

Series: Invited to Ask

“A House of Prayer”

Mark 11:15-18

Over the past several months we have been studying what it means to pray, and we have been focusing specifically on our individual, personal prayer life. Throughout this study we have looked closely at the example and the many instructions of Jesus. We have been continually reminded that prayer is a wonderful privilege that is offered to every child of God. Because Jesus came to this earth, lived a sinless life, and gave His life on the cross in our place, He has made a way for all of us to have direct access to God. God has been so gracious to us that He has literally invited us to come to Him to relate Him and to ask of Him from anywhere, at any time, about anything. This is wonderful!

We are still focusing on the importance of prayer today, but we are now going to look at it a little differently. Prayer should clearly be a part of our personal relationship with the Lord, but it should also be a key characteristic of our corporate activity. When we come together as a body of believers, a church, prayer should be one of the distinguishing characteristics of who we are. The church that recognizes their need for God and dependence upon God will be a praying church. Sadly, though, this is not what most think of when they think of the Church in America. When someone looks for a church, they evaluate and ask questions like this: What kind of music do they have? How is their children’s ministry? Are the people friendly? What is their preacher like? Does he wear a suit and tie? What is their discipleship program like? How are they involved in the community? What do they give to missions? I am not suggesting that these things are all unimportant, but merely these are things that we tend to focus on. I wonder, though, what the Lord would say about these things. Is this His measurement for whether a church is effective or not? Or are these just cultural things that we have come to place importance on? What does God expect of His house? What does God desire of the Church? What is He looking for in our lives? I believe that we see the answer in Mark 11.

Show Text

If you were describing your house to someone, how would you describe it? Perhaps you would call it a Ranch style house or a Colonial house or a farmhouse. There are many ways that we can describe our physical dwellings. However, our personal description is not always accurate. ****ILL:** I remember when moving here three years ago we went through the process of purchasing a house. I remember watching the listings for a few months and reading the various descriptions. We made a list of all the houses that we wanted to see. Our realtor graciously showed us all the houses on our list. I quickly realized that not every house was “as advertised.” There were several that were explained perfectly, and they gave numerous images and proofs that the information they were giving was correct. However, I also learned that there were many that weren’t so clear. On the outside everything looked fine and dandy, but when we got inside and began to really evaluate, the truth told a very different story. There were moisture issues, a roof issue, a foundation issue, etc. The owners presented a beautiful picture, but beyond the surface there were major issues that

needed to be addressed. Those issues needed an expert, a master carpenter, to repair and restore. I wonder if Jesus would say the same in our lives. The Lord knows everything in our hearts and lives. He knows every thought and even the intentions of our heart. I wonder what He would say about our families and our homes. Are there things in our life that He wants to change? Are there areas in our family that need His touch and His work? And, what about the Church? Are there are areas that need to be addressed?

To answer these questions, we are going to study this passage of Scripture in Mark and see what Jesus was doing, why He did it, and what it means for us today. As we do, I believe that God will use it to reveal things to us so that we can know Him and grow in Him.

It will help us to have some background from this passage. It was the Jewish time of Passover. Being that He was a Jew, it was normal and even expected of Him that He, and all the Jews, would go to Jerusalem at this time to worship. During Passover, Jews would go to the temple to worship God by praising Him and by offering sacrifices as a reminder of His faithfulness in sparing them and blessing them. So, Jesus makes His way. When Jesus gets into the city He doesn't first start preaching to the masses. He doesn't first begin healing people. Instead, He first went to the temple where many people were gathered. I don't believe that Jesus was surprised by what He saw. I don't think that Jesus was taken off-guard but rather was directly led by God the Father because there were some serious things to be addressed. The temple was a special place that had been designed by God. God had given specific instructions on every detail of the building and had given direction on how He was to be worshiped. There were various aspects of the courtyard that were open to all. Even in a culture that largely looked down upon women and Gentiles, in God's great grace and plan He designed a place in the temple specifically for the Gentiles and a place for the women. But there in the temple there was one place that was set apart for only the high priest to enter. That place was called "The Holy of Holies." The Holy of Holies was separated from the common places of the temple by a large veil. It was there that the presence of God dwelled. It was there that He established a place to meet with Him and intercede for all the people. The high priest alone was allowed to go into this sacred place to meet with God. The Temple as a whole was clearly a special and sacred place because it was all about God, all from God, and all for God. So, here comes Jesus walking into the temple. When He arrived, He quickly saw the chaos of the situation. Remember, this is the temple. This is supposed to be the place for the people to worship God. This is to be the place where people were hearing the Word of God. This is to be the place where people are helped. Instead, Jesus sees everything but this. He sees the poor being taken advantage of. He sees the travelers/foreigners paying outrageous conversion rates because they had to pay their tithes in Hebrew currency. He sees that the sick and the lame weren't being helped. He sees that people were passing through the courtyards from one side of the temple to the other as a mere shortcut. The temple was vastly different than God desired it to be. What was Jesus to do? He did three things that I believe we need to hear this morning.

