

Cleansing the Temple

In the name of him who cleansed the Temple; dear friends in Christ: How many of you have seen a TV program called *Hoarders*? It's on one of those educational networks, I don't remember which one. I've only caught an episode or two; but that's enough. The show documents cases of people who suffer from an obsessive compulsive disorder that makes it impossible for them to throw things away when they are no longer useful or needed. The result, invariably, is that their homes become filled from top to bottom with junk. Whole rooms are packed tight with heaps of ... well, just about everything. In front rooms that aren't completely filled, the people exhibiting the hoarding behavior live like rats in a maze because they've built narrow passages between the high stacks of rubbish that tower around them from floor to ceiling. In one episode I saw, the guy's only bathroom had been filled with junk and rendered unusable for years. He used a bucket and the kitchen sink for his "personal business". He slept in a small space on the floor under his kitchen table because it was not possible to enter his bedroom. His relatives feared that he'd be crushed some night while sleeping when the table collapsed from the weight of the junk that had been piled on it. It's really sad.

This sort of behavior never begins all at once. It starts slowly. At first, the person retains stuff that was once useful: old appliances, broken tools, empty bottles and jars, things he convinces himself might be useful again, so "I can't part with that". But, it seems, that mentality of being unable to let go takes over at some point. Then it's old magazines and newspapers, junk mail; in the end, they don't even throw away the rotting garbage. They simply lose the ability to decide what's good and needs to be retained and what's not and needs to be thrown out. They keep *everything* and in time their homes become completely un-livable.

And now I'll bet that a lot of you already know where I'm going with this. The aberrant behavior displayed on the show *Hoarders* is not limited to people's homes. It occurs also in the Church. In fact, it's one of the biggest recurring problems we see among God's people since the time he set aside the nation of Israel and called them to be his own. And just to be sure, I'm not talking about piles of physical junk accumulating in church buildings (although that can and does happen, though perhaps not to the same extreme degree). No, what the Church tends to accumulate and store up are stories, myths, legends, human ideas, worldly philosophies, superstitions, traditions, and teachings that all come from sources other than the Word of God. And like it is with the hoarders, it doesn't happen all at once. It starts slowly. An idea or practice that isn't quite biblical is introduced, usually with good intent, or perhaps because it's not immediately recognized as something unscriptural. On the surface, it looks good. So it's allowed to stay. After a while, it becomes ingrained as part of the church's message and method. And it helps pry open the door to other things that don't quite fit, which soon follow – and which in turn open the door wider still for the church to let in things that are even more at odds with the Word of God. It snowballs. Eventually the church is filled with all kinds of junk, and no one can tell the difference between what's good and true and needs to be preserved, and what is, theologically speaking, rotting garbage and poison to souls that needs to be thrown out. Everything is retained and the church's message becomes garbled, confused, and powerless to save souls.

In the Old Testament period, it was usually Canaanite idolatry and the worship practices of pagans that kept creeping into the Temple and the religious life of God's people. They let it all in: idols of false gods, altars on which sacrifices (sometimes *human* sacrifices) were offered to these idols, cultic prostitution, and occult practices like divination and witchcraft. It got so bad in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that the Lord had the nation destroyed. They simply weren't

worshipping him anymore. And with all the clutter they let in, they didn't know how to recognize his voice when he called them to repent. And part of the reason for their destruction was so that the Southern Kingdom of Judah would take notice. If they didn't clean their act up, the same thing was going to happen to them.

