Dear Worshipers of the true God:

What if someone would come into our church and turn over the pews and separate those who were sincere in their worship from those who were only hypocrites? How would we react to that?

This astounding event of Jesus cleansing the temple drips with passion. That's what Jesus did one Passover at Jerusalem. We might react with this statement.

“Wow, Was Jesus Zealous for God’s House!”

I. Jesus recognized the purpose of the temple.

A. The temple culture of buying and selling that we see at this Passover was normal.

1. Jesus was known in the temple area. He had been there at twelve years old and had frequented the temple at least for the three major feasts of the Jews that came in the spring of the year (Deuteronomy 16): The Passover, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles.

2. The practice of buying and selling worship items in Jerusalem was an established practice that dated back to the time of Moses. Listen to the regulation that was set just before the Hebrews entered the Promised Land. “If that place [of worship] is too distant and you have been blessed by the Lord your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the Lord will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish” (Deuteronomy 14:24-26).

B. But just as any privilege and convenience, it had become corrupted and perverted. There were several problems with what Jesus experienced in Jerusalem during Passover.

1. First, Jesus found serious distractions from the sacred festival. The vendors were setting up their businesses in the Court of the Gentiles, invading the space set aside to worship the true God.

2. Then the noise and confusion detracted from the worship. It was like opening day at Middlesex County Fair. They set up their tables in strategic spots so the shoppers could see their wares. The cattle were bellowing. The sheep and goats were bleating. The pigeons and doves were cooing. The crowds were negotiating with the merchants.

3. The price gouging was obvious from Jesus label. He later called the vendors booths “a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13). They exploited the people like the money sharks who will give you an
advance on your paycheck for a high interest return. Many foreigners would come to Jerusalem and bring money instead of items for temple worship such as animals for sacrifice, incense, wine, salt and oil, etc. Plus everyone was to pay the half shekel for the annual temple tax. If they brought a shekel, they would need to exchange it for the half-shekel. Or if they brought foreign currency, they would need to change it into the acceptable Jewish coinage acceptable at the temple. Everything was pure chaos.

C. Jesus acted with uncharacteristic indignation.

1. He took a cord and made a whip out of it. The merchants were stunned. The cattle, sheep and goats ran in confusion. The doves and pigeons went flying. The coins jingled on the ground as he overturned the tables. Jesus was angry with a passion that we see only on a rare occasion.

2. But it was righteous wrath and he titles it as such, “Get out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!” (John 2:16). Connected with the angry words was a heart that loved not only the sacred building, but also each and every soul present at that place on that day.

3. It was one of those occasions that brought back something learned in Hebrew school. The disciples, even though they were humble fishermen, knew their Bibles. They recalled a memory verse from their Bar Mitzvah: “Zeal for your house will consume me” (Psalm 69:9). We could complete the passage from the Psalm 69, “and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.” It was prophesied in other places that things like this would happen during the time of the Messiah. The last prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures testifies to that: He will set as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

4. The disciples may have caught some of the implications of the Messianic fervor. But others did not. Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

Then Jesus made what seemed like an outlandish statement. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19).

The skeptics were taken back. “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days.”

Now comes a commentary by the human author of this Gospel, one of the disciples who was there and heard the conversation. “But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:21,22).

Transition: The disciples didn’t immediately make an application. Many there didn’t understand how to grow in their faith through this event. We don’t want to visit this scene without the intended impact. We want to leave this house of God with some change to our life and growth in our worship life.

II. We are to recognize the purpose of our house of worship.

A. The various witnesses to this cleansing of the temple were to learn something from Jesus.
1. Hopefully the vendors came to realize that God will to tolerate a misuse of his house. That temple was dedicated to the glory of God with 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and 12 male goats, one for each of the 12 tribes (Ezra 6:17). Then in 167 BC it was cleansed from desecration and rededicated to God. That was celebrated as Hanukkah. Maybe some of the vendors came to their senses and rededicated their lives to the true worship of God.

2. Then there were the Passover crowds. If only they could understand the lessons that were taught in that temple! The people of Israel were well educated in the Word of God. They needed a reminder that the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17). True worship is not in the animal sacrifices themselves, but in recognizing sin and looking to the One who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world. “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days” (2:21). How perfectly that statement would play out three years later! The statement would again come up during Jesus’ trial. Even Jesus’ enemies heard he would raise up the temple in three days. They also knew he predicted he would rise from the dead on the third day.

3. The disciples were also students of the situation. They would eventually become the apostles of the early church. They needed to gain the courage to speak the truth about sin. The law was and is a necessary message to destroy sinful self-righteousness and lead a soul to the comfort of the cross when peace is restored. There is a time to tear down, and a time to build up (Ecclesiastes 3:3).

B. Now it’s our turn. What should we be learning from the cleansing of the temple?

1. Jesus is no pushover. His anger lashes out against every sin. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the Lord (Hebrews 10:31). There is a delirium that a loving God would not punish anyone. The gossip you participated in yesterday – it’s punishable by death. The lustful thought that keeps looping in your head – it damns us to hell. The attitude that worship and word is not so important – it’s a thief that steals heaven from us. The proud look that came from despising others – it’s a threat for rejection on the Day of God’s Wrath.

2. But God’s wrath is necessary, but it is not to predominate. We let go of our pride before God and grasp onto the forgiveness that is ours through Jesus’ death and resurrection. This house of worship was dedicated for that purpose. We need to remember that this building was dedicated to the glory of God. When the Gospel is preached and taught in these walls, it brings glory to God. We will want to treasure the message that is proclaimed here. If our community really understood what we offer here, they would come in crowds. If in an instance their eyes were opened to the reality of heaven and hell, and then knew how Jesus opened up the gates of paradise for them, they would leave everything outside and flood into this sanctuary to hear the word.

3. A more direct application of Jesus’ actions is what we do here. We need to be careful about the practices we conduct in this “house of prayer.” We dare not make this church into a market to make money. How much more God-pleasing it is to gather free-will offerings that come from the heart. Everyone should give what he has decided in his heart to give, nor reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Conclusion:
We want to be good stewards of this temporary structure. Everything we do in this church is done in view of the resurrection from the dead and Judgment Day. It’s made of wood and cement and fabric with light fixtures etc. These will be destroyed on the last day. Lord, give us the wisdom to see things as they really are. God’s grace be with you always.   Amen.