

The Image of the Invisible God: Jealousy

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 5, 2025 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

John 2:13-22

In our passage, Jesus is filled with zeal. That's the word that comes to the disciples' mind. Jesus comes into the temple with a whip that he made out of cords, and he cleans out all the animal stalls, and he cleans out all the money lenders; drives them all out while the merchants yell and the cattle scatter in confusion. And as he grabbed the tables and began to overturn them, when the disciples looked at his face, what they saw there was zeal.

Zeal is not our favorite attribute of Jesus. It's not how we like to see him. Throughout history, when people have made paintings of Jesus, they don't generally paint zealous Jesus with the fire in his eyes and a whip in his hand. Most religious art has favored calm, peaceful, loving Jesus. That's because zealous Jesus doesn't just turn tables; he raises questions. How can the Jesus who said 'blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,' and who urged us to turn the other cheek, be the same Jesus who stomps through the temple courts with fire in his eyes?

I think he must have caught the merchants completely by surprise. I am sure that most of the people in Jerusalem thought that their presence in the temple courts was perfectly fine. The money lenders were there because you weren't allowed to give roman coins at the temple. It had an image of Caesar in it and that would be a kind of idolatry. So the money changers allowed for a convenient exchange to Jewish currency. The animal sellers were there to help with the sacrifices. People had to make sacrifices, and so they were providing a service for the people coming to the temple to worship. If you were living in Jerusalem the moneylenders and the merchants wouldn't be bad guys; in fact, it might even seem that they were doing something good and helpful and godly. But obviously Jesus didn't see it that way. Jesus saw them as an affront, Jesus made a whip.

What made Jesus so zealous? There's a couple of things. First, he didn't like the commercial aspect of the stalls. He didn't like it that his father's house had been turned into a marketplace. "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" But it wasn't just the financial thing that bothered him; Jesus has fire in his eyes because people are being prevented from worshipping God. The merchants had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles. There were multiple courts in the temple; the outer court was the court of the Gentiles. That's a place where God-fearing Gentiles could come and worship Israel's God. But with all the market stands and all the cows and sheep, there was no way the Gentiles could worship! So that's why Jesus is mad. That's why he has fire in his eyes and that's why he's so zealous: he doesn't want anything to stand in the way of people's complete devotion to his Father.

This isn't the only place where Jesus shows this zeal for complete devotion: You get a sense of the zeal of Jesus for complete devotion in the love command. How do you keep the commandments? You love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Make sure that all the courts of your temple are completely full of the love of God. You get some of that zeal in Jesus encounter with the rich young man. You've got to sell everything you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me. You can't keep some of your temple courts for yourself. You get a sense of that zeal in the parable of the pearl of great price. What's the kingdom of heaven like? It's like a man who finds the pearl he's been looking for, and sells everything he has to get it. Again, no half-heartedness; everything is surrendered. Following Jesus is not a side hustle, it's not a part-time job; it's one holy passion, filling all our frame. And if something stands between us and wholehearted commitment to our heavenly Father, that will light the flame of his zeal.

Do you know where Jesus gets his zeal? He gets it from his Dad. Jesus is a chip off the old block in that regard. As I mentioned earlier, this is a series where we think about how the characteristics of Jesus illustrate the character of God the Father. In the Old testament, God is occasionally called a zealous God, but there's

another related word used to describe God's intense desire for our wholehearted devotion: Multiple times, the Old Testament tells us that God is a Jealous God.

If you grew up in a church that read the ten commandments a lot when you were a kid, you knew about the jealousy of God. Because in the commandments there was that phrase: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God visiting the iniquity on the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." Jealousy is actually something attributed to God around 20 times in the Old Testament. There's a passage in Exodus where it actually says this. "Do not worship any other God, for the Lord whose name is jealous, is a jealous God." The Lord whose name is jealous. When you say, the Lord's name is jealous you are making jealousy a strong part of God's character.

I remember being confused about that when I was a kid. God is jealous?! Isn't jealousy bad? 'Don't be jealous of your brother!' my mother said, 'It's wrong!' She said it all the time, so I tried not to be jealous of my brother when he got more ice cream than me. And it wasn't just my Mom who said jealousy was bad; the Bible said that too. During the Exodus, some of the Israelites are jealous of Moses and they are chewed out for it. Romans 13 Paul says, "let us behave decently, as in the daytime ... not in dissention and jealousy." 1 Corinthians 3. "You Corinthians are still worldly for there is still jealousy and quarreling among you." It's really interesting: in the Bible when jealousy is attributed to God, it's good. But when jealousy is attributed to human beings, it's almost always bad. So strange and so interesting.

How should we understand Jesus's zeal and God's jealousy? I want to say two things here. First, God's jealousy reflects his deep desire to be in a relationship with us. Tim Keller, talks about how the nations around Israel who worshipped other gods, the idea that God would be jealous for our wholehearted love would have been something utterly new. All the other religions had gods that didn't really care all that much about people except as a means to an end. In the Greek myths or the Babylonian myths or the other myths of the age, if a god had an interest in you it wasn't because he was concerned about you; in the other myths, if a god paid attention to you, it was for selfish reasons. The other gods used humans. When human beings related to these other gods it was more of a business relationship. You appeased them and gave them stuff, in return they would give you favors. There was no question of love or commitment. It wasn't personal; it was business.

