

The day after “Palm Sunday,” Jesus visited the temple in Jerusalem. Each Gospel writer includes something about this event. They tell how Jesus went in to turn over tables and drive out those using the temple courts as a marketplace. Jesus clarifies his actions when he describes the activity there as robbery (the temple was compared to a den of thieves). Indeed, we can see robbery happening there in three ways:

First, the temple leaders and those selling in the temple were robbing the people. Mark 11:15 specifically mentions that Jesus targeted those selling doves, a sacrifice for the poor. Historically, we know that pilgrims traveling from far would plan to buy their sacrifices in Jerusalem. There was a market for this set up on the Mount of Olives. However, the High Priest Caiaphas moved the market into the temple courts and was perhaps using it to enrich himself and other temple authorities. Jesus was clearing the temple from this corruption.

Second, the temple leaders were robbing God of his glory. Mark said that Jesus “drove out” the sellers. This same verb is used by Mark in places like Mark 1:39 and 6:13 to describe Jesus driving out demons. Jesus didn’t just ask them to leave, he cast them out. Even though they were providing a valuable service to worshippers, their methods were not bringing glory to God. Rather, they were diminishing the glory of the temple by their corrupt intentions.

Third, and this is where I want to focus, they were robbing Gentiles of a place to worship. Gentiles were not allowed inside the temple but there was a place for the Gentiles along the outer edges of the temple. History tells us that this outer courtyard was used for the selling of animals and the changing of money. Thus, when Jesus began throwing furniture, he wasn’t merely lashing out with violent rage. He was intentionally clearing a path for Gentiles that had been obstructed by the very people who were called to be a light to bring them in. Mark reports that Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 to explain his actions. Here we see God’s desire for the temple to be a house of prayer for all nations. Jesus reminded Israel of its calling to bring the Gentiles in, not keep them out. Jesus not only cleared the way for the Gentiles to find a place to worship around the temple, he went all the way to Calvary to ensure that Gentiles could ultimately find a place in the Kingdom of God.

God still desires to use his people to reach the nations and God’s people still often put unnecessary obstacles in their way. We may not be using furniture to hinder people from coming to worship but we may be harboring attitudes, resentment, prejudice, and unconcern towards the very people God wants to invite into his house. Even those who stand in the temple can stand in the way of what God wants to do. May Jesus drive out of us anything that would prevent us from loving the nations into the Kingdom of God. I never want to rob someone of a place that God has called them to stand. In fact, God calls us to participate by praying for them to join us in the house of God. Let us therefore prepare with expectation to receive the people for whom God has asked us to pray even during this Easter Season.