

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010**

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Hymns: 460, 142:1, 143:1-5, 144, 51  
Lessons: Isaiah 56: 1-7, Ephesians 2: 8-22, Luke 19:45-48  
Sermon Text: Mark 11:15-18.  
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

On the day after Palm Sunday, Jesus made quite a public disturbance in the temple in Jerusalem. He overturned the tables and benches of *“those who were buying and selling there”*. In this very dramatic cleansing of the Temple Jesus publicly brought to the attention of God's people that those in authority, the priests and the Sanhedrin, had been desecrating the house of God. In so doing, he did not bring about their repentance but strengthened their resolve to get rid of him by killing him.

Jesus, the Son of God, was appalled that they made his father's Temple a den of thieves, a den of robbers. God's temple, which the chief priests and the teachers of the law supervised, was called and is *“a house of prayer for all nations”*. The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and the Word of God tells us that they *“began looking for a way to kill him.”* They wanted to get rid of him, do away with him, and murder him. But Scripture says *“they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.* They were afraid of him because of his popularity. *“Amazed”* is a word that means to reverence, or give honor to him, but they surely did not reverence him or give honor to him. Today let's make no mistake:

**THE LEADERS OF THE JEWS REALLY WANT TO KILL JESUS**

- 1. Jesus drove those out of the temple who had made it a place of merchandise.**
- 2. This, too, infuriated the leaders of the Jews who feared the people if they were to publicly capture Jesus and put him to death.**

In order to bring their sacrifices to God in the temple, the worshipers, according to the Law of Moses, had to offer animals that were ceremonially clean. The sellers of doves were there to provide the animals people needed for the sacrifices. To pay the temple tax pilgrims also had to have an opportunity to exchange their foreign currency for some that was acceptable. This temple tax had to be paid with a certain kind of coin.

But this buying and selling and money-changing should not have been done in a temple area, that is called the court of the Gentiles. These people doing this kind of business were not in the sanctuary, but only in the outer courtyard. That was the only place in the temple where Gentiles could gather to say their prayers to the true God, to hear God's Word and to meditate. The merchants could not have transacted business there without the permission of the priests. Whether the priests rented space to these merchants in the outer court of the temple or just permitted this doesn't make any difference. The profit motive – greed – which was the downfall of Judas Iscariot, also led to these activities in a place that was supposed to be set apart for prayer. These profiteers did not worry about the impression they were making on the Gentiles who came to the temple, who were not permitted to go beyond this courtyard area. Gentiles could not go into the sanctuary. These merchants were interested only in their own profit. God-pleasing prayer became almost impossible in a place filled with animals, animal sounds and animal smells in addition to the clink of coins and cries of the money changers. All these concessions were controlled by the temple authorities. In all of this the Gentiles were robbed of the one place in the temple area where they could offer prayers to God.

When Jesus accused these people of turning the temple into a "*den of robbers*" he did not necessarily imply that they were all dishonest in all the business deals they carried out there. We may assume that they made a good profit but we do not know for sure that they were all cheating their customers. A robbers' den is not the place where the thievery is committed; it is rather the place where robbers seek refuge after their crimes have been committed. Their den is where they feel safe. The temple had become a place of merchandising and a place where thieves felt comfortable.

Three years earlier Christ had also cleansed the temple. But his action at that time had not been taken to heart by the merchandisers in the temple or by the leaders of the temple worship. The evils had taken over again, with full approval of the authorities. So it was necessary for Jesus to drive these people out of the temple again. And Jesus in his zeal for the house of his Father tried to restore it to a God-pleasing condition. At least it stayed that way until Jesus was crucified, since Jesus daily came back there to teach the people during the last days of his life on earth.

He cleaned out the court of the Gentiles by driving out those selling and buying, by overturning the tables and benches of the money changers and those selling doves. He did it with authority and used God's Word to back up his actions. Jesus was not the least bit gentle about driving these people out of the temple. The words he spoke to them echo the Word of God in Jeremiah 23:29: "*Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*"

Profits had replaced prayer as the dominant feature of temple activity. Scripture does not record anyone publicly objecting to Jesus' righteous anger. Then he also prevented anyone from using the court of the Gentiles as a shortcut between the eastern section of Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Those in authority, who had permitted this, had lost all sense of the presence of God. Interestingly enough, we are told this kind of activity also was prohibited by the Jewish Talmud, the written traditions of the Jewish elders. It is this example which also encourages us to set aside our places of worship as a quiet place appropriate for prayers, even before our formal worship begins.

