

“In the Temple” (Luke 19:45–20:18)

October 20, 2019

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What is the most important place in America? When I say “place,” I’m thinking not of a state or a city, but of something more specific, a site, a piece of land, a building. What do you think is the most important place, a place that Americans regard as sacred?

I had a hard time coming up with just one place. For some, it might be a place that has a lot of symbolic weight, like the State of Liberty. Lady Liberty stands as a symbol of freedom, beckoning the tired, poor huddled masses to a new life in America. The Statue of Liberty is important because of what it stands for. But in another sense, it’s not important. It’s less than one hundred fifty years old, no historical events took place right where it stands, and nothing important happens there—well, other than tourists visiting it.

Perhaps a political building is the most important place. Depending on which branch of government you think is most important, the most important place might be the White Office, the Capitol Building, or the Supreme Court Building. Important things happen in those places.

For some people, the most important place might be a religious site. I have a hard time coming up with one particular church or cathedral in America. But if we were in France, the Notre-Dame would probably be the most important religious building. That’s why so many people grieved when the building was on fire earlier this year.

We Americans might not have one site that is the most important symbolic, political, and religious site. There are probably a lot of cultural, political, and religious reasons why that is the case. But for the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, the most important symbolic, political, and religious site was the temple in Jerusalem. There’s nothing in America that we can compare it to. Imagine if the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell, Mount Rushmore, the White House, the US Capitol, the Supreme Court Building, and the most important church buildings were all combined. That’s kind of like what the temple was for Judaism.

Today, as we continue to study the life of Jesus, we’re going to see Jesus go to the temple in Jerusalem and challenge the authority of the temple’s leaders. It would be like taking a tour of the White House, then sneaking past Secret Service and going to the Oval Office and telling the President what to do. Now, there are a lot of people who tell the President what to do and where to go on Twitter, but it would be something else to go right into the Oval Office and act like

you're the real President. But that's more or less what Jesus does. And, as you can imagine, that gets him into trouble with the religious leaders of his day.

We've been working our way through the Gospel of Luke for some time. The Gospel of Luke is one of four biographies of Jesus that we find in the Bible. Today, we're going to read the very end of chapter 19 and the beginning of chapter 20. We'll start by reading Luke 19:45–48:

⁴⁵ And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, ⁴⁶ saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers."

⁴⁷ And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, ⁴⁸ but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.¹

This story is Jesus' so-called cleansing of the temple. Both Matthew and Mark have longer accounts of this event (Matt. 21:12–16; Mark 11:15–18). Luke focuses on the essential details. Jesus goes into the temple, kicks some people out, and quotes two different passages from the Old Testament. Then he starts teaching at the temple daily during the last week of his life. This is most likely Monday. He will be crucified four days later.

As I said earlier, the temple was the most important symbolic, political, and religious place for Jews. The temple represented where God dwelled among the Jews. Specifically, he was supposed to reside in the Most Holy Place, the inner part of the temple building. The temple was also the place where priests offered up animal sacrifices which were supposed to pay for the sins of the people. The priest would touch the heads of animals that were sacrificed, symbolically transferring the sin of the people to the animals, who would then be slaughtered in place of sinful people. This taught Israel that the penalty for sin was death, but that this penalty could be taken by another, a substitute. The temple was also a place where priests taught people, and where prayers were made.

Jesus goes into this most important place and acts like he owns it. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, there's a brief story of how Jesus, at age 12, was sitting among teachers at the temple and asking them questions. When his parents, who didn't know where he was, found him there and rebuked him, Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 12:41–49). God the Father owns the temple, and what belongs to the Father belongs to the Son of God, Jesus.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

At the temple, people were supposed to offer animal sacrifices. People who traveled to the temple from a distance could buy animals at the temple instead of traveling with animals. They also had to pay a tax to the temple, and the tax had to be paid in a particular currency, a coin made in the city of Tyre. So, there were people who sold animals, and there were money changers, people who exchanged currency. The people who sold animals and changed money did so for a profit.

Why did Jesus drive out people who sold things? There are at least two different possible interpretations, understandings of this passage that aren't mutually exclusive. One is that people were selling animals and exchanging currency at high rates, making money off the poor and the pious. Perhaps Jesus drove them out because they were capitalizing on religious practices. That would make sense of Jesus' quotation of Jeremiah 7:11, the bit that calls the temple a "den of robbers."

