

**Sermon** March 3, 2024  
[John 2:13-22]

*What Made Jesus Mad?*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. This story raised a big question. We know why Satan tempted Jesus in the Judean wilderness. But what tempts *us* in the *American* wilderness? How, in other words, do we let the glittering idols of our age control and dictate our lives instead of Christ? How, in short, are we tempted to idol worship?

Now in a great act of mercy, I kept my sermon to 15 minutes, and limited my response to three ways. Three ways American culture tempts us to give up our freedom, three ways American culture robs us of our dignity. So what were they? Well, number one, American culture tempts us to live in self-indulgent ways. As the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3, we worship “the God of the Belly.” When we succumb to this temptation – of hoarding and acquisition, of consumerism, of cramming the world into our mouths – when we succumb to this temptation, acquisition and hoarding become God, and the goal of our lives. It also means that the people around us go hungry. America, as you may recall, or may well know, consumes far more of the world’s resources compared to other developed countries, causing millions of people to go hungry, and not only here, but across the globe, some 26 to 28,000 children who die of malnutrition each day.

The two other ways I argued American culture tempts us to give up our freedom is, number one, it conditions us *to live only for ourselves*, to make ourselves number one. It exacerbates a tendency, already present in human nature, to live for ourselves and not for others. Instead of, as our first hymn said, “Daily dying to the way of self,” we are instead encouraged to focus on the self, and focus on all things that prop up this self.

The other way that American culture tempts us is to neglect God in prayer and worship. In so doing, we fail to heed the first commandment, which we heard in our First Reading for today, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Normally, of course, this prohibition refers to physical idols in the Bible, including the idol of the golden calf. But it can also refer to immaterial idols, or what I like to call “idols in the abstract.” It’s no wonder here that the theologian John Calvin, about whom we heard a little today in our forum, says that “the human mind is a continuously working factory of idols.” The human mind is a continuously working factory of idols. And that’s because the human mind, estranged from its divine source, reflects its fallenness by investing things with ultimacy. Consider, for example, First Timothy, which famously says, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

“And in their eagerness to be rich,” he continues, “some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” Notice here the phrase, “their eagerness to be rich,” as well as the phrase “their love of money.” Timothy is not saying that money, or the acquisition of money, is, in itself, bad or evil. He’s saying

that we can form what the founder of the Jesuit order, St. Ignatius, calls “a disordered attachment” to it, and turn the acquisition of it into our reason for being. This helps us understand why many millionaires and billionaires simply cannot stop themselves and give their money away to the poor. Instead, they keep on acquiring, because money is their God. The *love of money* has enslaved them.

This is why the first letter to Timothy concludes the chapter by saying, “As for those who in the present are rich, command them not to be arrogant – or not to be proud, or not to be haughty, or not to be conceited – not to be arrogant, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

In other words, don’t let the love of money tighten its grip on you. Why? Because like all other idols, it will either let you down, or worse yet, *it will rob you of your freedom and dignity*. As another great Jesuit Father Pedro Arrupe, once put it, “When we surrender ourselves to the possessions we covet” – and we heard about coveting in the last of the 10 Commandments, our First Reading for today – “when we surrender ourselves to the possessions we covet, to the things we inordinately desire, we become slaves, no longer persons who are self-possessed.”

This is language derivative from Paul in Galatians 5, where he talks about exhibiting self-control as a sign of the Spirit, or a work of the Spirit.

“...no longer persons who are *self*-possessed,” but *un*-persons!

I think here of zombies. Zombie movies are cultural commentary. The zombie is the mindless consumer, who has made the acquisition of something its goal. And notice here how I use the word “it,” not his or her. We’re talking here about un-persons, the walking dead, “things,” Arrupe says, “that are driven by our blind desires and their objects” – which brings us to our Gospel Reading for today.