Thing is, they didn't learn the lesson – not at first anyway. They kept right on burying the true faith and the worship of the Lord under all the filthy pagan garbage they let into their Temple. It wasn't until the Assyrian army was ravishing their country and threatening at the gates of Jerusalem that they finally woke up. That's what we heard in today's reading from Chronicles. King Hezekiah ordered the cleansing of the Temple. "Take out all that unclean idol trash and destroy it. Keep only the articles that have to do with the worship of the Lord." At the time, Judah repented and returned to the Lord. They were spared – for a while, anyway. A generation or two later they were right back at it, even worse than before. Eventually the Lord was left with no choice but to destroy them and their Temple too.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is cleansing the Temple of a different kind of idolatry: the worship of the Almighty Dollar. The outer court of the Temple had become a market – a corrupt market at that, where the faithful were being fleeced. It had started as a good idea: make it easy for people to buy animals for sacrifice right there. You wouldn't have to bring them with you all the way from home when you traveled to Jerusalem. The animals for sale would have been preapproved by the priests: guaranteed no injuries, spots, or blemishes. If you brought one from home, it might not pass inspection and be judged unfit to offer to the Lord – and then where'd you be? You see? It's a convenience! Ah, but before long *no* animal brought from home would pass the priests' inspection, no matter how perfect it was. You could *only* buy at the Temple. The priests had worked out a deal with merchants: we let you sell here, and we get part of the super inflated sale price. It was an open scandal. And what do you suppose your attitude would be when you offered your sacrifice to the Lord knowing that the men who worked at the Temple and to whom you were to look for spiritual guidance were crooks who were ripping you off? "Here I am confessing my sins to a thief." Might sour the experience a bit, don't you think? Might even make you resentful toward the Lord who's allowing it to happen. Small wonder that Jesus was infuriated to see it going on. And that he took the time to make a whip of cords tells us that his response was no spur of the moment act of rage. He planned his attack and carried it out with deliberation. He knew that the House of the Lord must be kept clean for the sake of God's people.

And that's not the only kind of garbage that Jesus fought to remove from the Temple. The Pharisees with their legalism were another form of clutter obscuring the worship of the Lord. Theirs was a form of self worship: the notion that I can make myself righteous and earn the favor of God through my obedience to his commands. People with that mindset don't need a Savior; they're saving themselves. They've turned the true faith around backwards. Instead of trusting God and looking to his mercy, they trust in themselves. And though it's completely opposite to what the worship of the Lord is supposed to be, it's far more insidious than turning the Temple into a market. That, at least, is obvious: the corruption is out in the open. But self-righteousness is in the heart and on the outside it looks pretty good. "My, what fine people; working so hard to keep God's commands. It looks so good; but it is in fact nothing but death and decay, as Jesus said of the Pharisees, "Whitewashed tombs filled with the rotting flesh and bones of dead men". Jesus wanted to remove all such filth from his Father's House.

And today we celebrate the Reformation, which marks another occasion on which the Temple was cleansed. By the late middle ages, the western Church had become, in a theological sense, a hoarder's dream. You had it all: idolatry in the form of the worship of saints and Mary; a corrupt business of selling God's forgiveness for a price with indulgences, private

masses, and various other money-making schemes they cooked up; an elaborate list of supposed good works you could do to make yourself righteous, like pilgrimages, monastic life, crusades, and so on; all tied up together with ideas borrowed from pagan philosophers in a system of unbiblical doctrine called scholasticism. Mind you, somewhere underneath all that junk was the truth, and some few people did manage to find it; but for the vast majority it was anything but the worship of the One True God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ the Savior.

So it's right that we praise our gracious God for the cleansing of the Temple that took place nearly five hundred years ago, and for making his House livable again unto the salvation of souls. But to truly observe and appreciate what was done then is to recognize that Temple cleansing must be an ongoing activity. There's always stuff that doesn't belong in the house trying to get in, and we are by nature hoarders of such things.

On the show I mentioned at the beginning of this message, they send counselors to help train people with hoarding disorder how to identify and part with stuff they don't need. It can be amusing to watch. After some intervention and discussion they'll begin with a pile of junk and say, "Okay, now we're going to make *two* piles. Over here we'll put what you want to keep, and over there stuff to throw away." At first the hoarder wants to keep everything. Nothing goes into the throw away pile. And the counselor will say, "C'mon. Really? You want to keep this bag full of garbage? It stinks. It's attracting flies. Let's put it over there. Okay?" And with reluctance the guy will finally agree, looking longingly at what he's throwing away. Then it's, "Good. Now how about this old pizza box? You don't want to keep it, do you? What? You do? Why? What are you going to do with it?" And then there'll be a brief tug-of-war as the two struggle to put it in their pile of choice. Eventually the counselor will give in. "Okay ... I guess we'll keep it for now; but I really want you to think about your choices." It goes on like that, the counselor helping the person to make better decisions; but at least in the show I saw, whenever the counselor stepped away, the guy would go over to the trash pile and sneak certain precious items back into his keeper pile.