Another interpretation is that Jesus' action of driving out these sellers is a symbolic and prophetic action. He's announcing that the days of the temple building are coming to an end.² There will be a new temple, a true temple, one where no animal sacrifices are needed, one that all of God's people can access directly, wherever they are. There will be no more pilgrimages to one holy site. Jesus is the true temple of God. He is the "place" where God and his people meet. His body will be the true sacrifice for sin. The blood of animals cannot pay for human sin. If someone is going to take the penalty for my sin, it must be a human. In the animal sacrificial system, only unblemished animals could be sacrificed. They had to be perfect. This meant that something valuable was sacrificed. Jesus is the only unblemished human. And he can take the penalty of sin away from many people because he's not just a man. No, he's the God-man, truly God and truly human. He is infinite, and his sacrifice on the cross can take away the sins of every single person who comes to Jesus in faith, who trusts that he is divine, that he's the world's only Savior, and that he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Anyone who trusts Jesus personally, knowing that he is the only way to be made right with God, and that is the ultimate authority, becomes part of the true temple of God. When you come to Christ, you become a dwelling place for God. God the Holy Spirit lives in you. You have 24/7 access to God, wherever you are.

² I must give credit for this interpretation to Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus in Jerusalem: The Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 161–164.

Jesus came to the temple to show that the leadership of the people had become corrupt. If you look at Jeremiah 7, which Jesus quotes here, you can see that about six hundred years earlier, the people of Judah were corrupt. They oppressed and killed other people. They put their trust in false gods, in idols. They even made the temple into an idol, trusting that as long as they had the temple building, they could not go wrong. God warned the people that because they had not listened to him, he would destroy the temple.

But Jesus also came to announce that the temple was no longer going to be needed. The true sacrifice for sin was about to be offered to God. And Jesus knew that many people would come to the true temple, his body, and become part of God's people. That's why he quotes Isaiah 56:7, which refers to the temple as "a house of prayer for all peoples." Isaiah, over seven hundred years earlier, foresaw a day when foreigners, Gentiles, would "join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants" (Isa. 56:6). And that same passage in Isaiah 56 speaks of the leaders of Israel as "watchmen [who] are blind" and "shepherds who have no understanding" (Isa. 56:10–11). Jesus seems to indicate that the leaders of his day didn't really know God. They were blind. They didn't recognize God's own Son when he was right in front of them.

Jesus acts like he owns the temple. He seems to say that the current leadership of Israel is wrong. And that's why the leaders—the chief priests, the scribes, and other leading men—wanted to destroy Jesus. But they couldn't destroy him right then and there. There were too many people "hanging on his words." Many people were attracted to Jesus because there was never anyone like him, someone who taught with complete authority. If the Jewish leaders killed Jesus in front of these people, there would be a riot. The Jewish leaders couldn't afford a riot, because that would lead the Roman Empire, which controlled the land, to punish the Jewish leaders. The high priest was a political appointment. The Roman governor of Judea had the authority to remove a high priest and replace him with another. The chief priests didn't want to lose political power, so they had to find some other way to get rid of Jesus.

Since Jesus comes to the temple and acts like he owns the place, the Jewish leaders want to know what kind of authority Jesus has. So, they ask him. Let's read Luke 20:1–8 to see what happens:

¹ One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ² and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this

authority.”³ He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me,⁴ was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”⁵ And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from.⁸ And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

The Jewish leaders ask Jesus two questions that are related. Really, they want to know where he gets such authority. Jesus didn’t have political power. And he wasn’t an official religious leader. He wasn’t a priest. So, how can he act like he owns the place. Again, if you were to confront the President in the Oval Office, he might say, “Who gives you the right to tell me what to do?”

Jesus answers by asking his own question. He asks them if John the Baptist had authority from God or if John’s ministry was simply manmade. John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus who preached in the wilderness. He told people that the Messiah, the anointed King of Israel, was coming. He told people to prepare for this event by repenting of their sins. And he baptized people as a sign that they needed to be made clean. He told them that being biologically related to Abraham, the father of all Israelites, didn’t guarantee them a place in God’s kingdom. He told them to “bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). He also told people, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). He was referring to Jesus. Many people responded to John’s message, but most people ignored him, including the leaders of the Jews.

