

AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE

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Mark 11:12 The next morning as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ He noticed a fig tree in full leaf a little way off, so he went over to see if he could find any figs. But there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. ¹⁴ Then Jesus said to the tree, “May no one ever eat your fruit again!” And the disciples heard him say it.

Mark 11:20 The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it had withered from the roots up. ²¹ Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree on the previous day and exclaimed, “Look, Rabbi! The fig tree you cursed has withered and died!”

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Mark 11:15 When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the people buying and selling animals for sacrifices. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and he stopped everyone from using the Temple as a marketplace. ¹⁷ He said to them, “The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.”

Jesus stopped the people “from using the Temple as a marketplace.” “Marketplace” is a popular buzz word these days. In the church world it refers to virtually every place *outside* the church’s facilities—the school, the workplace, industry, leisure activities—wherever people interact with one another about non-spiritual issues. It is the whole realm of daily living, outside the church. It is in just this sense that the translators have chosen this word for verse 16.

There was a day when church folks got upset about selling anything within the walls of the sanctuary—like a music minister’s CDs or a preacher’s audio tapes or a children’s ministry fund raiser—imagining that such activity desecrated the “house of the Lord.” But it was not the exchange of money that desecrated the Temple; it was the act of disregarding the sanctuary—in any way—and turning it into an ordinary place, a place of worldly notions and activities, absent the recognition of God’s presence.

Jesus likened it to a “den of thieves.” This was a term borrowed from the writings of Jeremiah (7:1-11), one of the Israeli prophets.

Jeremiah 7:1 The Lord gave another message to Jeremiah. He said, ² “Go to the entrance of the Lord’s Temple, and give this message to the people: ‘O Judah, listen to this message from the Lord! Listen to it, all of you who worship here! ³ This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: “‘Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land. ⁴ But don’t be fooled by those who promise you safety simply because the Lord’s Temple is here. They chant, “The Lord’s Temple is here! The Lord’s Temple is here!” ⁵ But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; ⁶ only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. ⁷ Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever.

⁸ “‘Don’t be fooled into thinking that you will never suffer because the Temple is here. It’s a lie! ⁹ Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, ¹⁰ and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, “We are safe!”—only to go right back to all those evils again? ¹¹ Don’t you yourselves admit that this Temple,

which bears my name, has become a den of thieves? Surely I see all the evil going on there. I, the Lord, have spoken!

The Temple had become (in God's eyes) a "den of thieves," because its worshipers exploited the weakest among them—foreigners, orphans, and widows—and gave honor to false gods. Their rap sheets listed stealing, murder, adultery, lying, and idolatry. Thus, the Temple had become a "den of thieves," a "hiding" place, where each crook covered for the others. But they could not hide from God. He knew all about their evil ways.

As evidence of this, the prophet pointed them to the ancient city of Shiloh, where God first established His house. When Israel's wilderness wanderings were over, God told them to plant the Tabernacle (the tent of worship) in Shiloh. That place became the seat of God's presence and the center of the people's worship. Unfortunately, that people turned to similar acts of greed, injustice, and idolatry. Now, the prophet reminded Israel of what had become of Shiloh—that once great city where the name of God had dwelt. God had destroyed it. The site of the ancient Tabernacle is merely a scattering of broken rocks.

You see, God does not dwell in places or in buildings made by men's hands. The Land, the Tabernacle, the Temple—they all mean nothing in themselves to Him. He has no sacred investment in dirt or stones. God is interested in only one thing: the loving worship of His people. It is fellowship that He wants, not religiousness. Their impersonal religion angered Him then, and He destroyed Shiloh. Their impersonal religion angered Him again in Jeremiah's day, and He destroyed Jerusalem.

Returning to Mark's report, we see that Jesus was angered once again with their impersonal religion, for they used religion to exploit the very people that religion was intended to serve.

As justification for His anger, Jesus referred to another Old Testament prophet, Isaiah (56:1-5), by whom God had spoken of the value of His House.