Then Jesus elaborated on the words he had spoken in driving out those who bought and sold by calling attention to what they had ignored – God's own written word. First he quoted the prophet Isaiah which you heard in our Old Testament lesson: "*for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.*" Isaiah 56:7. Then he also quotes Jeremiah: "*Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.*" Jeremiah 7:11.

The temple officials had not only robbed God of the honor due him, but also the Gentiles of their only place in the temple to meet God. God's house had become a hangout for those who would put their own advantage above the Lord's will and other people's good.

In this scripture lesson, we are reminded of a very important principle in connection with our religious activities. Our church and its activities are not supported by fund-raising. We give, of our first-fruits, to the work of the Lord. We do not ask outsiders to support our religion. And we emphasize that our gifts to the Lord are just that – gifts – not just buying something so the profits can go to the work of the Lord.

**These actions of Jesus infuriated the leaders of the Jews who feared the people if they were to publicly capture Jesus and put him to death.** When Jesus cleaned up the temple of the merchandising – the buying and selling – that was going on there, the reaction of the priests and members of the Sanhedrin was the very opposite of what God had looked for. The religious leaders saw in Jesus a rival invading their territory.

Jesus had plainly told his disciples "*that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised*

*to life."* Matthew 16:21. He repeated that message a number of times: ***"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*** Matthew 20:18-19

They were afraid because the crowds listening to Jesus' teaching were beginning to recognize it as the truth. That's why the chief priests and teachers of the law began to look much more seriously – really they were continuing to look – for a way to put Jesus to death. It is not only the cleansing of the temple which upset the leadership of the Jews; it was also the teaching of Jesus.

Little did they realize that God would use their envy and hatred to bring Jesus to the sacrificial cross. Did any of them ever repent? Well, there were some who did not go along with the leaders, people like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and others. John tells us in chapter 12: ***"Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;"*** John 12:42. But these men did not go public with their faith until after Jesus died or later. We do not find in their actions an excuse for not witnessing to Jesus' love in our lives, but we pray for the strength to witness always. However, the majority ***"of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law"*** did not repent and by this failure to repent wrote their own damning verdict.

In our Gospel lesson three opposition groups are mentioned. The chief priests had charge of all temple business and activities. The teachers of the law were interpreters and instructors of the Old Testament Scriptures. The leaders among the people refers to the elected elders and members of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. They wanted to kill Jesus, but the popular support which his teaching had among the people made this very difficult.

So we are not surprised that they were looking for a way to kill him. This is not the first time that anyone wanted to kill Jesus. There are a number of places in the New Testament reporting that groups such as the Pharisees got together with the groups such as the Herodians or Sadducees seeking how they could kill him. You know that many people wanted to get rid of Jesus. In our text today it's the chief priests and the teachers of the law who are mentioned. They were continuing to plan and seek means by which they might put Him out of the way. Their counsels against Him were held with increasing frequency. But they did not dare lay hands upon Him, for the people were simply carried away by admiration for His deeds and his doctrine, since He taught simply, but effectively, and especially, he taught what was written in the Scriptures.

Popular opinion of Jesus made it impossible for them to publicly arrest him. There was a great deal of pressure from the people who admired Jesus for one reason or another, such as his miracles, his teaching, or his rebellion against man-made laws and rules.

So, although these actions of Jesus were another reason for them to get rid of him, they had to do it with stealth so that their own public image would not be damaged. They had to get the people to think as they did, to make a mob of them demanding Jesus' death. That would happen five days later, when they would persuade the people to demand that a murderer, Barabbas, be released to them and that this innocent Jesus be crucified. They couldn't go public with their plans and schemes – not just yet. They had to use darkness as a cover for their activities, so that they could put Jesus to death.

But this was all part of God's plan: to kill Jesus, the sinless Son of God for sinful mankind. For if this had not been done, we would still be in our sins. I would have no eternal gospel to preach to you, and nothing you could hear here today would make any difference in your eternal salvation. But Thanks be to God who gives us eternal life through Jesus, OUR Savior. Amen.