But now the living God, the true God, reveals himself, and it's completely personal. God reveals himself as a jealous God; a God who has an intense desire to be in relationship with us, a desire so intense that the Bible calls it jealousy. His heart longs for loving fellowship with his children, and he wants that relationship to be exclusive. The word 'jealous' might make you uncomfortable, but it shows that God's attention to us is deeply personal.

How can that be? He is the maker of a billion galaxies and Lord of the angel hosts; I am a nobody. I am a squirrely little soul in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I can do things that arouse his jealousy?! Yes. He cares that much about me, about you. He really wants to be in relationship with us, and if that means cleaning out the temple with a whip, he'll do it. If that means putting himself at the other end of a whip and at the wrong end of some nails, he'll do that too.

So, first of all, God's jealousy shows his desire for a personal relationship with us. Second, the jealousy of God is for our good. Part of the problem with understanding a jealous God, is that the word makes God seem self-serving. For human beings, our jealousy is usually selfish. I want my brother's ice cream because he has more. But God's jealousy for us is different. God's jealousy for us is for our benefit, for our well-being. When God asks for your praise and devotion, it's not for his sake.

I remember, years ago, a 13-year-old girl in one of my catechism classes articulated a question for me that I had always struggled with. We were talking about how we humans are created to glorify God, and she said, "why does God ask for our praise and devotion all the time?! It makes him sound selfish." It's a reasonable question. A non-religious person who walked into one of our services and heard us say, 'we, are created to glorify God,' and heard all the calls for us to praise him always, might have similar questions. "You Christians say God created the human race to glorify him? Did God create people so that they would spend all day telling him how awesome he is? Because that sounds a little self-serving!"

It's a fair question but it misses the point about how we glorify God. Think of parents and children. What makes parents happiest: when a child tells them, "Mom you are awesome! You are great! You are the best Mom!" or is it when you see a child becoming what they are supposed to be. Your child has spent a long time practicing for her violin piece she's going to play with the school orchestra. She faithfully and diligently practices in her room. 2 hours every night. And then the day of the concert comes and she performs with joy and excellence. She's radiant. What brings you more pleasure? What brings you more glory? I certainly like it when my children tell me that they like me and think I'm a decent guy, but it's nothing compared to watching your children become the people they are meant to be, finding their calling and doing it with joy.

Parents find pleasure and joy when their children flourish. And so it is with God. When a shy uncertain young man who's had a hard time figuring out what to do with his life tries his hand at automotive repair and absolutely loves it, he just starts to blossom, not just professionally, but personally too, God is glorified.

Christian friends gather round a member of their friend group who's struggling. They call her, they check in on her, they have long conversations which consist of lots of listening and passing her tissues. Over time, working together, they help that friend make their way out of grief and into hope. God is glorified by these people.

And yes, when his people show up for worship; whether that's at the temple, or in our case, here in church, and God greets them and blesses them, and they respond with thanks and praise. When they share with him their fears and hurts and sickness with him in prayer, and he responds with his Word of hope and his promises and his forgiveness. When his children spend an hour with him on Sunday morning in an honest exchange of need and blessing, God is glorified.

Here's how the early church Father Irenaeus put it. It's a saying worth remembering: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." We are fully alive when we are in a deep exclusive loving relationship with God, opening ourselves to his Spirit so that we can become the people he wants us to be. If something stands in the way of us becoming fully alive in that sense, Jesus will not hesitate to overturn a few tables if that's what it takes to make it right.

Over the last days as I've prepared for this sermon, I've found myself asking myself a question, "I wonder what tables Jesus needs to turn over in my life?" Remember: the moneychangers and the merchants thought what they were doing was perfectly OK, good even! They had no idea their tables needed flipping. I wonder if there are blind spots like that in my temple?

I realize that Jesus' table turning isn't about me; he's clearing the temple because he's planning to fulfill the temple. When he talks about how he will rebuild the temple in three days, he's talking about how his death and resurrection will offer a new place to meet God. You won't have to come to Jerusalem anymore. He's the presence of the Father, he's the way the truth and the life, he's the new temple, and when we are united in him through belief and baptism, the church is a temple too. But as Paul says, through Jesus, our lives are temples of the Holy Spirit too. So, I wonder if there are tables that need flipping in my temple; things that seem just fine to me. Things that I've previously thought of as good things, but maybe are keeping me from a life wholeheartedly devoted to my Lord. Things that I think of as OK, but are maybe keeping me from flourishing.

Maybe you have some of those too. Maybe you've rationalized about your alcohol consumption (but wait, didn't Jesus turn water into wine?! It's all good.) Maybe you are spending too much time and energy thinking about your favorite sports team (but wait sports is fine! It's harmless). Maybe you're spending way too much time on your phone - your head dipped in reverent attention as you fall under its spell (but wait, that's how I keep up with my people). I don't know if these are problems for you, and I'm not sure if they're problems for me. But Jesus knows. So as we start the new year, I wonder if we dare to call upon the zeal of our Jealous God. I wonder if we have the courage to pray, "Lord Jesus come into my temple and in your mercy, start flipping."

©Rev. Peter Jonker