

March 7, 2021

Sermon Manuscript

Jeremiah 7:1-15 (NIV)

¹ This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:
² “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message:

“Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. ³ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ 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!” ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. ⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

⁹ “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.

¹² “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. ¹³ While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. ¹⁴ Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. ¹⁵ I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

Mark 11:12-25 (NIV)

¹² The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts 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, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹ When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

²⁰ In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹ Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

²² “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. ²³ “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

A Deeper Look at Jesus Turning Over Tables

This morning we’ve just heard St. Mark’s account of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, occurs the day after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and mere days before he will be unjustly tried and put to death. And what Jesus does in the Temple here is probably one of the more familiar stories from the life of Jesus. It is in all four of the gospels; here, Mark bookends with Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree. And this episode is often cited as at least one instance where Jesus indisputably shows anger and even aggression. But what precisely is He angry about? I am sure most of us have heard many, many sermons on Jesus’ actions in the temple that day, although I would imagine they tend to frame what Jesus does here as a purely religious act. But today I want to challenge this perspective by sharing some of the insights of Biblical scholar Obery Hendricks, who details the political, economic, and social climate in first century Jerusalem, which I will believe expand our understanding of what the temple really

represented in Jesus' day so we can better appreciate the full meaning & significance of his actions here and its implications for us as his followers in the 21st century.

As we may recall from the Christmas story, Jesus had been born under the reign of Caesar Augustus, who in that same decade of Jesus' birth declared his reign to be "Pax romana", or the era of Roman peace, a promise to the citizen of Rome of a life in peace.

However, what Augustus failed to mention about this Roman "peace" was that the fruits of it fell almost exclusively to the rich. And in Israel, where the Jews lived under Roman occupation for all of Jesus' earthly life, this was certainly the case. 95% of the Jews in the first century were the 'working poor'. Hendricks explains that most peasant farmers had land holdings, but of less than 6 acres on average and only 1.5 acres that were available for cultivation, which was not nearly enough to support the needs of family. Particularly, when you factored in the taxes levied by the Romans. Rome tasked their governors, like Herod, with milking the greatest possible fortunes from the occupied territories in the shortest possible time. So taxes on peasant farmers were as high as one-fourth of their crop every other year.

So, to make ends meet, most farmers either had to hire themselves out for wages to supplement their meager crops, or go into debt. So Hendricks explains that for many the experience was similar to that of sharecroppers in America's southland, as many farmers had no choice but to repeat this pattern of borrowing every year until their burden of debt became so great that they were no longer able to meet the payments and were forced into default. So the working poor who managed to keep possessions of their farms and not have them seized by the Romans for loan or tax default, they were the fortunate ones. The debtors who got in too deep would have to sell themselves into slavery, and in cases of extraordinary debt the lenders had the right to enslave the debtors wives, children, and even distant relatives or neighbors (!). And dispossession apparently happened a lot, because such machinations of the Herodians and their cronies managed to amass ownership of somewhere between one-half to two-thirds of all the land in Galilee.

So these were the challenging - and for many hopeless - circumstances that 95% of the Jews in Jesus' day were born into: widespread poverty and destitution; while what remained was 5% of Jews who were very rich. And the majority of this 5% were actually part of the priestly class. It may surprise you, but as Hendricks explains that they "were considerably better off than all but a handful of Jews in Israel. Most priests resided in the Upper City of Jerusalem, its most well-to-do precinct" and they "were said to entertain often, hiring expensive cooks for the festivities and drinking choice wine from crystal glasses."¹ And of course they were born into this, as the priesthood was hereditary, based upon genealogy alone. And holding significant influence over them were the Sadducees, whom we see in scripture; more than any religious doctrine what distinguished them was their wealth and political influence. And this wealthy class of 5-percenters also included non priests known as "elders" (gerousia), who were the heads of the richest families in Jerusalem whose wealth earned them full membership in the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Temple. And rounding out this top 5%, attached to this priestly class, were the Pharisees, who were known for their stringent adherence to the sabbath and other religious laws, but also had the financial means to be able to do so; to not need to work on the sabbath.

Well, needless to say, the members of the priestly class were completely in bed with the Romans. That's what gave them their power and allowed them to maintain it. And so, they remained loyal to Rome, despite the Romans awful treatment of their people. Since 34 BC, Rome had decided it would

¹ More on this from Hendricks: "A female member of a high priest's family was said to have had the entire distance from her house to the Jerusalem Temple carpeted so she could comfortably walk there barefoot on the Day of Atonement, as was the custom... The widow of one priest is said to have cursed the scribes who negotiated her widow's allowance because she was granted only four hundred denarii a day for luxury items (a single denarius was roughly equal to one day's pay for the rank and file). (59)

select the high priest, always choosing someone they believed would be loyal and were quick to make a change any sign they wouldn't be.²

So “the Jewish priestly aristocracy maintained a consistently cooperative relationship with the Roman [provincial] governments.” And “in return for the priests’ cooperation”, the Romans “brutally disposed of anyone the priests identified as threatening their status and power.” For example, Jesus fell into this category, so Rome crucified him for them. Rome also “protected the Jerusalem Temple, (which was) the primary source of the priests’ wealth (in the form of tithes and offerings).”