I. **Jesus's Clear Rebuke (vs. 15-16)**

Can you envision the scene? It was very dramatic. Now, this was not Jesus's normal activity. Up to this point in Jesus's public life and ministry, He had acted so calmly that He quietly slipped in and out of places. Whenever a crowd gathered around Him to proclaim Him king, He quietly

slipped away again. We often read of Him telling people not to reveal who He was or what He had done for them. However, this time when He enters Jerusalem it was much different. Jesus was still filled with grace and mercy, but He was no hypocrite. As God in flesh, He could not and would not turn a blind eye to the open sin of the people.

It is important for us to understand that this wasn't the first time that Jesus had to address this sort of behavior in this very temple. In **John 2:13-16** right as Jesus began His earthly ministry, right after the wedding in Cana, He had to address the inappropriate business in the temple. Now, only three years later, the temple was being defiled again by the "religious business" of the leaders. They had turned the temple, which was meant for worship, into a place where people could exchange money and buy animals to sacrifice. Jewish history shows that this was originally done with the good intentions of helping visitors from distant lands in their sacrifices to the Lord. However, the greedy, callous, hypocritical hearts of the temple leaders turned this into a lucrative business. The people selling things were charging ridiculous prices to take advantage of the people and make an extra dollar. ****ILL:** They turned the temple courtyards into a concession stand at a theme park. They knew that the people had nowhere else to go, so they charged an arm and a leg. All of this was done in the name of God. And shockingly, Jewish historians tell us that Annas, the high priest, was actually the overseer of this whole ordeal. He and his sons kept the whole enterprise going. What a slap in the face of God. There was incredible corruption.

So here goes Jesus into the temple. He begins to clean house. In my vivid imagination I envision that Jesus was more dramatic than a Liam Neeson movie. He goes in and immediately begins to drive out all the money changers. He begins to flip over the tables, shove the chairs, and make it known that this was a sin against God. Jesus's actions were intense and dramatic. I imagine that the response of the disciples was interesting. Thomas was probably saying, "Jesus, are you sure about this?" Peter was probably trying to find a way to deny that he knew Him. Matthew was probably trying to count all the money that had fallen to the floor. Andrew is probably searching for someone to tell about what has just happened. James and John are probably saying, "Woo Hoo! It's about time! Let's get 'em, Jesus!" And Simon the zealot has already drawn his sword. He's ready for a real battle. Jesus's actions would have caught everyone off guard, but please understand that these were not the actions of someone in a childish rage, but the actions of a Holy God who hates sin.

The word "rebuke" means "an admonition, scolding." None of us like to be rebuked. I don't like to be scolded or corrected, but I am thankful for the many times that it has occurred in my life. ****ILL:** Being at a gun range. My brother and I, grown men, were flat out scolded by the owner. It wasn't comfortable. I didn't like it, but we both acknowledged that the owner was doing it for our safety and for others around us. In fact, by the end of the day we were even laughing that it reminded us of much of our childhood. I didn't enjoy the rebuke, but it was needed. In the same way, I don't enjoy God's rebuke and the conviction that comes with it, but I need it. We need it. We don't naturally pursue the things of God. In fact, our hearts are desperately wicked, and they are prone to wander from the things of God. Our natural flesh wars against the things of God, struggling with thoughts and temptations that are quick to lead us astray. We need God's rebuke and conviction to show us where we have fallen and to prevent us from straying further.

There are many in our culture who deny the rebuke of the Lord. They say that God would never rebuke, but if that is true, then they are speaking of their own little “g” god and not the true God of heaven. There has been a movement gaining momentum in our community and in many others that says, “God is love.” If it stopped there I would agree because **1 John 4:8** tells us that He is. The argument goes on to say, “God is love, and love is God.” The problem with this argument is largely that God’s love is different from man’s love. God’s love is pure, sacrificial, unconditional, unwavering, without hypocrisy, never failing, etc. Man’s love, generally speaking, is impure, conditional, wavering, often failing, etc. When they say, “Love is God,” they are saying, “My emotions, my feelings, my desires are acceptable to God because this is my love.” The end result is that they do whatever is right in their own eyes and reject God’s Word and will because God is no longer God. In their lives, their love and their feelings are the authority and their god.

