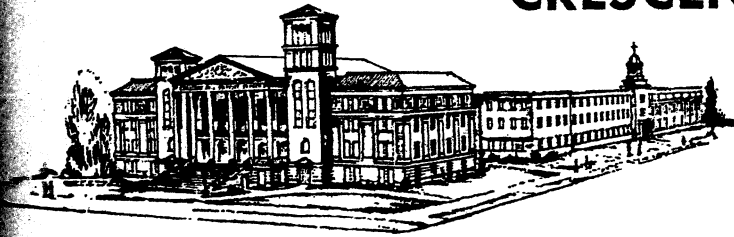


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"REPULSIVE RELIGION"



Sunday Morning, February 26, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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One of the most dramatic things Jesus ever did was to cleanse the Temple in Jerusalem. We are told that He descended on that place with an awesome indignation. He drove out the animals and overturned the tables of the money changers. Shouting out the words "My Father's house," "a house of prayer for all nations," and "den of thieves," He resorted to violent means in carrying out His purpose. Needless to say, that event was quite upsetting, not only to the thriving enterprise in the Temple, but also to a popular notion of our day. You see, the tremor of that outburst has reverberated into the present, and challenges a very common opinion; namely, that one religion is as good as another. Someone has characterized our modern mood of relativism as "religion in general." Almost every week I hear someone say: "Oh, all religions are good. After all, we're serving the same God and striving for the same place. As long as one is sincere, that's all that matters." Now quite obviously, the cleansing of the Temple is incompatible with this philosophy. Jesus did not accept as good everything that parades under the name of religion. He was painfully particular; he passed radical "value judgments" on what He saw. He believed that religion could go wrong, and the sight of such seemed to arouse Him as nothing else. His most scathing invectives were hurled, not at organized crime, but at distorted religion. It was not prostitutes or thieves, but Pharisees that He called "white-washed tombstones," or likened to bowls that were clean without but filthy within. And if we are serious about being His followers, we must carefully examine this incident. From it we can learn both the general truth that a religion can be false, and the specific truth of what constituted such repulsion.

Let us look at the matter a little more closely. What was it that so offended Jesus? What conditions evoked such a response of hostility? Here is what Jesus saw:

It was during the Feast of the Passover. Thousands of Israelites from all over the Near East converged on Jerusalem to celebrate their greatest holiday. All of the activity centered around the Temple, that magnificent building that stood on the highest peak and symbolized the presence of God. There were many courts in this Temple. One was the Holy of Holies, where rested the Ark of the Covenant and into which only the High Priest was allowed. There was a court for the priests, one for Jewish men and another for Jewish women. And on the outer extremity was a Gentile court where even the non-Jew could come and worship. This latter court was the scene of the action, for the Jews had changed its function altogether. Within this court they had set up stalls and counters, and were doing a thriving business with the travelers. The two main enterprises were changing money and selling animals. The Temple had its own currency; no profile of an earthly ruler was to

fall into the holy coffers. So foreigners from many places came to exchange their money for the shekel and half-shekel of Temple coinage. And since many of them came long distances and did not want to bother with an animal, they would buy one right there and hurry on to their sacrifice. It was a scene of bustling activity and profitable commerce. And when Jesus' sensitive eyes fell upon it, He could bear it no longer, and erupted in violence. Let us single out the distasteful features.

First of all, Jesus was offended by the irreverence. In this place where men were supposed to pray and pay homage to their Creator, there existed the confusion of the market place. If you have ever heard Palestinians haggle, and know how they speak in a high pitched voice and gesticulate wildly, you can envision the turmoil of this place. Cattle lowing, merchants trading, buyers bargaining—it must have been bedlam, and anything but conducive to worship. I am sure the irreverence of the scene repelled Him.

Then again, the sight of utilitarian religion must have angered Him. Here even the worship of God had been turned to a profit. The travelers needed certain things, and enterprising Hebrews had responded to this for a price. The sellers were not all to blame, however. The travelers were looking for a short cut. The sacrifice was intended to be a highly personal act. A man would take his best animal and the first fruits of his own harvest and bring them to God as an expression of himself. But this was too demanding. Gradually, a Jew would rush in and buy an animal as cheaply as possible and go through the motions of offering it. It was getting off as lightly as possible, while still complying with the rules. Thus, the whole atmosphere was one of selfish expediency. There was little thought of God on either side of the counter—a profit-making "religion-made-easy" affair.

