

Seven Days to Glory: Holy Week

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Monday: Robbers in the Narthex

Scripture

Mark 11:15–19

Main Idea

We explore the first “day to glory” through the implications of Jesus’ cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. We examine the relationship between economic justice and spiritual integrity, along with the challenge to consider the witness we provide by the conduct of our lives and the church’s business outside of worship.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The tension, ancient and contemporary, between Jesus’ joyous Sunday entry into Jerusalem and the temple’s cleaning on Monday.
2. The personal, ecclesial, and social implications of this prophetic critique of unjust economic practices by Jeremiah’s words and Jesus’ actions.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Table or bench, covered with purple cloth

Six candleholders and candles, matches or lighter

Paper and pens

Leader Prep

Consider the variety of Holy Week experiences that may be reflected in your group. Longtime church members from congregations that intentionally incorporate the flow of the church year into worship will have years of familiarity with Holy Week services and traditions. Those from non-liturgical traditions or newcomers to the church may have fewer associations with this season, outside of it being the week before Easter. Consider those potential differences as you plan this session: What do you presume folks will already know? What added background to Holy Week do you need to offer in Gather or Head?

The story of Jesus' cleansing of the temple provides a jarring initiation into this week—and into this study. As Dr. Monie reflects, it comes in stark contrast to the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” portrayal of our Lord quoted by Charles Wesley. It also comes in stark contrast to the not always stated, but often practiced proverb in some churches of “not rocking the boat”—either in relationship to the church's internal affairs or to the church's interactions with wider society. Jesus' anger and action, triggered by economic injustice and spiritual hypocrisy, invite us to reflect on what evokes our righteous anger and actions.

There is a cost to such action, then and now. This study of Holy Week begins with the temple's cleansing on Monday, and not just because of the sequence of days. This is the starting point because, in Mark's Gospel, it initiates the plot to kill Jesus and leads to the rest of the week's events.

Prayerfully keep all these things in mind and heart as you plan and lead this session. The very structure of these sessions in *Being Reformed* brings an important reminder to the purposes of this and coming sessions. Gathering reminds us we come into the presence of God in one another's company. Holy Week is inherently concerned with community, as are Jesus' actions in the temple. Head and Heart blend the dual emphasis upon information and formation. The observance of Holy Week relies upon both, even as Jesus' informed knowledge of prophetic Scripture issues in reforming the temple. Hands elevates the practicing of faith. Holy Week beckons more than pious attitudes and warmed hearts, even as Jesus translated prophetic tradition into prophetic action.

Prepare the meeting space by covering a table or bench with purple cloth and placing six candleholders with candles on the table to symbolize movement found throughout the six sessions in this study.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to share briefly one memory or one question they have of Holy Week.
- Light one of the candles to signify coming into the presence of God and your awareness of the community God has gathered.
- Offer in unison the prayer in the participant's book.

Head

- Read Mark 11:15–19. Note that the traditional title of this story is “Jesus Cleansing the Temple.” Ask: *If you wanted to relate this story to someone unfamiliar with it or unfamiliar with Holy Week, what other verbs might you substitute in place of cleanse? Why?*
- Talk about how the Gospel writers place this story at different junctures in their narratives, as identified by Dr. Monie. Ask: *What difference in emphases in these Gospels, and in our understanding of this story, result from those placements?*
- Consider how the confronting of economic injustice and spiritual hypocrisy at the temple on Monday might have transformed the thoughts and moods of the disciples and the crowd, from Sunday's parade of palms and hosannas.

Heart

- Divide the participants into pairs. Assign each group one of these identities: money changers and animal sellers; temple authorities; disciples; crowd. Have each group discuss how Jesus' action at the temple affected their financial selves, their spirituality, their authority, and their hopes and fears. Ask: *What would you feel toward Jesus? What action might you consider taking toward him?*
- Review “The Narthex” in the participant's book. How would you respond to Dr. Monie's question: “At what point does the church cease to be a house of prayer and become a den of robbers?” Ask: *How does this conversation connect with our congregation?*

- Consider the quote highlighted in the text box: “Greed is even more sinful when it happens in the house of God—or when Christians fail to reflect God’s justice and compassion toward others.” Distribute paper and pens. Have individuals write journal entries about where such greed or failure exists in their lives, in Christian community, and in the wider world today. Give participants an opportunity to share their entries in pairs. Ask: *How might Jesus confront such realities of economic injustice and spiritual hypocrisy in words or actions today?*

Hands

- Ask: *With what words and actions might we, as individuals and as a community of faith, confront realities of economic injustice and spiritual hypocrisy?*
- Recall how the story of the cleansing stands in stark contrast to the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Ask: *In what ways, liturgically and service-wise, can we hold in creative tension the joy of Christ’s presence with the call to prophetic witness?*
- Reflect on Dr. Monie’s point that the cleansing of the temple occurs in the area of the temple where Jews and non-Jews would have been present. Talk about the places of entry (in Dr. Monie’s imagery, *narthex*) where folks not normally part of your community may observe your congregation. Ask: *What might such folks observe about God or the life of faith from you, apart from crafted liturgies or prepared promotional materials?*

Depart

- Ask participants to identify, silently or in brief responses, what they will carry from this session. Encourage participants to consider what this passage might be inviting them to confront—within themselves or in the world or church—that stands in the way of faithfully following Jesus.
- Offer this or another prayer:

Holy God, loving Christ, powerful Spirit: help us as we journey toward Jerusalem in these stories, and as we journey toward faithfulness in our practice of discipleship in the way of Jesus. In whose name we pray. Amen.

