

# Masterwork of the Messiah

## Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

### *Clear Out The Clutter*

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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**C**lutter. Admit it. We all have it to some degree. Some have organized clutter, while others have disorganized clutter ... but it is always present somewhere in your life if you are honest. What is the problem with it? It prohibits you from enjoying the function of the location where it takes up space.

A married couple of my parents when I grew up were great people and wonderful, devoted Americans. He, an Air Force Colonel, flew a Blackbird spy plane at the end of his amazing career. His wife had moved countless times with him literally all over the world, and she stuck by him on all those deployments to Vietnam and all the others clandestine ones he took in his high, fast-flying intelligence gathering aircraft.

One day as I visited them and commented on all of the unusual furniture they had in their home from all of their global tours, I couldn't help but rest my eyes on the ornately carved tea cart by my chair. "Where did you get this?" I asked. She replied, "We picked that up in Taiwan, but that is not the only one I have. You will find a bunch of them stored in our two car garage. Would you like to see them?" "Sure," I answered.

I'll never forget what happened as she opened the interior door into the garage. I immediately understood why they didn't ever park their cars inside the garage. Boxes, of all sizes and shapes, were stacked from the floor to the ceiling, and they had well-ordered aisles to walk down to either view or find things (What else would you expect from an Air Force officer?) Within a few minutes my tour guide showed me the location of the other five beautiful

tea carts. I kidded her that she should get rid of some of these items, but her quick reply let me know that wasn't ever going to happen. After all, this was all their supposedly important stuff. Right.

Now please don't get me wrong on this story. Yes, please don't get distracted thinking, "Boy, that sounds like my garage. I'm certainly never going to let Marty take a tour of my garage." To think like this would miss the spiritual import of the metaphor. What is the message? Well, first remember the premise that clutter keeps you from enjoying the location and function of where the clutter is located. Secondly, applied to Christ's clearing of the Temple in Jerusalem five days before His crucifixion, we readily see how sinful clutter can keep people from seeing who Jesus is and what He wants us to do.

Maybe your life has its share of sinful boxes stacked high all over the place. Yes, you have so much sordid stuff in your life you can't see who Jesus is and you certainly are at a loss for what He, the Lord of glory, desires from your life. Why some of those boxes might even be religious in nature, which to men look great and godly, but to God they look problematic because they are just rites you blindly or superstitiously observe without ever having a relationship with the living Savior, Jesus.

One thing is sure, though. God loves you enough to get your attention in a big, bold way. He wants to awaken you from your spiritual stupor, to help you clear away the carnal clutter so you can either secure a faith relationship with Him for the first time, or, at least, get back to that intimate relationship you once had with Him. To achieve these great goals we need look no further than Matthew 21:12-17. From this intense, instructive historical episode we encounter the following motif:

### Clearing The Clutter Underscores Jesus's Person & Plan (Matthew 21:12-17)

As we remove the sinful stuff piled high in this passage, we readily and clearly see Christ's person and plan.

#### Christ Is The Messiah/Prophet Who Rejects Profiteers (Matthew 21:12-13)

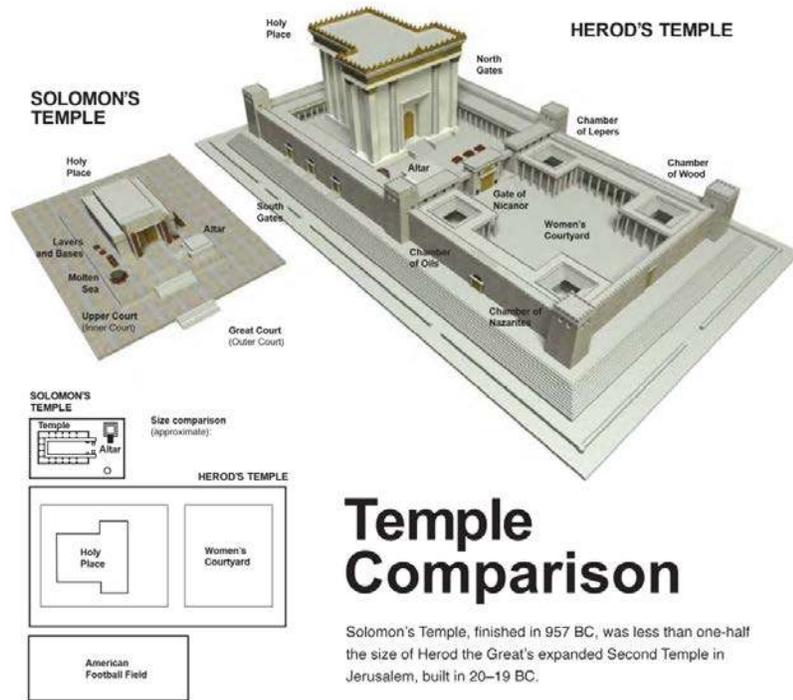
Matthew reminds us what happened on that Monday as Jesus, the one the crowds had just the day before joyously claimed to be the prophet (Matthew 21:11), now stepped into the prophetic role within the busy confines of the Temple in Jerusalem:

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. <sup>13</sup> And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' "

To properly understand these verses it is imperative for us to get a cognitive grasp of the Temple concept, layout, and function in Israel at the time of Jesus.

Herod's Temple, of Christ's time, was a massive, ornate, impressive structure which dwarfed Solomon's initial temple. Sitting on a leveled 25 acres, the entire complex including the Temple and the surrounding courtyard took up the equivalent of five football fields. The following picture depicts the Temple compound proper, located within the larger temple complex.

The Court of the Priests, located in the area of the altar, was reserved specifically for their sacrificial work with the slaying of appropriate animals. Only the priests could enter this area and the Holy Place, where they serviced the golden Menorah candelabra, the altar of incense, and the table of showbread. Of course, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies annually on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Just inside the Gate of Nicanor was the Court of the Israelites, a small strip of property reserved only for ritually pure males. Heading eastward through this gate, we step into the Women's Courtyard, an area reserved for Jewish women (and men), and moving eastward we walk through The Beautiful Gate and step into the outer court, and



just beyond this we walk onto the Court of the Gentiles. A small stone wall formed a protective perimeter separating the Jews from the Gentiles, and strategically placed signs on this wall warned Gentiles of immediate execution if they wandered into the Jewish worship sector.

There were multiple entry points to the Temple complex, but on this day of Christ's visit it is most likely He entered with other worshippers through the Huldah Gates ... named after the prophetess

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Looking north at the southern gates of the temple complex.

Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22) ..., located on the southern wall. Walking up these steps and through these massive gates led to subterranean stairs, allowing you to emerge into the Temple complex proper. Imagine the breath-taking view when you took your final step and caught your first glimpse of the white marbled and gold-trimmed Temple looming above you. Imagine the scores of people packed into this area for Passover. It must have been moving and exciting.

Since God commanded His people to bring the appropriate sacrifices to the Temple at the right times (Leviticus 1-7), it is not surprising to find money-changers converting pagan currency from the worshippers, who came from all over the known world, into the proper Tyrian temple shekel so they could pay their required temple tax (a half-shekel for Passover) as well as purchase much needed sacrifices. What was spiritually disturbing to Jesus, however, was where the money was exchanged and how it was exchanged. Instead of setting up shop outside the temple complex, these unscrupulous men, under the control of the High Priest, conducted their noisy business in the Court of the Gentiles, thus negatively impacting the worship of said Gentiles, and anyone else who might be in this area. Additionally, if you failed to purchase a sacrifice outside of the temple complex, the prices inside the walls were exorbitant. For example, if you were poor and desired to purchase a dove instead of a costly lamb (Leviticus 12:8; 14:21-22), you would pay, on average, 1,800 percent more inside the temple than outside. Can you say greed personified? (And you thought popcorn at the movies cost a lot). Based on this analysis it also not shocking that the name for the "money-changers" is from the Greek root *kollubistes* (κολλυβιστής), which has the negative connotation of "money clippers." They did a bang up job ripping off people who had merely come to worship God in the way He prescribed.