Third, I can imagine Jesus was repelled by the hardened indifference this scene implied. The court was intended for the Gentiles, and was a reminder of the universal intention of God. But the Jews "could not have cared less." They always made the mistake of viewing God's love for them as terminal. They never could realize that God meant to work through them to all mankind. And setting up trade in the court of the Gentiles betrayed precisely their attitude. The "house of prayer for all nations" was an exclusively Jewish affair.

These three elements were repugnant to our Lord, and if you will reflect upon them, they are quite basic. Revealed here is a defective attitude toward God—irreverence; a defective attitude toward themselves—selfish and expedient; and a defective attitude toward others—hardened indifference. In the three most crucial relationships of life, they were out of touch with reality. Little wonder that Christ was so moved. He, who had a passion for the real things of life, could not bear such pretension. Here was something claiming the guise of religion when it was actually something else. The word "religion" does not suspend the order of reality or change black into white. Everything that is called by that name is not automatically valid.

But we cannot leave the matter either as a general principle or an historical indictment. What about our religion? We are subject to the same gaze, and bounded by the same realities. If the same Christ came into our midst, what would He think?

For example, how do we measure up in terms of reverence? Oh, I know we do not sell animals or change money, but how respectful are we in the presence of the Almighty? Most Baptists shift a little uneasily here, and rightly so; we are famous for many things, but not for our reverence in worship. A friend of mine from

another denomination attended services in several Baptist churches, and do you know how he labelled us?—"the gymnasium church." He said if you sat before a service and closed your eyes and only listened, you could well imagine you were in a colosseum just before the game had started, so much chatter and confusion! And this is significant, for the degree of reverence is a measure of one's attitude toward God. The first law of worship is awe and respect. You reflect how you feel about someone by the way you behave in his presence. You would not think of going to President Kennedy's office and whispering and talking. Yet we fail to give the Lord of the universe as much respect as we do a human president. This is an area where we need to grow. I would not for a minute want to diminish the social aspect of church life, for it is important. But this is what I wish—before the service, you speak to God; during the service, let God speak to you; then after the service, speak to one another. The level of reverence reflects our depth of respect for Him.

Again, how would we measure up in terms of inner attitude? Many of us have fallen into this attitude: "how much can I get, how little can I give?" Our religion has become selfishly oriented; we come to church looking for "value received." We want "peace of mind" and "inner security," and our whole motive is simply what we get out of it. We may not be changing coins for a profit, but there is little difference in principle in this and going to church to make contacts or create a false image of respectability. Religion does import value, but if you come at it with this in mind, you contradict its basic nature. Not only is modern religion shot through with self-interest, but also with the desire for "a short cut". More and more people are interested in the irreducible minimum: "What is the least I can do and get by?" They are looking for the pat formulas of a "religion-made-easy!" I went once to call on a member of a church to enlist his service. He was one of the ablest men in the community, and the church needed his leadership badly. He listened to my request, and assured me of his interest in the project. But, he said, "I'm too busy to take that responsibility". Then he whipped out his check book and scratched off a handsome gift, and gave it as a substitute. I felt when I left that he was quite satisfied with himself. I felt I had failed. I had gotten some money, I had not gotten the man. And there are many people in our affluent society who are trying to hire others to do their religious work. They give out of the overflow, at no sacrifice to themselves. And this is not enough. You can hire many things done for you, but not spiritual development. And if your motive is one of "get as much as I can, give as little as I can," you will be "weighed in the balance and found wanting."

What about the third issue—indifference? They cared so little for the outsider of another race that they crowded him out and took over his place. And what about us? We talk about the universal love of God and how Christ died for all men, but do we really mean it? The temper of our times is such that our words are being put to the test, and we must decide whether we shall be an exclusive country club of people with similar backgrounds, or a fellowship of forgiveness that includes all. There are many barriers of indifference—race, class, education, and an absolute difference in whether we let God's love move to us or through us to others. Just how much do we care for all men?

Yes, when Jesus cleansed the Temple, He upset many things. He shattered the myth that any religion is all right. He was brutally precise; ruthlessly exact. He was repelled by one religion. And on the basis of that performance, if He came to our church, what do you think He would do?