Isaiah 56:1 This is what the Lord says: "Be just and fair to all. Do what is right and good, for I am coming soon to rescue you and to display my righteousness among you."² Blessed are all those who are careful to do this. Blessed are those who honor my Sabbath days of rest and keep themselves from doing wrong.

Isaiah 56:3 "Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say, 'The Lord will never let me be part of his people.' And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.'⁴ For this is what the Lord says: I will bless those eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me."⁵ I will give them—within the walls of my house—a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!

To discover the value of God's house, let's define a couple of terms. "Foreigners" is a reference to any people who are not descended from Jewish blood; "outsiders" would be a good equivalent. I have felt like an outsider in the church. I didn't meet Jesus Christ until I was 21. Even though my conversion experience was remarkably powerful and meaningful, and my walk with the Lord has been fruitful in terms of personal changes and interpersonal ministry, whenever I am around people whose spiritual pedigree goes back several generations, I feel a certain discomfort, a certain shallowness, a certain backwardness—kind of like a country boy trying to fit in with a city crowd, or an auto mechanic trying to fit in with university professors.

But God says that your spiritual pedigree (or lack of one) is not a limitation. It does not limit His acceptance, nor can it limit your potential as a follower of Christ! Paul underscored this truth when He wrote to the church in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 12:12 The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. ¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? ¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

God has made you a part of the Body of Christ, and every part of His body has significance! You are significant to God, and you have significant ministry to offer to others. Anything less is a lie! Reject it.

And what is a "eunuch"? A eunuch was a bondsman who gave himself wholly to the service of his master, and, in order not to be distracted by the affairs of this life, submitted to castration. That's right! It seems grim and over-the-top, but it was a gesture of submission and a pledge of faithfulness—from a slave to his master. This gesture said, "From this day forward, nothing in this life will be more important to me than serving you." Of course, this gesture had lifelong consequences. With no offspring, there was no family to care for him in his old age, and no one to carry on his name (no one to make a mark for him).

What kind of retirement plans have you made? Many advisors recommend to invest in real estate for the greatest return-on-investment. But I tell you, an even greater return is guaranteed by raising children in the loving ways of the Lord. Martha and I have a combination of IRAs, 401(k), deferred compensation, government pension, Social Security, and savings, but I'm putting my hope in my kids! If I've loved them and helped them become all they can be, I believe they'll go farther than I can and magnify my name, and make up anything that's lacking in my financial future.

Eunuchs had no such security. They were subject to buffeting fears that suggested, "You've got no dependents and no dependable future." But God's Word promised them an everlasting memorial. Jesus taught, "If you are willing to lose your life for my sake and the gospel's, you will find a life everlasting."

Now, what about God's house? What was the value He attached to His house?

First, it was signified by the blessing of the eunuchs, or the blessing of the radicals, as we have already seen: an everlasting inheritance, a name and a blessing.

Second, it evidenced by was the blessing of the adopted foreigners.

Isaiah 56:6 "I will also bless the foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord, who serve him and love his name, who worship him and do not desecrate the Sabbath day of rest, and who hold fast to my covenant. ⁷ I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations. ⁸ For the Sovereign Lord, who brings back the outcasts of Israel, says: I will bring others, too, besides my people Israel."

The blessing of the adopted ones is fullness of joy in the Lord. Their offerings would be acceptable in God's sight and their prayers would be effective. What a fellowship! What a joy divine!

Because God's house is to be a "house of prayer for all nations." That name expresses the divine welcome to all peoples. Everyone can follow Christ. Anyone is accepted. When Isaiah wrote, three thousand years ago, that was plain. It remains the same today. All may worship Him! All may call upon Him! He will hear and He will answer, whoever you are. You will be blessed.

Do you follow Him? Have you pledged your life to Him? Are you one of His worshipers? Do you call on His name in prayer?