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Monday: Robbers in the Narthex

Scripture

Mark 11:15–19 This surprising, even disturbing, scene of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple follows on the heels of his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Here we find an example of Jesus’ anger and indignation. To understand the events of Monday, we must understand the teachings of the Old Testament prophets underlying them.

Prayer

God, whose Word both comforts and challenges those who have ears to hear and hearts to understand: open us to what you have to say to us, even if your message challenges us and the church we love. We ask for your help to become the people you want us to be.

May your Word lead us into new paths of understanding and service.

May your Spirit open us to new directions in our lives.

May we live in the freedom of your Word and Spirit in all we do. Enlighten us, guide us, and give us your grace. Amen.

Introduction

We begin our exploration of the days of Holy Week on Monday with the cleansing of the temple. Comparing the Gospel accounts, you may be surprised to find differences about when Jesus’ encounter with the money changers occurred. John reports that it followed the wedding at Cana, which was the first act of his public ministry. In Matthew, it is suggested that Jesus entered the Court of the Gentiles on Palm Sunday after his triumphal entry. In Mark, the confrontation occurs on Monday, probably in the morning, after paying a brief visit to the temple on Sunday.

Remember the Gospel writers were working from a “catalog of memory,” their personal recollections of the various events and their time of occurrence. It might help to imagine they are each working from a stack of note cards, from which they drew their individual

recollections. Thus, the Bible includes four different accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, interpreted by four different authors. For the purposes of our Holy Week study, we accept Mark's chronology, that the cleansing of the temple occurred on Monday, the day after Passion/Palm Sunday.

When placed on the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus' angry scene in the Court of the Gentiles reflects a wrenching change of mood. Only yesterday, his disciples had thrilled at the festivity of the triumphal entry with its waving palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna!" Just yesterday, the followers of Jesus felt the thrill of thinking that just maybe their Lord would be a success, that he would be embraced by the acclaim and acceptance of the people. They hoped for a happy ending. But now, coming into the temple and overturning tables with a stern rebuke was a public relations disaster! Jesus was spending all his political capital. They were frightened, disappointed, and confused. Here was no "gentle Jesus, meek and mild,"¹ but an angry prophet, reacting to what he saw as dishonesty in the holy place.

Starting here, the story of Holy Week begins as a kind of *dark* tale. The road to glory begins in the shadows.

The Money Changers

The money changers were highly visible, one of the first things we would have noticed upon entering the temple. They were necessary. Every Jew was required to pay a temple tax of a half shekel, and tax day was the Passover. About a month before Passover, tax booths were set up in various towns and villages. But after a certain date, it could be paid only in the temple, and in a particular currency. Tyrian currency was preferred.

The function of the money changers was to exchange unacceptable currency for proper currency. A small handling fee would have been understandable. The fee was called *Qolbin*. The issue was not the fee itself; it was the amount. Some of the handlers saw an opportunity to gouge the people, charging what the traffic would bear. And at Passover time, the traffic bore plenty.

The selling of doves was another matter. For most visits to the temple, some kind of offering was expected. For example, doves were necessary when a woman came for purification after childbirth (which is why Mary and Joseph brought a couple of young pigeons with the baby Jesus, at the time of her purification in Luke 2:22). It

1. This phrase is taken from Charles Wesley's well-known hymn "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild."

was easy enough to buy animals for sacrifice outside the temple. But any animal offered for sacrifice had to be without blemish, so there were official animal inspectors at the courtyard gates. And it was not uncommon for inspectors to be “on the take.” They would reject animals purchased elsewhere, thereby forcing people to buy their sacrificial animals within the temple itself.

There would have been little problem if the prices inside the temple matched the prices outside the temple, but the price could double once people were inside the temple gates. That these abuses had gone on for years did not excuse the money changers. This financial abuse led to Jesus’ angry scene.

But there is more. To understand fully the scene in the temple, we must go to the prophet Jeremiah, who warned his people about the chasm that existed between their worship practices and their lack of justice and compassion. God had placed Jeremiah at the entrance to Solomon’s temple to warn worshipers that right worship practice is not a substitute for justice:

If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. . . . Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?

—Jeremiah 7:5–7, 11

Jesus’ use of the term “a den of robbers” hearkens back to Jeremiah. His concern is the same—the lack of connection between the people’s worship practices and their lack of justice and compassion.