So, Jesus is asking them if John’s message was from God. If so, then they should have responded to him. And they should have known that Jesus was the one greater than John, the one that John promised would come. If John came from God, then the leaders should have known that Jesus came from God, and that he is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). But if John’s message wasn’t from God, then it’s possible that he was wrong, and that Jesus wasn’t from God.

The Jewish leaders then huddle up and discuss how they will answer Jesus’ question. If they say that John was from God, then they should have believed John. And that means they should recognize who Jesus is. If John’s ministry wasn’t from God, then they can simply reject Jesus. But the crowds thought that John was a true prophet, so if they say that John wasn’t from

God, they'll get into political trouble. The Jewish leaders don't believe that John was a prophet, but they don't want to get into hot water with the people, so they give a very political answer: "We don't know." That's like a politician saying, "I don't recall," or, "I'm not allowed to speak to that," or, "That's above my pay grade." We've heard these political answers before, and we've come to expect that kind of dishonesty from politicians. It's sad that these men, who were supposed to speak for God, are mere politicians.

Jesus therefore says that he won't answer them. But, in fact, Jesus does answer them—just not directly. He tells them where his authority comes from. Jesus also tells them who they are. He does this in a parable. Let's read Luke 20:9–18:

⁹ And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone"?

¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

This parable is almost like an allegory. In an allegory, every character in the story stands in for someone in real life. The man who plants a vineyard is God. The vineyard represents the place of God's people. In this story, it could represent the temple or Jerusalem, or possibly all the land of Israel. The tenants are the leaders of the people. The servants of the owner are prophets. And the son is the Son of God.

In the Old Testament, Israel is often called a vine (Ps. 80:8; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 17:6; 19:10–14; Hos. 10:1). And God planted his "vine" in his "vineyard," the land of Israel. In Isaiah 5, there's a famous passage that speaks of God carefully making a vineyard. He expects the

vineyard to produce good fruit. Instead, it produces “wild grapes.” And God says that he will then destroy the vineyard (see Isa. 5:1–6). That passage ends with these words:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry! (Isa. 5:7)

God expects good fruit from his people. God is our Creator, and therefore he owns us. God can't have a bunch of rotten fruit spoiling his creation. He's very patient, and he puts up with our bad fruit for a long time. But his patience has limits. There will be a day when all the rotten fruit will be removed from his vineyard, so to speak, and destroyed. We refer to that as Judgement Day. But even before that final day of judgment, there are times when God brings things to an end. These are lesser acts of judgment. Israel's temple had already been destroyed about six hundred years earlier, in 586 BC. And this second temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed in forty years, in AD 70.

Jesus is telling the Jewish leaders that they are like those wicked tenant farmers of the story. They were supposed to manage God's possessions and produce good fruit. But they didn't. God sent them many servants: the prophets. But the people rejected the prophets, and even killed them. There are stories in the Old Testament of prophets being killed (Jer. 26:20–23; 2 Chron. 24:20–22) and Jewish tradition says that many of the prominent prophets, like Isaiah, were martyred. Hebrews 11:36–38 says that many were killed. At the end of the book of Chronicles, which chronicles a long portion of Israel's history, we're told this:

¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place.

¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy (2 Chron. 36:14–16).

And right after that passage, we're told about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the act of judgment that God brought upon Jewish people because of their idolatry and sin (2 Chron. 36:17–21).

So, in this story, the servants are the prophets, and they are treated worse and worse. Finally, the owner of the vineyard sends his own son, thinking that the tenant farmers will treat him with respect. But these wicked tenants kill him, thinking that, somehow, they can keep the vineyard that way. This is the owner's only son. He is thrown out of the vineyard and put to death. But because of that death, the owner will destroy those evil tenants and give the vineyard to others. Those who reject God's Son will be judged, and other people, those who embrace the Son, will become part of God's people.

When Jesus tells this story, the crowds say, "Surely not!" They understand what Jesus is saying about Israel. They don't want God to judge them and replace them with others. But Jesus says that the Son who is rejected will be the foundation of a new people of God, anyone who comes to the Son. He quotes Psalm 118:22: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." I talked about Psalm 118 a bit a couple of weeks ago, when we looked at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and how people quoted another part of that Psalm: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Ps. 118:26). Jesus is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. But he's also the one who is rejected, the one who will be taken outside of the city walls and crucified, even though he was an innocent man. Yet even though he is killed, he rises from the grave, and he becomes the cornerstone of the church. The church is built on Jesus, the one who is rejected by sinful humans but who is precious and chosen in God's sight (1 Pet. 2:4).