And a little more detail on that. After God established priests in Israel under Moses, for the next thousand plus years the way priests were supported was by taking an allotted amount from each sacrifice that was made before the Lord - remember these were animal sacrifices - the priests would take an allotted amount to eat for themselves. [I talked about this a little bit in my sermon on Eli back in January.] But after God's people returned from Babylonian exile about 500 years before Jesus, and the temple was rebuilt, the priests began to increase their means for deriving income by establishing different classes of tithes and offerings. So by Jesus' day, in addition to the income “from their portion of the Temple sacrifices” there were seven classes of offerings they taught people had to give; for example, they expected a special offering for the birth of a firstborn child. It was also common practice for a priest to require an additional offering for a man's consecration or redemption after a sinful transgression.³ And they insisted upon full and timely tithes from the working poor with little concern for the effect it had on their ability to provide for the families. Hendricks says that these temple taxes would amount to some 40 percent of what a peasant had, and that's in addition to the taxes Rome required.

And on top of that, many priests leveraged the wealth they had by becoming lenders to the very people “whose tithes and offerings their wealth had come from in the first place”, in some instances even seizing the farms of borrowers who defaulted, “totally dispossessing those whom they were called by God to serve.” So, you can understand why to the common person, priests were widely perceived as not only greedy, but predatory.⁴ As some of you know, the Old Testament law had this extraordinary provision meant to protect the poor and indebted where every seven years debts were forgiven. Well, the priests developed a legal device⁵ to get around that, where these debt certificates would be deposited in the temple treasurer for that year, but then reclaimed when the year was over. #

So Hendricks wants us to understand that “the Jerusalem Temple was not a purely religious institution;” not at all. No, the Temple was the center of Israel's economy, serving as its central bank and treasury. The record of debts was stored there.⁶ At times the priests would even collect taxes for the Romans there. And what Jesus did upon entering the Temple must be understood not merely through a religious lens, but also in light of these economic and political realities.

And to view what Jesus did that day as some spontaneous temper tantrum is short-sighted. What he did was planned.⁷ His cursing of the fig tree before this and then finding it withered the morning after support this. And Hendricks points out that it would've been pretty impossible for Jesus to shut down commerce in the Temple to the extent that he did - verse 16 says he “would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts” - without the help of others.

² Hendricks: “Apparently high priests were changed with such great frequency that John the Evangelist writes, with a tinge of sarcasm, as if the position was changed annually, “Caiaphas, who was high priest that year” (John 11:49; see also 18:13).”

³ The indulgences of Luther's day were not new! Hendricks says these could be as much as 50 shekels, or two weeks wages.

⁴ First century historian Josephus wrote that

⁵ Called the prosbul

⁶ Josephus, History of the Jewish War 2.426–27.

⁷ Hendricks further suggests it would have had to have been organized and that Jesus couldn't have done it on his own: “Apparently Jesus came to the Temple prepared to confront the merchants, prepared to occupy the Temple, prepared to publicly denounce Temple activities, and he carried it all out without a hitch.... The Temple grounds were thirty-three square acres in size. How could Jesus have halted commerce on so large a scale, as Mark tells us, except that other pilgrims and worshipers were empowered and inspired to stand with him?”

But his targeting of the money-changers and sellers of doves is significant. Money-changing and the purchase of sacrificial doves were a two step process that worshippers would go through in order to make a sacrifice. But to say the prices were inflated would be an understatement. Y'all know how you get food at the concession stand at the ballpark and it costs five times what it should. Well, the mark-up on these sacrificial birds was 100 times what it should have been - and the money went straight into the priests' pockets - but this left the majority of worshippers with a dilemma: either impoverish themselves further or feel shameful & unacceptable to God.⁸ And this sort of financial and religious abuse - propped up by corrupt politics - is what Jesus was disrupting when he turned over those tables. Almost everything about the Temple in Jesus' day had become exploitative and failed to treat the people and their needs as holy. And Jesus has had enough.

However, by demonstrating outrage over this, Jesus was not expressing a new concern for God. No, this was completely consistent with the Lord's concern for the foreigner and the fatherless and the widow revealed throughout the Old Testament. As Hendricks explains, the Old Testament concept of justice - the Hebrew word *mishpat* - was all about restoring and maintaining fairness and equity in society.⁹ And this is reflected in the three major law codes found in the Old Testament,¹⁰ which had the distinct focus of preventing exploitation. Just look at some of what these law codes required (on your insert or on the screen). They...