I am thankful that God is not silent about the things in my life that need to change. **Max Lucado** summarized it well saying, “God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus.” God convicts us and molds us to be more and more like Christ. He doesn’t ignore what needs to be addressed. We see this clearly in the life of Jesus, Who always addressed the truth with people. He did so in love, but He didn’t ignore the truth. He actually exposed it and called for change. In **John 4**, to the woman at the well He asked to speak with her husband and then exposed the fact that she had been married five times and the man she was now living with wasn’t even her husband. Jesus went on to offer her living water that would satisfy her soul. He even told her how she could be saved and rescued from her sin, but He first addressed that sin. In **Matthew 19** the rich young ruler approached Jesus and asked, “What good thing can I do to have eternal life?” Jesus didn’t say, “Well, thank you so much. What a nice guy. You know, just by the desire of your heart it will be granted to you. You can do what you want, and everything will be ok.” Jesus said, “If you wish to be made right with God, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, come and follow Me.” Why did Jesus say this? Because Jesus knew that money and possessions had become this man’s god. Jesus corrected this and offered grace. In **John 8** when the adulterous woman was caught in the very act, the self-righteous leaders brought her to Jesus and said, “The Law says to stone her, what do You say?” Jesus stooped down and wrote in the ground and said, “Let him without sin cast the first stone.” One by one the accusers left the scene. Finally, Jesus sat up and looked at the woman and asked, “Where are you accusers?” She said, “They are all gone.” Jesus then said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” In other words, He addressed her sin. He acknowledged it was wrong and He called for change. In each of these occasions Jesus confronted and rebuked the sin. In one of the cases the individual was repentant and changed. In one of the cases we don’t really know what happened. In one of the cases, we are told that the individual left grieving because he had many possessions and didn’t want to change. Make no mistake about it, Jesus confronted the sin.

In order for change to happen, we must first be convicted, and at times, even rebuked. What was Jesus doing in **Mark 11**? He was cleansing the temple. Jesus wants to do the same in our church. He wants to cleanse. He wants to do the same in our lives. He will reveal those things that do not honor Him, and He will turn them over. Cleansing first starts with a sting of conviction and rebuke.
****ILL:** Me getting bit by dog. The sting, then the shot, etc. I didn’t like it at the time, but it was

exactly what I needed for it to heal. None of us enjoy conviction, but it is in the conviction that God is exposing and dealing with the very things that need to be dealt with.

II. Jesus's Convicting Reminder (vs. 17)

As you can imagine, Jesus now has the attention of every person in the room. All eyes are on Jesus in this moment. All ears are ready to hear an explanation for His drastic action. I'm sure that many people were looking on to discover what all the commotion was about. I'm sure that many were wanting an explanation – "Who does this guy think He is that He can come in here and do this?" Then, Jesus opens His mouth and begins to speak. As He did, He spoke of three specific things:

A. The Exaltation of the Word of God – "*Is it not written*"

Notice that when Jesus began to speak, He didn't begin like a prosecuting attorney. He didn't begin by pointing the finger. He didn't begin with a long list of accusations or indictments. He began with a powerful question. He asked, "Is it not written?" Please understand what Jesus was doing. He was pointing them back to the Word of God. Somehow and some way, along the way, the people had become comfortable with a religion that wasn't pleasing to God. The Jewish high priest and his cronies had discovered a way to personally profit from those who came to the temple to worship God. The entire Sanhedrin court of the temple was set up to protect this, but nobody seems to care that this was happening. And the common worshipers felt powerless to change this. Jesus immediately pointed everyone to what was written – that is what God had directed about His temple. In **Isaiah 56:7b** over 600 years before the birth of Christ, God said, "Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." God spoke through Isaiah to show us that the temple was to be a place of worship for all peoples so that all can come to pray to God. By the time Jesus came on the scene, it had been turned into a place of business and money-making schemes. Jesus rebukes that and says, "It's not about what you think. It's not about what you feel. It's not about what you want. It's certainly not about man. It's about what God says." Please understand that Jesus is exalting the Word of God over the will and want of man. Friend, many of us need to get back to what the Word of God says. It is so easy for us to make our worship about us, but that is a dangerous path. Our direction for ministry and for life should not be based upon the cultural demands, the popular trends, or even the counsel of the so-called experts. Our direction for life and ministry must be based upon the Word of God. We must get back to, "What does the Bible say?" Without God's Word as our authority we are likely to either become unbiblical or extrabiblical in our actions, and both are wrong. We become unbiblical when we say, "Well, I don't believe the Bible really means that. It means what I want it to mean." We become extrabiblical when we say, "The Bible is too limiting. My experiences are the authority." Jesus says, "It is written," and points us all back to the authority of the Word of God. What about you this morning? Does God's Word have authority in your life? Are you adjusting your life to what God's Word says or are you trying to adjust the Bible to fit what you say? If our "house" is going to be right before God, we must get back to what the Word of God says.