Jesus is saying that he is the one sent from God. He is the Son of God. But he also knows that he will be treated like the prophets. He will be rejected and killed. Yet this is all part of God's plan. God's uses evil and turns it for good. The people will kill the Son of God because they don't believe him. But God's plan was always for the Son to become human and die, so that the sins of his people could be punished without the people themselves being destroyed. This was the Son's plan as well as the Father's. Jesus lays down his life for his people.

So, the irony is that while these wicked, faithless leaders think they can stop Jesus, by arranging to have him killed, they are actually making sure that the Son's plan comes to pass. Jesus cannot be stopped or thwarted. He is the ultimate authority. If people try to kill him, he will rise from the grave. And when people try to kill Christianity by persecuting Christians, more

people come to Christ. God uses evil for good. In fact, God's plans include using evil for good. So, evil cannot stop God. It is no match for him. These Jewish leaders conspired to kill the King of the Jews. And Jesus was killed. But that was his plan all along. He was crucified so that sinners could have their sin punished. He was exiled from the vineyard so more people could enter into it. And that vineyard is given to people who trust in Jesus, whether they are Jewish or Gentile. No one is born into the vineyard. But we can be born into God's vineyard if God transforms us, gives us the Holy Spirit, and leads us to turn away from our sins and to trust in Jesus.

What does this passage have to do with us? Let's think through what Jesus is doing in this passage. He comes to the temple and acts like he owns it. As the Son of God, he owns everything. He owns us, because he made us. What would it look like for Jesus to show up in our lives right now? What would Jesus find if he were to investigate our lives? Would he find us trusting in him and living life on his terms? Would he see that we believe he is the ultimate authority because he is God? Would he see us obeying his commandments? Or would he find us faithless? To put it another way, how would Jesus cleanse our lives? What from our lives would he drive out? Or, to look at the situation from another perspective, what good things would Jesus drive into our lives?

Those are personal questions. I can't answer them for you. I imagine that what he would see would vary from person to person. But I'm sure that all of us have things in our lives that need to be driven out. All of us live in ways that don't completely line up with the way of Jesus. We are often like those Jewish leaders—we want to be the ones in control, we want to be the ultimate authority. To quote that popular song from the '80s: "Everybody wants to rule the world."

If you are a Christian, I ask you to pray to God something like this: "Father in heaven, please reveal to me the ways in which I'm being rebellious. Please show me where I'm not following Jesus. Please show me the things in my life that need to be removed. Give me the strength to follow Jesus the way that I should."

If you're not a Christian, I urge to trust in Jesus. You can fight against his authority. You can deny him and ignore him. But you can't avoid him forever. You will have to deal with him, either now or on that great day of judgment. And you will either be part of his vineyard because you've come to embrace him in this life, or you will be removed from his vineyard, where there

is nothing but a joyless and painful existence for all eternity. Turn to Jesus now. There is no greater authority, because he is God. To reject Jesus is to reject your Maker. And there will be consequences for that. But know that Jesus is not just some harsh preacher of judgment. He's also the one who lays down his life for sinners. His death can pay for all the sins you've ever committed. There's no sin that Jesus' sacrifice can't atone for. But to have your sins forgiven, you need to trust in Jesus. And that will lead to a change in your life. You will live as if he is King. I would love to talk to you about following Jesus if you're not doing that now.

There's still another thing for us to think about. What if Jesus came to all churches that bear his name? What would he find? Many churches don't worship the way the Bible tells us to. Churches ignore what the Bible says about church leadership. They ignore what the Bible says about preaching. They ignore what the Bible says about evangelism, about telling people the good news of Jesus. They ignore what the Bible says about making disciples, teaching them all Jesus commanded—either directly or through his prophets and apostles. They ignore what the Bible says about money and generosity, or about church discipline, or about all kinds of things. No church is perfect. This church is certainly not. Churches contain people who strive for positions of power, like the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. It is often the case that people who aren't godly try to gain control of a church. And they don't want to give up that control, even if that would lead to following the Bible's instructions more closely. Struggles for power often make people do very ungodly things. It's happened in this church, and I can assure that it has happened or is happening right now in just about every church there is.

What would Jesus say about this church? What would he drive out? Let us think about that and pray about it. May God give us the wisdom and the grace to make any changes that are necessary.