If not, you can begin, or start over, today. A simple prayer, telling God three things, is the first step. Tell Him *Sorry, Please, and Thank You*. Sorry, God, for ignoring and offending you with my ways. Jesus, please forgive me and take charge of my life. Thank You for dying for me and rising again for me and for hearing my prayer.

What is the value of God's house? It is the people of the house, God's people. They are more treasured than its timbers or stones, more precious than its gold or silver, more sacred than its altar. Every one of God's people is precious in His sight. Don't you forget it! If you cease to value His people above religious things, you will turn this place into a den of thieves, and your songs of praise will fall on deaf ears.

There is just one thing more. His is not only a house in which all nations may pray, but it is a house which prays for all nations. Remember, God's house is not a building at all, but a global nation of people—the people of God. Prayer-for-all-nations is the name of God's house. But is it true? Do you pray for all nations?

Right now: think of a nation—not your own, but another group—a particular group of people. Got one? Take a piece of paper and write down the name of the people you're thinking of. You're going to pray for them today. I'll tell you how.

To pray for an entire nation is a tall order. It's a giant task! It's like moving a mountain. With a task so great before us, we would expect Jesus to give us some direction about how to proceed effectively. And, true to form, He did. It was recorded by Mark just a few verses later.

Mark 11:22 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "Have faith in God. ²³ I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. But you must really believe it will happen and have no doubt in your heart. ²⁴ I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours. ²⁵ But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too."

Only two things are necessary to effectively pray for all nations: faith and forgiveness.

It doesn't take a lot of faith—just a little bit of genuine faith aimed in the right direction. Jesus said that your faith may seem to you no bigger than a mustard seed, but it is capable of great things, even moving mountains of cultural unbelief.

So, when you pray, begin to pray for nations. Every kind of people has masses of unbelievers. Some have put their trust in religions that lead away from Jesus. Others have put their trust in science. Some have put their trust in business; some, in education. Most have put their trust in themselves, even though they cannot really change anything except their minds. Many have still not even had the chance

to hear about Christ. Whatever cultural barriers exist, prayer is the one means of effectively removing them.

Look at those mountains of unbelief and begin to move them with your prayers. The nations are waiting for your help!

“Have faith in God,” Jesus said, not in yourself, nor in your prayers, but “in God.” When you put your faith—even mustard seed faith—in God, then you can say to those mountains, *“May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea.”* Think about it right now: which of those mountains seems to stand in the way of the group of people whose name you have written on your paper? Is it religion, science, education, money, military might, politics, or self? What are they trusting in to save them?

With your faith in God, who hears and answers, begin to say to that mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea. Be removed.” Say it aloud. You have been authorized by Jesus. Say it like you mean it. God provides the muscle; you just provide the intent.

The other thing we need to pray effectively is forgiveness. Every people have done things that were wrong, offensive, destructive. Many have been deceived and misguided by their leaders, or by generations of cultural baggage. Apart from knowing Jesus Christ, they cannot recognize the truth. Perhaps you have suffered because of their ignorance or meanness. If not you, perhaps you know others who have so suffered. On their behalf, or on your own, forgive them now.

Don’t excuse them, just forgive them. If Jesus could say of those who condemned Him and nailed Him to the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing,” surely you can forgive those who have mistreated or misunderstood you. Forgive them. Just say to God, “Father, I forgive them.” Release them from your judgment. Release them from your anger. Though it may be justified, now is the time to release them into God’s just hands. Forgive them. Declare it.

Now, with faith and forgiveness in motion, pray for that nation to find Christ. Pray for individuals to step past those former barriers and come to Christ. Pray for believers to become missionaries, sharing Christ with others. Pray for the establishment of churches—groups of Christ-followers who gather to worship and encourage one another. Pray for solid teaching to illuminate the Scriptures. Pray for the values of Jesus to infuse the culture. Pray for justice and mutual care. Pray for individual and national transformation. Pray that Jesus will be magnified.