Now, the Cleansing of the Temple, for me, raises many questions. How, for example, can Jesus Christ – the Prince of Peace, a Lamb of God, the one who loves his enemies, and the one who tells us to turn the other cheek and not return violence with violence – how can this same Jesus resort to violence against other human beings in the temple?

Consider what he does, according to the King James translation, and I’m speaking here of John 2:15 in our gospel reading for today, according to the King James translation, “And when he, that is, Jesus, made a scourge.” (Some of you may recognize that word. That’s an older term for whip.) “When he made a scourge,” or a whip of small cords, “he drove them out of the temple, and the sheep and the oxen.” Let me repeat that: “When He made a whip of small cords, he drove them out of the temple, *and* the sheep *and* the oxen.” This makes it sound like Jesus, consumed by anger, *whipped men and women* in the temple, as *well* as the animals, driving all of them out.

The trouble is, the second use of the word “and” in this verse, *doesn't appear in the original Greek*. That is to say, in the original language of the New Testament, it means we have a mistranslation!

An accurate rendering of this passage, which among other places, appears in the New Revised Standard Version, (or what I like to call “God’s translation”), the one we use in our worship services. An accurate translation renders this passage differently: “And making a whip of cords,” it says, “he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.”

Let me repeat that. “He drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.” You hear the difference? It’s not that he drove *people* out, and the sheep and the cattle. That word “and” is not in the original Greek. It’s that he drove them out, the sheep and the cattle. So Jesus did not whip other people and force them out of the temple. Instead, as the original language makes clear, he drove livestock out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

Amazing isn’t it? How a single word, in this case a mere conjunction, can change the entire meaning of a passage – in this case, showing the consistency between what Jesus says, and here, what Jesus does.

Okay, you might say, “Thanks for the Bible lesson, Pastor Dan, that’s really interesting. I understand now that Jesus did not resort to violence against other human beings. And sure, I appreciate how that is consistent with his message and who he was. I get now that he drove the livestock out and simply overturned the tables of the money changers.”

But why does this matter? Why was Jesus so angry in the first place, and what, for him, was at stake? The answer, based on what I said earlier, should now be clear. Jesus recognized how the love of money, an idol, was getting in the way of what matters most, namely God, the source of life and being. He knew it undermined the first commandment, which says, “You shall have no other gods – physical or immaterial – before me.” In other words, when Jesus demands the money changers and profiteers leave the temple, he is defending the worship of God alone, and rejecting the ways in which commerce and profit-making can become our gods. He knows the love of money not only dishonors God, it also, as I said before, dehumanizes us, turning us into slaves, into zombies, into things driven by our blind desires, possessed by the very things we seek to possess.

“Do not make the house of my Father a house of merchandising,” Jesus says, in our Gospel Reading for today, or, as our translation puts it, “Do not make the house of my Father a marketplace.” For in so doing, Jesus implies, you will lose your souls, your humanity and your freedom.

That explains why Jesus was so angry. Why zeal for his Father’s house consumed him. He knew *precisely* what was at stake. He knew that the love of money could dishonor God, and turn us away from God in a way that was irreverent, but also bad for each of us.

Now, here's what I love about Jesus, one of the many things I love about Jesus. He gives us what the theologian William Hamilton calls "a place to stand." A place to stand. That is, a vantage point from which to step outside of our consumer capitalist culture and assess it from an alternative point of view. In this way, Jesus is often countercultural. With Paul, he calls us to freedom.

He shows us another way.

He says to each person sitting in this room, "You matter."

Your freedom matters. Your dignity matters, and your status in Christ as children of God matters. Be free, and live the abundant life God intended, no longer focused on idols that promise what they cannot deliver, but living before the Living God, who promises the very life the idols claim they convey.

In short, each of you in this room is worth more than you are "worth."

May God grant you the freedom to resist idols.

May God grant you the mind of Christ, to put God first.

Idols tempt us from every direction to pledge our allegiance to them, but God in Christ sets us free.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.