in the temple in Jerusalem. This incident did not take place during Holy Week. There was another very similar incident during that week before Jesus died. But this cleansing of the temple this took place very near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The two cleansings had much in common. It was Passover both times, and Jesus drove out the moneychangers and the people selling sheep and cattle. The fact that Jesus cleansed the temple once at the beginning and once at the end of his ministry shows us that his purpose and his message had not changed.

Why were they selling this stuff at the temple? God’s Old Testament law required the people to make animal sacrifices. Ideally, they were supposed to bring the best of their own flocks and herds. But God allowed people who lived at a distance to buy the animals they needed in Jerusalem. So, at a time like Passover when Jewish people from all over the world flooded into Jerusalem, there had to be a market somewhere. If people were coming from different countries, they needed to change money. So what was the problem? Partially, it was happening in the temple complex. Not inside the building itself, but on the grounds of that building. The temple was sacred space. God taught his people to think of him as being inside it, so it was all holy, even the grounds. There were very strict requirements about who could come in and being ceremonially clean and all this buying and selling and dickering over prices and maybe getting mad just ran contrary to upholding God’s honor.

But there was a bigger problem. There’s nothing wrong with selling religious people the things they need to worship God. We buy flowers and communion wine and candles. We even take money here from some of you for those purposes. The heart of the problem was the cheating that was going on. Some sources

from this time accuse the priests of getting a cut of every transaction. The priests required the purchases to be made with Jewish shekels – which at this time were only used in the temple. Many people felt that the priests were manipulating the exchange rates to make money.

But what does all that have to do with us today? We don't sell animals here at church. We don't exchange foreign money. Those things were just symptoms of a deeper problem. People who claim to be Christians need to live like Christ says. When we act pious on Sunday and then spend the rest of the week acting like Jesus has made no difference in our lives, can we say that our Christian life is real? If we try so hard to blend in with unbelievers that no one could tell the difference, what is the state of our faith? Or if we only follow what God says when it's convenient, but as soon as somebody pushes back, we go along with them, what does that say about our Christian life? The priests were not personally out in the courtyard changing money and selling lambs. They kept up this image of carefully following God's law. But in private they were hypocrites. Could someone say that about us? What do we watch on TV? What do we look at on the internet? How do we think of ourselves? Are we full of sinful pride? Do we think that we're better Christians than other people around here? How sincere is our Christian life?

Your Christian life flows directly from your Christian faith. If your heart is full of sinful pride, if you engage in all kinds of secret sins, if your confession of faith in Jesus is just a mask that you put on for Sunday, what is God going to say to you – and to me – on Judgment Day? Jesus shows us, doesn't he? He exposed the hypocrisy of the temple courts. He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and drove them out with a whip. We deserve the same, don't we? We are all sinners. We all have a sinful nature inside us that rebels against God. We all have secret sins that we don't want exposed.

Is Jesus going to expose us on Judgment Day? Is he going to put our secret sins up on big screens so that everyone can see just how bad we've been? No. We stand in a state of grace. Even though we have a sinner inside us, that sinner is not alone. God put a believer there, too. That believer clings to Christ. Jesus said, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”** John tells us he didn't mean that beautiful building where they were selling sheep and exchanging money. He meant his body. Our sins destroyed that temple. Our secret sins sent Jesus to the cross. But when he died there he paid the penalty we owe. Then he rose. When he rose, he erased all our secret sin. When he rose, he threw his whip away. Instead of driving us out of the temple, out of presence of God, he pulled us back in to his true temple in heaven. God will not rebuke us on Judgment Day. Even though we fall short and disappoint our Lord and ourselves, Christ died and rose for us. As long as we cling to that, our faith is real.

II.

