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Overturned Tables

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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THE SETTING

An air of breathless excitement was the order of the day. As a small band of disciples, we followed the Master's every move. From the day we began our pilgrimage of faith, life had become a daily adventure. Who could describe those hours, sitting at His feet, as He opened for us the Scriptures; and like a fresh breeze that blows in from the ocean, the testimonies of the prophets came alive with meaning. It was as if they were being interpreted by the author Himself, and indeed they were.

And who could even begin to describe the events of last week. We had been invited, along with Jesus, to attend a wedding feast. A festive occasion it was, to be sure. We watched His every move, not knowing what great thing might happen next. As the celebration gained momentum, it was the Master's mother who approached Him with a most unusual problem, and thus set the stage for God's entrance into the drama of life. The feast was far from over, but the hosts had run out of wine. Why she should approach Jesus with so trivial an issue, we could not understand. And yet, Jesus handled her request with such tender love. He honored her need by meeting it, yet quietly explained to her that "His hour had not yet come." We did not grasp what He was saying. If "His hour had not come", then how could He possibly help? As His ministry progressed, He repeated this phrase at carefully placed intervals, yet still we did not perceive the depth of what He was saying.

It was only on that fateful day when the Heavens declared to the unborn ages that God had completed the act of redemption, that we fully realized what it was He was saying. Not long before, He had acknowledged "the hour is come". Now we understood.

What our King-to-be did that afternoon in Cana caused us to marvel, and to believe, at least, in His supernatural powers. He called for the servants of the feast and asked them to take the huge water pots used for ceremonial cleansing and fill them

Overtured Tables

with water. Then, He ordered them to pour from those water pots into the pitchers reserved for the wine. But it was not water that came from the pitchers. It was wine; wine so far superior to that which the host had formerly served, that everyone exclaimed of its quality. Water turned into wine? What greater thing could He do than this? We were soon to discover that we had seen but a tiny fraction of His supernatural power.

The excitement began to build even higher as our Lord called us together that night and said, "We will be leaving soon for the Passover celebration in Jerusalem." Our minds were flooded with the possibilities of what kinds of miracles He might do there. The whole nation would be gathered together to celebrate and bring their offerings to the temple. Would He call down rain from Heaven like Elijah? Would He cause the sun to stand still? The temple to shake? The sun to darken? Whatever He decided to do, it seemed certain to us that by the week's end, the whole nation would know that Jesus was Lord, and we and He would be catapulted into the limelight as He began to set up His Kingdom. So that trip to Jerusalem was hardly routine for us. It was a step by step journey into the land of the unknown.

THE STORY

As we approached the city, the excitement began to be mixed with frenzy and confusion. Crowds, pushing and shoving, as the population swelled to a size beyond comprehension for that little town to hold, began to overpower the spirit of the hour. The bleating of lambs and the stench of all the animals being brought for the sacrifice, mixed with the press of humanity, seemed to overwhelm us and make us wonder what would happen next.

But as the hallowed walls of the temple loomed on the horizon, our hearts began to beat with a quicker beat. Now we were near to our destination. We did not know but that the priests would have a reception planned to honor King Jesus as He arrived. We did not know. We soon found out. Hoof beats and heartbeats intermingled as the crowds grew more dense and the frenzy more intense. We pushed and shoved our way with all the rest toward the gates of the city and, finally, to the entrance to the temple itself.

Preparations for this event had begun no less than a month before. It was as though the entire land was in a state of

Overtured Tables

expectation. A month before the feast, bridges and roads were put in repair, and sepulchres were whitened to prevent accidental pollution to the pilgrims as they journeyed to the city.

For many, this was a time of selecting from their flocks and herds those animals to be sacrificed; for still others, a time to go up before the feast to be purified, in case of some form of Levitical defilement. But perhaps the most visible expression of the occasion was the setting up of “money changers’ stalls” in each of the towns and villages along the way, an event that took place usually a full month before the celebration itself. Every Jew and every Jewish proselyte (women, slaves, and minors excepted), had to pay the annual temple tribute of half a shekel. Many of the priests claimed exemption from this tax, but even that claim was met with stiff opposition from much of the Rabbinical leadership.