My point is that we need to learn the spiritual discernment skills to make the same kinds of decisions. We need to be able to examine both what's already in the church and that stuff that's always trying to get in and say, "Is this consistent with God's Word? Is this useful for the proclamation of the Gospel? Does this promote faith in Jesus Christ and him crucified for our sins, or does it point us in other directions?" Just because something claims to be Christian, be it a book, a song, a program to grow the church and make it more relevant for today's youth, whatever – just because it makes the claim doesn't mean that it is. It must be tested against God's Word and our confession of faith. And if it doesn't pass the test, it has to be thrown out – no matter how much some of us might cherish it and want to keep it. The goal is to keep God's House clean, and to keep our doctrine pure and our practice in accord with biblical truth.

And the place to begin is with the Temple of our own bodies. You see, what clouds our judgment, what makes us hoarders of things we ought not hang on to, is the uncleanness of sin that we all have in our hearts. That's where we hoard selfish thoughts, pride, our love of self, our greed, our self-righteousness, and all kinds of evil lusts and desires. That's where we worship the gods and goddesses we imagine ourselves to be. And we do hate to part with our idols, don't we? But Jesus came to cleanse our hearts and minds, to take away all that is unclean within, and to make of our bodies dwelling places for his own Holy Spirit. He came to make of us both individually and communally Temples of the Living God.

The amazing thing is how he accomplished that: not with a whip of cords to drive the uncleanness away through intimidation and brute force. No, he did it with the Temple of his own body. He did it by making his body do what the Old Testament Temple was designed to do.

You see, back then when you went to Temple and brought your animal to sacrifice to the Lord, you did it in order to be cleansed of sin. When you confessed your sins to the priest, he laid his hands on the head of your animal, effectively transferring your guilt – the guilt for which you deserved to die – onto the animal. Then they'd kill it by slicing its throat. The blood they'd collect in a bowl, and take it to the burning altar where'd they pour it out on the fire. As the smoke and steam ascended to the Lord, the priest would pronounce God's forgiveness to you. Sacrifice accepted. By God's grace you live because something else died for you. Your sins taken away.

Ah, but not gone. The idea was that the sins were transferred to the altar, and by extension, to the Temple itself. You became clean, while God's House got dirty. Think of the Temple as a great big vacuum cleaner bag, sucking up all the sins of the people. That was the idea. And you know what happens when a vacuum cleaner bag gets full? It either explodes leaving a great big mess or you burn up the motor trying to pull air through all that gunk and dust in there. You've got to empty the bag. Same thing with the Temple: once a year on the Great Day of Atonement the Temple was cleansed. Special sacrifices were offered. Blood was poured out on the Mercy Seat on the top of the Ark of the Covenant so that what the Lord looked down on the Tables of the Law kept inside, he'd see that the atonement price had been paid. And then the High Priest would confess all the sins of the nation on the head of the scapegoat, which would then be driven out amid the shouts and jeers of the people. They'd drive it into the wilderness to die, carrying with it all the sins of the people.

That's what the Temple was designed to do: collect sins and then dispose of them. And that's what the Temple of Jesus' body was designed to do: collect the sins of the whole world, bring them on himself, and carry them away like the scapegoat – driven out amid shouts and jeers – and then to die as the sacrifice of atonement upon the cross. God looking down from above and seeing the penalty of the whole world's sins being paid in the suffering and death of his Son. God destroying one Temple entirely filled with sin in order to build a new one, a clean one, a Temple made up of the bodies of all of the faithful continually being purified by the blood of his Son. The whole story of the Old and New Testament is about Jesus cleansing the Temple.

And that means it's our story – or at least it should be: Jesus keeping God's Temple clean. First the Temple of our bodies clean from sin by hearing his Word and receiving the counsel of his Holy Spirit who enables us to recognize, confess, and turn away from sin. His Spirit, the Counselor, trains us to put the filth we love to hoard in our hearts on the trash heap. And he helps us not to reach over to sneak them back on the keep pile when we think no one is looking. And then, with our individual Temples thus purified by Jesus for whose sake we are forgiven, we continue to work together under the direction of his Holy Word to ensure that our collective Temple is kept clean; clean of false doctrine and unbiblical baggage that obscures the person and work of Jesus our Savior.

It's all about Jesus cleansing the Temple and keeping it clean: a work which is ever ongoing in time; but that he will bring to completion when the dead are raised and the living are transformed to be like him who is forever pure in thought, word, and deed. No more cleaning required. May the Lord in his mercy hasten that Day, and in the meantime keep his Temple clean, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!