- Forbade the charging of interest to poor borrowers (Exodus 22:25)
- Protected the poor from exploitation by requiring just weights
- Safeguarded the dignity of debtors by forbidding creditors to accost them at their homes
- Protected the earnings of hired servants by providing that wages be paid on the day they are earned
- Specifically forbidding perversions of justice against the poor (Exodus 23:6)
- Prohibiting partiality and bribes in the courts because such actions inevitably inured to the benefit of the rich (Deuteronomy 1:17; Leviticus 19:15)
- Instructed that truly needy persons be lent *whatever they required*, with any outstanding balance to be forgiven after seven years (like I mentioned earlier)
- Instituted the year of Jubilee, the end of a fifty-year cycle, where all land was returned to the original owners
- Allowed for the poor to bring less expensive sacrifices to the Temple

Meanwhile, one of the *major* roles of the prophets was to call Israel's leaders and the rich to account, when they strayed away from this. And our passage from Jeremiah 7 today is just one example. Very briefly, on the occasion of this passage, because Israel's upper class has been oppressing the poor. So God has Jeremiah¹¹ go and proclaim this oracle at the gate of the temple, which is directed at the temple leadership - and God threatens to destroy the temple, which He will do just a few decades later - for their unjust treatment of people, particularly the foreigner, the orphan, and widows. He says in verse 11 that they have made God's house into a den of robbers". And this, one of the most bitter attacks against the Temple in all the Bible is what Jesus chooses to quote from when he explains what he is protesting in the

⁸ Hendricks: "Simeon, son of Gamaliel, the rabbi the apostle Paul calls his teacher in Acts 5:34; 22:3, became concerned that the price of sacrificial doves was so unreasonably inflated that worshipers would be unable to afford them, which could result in supplicants' staying away from the Temple in shame and thus making no offerings at all. This would have had a chilling effect on Temple revenues and the priests' own income. As a result of Simeon's concern, the price of doves eventually was lowered by some 99 percent. That the cost could be dropped so drastically while the merchants still made a profit gives a sense of how disgracefully inflated the price of doves had become under Temple oversight."

⁹ More from Hendricks: "Sadiqah is usually translated as "righteousness." Study of the uses of sadiqah and its related terms reveals that its focus is on behavior that fulfills the responsibilities of relationship, whether with God or with other persons... What is significant here is that both justice and righteousness are based on social relationships. Not on individual, personal piety or on individual conformity with ritual and liturgy, but on social interactions." (44)

¹⁰ These were the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:33), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26), & the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26)

¹¹ In 609 BC

temple. In verse 17 of our Mark passage he quotes from Jeremiah 7, saying, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” And Jesus does this in the midst of his cursing of the fig tree outside of town, which in no less than five Old Testament prophets¹² the destruction of a fig tree is used as a symbol of God’s judgment for corruption and unfaithfulness.

But in doing what he did at the temple, Jesus made clear that people’s physical needs matter ; that people’s needs are holy; *just* as holy as any temple rituals or pronouncements by a priest. Remember, the people had been taught “that the Temple was God’s inviolate dwelling place”. So even though there’s evidence that the people of Jesus’ day had enormous resentment toward the priestly class, most of them were unwilling to challenge the priests “for fear of incurring God’s wrath.” And so Jesus did what they could not do for themselves he gave voice to the voiceless; he stood in their place and interceded on their behalf.

And Jesus calls those who follow him to share in his concern for justice and the least of these. And there is not time like Lent to take measure and examine our attitude toward and complicity in systemic sin.

Now, I know there is a term that can sometimes be thrown around today the minute anyone talks about systemic sin, and that is the term “wokeness”. This term tends to be used condescendingly by those who benefit from the status quo - from injustice continuing. As Christians, I discourage its use and the cynicism that accompanies it, because I’m pretty sure that what Jesus did in the temple that day would qualify for being pretty darn woke. And I’m sure if there was a word like ‘wokeness’ in the Ancient Greek, the priests and sadducees would’ve used it to undermine Jesus’ credibility; instead they just put him to death. But just like the prophets before him, Jesus had no interest in preserving or maintaining any status quos that were unjust.

Then again, when it comes to beasts as enormous as systemic sins, it’s hard not to wanna just throw up our hands and question what if anything can be done? But what may surprise you is that I would suggest this is what Jesus is addressing at the end of our passage, beginning in verse 22. There, standing by the withered fig tree outside of town, Jesus begins to say to his disciples, “Have faith in God,” He continues,²³ “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.” Now, I think readers are often quick to assume that Jesus has moved onto some other topic here. But Jesus’ encouragement is for his disciples is that, in the face of insurmountable problems, however helpless they may feel to, they should have faith and ask God how to help them. And, as Hendricks points out, what is often missed here is that the particular mountain Jesus would’ve been pointing to is Mount Zion, the temple mount!!!!