Now does that mean that we can live any way we want to and we don't have to worry about repenting or turning from sin? No. If your faith is real, it changes your life. But when we're weak and sin wins, Jesus picks us up and dusts off and sends us back into the battle to live for him. And it is a battle. When you wrestle with those failures, especially when you wrestle with all those hidden sins that only you and God know about, how can you be sure that your faith is real? I mean, so often, we lose the battle. We do sin. But even then our faith is about Jesus and what he does. **How real is your faith? How clear is your picture of Christ?**

The devil is clever. He's really good at confusing our picture of Jesus. So it's good for us to see Jesus driving out the hypocrites with a whip because Jesus is often portrayed today as someone who would never condemn sin. That's the Old Testament God. Just to give you an example, in every church body in America that has accepted homosexuality, the argument always was the same. On one side people pointed out what the Bible says. On the other side people said, “Jesus accepts everybody.” Again and again, that argument has won. So we need to see this Jesus who drove sinners out of the presence of God. We need to understand that on Judgment Day, Jesus is going to send people to hell. Jesus demands that we hold to all that he teaches and that we change our lives and live for him.

But we need to see the full picture of Christ in this lesson. The temple officials challenged Jesus' authority to drive out the merchants and money changers. They asked him for a miraculous sign. They knew the Old Testament prophetic tradition and they figured that Jesus was going to claim to be a prophet and so they demanded that he prove his calling with a miracle. We could easily list a dozen famous miracles like healings and feeding the five thousand and turning water into wine. But at this moment, Jesus had only done that last one. And he refused to do another. In a display of his power, he told them that they would destroy his body

and he would raise it. Then he walked away and they could do nothing to stop him. They had to wait three years to see him keep that promise.

But keep it he did. Sadly for these men, they learned nothing during that time and many of the men who were angry at him on this day probably conspired to kill him and even served on the kangaroo court that condemned him. But Jesus didn't let death be his end. He said, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”** Notice the “I”. Most of the time, the Bible says that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. But Jesus clearly said here that he would raise the temple of his body. Jesus was going to do something that no human being had the power to do: he was going to raise himself. That's true, even while it's true that the Father and Holy Spirit raised him, because Jesus is true God. He is God the Son and all that God does, he does. He has all the power of the ruler of the universe. That's why he gets to judge.

That's who laid down his life on the cross: God the Son. That life was not taken from him, even though it is true that these men killed him. No one could touch Jesus without his permission. He let them kill him. He let them nail him to a cross where he suffered hell itself before he gave up his spirit and died. He did that because death and hell are the price for sin. The Son of God paid the price of every human being who will ever live. So he paid for you and me.

The only difference between us and those corrupt priests is that God has given us faith in what Jesus did. Not faith in some made up Christ who would never condemn sin, not faith in some social worker Christ who came here to end drug abuse and racism and war, not faith in some really good man who gave us an example of self-sacrifice that we can follow. God gave us faith in his Son made flesh to live and die in our place and then rise and give us eternal life. With that resurrection came the promise that the Son of God who could die and then raise himself has the power to renew this world when he comes back. He really will put an end to racism and drug abuse and everything else that's wrong with this world because he will put an end to sin. But not until he comes back.

Between then and now, we trust in Jesus who loved us enough to die for our sins. That means that even when we struggle with sin and temptation, he still loves us and he still forgives us and strengthens us to fight the battle by reminding us of all that. And we trust in Jesus who had the power to rise from death. He has the power to keep us in the faith until we reach eternal life. He has power to defeat the sin inside us that torments and leads us into sin. He has the power to renew our repentance and to comfort us when we fail. He has the power to work tremendous works of faith in our lives here, things that we can't even imagine we would ever do. He has the power to bring us home to heaven when we die and to keep us safe there until he returns and renews all things.

That Jesus is the one who calls us to live for him. Who alone can call us to have a true and repentant heart here while we live for him but the one died to give us a new heart? Who alone can lift us up to heaven but the one who promised the Holy Spirit and who gave us baptism and his body and blood in communion and his word that always works? Who alone but Jesus can make our faith real? It is real when you cling to him! Because it is real, it will change your life. Amen.