

## Put Down the Whip

For many Christians, Jesus's confrontation with the moneylenders in the Temple is among his finest moments. Thanks to John's detailed description, we can readily imagine our Lord with his whip lifted high, driving the sacrificial animals away, ordering removal of the doves, overturning tables, scattering buckets of coins, and commanding the startled sellers, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" John specifically confirms that the disciples were watching, but all eyes in the Temple were undoubtedly fixed on Jesus as he battled corruption and greed. He must have been magnificent.

Jesus's cleansing of the Temple is one of the most dramatic incidents in the Gospels. Mark, Matthew, and Luke place it near the end of Jesus's ministry, when it becomes the final straw for the Temple authorities. John, by contrast, puts this event at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, right after he turns water into wine for the wedding at Cana. John uses Jesus's actions in the Temple courtyard to establish his divine authority right from the start. It would have been blasphemous for anyone else to disrupt the Temple as Jesus did. However, as the only begotten Son of the God who was worshiped there, Jesus was uniquely qualified to tell the Temple authorities that they were doing it wrong. The offended Temple leaders questioned his authority because they didn't realize who Jesus was. We have the advantage of knowing exactly who Jesus is, so we can appreciate his performance as they could not.

And boy, do we ever enjoy watching Jesus when his righteous anger is on full display! A colleague whom I very much admire once compared Jesus to Indiana Jones when preaching on this passage. (It was probably the whip that brought the comparison to mind.) In modern America, we love it when our heroes come out swinging. Gentle Jesus, the healer and teacher, appeals to our better nature. Kindly Jesus, calling children into his arms, makes a nice Christmas

card. But angry Jesus? Get your tickets and grab some popcorn, folks, because now we're in for what the late Ed Sullivan would have called "a really big shew."

Americans also have a long-standing love affair with anger. Arguably, anger is the force that formed our country; without the founders' anger over taxation without representation, we might still be a British colony. Over the past several years, our collective anger has grown. Everyone from the BBC to the Christian Science Monitor has noticed an increase in American anger. Whether it's the economy, the pandemic, climate change, or the growing division between right and left, everybody seems to be angry about something these days. That's not all bad. The Center for Action and Contemplation's morning meditations this week focused on anger and how it can drive positive change. Theologian Allen Dwight Callahan argued that God commands us to be angry when we encounter injustice, greed, treachery, and other egregious wrongs. Scripture tells us that anger has been with us from the moment when Cain's jealous fury toward Abel drove him to commit history's first murder. When we think or talk about anger, however, we don't always acknowledge its dark consequences. We prefer to focus on righteous anger, the uplifting outrage that inspires confrontations, demonstrations, and revolutions, that fuels bold visions and idealistic dreams. Many Christians worship angry Jesus as the epitome of righteousness. Angry Jesus made a messy public scene but, because he was challenging corruption, our theologians call this episode "the cleansing of the Temple." If his anger was virtuous, isn't ours? And if he acted upon his anger, shouldn't we follow his lead? Maybe. But before we get too enchanted with our fantasies around angry Jesus, we ought to take a careful look at exactly what our Lord did and didn't do at this crucial moment in his ministry.

I don't doubt that Jesus was genuinely angry to see the Temple authorities fleecing his Father's worshipers. Every Hebrew who came to the Temple – and all the adult men in Israel had

to make the trip at least once a year – were required to make a ritual sacrifice. Worshipers could only buy “unblemished” animals that were sold by the Temple, and they had to pay with Temple coins. Travelers who came with other money had to exchange it and, just like currency exchanges today, the moneychangers charged a commission on every transaction. Poverty was no excuse. Worshipers who couldn’t afford a lamb or calf to feed the Temple’s fires had to purchase doves. Mary and Joseph offered a pair of doves when they first presented Jesus at the Temple as an infant, a detail Luke provides to hint tactfully at how poor they were. Luke doesn’t tell us how much that small sacrifice cost them, but Jesus might well have been thinking of his human parents when he ordered the dove sellers to remove their birds and picked up that whip to drive the other animals away.

However angry he was, though, Jesus never lost control. If the Son of the Most High God really blew his stack, the results probably would have been several orders of magnitude bigger and scarier than a few tipped tables and scattered shekels. (Think Sodom and Gomorrah times twenty.) He might well have wanted to provoke the Temple leaders. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had fretted ineffectually about him for months. Jesus might have been prodding them to actually do something. As Richard Rohr pointed out, Jesus was violent, but only with objects. The cords he tied together wouldn’t have hurt the animals and, no matter what you might have seen in paintings, Jesus never used that whip on the moneylenders. I suspect Jesus was simply teaching as he always did, making a scene to drive home his point without doing any lasting damage.

Jesus’s cleansing of the Temple was dramatic, but no more so than his Transfiguration. He only did it once, so we need to weigh it against his parables, preaching and healings if we are to put it in proper perspective. It was far less miraculous than turning water to wine and raising Lazarus – heck, there was nothing miraculous about it. Anybody with a grudge can cause a

disruption; you don't have to be the Son of God to make a scene. Perhaps most important, Jesus never invited the disciples to participate in his protest. They watched like everyone else as Jesus acted alone. This is the same Jesus who assured his followers that the meek would inherit the earth and the merciful would obtain mercy, the same Jesus who told Peter to put down his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. We do well, I think, to remember his words.

Wanting to be like Jesus is a grand aspiration, but we can't. Not entirely. Jesus is the sinless second person of the Holy Trinity. We are flawed creatures who need commandments to follow, who clamor for signs and struggle for wisdom, who were adopted as God's children solely through the grace of our Savior. Instead of pretending we can be just like Jesus, we're wiser to try, as the disciples did, to remember what he said and live the way he told us. Jesus told us to be meek and merciful, to be peacemakers. We are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, but not to the point where our rage drives us to seek it at gunpoint. We are to have compassion for the poor and oppressed, letting our anger inspire us to positive action but not allowing it to overwhelm us. Our task, as Paul told the Ephesians, is to "be angry but do not sin."

Science has confirmed what Jesus surely knew: chronic anger inflames the body and scars the soul. As Mark Twain observed, "Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." Anger should be expressed in healthy ways, but then it should be released. Angry Jesus made his point, then stopped before he hurt himself or anyone else. We need to learn how to do the same. So, if the thought of following angry Jesus ever tempts you to do something dramatic and destructive, remember that righteous anger may be justified, but self-righteous anger almost never is, and chronic anger is pure poison. Perhaps the best lesson Jesus taught us when he cleansed the Temple is this: never pick up a whip in anger unless you're sure you can put it back down again. *Amen.*