And so, he is telling them that however enormous the systemic injustices of their day may feel, they should expect faith in God to enable them to at least not be complicit in the problems and to even show them ways they can use whatever blessings and authority they may have to mitigate injustice for the least of these.

Now, remember, Jesus’ disciples were pretty diverse with a wide range of backgrounds in regard to the injustices Jesus is confronting. For example, you’ll remember that Matthew has been a tax collector, who would’ve enriched himself by working for Rome. On the other hand, Simon - not Simon Peter, but the other Simon - was a zealot. Zealots were revolutionary Jews who engaged in politics and anarchy, attempting to overthrow the Roman government.

And the same is true for us. Some of us may identify more with the Jews who were economically oppressed and never seeming able to get ahead. Others of us may have benefited considerably from the status quo, and have parts of us that want to maintain it forever. And still others may be somewhere in

¹² See Isaiah 28:1–4; Jeremiah 8:13; Hosea 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7, 12; and Micah 7:1

between. But before I close I wanna talk about what it could look like for us - as citizens of the Kingdom of God - to by faith throw that mountain of worldly power: "be thrown into the sea".

The first step is to identify the ways we trust in worldly power to secure us rather than God. I know if we're Christians, we talk a lot about God being our provider, but the amount of time many of us spend tracking worldly goings-on & getting worked up about politics as it impacts our checkbook versus turning our worries over to God and resting in Him would seem to tell a different story.

Now, you may wonder, "Well, what about patriotism, John? What about love of country?" But what do we mean by love. You see, as Hendricks explains it - and he's right - there are two kinds of patriotism. The first type is blind patriotism. Blind patriotism usually comes from having bought into at least one of a few heresies. One is the myth of American Exceptionalism - this idea that there is something about Americans that are superior to other people of that America has been chosen by God as some sort of New Israel. It may sound ridiculous when we say it like that, but this lie is pedalled and encouraged by both political parties for different reasons ad nauseum, both use rhetoric that re-appropriates Biblical language describing ancient Israel and re-appropriate it in reference to the United States: "City on a hill" and all of that. All of this is heresy, that is used both to rationalize oppression and to shield against any criticism. Blind patriotism is destructive patriotism.

In contrast, a true patriot, a true lover of one's country, is able to be grateful for its blessing while always desiring for America to be more righteous and more just, and thus will not shy away from good-faith criticisms with those aims. But these are just the sort of things condemned as unpatriotic by so many today. The Old Testament prophets of Israel may have been unpopular for drawing attention to many inconvenient truths, but they were the real patriots. It's okay to admit that America has some fig trees that we may even benefit from that would do well to wither up.

So, repenting of our habits of destructive patriotism are critical for ridding ourselves of ungodly trust in worldly power rather than faith in God. As are giving up wicked attitudes toward the poor. Recently a parishioner shared an excerpt with me from a book called *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by E. Randolph Richards. And Richards observes that "there appears to be a trend from very early in American thought to inverse Paul's proverb from 2 Thess 3:10. Paul's proverb reads "If a man will not work, he shall not eat," but Richards says Americans tend to invert this proverb to read "If a man can't eat, it must be because he doesn't work" A prevalent attitude of middle and upper class America is if people are poor, they must deserve it. But within this belief is the fruit of someone saying they trust in God as their provider, but really trusting in themselves and their worldly power. And this has made it all the easier for Christians to rationalize treating power as more holy than people's needs and a political culture where the mantra seems to be "Love yourself and those who are like you" rather than "Love your neighbor as yourself".

What allowed Jesus to be able to stand for justice and give voice to the voiceless is that he didn't trust in the worldly system for his provision and preservation; He trusted in the Father. So placing our trust in God and his kingdom rather than worldly kingdoms is what frees us up from our fears that would prevent us from questioning the status quo, but even then we must begin to cultivate the imagination around how we might really tell the beast of worldly power to take a hike.

For some of us this may look like using our privileges and means to help others less fortunate than us and show them that their needs are holy to God. For those who have been oppressed, this may look like learning to derive your dignity and worth in Christ, even if society seems to say you don't matter. Jesus makes an amazing promise in verse 24: "whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours," But in order to ask for God to help us do something we have to first be able to imagine it.

Well, I've said enough, so I'll close with this. The call of Jesus is to seek not to stand side by side with Caesar, but side by side with Jesus, being a voice for the voiceless, saving our anger for the injustices endured by others, and trusting God to have our back. Amen.



