



"Money often costs too much."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

11-Jan-13

Cleansing the Temple and Economics

In [John 2:13-17](#), the apostle John records Christ's cleansing of the Temple near the commencement of His ministry:

Now the [Passover](#) of the Jews was at hand, and [Jesus](#) went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

The incident mentioned by Mark in [Mark 11:15-18](#) (and by Matthew in [Matthew 21:12-13](#) and by Luke in [Luke 19:45-46](#)) takes place about three years later, at the end of His ministry:

So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those

who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.

Both incidents occurred during the Passover season, as thousands of visitors from east and west milled around the Temple precincts.

The Jews, working in tandem behind their Roman masters, had turned the Temple into big business. Inns aplenty serviced the many pilgrims who flooded Jerusalem's streets during [the holy days](#). Priests inspected offerings brought by the people; if they were not acceptable, another animal had to be purchased, from the priests, at exorbitant prices. Behind it all was an extensive banking arrangement that supported the collection of the Temple tax (see [Exodus 30:11-16](#)), which was generally paid around Passover.

Moneychangers, who served as currency traders through whom sojourners could change their money into the half-shekel required to pay the tax, facilitated this collection. Conceptually, the operations of these moneychangers did not differ from those of today's international bankers, who enjoy sometimes incredible profits from low-risk (or even no-risk) trading in foreign currencies, a practice commonly called "currency arbitrage." In other words, the Jewish leaders were *arbitrageurs*, a name given to those individuals who really add no value to a financial transaction. They merely bottom-feed in the murky waters of international finance.

It was not religion or philanthropy that drove Herod the Great to enlarge and beautify the Temple complex. Along with the Jewish leadership, that Edomite king recognized the vast profit [waiting](#) to be realized from the Temple operation. His building activities are best understood to be not unlike those who build mega-hotels in Las Vegas or theme parks in Japan. In cahoots with the Jewish leadership, he invested heavily to create an attraction to which thousands of people would flock every year—only to be fleeced. Herod was in the religion business, pure and simple. It is no wonder that Jesus called one of his sons "that fox" ([Luke 13:32](#)).

Violently, with righteous indignation, Christ responded to this corrupt, moneymaking establishment, overturning tables, driving away people and animals. But why did He do so twice?

In answer, consider this question: How long before it was "business as usual" in the Temple again? An hour? Maybe a few hours before the moneychangers slinked back to their tables? Either would be good guesses, and either answer should illustrate something to us: The persistence of an economic system.

Christ's actions provide a dual witness to the resiliency of an economic system. Such a system is founded on human greed and self-interest. It is highly persistent in the face of cyclical booms and busts. Yes, it takes some hits, but it survives. It is extremely adaptable to controlled change, but strongly resistant to external changes that it perceives to be a threat. This only makes sense: After all, economic systems are designed by the rich and for the rich—to maintain and grow their wealth and status. The "movers and shakers" of this world have interest in maintaining and defending the system that supports them. They view any alternative system as a competitor and dismantle it as soon as they perceive it to be a threat.

Christ Himself was not able to overthrow the system during His ministry, though He twice violently set His hand against it. The Temple system continued decades after His resurrection, until ^{AD} 70, when the Romans finally destroyed the Temple. That time is a type of the Great Tribulation. The overthrow of this world's systems will not be possible until Christ's return. Then, "the kingdoms of [the world](#) [will] become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" ([Revelation 11:15](#)). Then—in His third try—He will effectively uproot this civilization's economic, military, and educational systems, which seem so deeply entrenched today.

Yet, even when He has done so through His wrathful activities during the Day of the Lord, He knows that these manmade (though Satan-inspired) systems will grow up again unless He changes the heart of mankind, changes the way people think. He will set His hand to do just that. The time will come when,

Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the [God](#) of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ([Isaiah 2:3](#))

During His ministry, Christ was no "social activist." He did not use His position as The Prophet to advocate social, economic, or educational reforms at governmental levels. By His two unfruitful Temple cleansings, He serves notice on us that our consuming goal should not be to "fix" misdirected and just plain wrong-headed governmental policies regarding finance and economics and education.

"What is crooked cannot be made straight" ([Ecclesiastes 1:15](#))—at least, not by us. The economy is not our fight—not now.

- Charles Whitaker

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Money Is Power](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

How we spend our money at the Feast of Tabernacles will give God an idea of how we will use power in the Millennium. Using the analogy of Bill Gates' wealth in comparison to the average person, or the national debt, we see that responsibility with currency is both relative (in terms of the amount of wealth) and absolute (in terms of responsibility for this wealth). For a responsible diligent person, money is power, but for an irresponsible lazy person, it can prove an absolute curse. Whoever is faithful in small matters will in all likelihood be responsible in major matters. Leadership demands faithfulness, productivity, and responsible stewardship of all of our resources. If we are untrustworthy with a paltry sum of money, we will be untrustworthy with the vast resources of God's creative power. At the Feast

we have the opportunity to demonstrate to God that we can show outgoing charitable uses for the financial blessings God has given us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Tithing: God's Financial System](#)

by John O. Reid

God has set in place a wonderful system to pay for the promulgation of His truth. John Reid discusses tithing in general, the different tithes and what income is titheable, and answers several common questions on the subject.

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