B. The Explanation of the Will of God – “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations*”

It is this point that is still convicting to me today. If I were to ask you about the things you most look for in a church, I imagine that I would get a whole list of things that were and are important to you. The temple was the place that was designated as a specific place to come to worship God. In other words, it was designed by Him and for Him. It is His house. When Jesus said, “My house shall be called”, He was claiming to be God in flesh. He was claiming to have the authority to define what was important about this house. What is most important is that we value the things that are important to the Lord. We shouldn’t get caught up in our wants and our preferences. We should get caught up in what was important to Jesus. There are many elements of a place of worship that get our attention – such as the music, the sermon, etc. To be clear, each of these have their place. In fact, after Jesus cleansed the temple He immediately allowed and modeled three specific things. Once the religious crowd was rebuked, **the temple was immediately filled with people, praises, and preaching.** It was **filled with people** being helped as the sick and the lame were brought to Him for healing. There in the outer courtyard of the temple Jesus took time to help and minister to each one that was brought to Him. It was **filled with praises** as the people gave praise to God for His salvation. It was **filled with preaching** as Jesus began to teach the people about the Kingdom of God. In fact, **Luke 19:48b** tells us that “all the people were hanging on to every word He said.” But when Jesus was summarizing the will of God concerning this house, He described it in one word. It shall be called a house of Preaching? Singing? Giving? Serving? Praising? Fellowship? Training? All of these are important, but that’s not what He said. He said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.”

As a Church in America, we need to hear this today. It is amazing how quickly we have lost sight of the value of prayer. In the average church, a pastor can plan a concert and the place will be packed. A pastor can plan a potluck dinner and people come from all over to be there. Special services can be promoted, and many will come. Yet, when a time for intentional prayer is announced it just doesn’t seem to strike us. It isn’t as appealing. It is widely known among pastors that the least attended events of the year are usually prayer meetings, but according to Jesus’s words, it shouldn’t be this way. Crosslink Community Church, I believe this morning that **prayer should not merely be a part of what we do and who we are. It must be the heart of what we do and who we are.** Prayer is a statement of our dependence upon God. We need Him. We want Him. We desire His will in our lives. We seek for Him to be glorified in all things. It is in prayer that we acknowledge that we can do nothing without Him. Prayer shouldn’t be simply an action that occurs during the transitions of a worship service, or what takes place only in times of a crisis and emergency. It should be the natural outpouring of our love for God, our devotion to Him, and our dependence on Him. Yes, we can pray individually, but as we will see in the coming weeks, it is a powerful thing when we pray together, corporately, as the body of Christ. **Pastor John Onwuchekwa** said it this way, “We taste God’s glory in a unique way as we participate together in corporate worship through prayer.” This is what

many of us experienced this past Wednesday when we gathered for our Night of Prayer to worship and to pray and intercede together. God moved in a mighty way. It was awesome, not because it was programmed or because we had a sermon or because Pastor Scott has long hair like Jesus. ☺ It was incredible because of how the Holy Spirit moved and orchestrated the time. It was amazing because of how we were unified together as we prayed and interceded.

The will of God is that His house would be a house of prayer for all the nations. I do believe that we should pray for all the peoples and all the nations of the world - we will learn more about that in the coming days – but, this isn't exactly what Jesus was referring to. He was explaining that anyone and everyone was welcome to come to Him to pray. Remember I said earlier that the temple had various sections? While the Jewish leaders often demeaned and devalued others, God showed His plan and His passion for all when giving instructions for the temple. He gave direction about a place for the Gentiles and a place for the women. These were designed to be places where they could worship the true God of heaven. The Women's Court was a place for the ladies to gather to worship. The Court of the Gentiles was a place where they could come to ask questions and learn about the God of Israel. What set Israel apart from every nation in the world was their God. There was much they didn't know about Him. So, it was here that they could learn and that they, too, could worship Him. But, sadly, as most scholars today point out, it was in this very courtyard of the temple that the Jewish leaders were selling all the sacrifices and taking advantage of the people. In other words, in the very place that they should have been ministering and doing missionary work, they were instead taking advantage of people and turning their attention away from the things of God. Can you imagine what it was like? Many well-intentioned Gentiles would come to Jerusalem to learn about God so that they might worship Him and pray to Him. However, they would arrive only to find the professing "Godly people" practicing a scheme to make money and take advantage of the people. I'm sure many were disgusted by what they experienced. It's amazing how we see glimpses of this today. God's will, though, still has not changed. God desires this place to be a place of prayer where all – Jew, Gentile, man, woman, child – can pray to Him.