This temple tribute had to be paid in exact half-shekels of the sanctuary, or ordinary Galilean shekels. The problem was that there was circulating in the country at that time, besides the Palestinian silver and copper coins, Persian, Tyrian, Syrian, Egyptian, Grecian, and Roman money, as well. So these “money changers” had quite a task to fulfill. Their job was two-fold: 1) to change foreign currency into temple currency, and 2) to make the correct change for those who did not have the right coins. A third function was perhaps the most vital. That was to make change for those who were selling or buying sacrificial animals from the peddlers in the temple area, who had collected animals to offer for sale to those who had none of their own to sacrifice. From the fifteenth to the twenty-fifth of the month Adar, these “money-changing stalls” were found in nearly every country town. On the twenty-fifth, these country stalls were shut down, and the “money changers” moved into the temple area itself.

As we made our way into the outer perimeter of the temple that day, it was as though a carnival was in town. Tables had been set up in the Gentile Court, completely desecrating that area. Behind these tables were fast-talking merchandisers, weighing in foreign currency, offering what they considered to be a fair exchange, and then haggling unmercifully with the prospective worshipper. Not too far away were merchants hawking their wares, offering for sale “acceptable” meat and drink-offerings, animals certified by the temple authorities as suitable for sacrificing. Just outside the temple area little shops

Overtured Tables

thrived by selling pigeons and other such sacrificial animals, but these animals still had to be certified as “acceptable” by an inspector on the temple grounds. Thus, a more sure-fire way of finding an acceptable sacrifice would be to buy one in the temple itself, thereby insuring its acceptability, though of course, at a considerably higher price.

Now the end result of all of this religious retailing was, of course, a healthy profit, a profit that made its way into the Temple coffers, passing through the hands of the priesthood, who always seemed to do quite well as a result of these “necessary” merchandising procedures. In other words, even though what was happening was totally destroying the worship atmosphere at the temple and was circumventing the very reason for the celebration itself, those who profited by it were those accountable for it, and thus it was destined to perpetuate itself with no end.

As we entered the courtyard that day, the circus-like atmosphere was oppressive to say the least. Peddlers, money-changers, and inspectors were arguing with their clients, and they indeed had the upper hand, having an exclusive on the products and services they sold. The air was filled with shrieking and cursing, with bleating and squealing, with the sheer din of voices being raised in an effort to talk above the auction-like flavor of what had once been intended to glorify God.

We had no idea how Jesus would overcome the loudness and frenzy of it all, nor did we know how He would relate to the merchandising that was going on so flagrantly in the temple area. What He did do, however, we were not prepared for. Shortly upon entering the courtyard, we noticed that the lines on the Master’s face had become drawn, and that there was deep grief exhibited in His eyes, a grief beyond what we had seen before. Just inside the gate, He knelt down and began picking up strands of rope that were strewn about, having no doubt been left behind by those selling or buying lambs to be sacrificed. Suddenly, Jesus sat down at the edge of the court and began weaving those strands of rope together. We watched in amazement, not at all aware of what was about to happen. Why it never dawned on us, I do not know. Why Peter didn’t ask, I do not know. Asking questions was, even now, Peter’s specialty. So in awe were we, however, that we simply watched and said nothing.

The Master, having woven the strands of rope into a long,

Overtured Tables

whip-like cord, stood to His feet once again. Even then it never entered our minds that Jesus' entrance into the scene of Jewish religious life was about to take on an entirely different color than we had anticipated. Not only were the priests not planning a reception for us, we were about to become as popular in the temple area as vegetarians in a meat market. We were about to become the equivalent of the plague.

Jesus, eyes now flashing with purpose, moved towards the center of the courtyard, where the noise was the loudest and the activity the fiercest. Up to the money-changers' marketplace He moved, quietly, but decisively. About that time, I looked at Simon. I believe it dawned on him at exactly the time it dawned on me, what was about to happen.

Suddenly, Jesus raised His arm and snapped the whip. Sheep and oxen began to scurry. The men behind the money tables flinched in disbelief. Again the Master raised His arm. Again the animals fled, and the money-changers and merchants began shouting at the Master to stop. Except for their angry cries, however, the mass of humanity in the temple area became strangely quiet. Jesus walked up to one of the tables which was filled with baskets of coins, and to the sheer amazement of the man who stood behind it, he overturned the table. Money went everywhere. Suddenly, the other money-changers began to reach for their coins and hurriedly throw them in cloth bags, lest this man overturn their tables as well. Others became defiant and were prepared to do battle, as the Master went over to another of the merchants and, much to his dismay, overturned the tables in front of him as well.