No wonder Jesus's righteous anger flared when He witnessed this unadulterated greed in the name of worship, coupled with the mistreatment of people. With the righteous zeal of a prophet (viz., Jeremiah's judgment at the Solomonic temple in Jeremiah 7 because of the wickedness permitted there, and Ezekiel's castigation for the idolatrous worship Israel had drug into the Temple in Ezekiel 8), and with the spirit of Psalm 69:9, which foretold how the Messiah would be focused on the love and respect of the Temple, Jesus flipped over their tables and chairs of the greedy businessmen, and, for the second time in His life (cf. John 2:13-25 where He began His ministry three years prior by clearing out the carnal clutter of the temple), He drove them from the temple precincts along with many of their customers

Don't you know that after the dust settled, after all the bleating sheep left, after all the commotion around the tables ceased, you could have heard a pin drop. Here stood one, lone man, the God-man, with God-given authority before the shocked and silent masses, including the self-righteous Pharisees and the Sadducees who had just watched their profit margin run out the literal doors. His next words were, well, powerful and prophecy fulfilling:

<sup>13</sup> And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,'

His first biblical quote was from Isaiah 56, a prophetic word from the eighth century B.C. regarding how God is concerned with preserving justice and righteousness in our dealings with people (v. 1), with keeping from profaning the Sabbath by evil activities (v. 2), and with making His temple a place where all people, of all nationalities are welcome to worship Him through the vehicle of prayer (vv. 3-7). In fact, the sole function of this temple was not primarily sacrifice, as important as that was for sinners who needed forgiveness, but prayer. Sacrifice would make the

sinner prepared to stand before God, but the main function of this temple was to provide an atmosphere where all peoples, Jew and Gentiles alike, could pray in God's presence.

This is the ancient prophecy Jesus opened with and all Jews knew what followed verse 7 which emphasized God's desire for this to be a place of prayer. The ensuing words were words of judgment against Israel's leaders who were more concerned with lining their pockets and maintaining their power than caring for the people:

<sup>9</sup> All you beasts of the field, come to devour, All you beasts in the forest. <sup>10</sup> His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; Sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. <sup>11</sup> Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory. <sup>12</sup> "Come," one says, "I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant."

So much for speaking with kind, tolerant, and softened words. God's righteous anger flared toward sinful greed and the pollution of prayer here, and it flared again, some eight hundred years later when Jesus, the divine Messiah, cleared the carnal clutter from the temple one more time. Some sins die hard, don't they?

Christ finished off His verbal rebuke with a quote from Jeremiah 7: 11:

"... but you have made it a den of thieves."

To read Jeremiah's prophetic disciplinary word against the Jews of His day, who had profaned the temple, is to see how once true worship within the nation was polluted then national judgment was not far behind.

Interestingly enough, the word for "den" is literally the word for a cave. The word for "thieves" (ληστής) is really the word for an insurrectionist, a terrorist, as it were, whose sole intent is robbing people and gaining money so they can overthrow the establishment. The cave motif merely spoke of where thieves of this nature typically hid out after they fleeced some unwary traveler. All of this is absolutely jaw-dropping. Jesus minced no words in condemning the spiritual leaders of living only to gouge the people instead of providing them an atmosphere of serenity where prayer to God could be engaged and enjoyed.

Greed is a terrible sin, is it not? And it is so easily hidden from view. Here it is hidden in the confines of the operation of the temple itself. Talk about a sin which can obstruct your view of who Jesus is? If you are so caught up with materialism and getting ahead of everyone else, chances are good that God will be the last thought on your mind. If you are enamored with money, and if gouging customers is what you are about, if getting instead of giving is your mantra, then you can bank on the fact that this carnal clutter will negatively impact your prayer life. How so? You'll be so caught up with the acquisition of cash you'll not have any time for prayer, nor will you see the practical need for it.

An old method for catching raccoons called for placing a piece of shiny foil inside a small barred box which was staked to the ground. When a raccoon reached inside the box and grabbed the foil his hand changed shape, making it impossible for him to pull his hand out of the

box. Unfortunately, many times the ol' raccoon would rather give up his freedom by greedily hanging onto the foil than to release his grip and walk free. Such is the nature of greed. It blinds you and leaves you a prisoner of your own appetite. Such was the spiritual condition of the Jewish leaders of the day, along with many Jewish businessmen they worked together in a mafia-like fashion. For them, the Court of the Gentiles, wasn't, as Wiersbe points out, for missionary business, but mercenary business.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, their insatiable greed had permanently blinded them from understanding the importance of prayer, and it also prohibited them from seeing who this prophet Jesus truly was.

