

Which temple cleansing?

Twice the Lord expelled those who defiled the temple by selling doves and other sacrificial animals within the temple grounds, once soon after entering Jerusalem near the beginning of his ministry which is the focus of this study and again near the end of his ministry (Matt. 21:12-17).

The first incident, the one in John, is more dynamic since Jesus made a whip of cords to drive out most of the animals and those who sold them (2:15). Yet, he was gently with the doves, commanding that they be carried out (2:16). Thus the Lord demonstrated his zeal and stern authority but without ceasing to be gentle. As the Creator and the true Owner of all the animals, Jesus had authority to do as he desired with them, but he also, of course, knew how weak the doves were compared to the oxen and sheep.

Was the temple defiled?

Bringing sacrificial animals into the temple did not, in and of itself, defile the temple since these animals were to be offered up there. In fact, the shedding and sprinkling of their blood was the way that sin was to be covered, and such was required in order to approach God. The defilement was because the animals were brought in by agents of the Jewish leaders to be sold for a large profit more than in order to be sacrificed. The dealers and the priest should have been entering the temple to pray rather than in order to do business.

Does this kind of defilement still happen today?

There is now no temple, but Paul wrote of professing believers who try to use superficial godliness as a way to material gain (1 Timothy 6:5-6). Such self-seeking “believers” are to be avoided, since they misuse Christian fellowship like the Jewish leaders misused the temple.

Was it sinful to sell sacrificial animals for a profit?

Generally speaking, no, but since the priests controlled access to the temple, those that could sell therein had a monopoly of the market so that their prices were artificially high. The place was wrong, but so too were the prices. The doves were for the poor, but wealthy Jewish leaders were taking advantage of everyone, including the poorest in the nation who could not afford to buy an ox or a sheep.

What are the applications?

The main application in John’s Gospel is always to personally believe in and honor the Creator and Savior, the Lord Jesus. This, of course, involves recognizing the need for atonement for sin through his sacrifice. Moreover, no believer should seek to use God's house and Christian fellowship to improve his or her business interests, in line with Paul's command in 1 Timothy 5:5-6.

Secondarily, Jesus treated the doves gently, and so should we. Yet, he was also strict with those who misused God's house. Thus he provided a pattern for us of biblical strictness that is not overly harsh.

Is God really more gentle in the New Testament than in the Old Testament?

The coming of the Lord Jesus has made God’s love and grace easier to see, but God has not changed. Though the doves were to have been handled gently, they were still later sold and offered up as sacrifices for the poor. Since the death and resurrection of the Lord, however, such animal sacrifices are no longer needed since Jesus is the true Lamb of God (John 1:29).