The Court of the Gentiles

Remember this scene takes place in the Outer Court of the temple. The temple of Jerusalem was designed in a series of concentric courts. The Outer Court was for anyone, including non-Jews. Next came the Court of the Jews, where Gentiles couldn’t go, and then came the Court of the Priests, where the laity could not enter. At the

Jesus’ concern is the same—the lack of connection between the people’s worship practices and their lack of justice and compassion.

very center was the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could go, only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The cleansing of the temple took place in the Outer Court—the Court of the Gentiles. The Outer Court was the most inclusive place in the Jerusalem temple. Imagine people of different nationalities, in their varied garb, milling about in a bazaar-like atmosphere where money changers, guides, and priests could be seen in great numbers at Passover. It was the place where seekers came—those who might be exploring the idea of God, drawn out of curiosity. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus refers to the temple as “a house of prayer for all the nations.” For reasons that are unclear, Matthew omits the words “for all the nations.” But that is exactly what the Outer Court was—a place for everyone, including Gentiles and strangers.

Inside the Outer Court was the Court of Women, where Jewish women and men were allowed entrance—no non-Jews allowed. Then came the Court of the Priests, where the laity was excluded. Finally, the Holy of Holies, where God was believed to hold court. In fact, there were signs at the entrance to each succeeding court, defining who was allowed entrance and who was forbidden. The courts toward the center were most exclusive, while the ones farthest from the center were the most inclusive. It would be instructive to

The courts toward the center were most exclusive, while the ones farthest from the center were the most inclusive.

reflect on what parts of our churches are seen as exclusive rather than inclusive. Particularly if we have been church members for a long time, we might assume that our church is a welcoming place for strangers. You might ask visitors to your church whether they felt welcome and included.

It is likely that as Jesus entered the Outer Court, he was particularly sensitive to what was happening in that most inclusive of places. The scene in the Outer Court may have looked similar to modern Jerusalem, with people of many nationalities and ethnic backgrounds milling about. Perhaps he was angry at what the strangers and the seekers saw there. Could it be that rather than finding deep and genuine faith—rather than seeing people at prayer, in a living relationship with God—they saw a temple on the take? If so, it would be understandable that they would be turned off by the scene. It is ironic that all this exploitation was taking place in the only section of the temple where non-Jews could worship—that the

people who were most inconvenienced by the presence of the money changers were those who were furthest from the faith and least versed in its beliefs and practices. No wonder Jesus was angry!

The Narthex

So what do we make of this? What does this Monday scene say about Jesus—and about us?

Of course, it raises the question of commerce in the church. At what point does the church cease to be a house of prayer and become a den of robbers? As the pastor of an active church, my thoughts turn to all the announcements I've made in church about upcoming events: "Buy your tickets in the narthex!" We sell pansies in the fall, poinsettias at Christmas, and lilies at Easter. I can't count the number of statements I have made in worship to remind the saints about making a reservation, buying that devotional, or paying for a study guide. Who knows, we may even end up selling this participant's book in our worship space! Is our narthex a den of robbers? Not once have I gone over to the narthex and turned over any tables, nor have I cracked any whips. But this story does raise a question for me: Where is the line between honest commerce and the kind of activity that made Jesus angry?

I don't really think we have sold out to the marketplace, nor have I noticed any robbers in the narthex. The booths are there for the convenience of our people—and the same was true in the temple. What Jesus was angry about was the misuse, the corruption of the money changers making excessive profits off those who came to worship God. The problem was greed, and we hear a lot about greed these days—big company CEOs accepting bailout funds, then approving billions in bonuses for their cronies; supposed financial gurus making off with billions of trusting people's money. There is nothing wrong with commerce, but there is something inherently wrong with greed. And greed is even more sinful when it happens in the house of God—or when Christians fail to reflect God's justice and compassion toward others.

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It is no surprise that nowadays people are skeptical about churches. They have seen too many TV preachers selling their wares for a love

offering. A pastor friend recently admitted his amazement at members of his congregation who left the church because they were against organized religion, only to join a church where the pastor owns the place! People have good reason to be suspicious of the church.

Just as Jesus was sensitive to the seekers in the Outer Court, we need to be sensitive to the seekers in the narthex. When some soul walks into our church for the first time, testing the waters of faith, that person will be experiencing the ways in which what we believe squares with what we do. Will such people be welcome for who they are, their spiritual and relational needs valued? Do we greet them asking, “What can you do for us?” or “How can this church help you along your spiritual quest?” Few of us are selling doves at a marked-up price, but we would do well to ask ourselves what kind of message we are sending to the seekers in the narthex. That’s the question we ask on Monday.

Spiritual Practice

Spend time observing in a narthex or gathering place. Watch for the seekers. How are they welcomed—or are they ignored? Does your signage or map clearly indicate the way to the sanctuary or a Sunday school class? What is happening around them? What is your church doing to communicate care, respect, and hospitality?

Questions for Reflection

Does Jesus’ anger surprise you? Does your image of Jesus allow for anger, for righteous indignation, or, as quoted by Charles Wesley, only a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”?

A rabbi once wrote that some of us get angry too much, while others of us don’t get angry enough. When is it appropriate for us to express anger?

How might your church be more sensitive to the needs of the seekers in the narthex?