In light of all of this, I have to head down two roads.

Road one concerns all of those among us who, like the money-changers and Pharisees, are blinded by and in love with greed so much so they can't wrap their minds around the person of Jesus. And don't just think greed is the only sin which the ol' Devil can use to keep you blind to the person and work of Jesus. He has many sins in his bag of tricks. Hopefully today God has flipped a few tables and chairs over in your life today so you can, for the first time, see His Son as the chosen Messiah who came to lead us into a loving, life-long faith relationship with the God-head. The question worth asking is clear: Will you give up your false god to embrace the true God?

Road two concerns Christ-followers who have so cluttered their lives with sinful pursuits they have lost sight of the importance of prayer. Yeah, you used to pray a lot, but that was years and a couple of jobs ago. Now your life is locked-on carnal clutter. Like the Pharisees you might walk around the temple precincts and look holy and together, but in reality you have allowed the godly garage of your life to be jam-packed with sinful boxes which stifle, and maybe even silence, your once robust prayer life. The sober reality is, however, you are now the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20), and if God wanted prayer to be a priority in the earthly temple, don't think for a moment He wants us to focus on something different.

Paul, the apostle, steers us in the right direction when he writes:

<sup>8</sup> I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; ... (1 Timothy 2).

<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, ... (1 Thessalonians 5).

So what about it? Will you clear away the clutter in your life through confession so you can get back into that vibrant prayer life you know God desires from you?

From verse 14, we gather a second concept about Jesus. This is most noteworthy. After the clutter of covetousness was cleared away we are given a glimpse into the heart of God.

## Christ Is The Messiah/Prophet Who Reaches The Pitiful (Matthew 21:14)

With the Court of the Gentiles pretty much emptier, we can now readily see the blind and the lame who probably didn't participate in the greedy business of money-changing, nor did they

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989):77.

have the ability to run out when Jesus cleared the temple. Matthew reminds us who sat there in the silence when the dust settled:

<sup>14</sup> Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

Jesus quickly moved from righteous anger to righteous love, love of the needy, downtrodden, and pitiful. This is, interestingly enough, the last time miracles of this nature are mentioned in the book of Matthew, and together they testify, one more time, of His absolute deity and fulfillment of the prophecies of the work of the Messiah:

The wilderness and the desert will be glad, and the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; like the crocus <sup>2</sup> It will blossom profusely and rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. <sup>3</sup> Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. <sup>4</sup> Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, but He will save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. <sup>6</sup> Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the Arabah (Isaiah 35).

Dr. John Martin, one of my former professors from Dallas Theological Seminary, offers this analysis of this great prophetic passage:

The description in this chapter of the land and the people is a highlight of the first half of the book. This is the desired millennial state for which the nation has longed since God first promised it to Abraham. This is the state that mankind constantly longs for—a utopia in which peace and fertility prevail. This condition will not come, however, till after God's judgment on the world (chap. 34). <sup>2</sup>

I couldn't agree more from my study of Isaiah. Here Isaiah looks forward to the eschatological time when the Messiah reigns in the Davidic kingdom (Isaiah 2; 9:6ff) over all the earth. You will readily note how the Messiah's presence will radically alter the earth, bringing vegetation and life to all parts of the earth, much like the earth enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. At this time, disease like blindness and lameness will be removed, and mankind will enjoy a body made, as we see from the New Testament, like that of the Messiah in His resurrection. What Jesus did, therefore, with the healing of these pitiful, needy people was demonstrate His prowess as the Messiah, and to give mankind a small, exciting taste of what is yet to come at His glorious Second Coming (Matthew 24-25).

This is all so instructive.

While the religious leaders and religiously minded businessmen were consumed with making as much money as they could from the sheep, they were blinded by their own greed. But

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, John A. "Isaiah." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, edited by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985, Vol. 1: 1085.

with the greedy people driven from the temple, we can see that Jesus was/is, in fact, the Messiah, by definition of His miraculous actions, and we can see His heart. He didn't prey upon people. He prayed for them. He didn't fleece the sheep. He tried to find them, spiritually speaking.