Then Jesus turned around and began to speak. He looked down at one of the merchants who was selling doves. There was a total hush as He uttered those unforgettable words,

Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!
(John 2:16b)

I turned and looked at Andrew and Peter. Their mouths were open, and their eyes were filled with awe. A passage of Scripture raced through my mind. Later I learned that the others thought of it, too. It was from the Psalms. It said,

Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.
(Psalm 69:9 quoted in John 2:17 NKJV)

Out of the corner of my eye I could see an entourage of

Overtured Tables

temple officials coming our way. I somehow perceived that this was not the welcoming committee we had envisioned on our way to the city. The angry priests gathered around us and began questioning the Master. There was no doubt that He had touched a sensitive nerve end, and a particularly profitable one, at that. The Chief Administrator of Temple Business spoke up.

What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?

(John 2:18b NKJV)

What they were saying was obvious. They wanted some evidence of His authority, some sign of His Kingship. Perhaps they had heard about the wine at the wedding. Perhaps they had heard some of the rumors circulating about the countryside that John had claimed to have found the Messiah, that this mere carpenter's son was the Son of the Most High God. At least now, we could begin to relax. We knew that we were on safe ground. If Jesus could pour water into pitchers and it became the finest of wine, He could do anything He chose to convince these arrogant profiteers of His divine power. We selfishly were hoping it would be a dramatic miracle, something that would establish Him and us as well for who we really were. After all, we had left our vocations, our families, and our reputations behind to follow Him. We were anxious for our peers to know that we were not following a mere man.

After a few brief seconds, Jesus answered. But His answer was not at all what we expected, and not at all what they expected either. His penetrating eyes met theirs, and He simply replied,

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

(John2:19 NKJV)

The startled officials looked at one another in disbelief. Aaron, their spokesman, began to laugh. "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?", he scoffed (John 2:20). Soon he and all of the others began to laugh uncontrollably. They may have been laughing to keep from crying. Their income was being packed in cloth bags and carried away as the confused money-changers, frightened by the authority they saw in Jesus' eyes, prepared to leave before they lost it all.

It was more than three years later before Simon and Andrew and the rest of us realized what the Master was saying. Not until after the resurrection did it dawn on us that He was speaking of

Overtured Tables

the temple of His body, *the real temple of God*, not the physical temple itself. Meanwhile, we departed with the Master and spent the rest of our time during the Passover celebration with groups of Jews in different parts of the city. Again and again, Jesus demonstrated by signs who He was, and many believed on His Name. Still, Jesus did not really commit Himself to them, though they committed themselves to Him. When we asked Him about it, He lovingly answered simply by saying, "I know what is in man."

Looking back, those of us who walked with the Master at that time of His ministry later realized what a significant event that temple experience was. At the time, we were too stunned and too spiritually insensitive to grasp its real meaning. Now, years later, we see the importance of what Jesus did and what Jesus said that day, where the purposes and priorities of the church are concerned. Now we see that the Master was illustrating principles, the violation of which were a direct affront to God. Finally we saw it. Do you?

THE SUMMARY

We will call them the "truths of the overturned tables". At least three of those truths clamor for our attention as we seek to make personal application to this amazing story, a story that indeed paints another graphic picture of how God behaves when He is allowed to be Himself in man.

Principle 1- God never intended the organization of the church or the administration of the church to interfere with or supersede the purpose of the church, which is to worship and serve.

This temple experience shows us what is in the heart of God where His people, gathered together to honor Him, are concerned. These men had not only missed the point, they had abused the privilege granted them by a Holy God, the privilege of overseeing the coming together of the people of God for the purpose of exalting the person of God. They had become so concerned with the operation and the activities; they completely lost sight of the reality. The Passover and all of the temple activities had turned into projects. They were so wrapped up in the doing of them, that the spirit of why they were doing what they were doing was totally lost in the shuffle. This is the curse of the modern, hyper-organized church of today as well. Satan has not changed his

Overtured Tables

tactics; he has only given man the freedom to adapt to his society. No longer is it the preparation for the Passover celebration that precedes and supersedes the worship experience. Now he has cleverly devised committees that get so wrapped up in when to meet, how often to meet, and where to meet that they forget why they meet...to glorify and exalt the Lord Jesus. Pastors and teachers get so embroiled in the presentation of the message they, forget the purpose of the message. Men and women get so tangled up in the details of a musical presentation, they forget the spirit of the presentation which is just to glorify the one to whom and for whom they sing. Staff members get so caught up in the logistics of the Lords' Supper and baptism and the organization of church services, they lose sight of the awesomeness of being allowed to represent God Almighty in the preparation and the presentation of those things that demonstrate who He is to man.

