

## Say No to Transactionalism

John 2:13-22  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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What would you be willing to do for \$10,000,000? When asked that question, two-thirds of Americans said they'd do at least one – if not several – of the following: Abandon their entire family (25%); abandon their church (25%); become a prostitute for a week (23%); give up their citizenship (16%); leave their spouses (16%); withhold testimony and let a murderer go free (only 10%); kill a stranger (7%); put their children up for adoption (a sad 3%).<sup>1</sup>

It's amazing what people are willing to do for money or power. Always has been. And yet, since the advent of Christ, people have been called and empowered to set all this aside in the example of Jesus, Jesus who said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:21)

In today's New Testament lesson from John, Jesus enters the Temple of God only to find people's hearts set – not on God – but on making money. "In the temple," says John, "he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables."

Now truth be told, there wasn't anything wrong, per se, about people selling sacrificial animals. The faithful had traveled such long distances there's no way they could have brought the animals with them. And because many carried foreign currency, the money-changers were needed.

No, it wasn't that money was changing hands that had Jesus so upset. It was that God's favor, God's blessing had become transactional in nature. This is the same reason we in the Protestant faith split off from the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church used to sell indulgences, taking money in exchange for forgiveness of sins. And the reformer Martin Luther saw no basis for that in the Bible. In fact, it's just the opposite, as we'll see during our sermon time today.

Martin Luther is known as the first reformer of the church and religion, but of course, it was actually Jesus. The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple is a story of Jesus reforming religion, doing a reset on how we should approach God, and in that, how we relate to everything else in the world.

The first thing we see Jesus take on is religion itself. The Apostle John tells us that it was the Passover that drew everyone to Jerusalem. God instructed them to observe the Passover in remembrance of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth*, 1991.

And when Jesus arrives for this religious festival, he finds that it's become a marketplace – a hub of economic transactions in which people were trying to buy God's favor through their faithfulness. We can't buy God's favor – not even through acts of faithfulness.

It's like the guy who died and went to heaven. He was met at the Pearly Gates by St. Peter who led him down the golden streets. They passed stately homes and beautiful mansions until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a rundown cabin. The man asked St. Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions he could live in.

St. Peter replied, "I did the best I could with the money you sent us." We can't buy God's favor through acts of faithfulness. Rather, acts of faithfulness are in response to God's favor and blessing freely given to us.

The next thing we see Jesus take on in the Temple is the economy – the exchange of goods and services. As John tells us, "... He drove all them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle" and "... poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables."

The rich were making money on the backs of the common folks, and Jesus turns the tables. With Jesus, economic oppression will not stand, in the fulness of time.

Next, Jesus takes on the government itself. When the Jewish officials saw Jesus disrupting the Temple economy, they said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" They're trying to turn their governmental authority into a transactional exchange – wanting Jesus to give them a sign in exchange for their compliance with basic, human decency.

That's not how it works! The government is suppose to look out for the best interests of society as a whole, without showing favor to anyone or seeking anything from those in power.

Next, Jesus resets our relationship with work, with the spirit of industrialism. When Jesus says to those charged with caring for the Temple, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," they reply saying, "This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

They are trying to stand on the good works of the past – construction of the temple – while failing to live in the spirit in which the temple was constructed, in the first place - our devotion to God. It's our devotion to God that leads to our good works, and not the other way around.

And finally, Jesus resets our notion of salvation, of what it takes to stand before God. John tells us that Jesus was talking about the destruction of his body, his life when he spoke of raising up the Temple after three days. After his resurrection, they disciples remembered this "and ... believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."

It is through our belief in Christ that we live into the salvation and blessing of God, not through any religious observances, or any economic exchanges, or earthly authority, or any industriousness, or anything we do.

Yes, we go to church. Yes, we give of our finances. Yes, we live under authority and have authority of our own. And yes, we do good works. But none of this is done in exchange for God's favor, but rather in response to God's favor, which is freely given, in keeping with the teachings of the Lord.

Now, that's not to say that life isn't give-and-take, full of transactions like the ones Jesus addressed in cleansing the Temple. But there's a difference between transactions and being transactional.

Transactions are a means to an end, but transactionalism is when the means becomes the end, when it's more about your power than it is about helping others. In transactionalism, the transaction itself takes on a life of its own, beyond the relationship, beyond the good it can do. And that ruins our relationship with each other and with God, because the good of all has become secondary to what we get for ourselves.

We see this playing out at all levels of society, including in our families and among our friends. Can you imagine setting aside what you get out of a relationship in favor of doing what's best for all concerned? I know you can. That's what Christians do, or hope to do.

But too often we get pulled back into being transactional instead of self-giving, focusing on what we get rather than who we're being. And then everyone suffers.

But Jesus has shown us a better way, a way to reset our relationships – our relationship with going to church, our relationship with money, our relationship with government, with the good works we do, and with our faith.

So, think about all the ways that you are more transactional with others rather than loving. And then look for those moments in life when you can stand up and say no to transactionalism and yes to show more grace and mercy, treating others how God treats you. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and merciful God, we thank you for the gifts of the season of Lent. Thank you for the call to slow down, to quiet the voices that vie for our attention, so that we may be still and enjoy the deep communion of your Spirit.

Thank you for the invitation to examine our hearts and lives, to take stock of our relationships, our loves and our fears.

Grant us courage to name the idols that hold sway over us, and to confess the desires that distract us from your higher purposes.

Thank you for a season of repentance and of preparation.

Empower us to resist the temptation to celebrate new life without first recognizing and appreciating the sacrifices others have made – and especially your sacrifice for our sake and our salvation.

Lord, we are mindful this day of all those who give of themselves for the sake of others, and especially those standing alongside loved ones going through medical issues. Bring your spirit of healing, strength and peace. And for all of us, Lord, let us lead with your spirit of love and care in all that we do and say. Let us look for ways to make the lives of those around us better.

Let us live according to the prayer that you taught us, which we join in now, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**