C. The Examination of the Worship of God – “*But you have made it a robbers' den*”

Jesus was very clear. God intended for the temple to be a house of prayer, but their actions were turning it into something different. God had a clear purpose for His house, but the religious leaders were manipulating God's house for their own selfish gains. In other words, they weren't concerned that this house belonged to God or that it was about His glory. They were only interested in what they could gain from it. When Jesus made this statement, He was actually quoting from Jeremiah 7:11. This passage was given to the Israelites 600 years before the birth of Jesus. In Jeremiah's day the people were living however they wanted to live and thinking they could just go to the temple and everything would be ok. Listen to the words in their context, **Jeremiah 7:9-11**. “ ‘Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which

is called by My name and say, “We are delivered!” – that you may do all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? (Then God gives the sobering reminder) Behold, I, even I, have seen it,’ declares the Lord.” In other words, the people were living however they wanted to live and then they would go to the temple and assume that everything was alright. Jesus was saying the same thing that Jeremiah had said hundreds of years earlier. The Jews were treating the temple and its rituals like a magic charm. They thought that they would be safe, even in their sins, as long as they went through the motions. No matter how they lived, they could just go to the temple and go through the motions and feel good about it. As long as they went to church, they thought they were alright. But because their hearts weren’t right with God, even their worship was defiled. They were no longer seeking to bring glory to God, but instead were seeking their own personal good. As a result, this place for prayer and worship became a den of thieves. This phrase in that culture referred to a place where thieves would go to hide and cover-up their identity. Jesus was saying, “You are using God’s house and your outward religion to hide behind the mask and cover up what’s really going on.” I call this the examination of the worship of God because I believe that’s what Jesus was doing. He was challenging them to examine the evidence and look at the truth. I believe that’s what He is doing today. He is calling us to examine our worship. What does it reveal about us? What were your motives in coming here today? What does it reveal about our relationship with God? Is this a place for you to put on a mask and act a certain way? Is this a place for you to come to get what you want? Is this a place that is being evaluated based upon your likes and preferences? Or is this a place where you come to worship the Lord, to serve Him, to give Him the glory, to confess your dependence on Him? Let’s examine ourselves.

III. Jesus’s Call for Repentance (vs. 18)

You may be wondering, “Where is this in the text?” As you can tell, it is not directly listed in this verse or even in this passage. It is listed in the background of this passage. Remember, this was not the first time that Jesus had to confront the sin and hypocrisy of the religious leaders. He had addressed this with them three years earlier in John 2:13-16. Those Scriptures show us repentance in two primary ways.

A. Turn Away from Your Sin

To repent means that there is a change of mind and direction. It means that you say the same thing about sin as God does. To repent means that you don’t argue away your sin or justify and excuse it. It literally means that you have a change of mind and agree with God about your sin, thus turning away from it. When Jesus addressed this very issue in the temple in **John 2:16b** He literally commanded, “Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business.” In other words, He was saying, “Put these things away from you. Turn away from them. Stop acting in this way.” As we examine our lives and things come to mind, this is what Jesus is calling us to do, but there’s a powerful fact that is revealed in the verses that follow the account in John 2.

B. Trust Jesus to Save You from Your Sin

The powerful fact that we must not miss is that we can't turn from our sin on our own. The Gospel wouldn't be powerful if it was all about what we can do. The very fact that Jesus had to deal with this again just three years later shows us that the leaders didn't get it. They may have outwardly conformed for a short period of time. They may have changed their ways for a season, but they were not truly changed because they went right back to their same old ways. We can't hear Jesus's command in John 2 to put these things away and neglect to point out that right after that Jesus foretold His death and resurrection and then in the very next chapter, **John 3:16-18** He declared, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." Which brings me back to Mark 11. The only way that we can be changed is to trust in Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior. When we turn away from our sin and turn to Him in faith, instantly we are forgiven, we are rescued, and we experience new life in us. In Mark 11 Jesus has spoken the truth. Little did they know, He was giving them one last opportunity to believe and repent. In **verse 18a** we see the sad summary, "The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him." They refused the opportunity. Their time of Judgment was soon to come because they had rejected the only One who could save them. In fact, Jesus immediately after this gave one other illustration to reveal that their opportunity to repent was coming to a close.

Today, we each have the opportunity to examine our lives, to believe in Jesus, and to repent. God wants a house of prayer. This is what He desires for this church. This is what He desires in our homes. This is what He desires in each life. Let's be faithful to answer His call.