Oh, Beloved, we are not here to promote Jesus Christ; we are here to present Jesus Christ. As such, it is not our cunningly-devised programs that will communicate who He is; it is the sensitivity of our spirits to those we minister to. It is the love we initiate, the confidence in the Word we generate, the awe of His presence we demonstrate, that will change the world. We have turned the worship of God into one big activity. So anxious are we to do it effectively, we have lost sight of how to do it correctly. To us, the message of the overturned tables is this: step back, take a hard look at all of your frenzied activities. Then restore to all you do an awareness of the majesty of the presence of God.

Principle 2- God never intended the religious pursuits of His Kingdom to become profitable commercial enterprises.

Obviously money had to be changed. Obviously animals needed to be provided for those who could not provide their own. Obviously, there were some needs for some kinds of business to take place within the temple. But the greed factor had entered into the process, and now the necessary transactions had been replaced by unnecessary profiteering. Men had taken the worship of God and seen it as a way to make a profit.

The Scriptures are plain that those who labor in the ministry are free to gain their livelihood through the ministry. That was not the issue. The issue was that once into the process of gaining a livelihood, these men saw just how profitable that livelihood could be; and they began to profiteer. They began to realize that a

Overturned Tables

man who is trying to serve His God is a ripe prospect to be taken advantage of. His emotions are ripe to be played on; his finances are ripe to be drawn on; his desire to honor God makes him pliable and available to those who would use just enough truth to make their message palatable and just enough deception to make their message profitable. In our generation, the money-changers are those who weep with clock-like regularity for funds, lest the “work of God” be caused to fail, as though God’s Kingdom were dependent on our sending in a gift to get a pin or a book or our name on a plaque, as though God’s work depended on the building of their school or their church or their program, as though their kingdom was God’s Kingdom. Seeking for a place to translate the currency of the heart into the currency of the kingdom, these “money-changers” have set up their tables in the court of the gentiles even today, and they are turning the worship of God into big business and the temple of God into a den of merchandise. The message of the overturned tables to them, and to us, is simply this: God never intended for man to profit from the Gospel at the expense of the Gospel. Those who do so stand to be judged harshly.

Principle 3- Christ in us will not tolerate the degeneration of the worship of God into a business or an activity. As believers, as individuals, and as a church, it is our responsibility, to maintain the sanctity of the worship experience as the primary objective of the church. This is the final truth of the overturned tables.

You and I were designed by God to worship. To become transformed into His Likeness as we were intended, we must spend time in His presence and stay in awe of His majesty. In order to flee from the legalism and traditionalism of the past, we evangelicals have yielded to the temptation to turn the church into either a classroom where doctrine replaces worship, or into a showroom, where we mistakenly feel that some form of ecstatic emotional expression on our part will bring God down to where we are. We forget He IS GOD. He is not made accessible by what WE do; He is accessible because of what HE DID.

Our task is not to create Madison Avenue type presentations, the sheer performance of which will awe the crowds. The world can do that. Our task is not to create Wall Street type organizations the sheer mechanics of which will awe the crowds. The world can do that. Our job is not to amass the talents of a Hollywood showcase and by the very talent we possess, to awe

Overtured Tables

the crowds. The world can do that. Our job is to fall down before a Holy God in absolute awe of who He is...and worship. Our job is to lead the people as together we learn more perfectly of *His power, His love, His sovereignty, His omniscience, His majesty, His justice, His supremacy.*

He IS! In the light of who He is, who are we? When we get that straight, we are ready to worship; and when we learn to worship, we learn the message of the overturned tables. The message is, "My house shall not become a house of merchandise." The message is, God is not only not impressed with our organization and our administration, He is *repulsed* by it, if by the sheer operation of it, we detract from rather than exalt WHO HE IS. And the message is: God does not tolerate profiteering from the Gospel. He does not take it lightly when men use the name of God and the message of God to fill their own coffers at the expense of the worship of God. They may prosper on this earth, and their ministries may flourish, but God is simply honoring His Word; He is not honoring the way it is done. Eventually, judgment comes.

The message of the overturned tables is, in reality, a singular message. It is that religion is not a business. It is a relationship with the Living God. Whatever business is necessary to define and develop that relationship, God honors. Whatever goes beyond that and becomes self-serving and self-perpetuating, God loathes. Thus we see Jesus here in the temple demonstrate more righteous indignation than at any other time in His ministry. This is the message of the overturned tables. May it overturn some of our thinking and reestablish some of our priorities. May we and the church become increasingly what we were intended to be, that our loving Lord need not come into our fellowships, or into our lives, and overturn any tables to remind us.

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