

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

Mark 11:15-18

The following are resource questions that you can use with your Care Group for discussion. They are based on the sermon preached on Sunday, July 18 2010, by Eld Jonathan Yao at the Grace Baptist Church, Singapore.

July 18, 2010

The Temple

There were many synagogues but only one temple. The Jerusalem temple courts covered a vast area of roughly 400 meters by 300 meters, with a high perimeter wall. The main buildings were in the centre, but the bulk of the space – called the Court of the Gentiles – was open to the sky, and available for people to move about and talk in.

The stalls were set up with the approval of the temple authorities and fulfilled the useful, indeed necessary purpose of enabling visitors to change their money into the special coinage needed for temple offerings and to purchase the animals needed for sacrifice. But to Jesus, they were a symbol of debased worship and a distraction from the prayer which all nations should be able to offer in God's house.

The Temple Tax

The temple tax could only be paid in Tyrian coinage (shekels), which had no human images on it. If tax had been collected in other currency, then money-brokers would change it into shekels. Other dealers sold sacrificial animals, which had been approved by the temple authorities as blemish-free and fit for offering to God.

Jesus is not opposed to the Temple itself, but His action is a protest about how it works – profit is obscuring the importance of prayer (worship). Jesus clears out (drives out) the sellers in order that He may teach, and day after day – the full extent of this is seen at the end of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem: 'All day long, He would be in the Temple teaching...and from early morning the people thronged to Him in the Temple to listen to Him (Luke 21:37-38).

The Temple Religious Leaders

Certainly Jesus was offended at the extent to which money surrounded and affected the work of the Temple. Jesus had already taken a dim view of the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-26). Nor would Jesus welcome the official monopoly on sacrificial animals at inflated prices. Jesus already felt that God's flock had no true spiritual leadership and the temple trade convinced Him afresh that the people were being fleeced rather than fed (compare Ezekiel 34:1-6).

Conclusion:

How do we translate this incident into our time? Some Christians ask, "Does it mean that a church should not sell fairly traded goods for Third World charities after Sunday worship? Is a church bookstall / canteen ruled out too?"

The issue is more about attitude than rules. Certainly this narrative suggests that money should not dominate our church life; that Christian giving should be genuinely a gift to God – not a levy; that even the best-organized and most carefully budgeted and prepared church can sometimes learn to focus on the purpose of individual and corporate worship that is not dependent on human engineering but upon the Spirit's leading.

Discuss:

Is what Jesus did in the temple an encouragement for His followers to use violence?

If yes, when and for what reasons?

If no, what is the difference?

How can our church live out our role as a place of worship of God, unless the people inside the church live godly lives and is open to allow others to come and worship?

Is worship an exclusive purview of certain class of people or is it available and open to all classes of people, rich or poor, young or old?

If yes, how can we improve it?

If no, why or why not?

Reflection & Prayer:

Lord, we use often enough your saying, 'My house will be called a house of prayer' of our own churches. Grant me, when I am in church, to listen to Your voice in words and in silence, in beauty and in wonder. Cleanse us and our worship from all that obscures You. Amen.