If you will but put your sin, be what it may, at His feet, you, who are spiritually blind and lame, will be given sight and new legs to walk with Him. You, however, must come to Him, as these blind and lame people did. They recognized their need, they realized that no one else could possibly help them, and they, like little children, trusted in Jesus, as the Messiah, to do what the Messiah does best: help and heal the needy. Don't think He will do any less for you. If you are spiritually blind and lame today know His heart is wide open to you.

For those who are believers, I must ask: Are you paying attention to the needy around you? Jesus did. Do you see the spiritually blind and seek to point them to the Messiah who gives blind people new eyes? Do you share with them how He gave you new eyes? When is the last time you shared your salvation story? When is the last time you, a former spiritual cripple, came up alongside another cripple and walked them toward the feet of the Messiah? Or, are you too caught up with your carnal clutter?

Finally, because Jesus unequivocally demonstrated His deity and messiahship in the healing of the blind and the lame, it's only natural for people, who are not blinded by the clutter of sin, like unbelief, to worship Him. We see this concept developed in the closing verses of this passage.

## Christ Is The Messiah/Prophet Who Receives Praise (Matthew 21:15-17)

Matthew unwarps this truth with this historical recollection:

<sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant <sup>16</sup> and said to Him, "Do you hear what these are saying?"

This was not the first time the religious leaders had witnessed Christ performing miracles of this nature. According to John 9, at an earlier date they hauled a blind man who had received new eyes from Jesus into their judgmental presence. Despite the firsthand evidence of his outright healing, which they couldn't refute, they still rejected Jesus outright. Now with countless former blind men walking around on their own power and with new eyes, coupled with people they had known for years as paralyzed beggars now walking and testifying of Jesus, they still rejected the incontrovertible evidences and increased their commitment to stark, unfounded, ungrounded unbelief.

Don't think for a minute that unbelief isn't alive and well. Its tentacles are still wrapped tightly around many hearts. Jim Spiegel reminds us of this sad reality in an article he wrote for *Christianity Today*.

In his article titled "Unreasonable Doubt," Jim Spiegel quotes two contemporary philosophers who have resisted belief in God for personal and not just intellectual reasons. Thomas Nagel, an atheist who authored a popular introduction to philosophy titled *What Does It All Mean?* wrote: "I want atheism to be true ... It isn't just that I don't believe in God, and, naturally, hope that I'm

right about my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."

Don't bother this man with the evidences of God's existence, and certainly don't bother him with any evidences about the person and work of Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. He's quite content with his "tenable," though intellectually tenuous (if he is honest), unbelief. Such were the religious leaders of Christ's day. They thought they could see when, in reality, they were the blind and lame ones. Is this your story?

Who are the ones who had eyesight that day to recognize Jesus as the Christ? The answer is simple: Innocent children. These children more readily and easily saw facts and made the right deductions and drew the right conclusions where spiritual truth was concerned. They stood by their parents, as I'm sure many of them had done countless times before, and watched as people they knew were blind and lame from prior exposure in the temple precincts immediately received new eyes and new legs. For these innocent, trusting ones the only logical result was to praise and worship Jesus as the long-awaited prophesied Messiah from the line of David. I guess it is true: heaven is made up of children, or at least people who come to embrace the proofs of who Jesus is with a simple, trusting child-like faith. Do you have that kind of faith yet?

Jesus responded to the self-righteous, religiously educated elites by sarcastically putting them in their place by quoting from Psalm 8:2:

And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?"

Ouch. Of course, they, of all people, had read Psalm 8:2, but they didn't really understand it. They could quote it but didn't understand its deeper meaning. What did it mean? Jesus showed them. God, the Father, has ordained that little children praise Him, and since Jesus is the divine Messiah, then the praise is well-placed for the expression of His miraculous power. With that Jesus departed to regroup and prepare for the next day of ministry among His unbelieving people. As Matthew states:

<sup>17</sup> Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.

Christ's final exchange leaves you with one question doesn't it? Have I come to Him with the faith of a child yet, or is my life still cluttered with my unfounded, ungrounded unbelief? I'd dare say it is a good time to do a little garage cleaning. Don't you agree? Some will need to ask Jesus to clear out their sin for the first time so they can become His children. Others, who already walk with Him, will need to clear out some clutter so they can get back to the spiritual disciplines which matter most. Either way, it's time for a little spring cleaning.