

You've probably had an experience like this. In high school my Spanish teacher arranged a trip to Spain and several of my friends and I went. Of course it was strange and kind of scary being in a foreign country, and I quickly learned that I really hadn't learned all that much Spanish at all. Still, I tried not to embarrass myself too much, but not my one friend. There were lots of amazing things to see and when we were walking down a street he'd stretch out his hand and point and proclaim, "Look at that!" I became pretty conscious of the looks and snickers of the locals towards us. I said to him a few times, "Can't you just try to blend in? We look like idiots."

This thought always comes to mind when I read about Jesus taking his band of disciples to the temple in Jerusalem. Apparently many of them had never been to Jerusalem, and they were definitely acting like tourists! In Mark 13 the disciples remark, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"

Indeed the temple was an impressive sight. Originally built in the 10th century BC by King Solomon it was probably the largest building in the nation; although by today's standards it wasn't impressive at all. Our current sanctuary is only slightly smaller than the original temple. The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and destroyed this temple early in the 6th century BC. Then late in the 6th century the Jews rebuilt it on the same spot. This second temple was probably also impressive to the Jews but not all that impressive compared to the temples of the Greeks or Romans. Then, along comes King Herod the Great. He embarks on a massive expansion and glorification project that took decades. Now don't get the idea that Herod was a particularly faith-filled guy. No, he was basically a usurper to the throne. Glorifying the temple was a way to win the Jews' favor. By Jesus' time the temple had been under construction for forty years. It had become a sprawling complex of buildings, courtyards, walls, and porches. To a fisherman coming from Galilee it had to be awe-inspiring: How did they move those giant rocks!?! Decorations and wall hangings and gold plate were everywhere.

And in response to all this awe-inspiring earthly glory Jesus has one sentence, "As for these things that you see, the

days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Indeed forty years later the Romans totally destroyed it, and it's never been rebuilt.

Jesus uses the topic of the destruction of the temple to teach some really important things - things that many Christians in our nation today would do well to learn.

How many times have you encountered people who are predicting the end of the world? Plenty of times - perhaps not as often as I do because when people find out I'm a pastor they want to get my opinions. And this is what I tell them. What does Jesus actually say? Here are his words again, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

In other words, what is Jesus saying? He's saying that a sure way to know that someone is a fraud is if they say, "I am he!" Or, "The time is near!" What do you reply to such people? You say, "Read Luke 21. It says that anyone who focuses on these things is wrong."

What should we focus on instead? Again, Jesus gives us an answer. We read on, "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify." And you can read onward in your Bibles.

The key here is testifying. Jesus shows that all times and places are opportunities to testify - even in the midst of persecution and imprisonment. And what is the testimony we are to give? Jesus doesn't say it here, but I think we can pretty safely connect the dots to the testimony that he gives. We find it in many places and there are many variations, but since we are in Luke's gospel, let's stay in Luke for the answer. Just before the ascension Jesus gives his disciples this mission:

Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name to all nations.

That is our testimony. That is our mission. That is what Jesus wants us to do. That is what we are made to do. Now, we've talked about this before. Does that mean go down to the corner of Maple Ave. and Main St. and shout out that message with a bullhorn to the cars that are passing by? How effective do you think that will be? Well, do it often enough and you may end up in jail. I suppose you could testify there too.

No, that's not what Jesus had in mind, although he does want testifying to be at the front of our minds. Look, Jesus did not come to build the church. And Jesus did not come to create traditions or institutions or anything like that. Jesus came to change the world by giving his life so that forgiveness of sins can come through him. Remember, for Jews in Jesus' day forgiveness was not something you got by going to the synagogue each Sabbath and asking for it. Forgiveness came by offering sacrifices at the temple; that magnificent edifice in Jerusalem that we started with. Forgiveness didn't come by asking for it.

It required sacrifice and right ritual in the right place to be accomplished.

And their understanding of sin was a bit different too. Today we think of sin as being the bad or naughty things that we do. Or we may include selfishness, laziness, greed, false gods and the like. All of these things are indeed sins, but what is at the root of all sin? Brokenness from God. Think of it this way. Sin is being locked out in the cold and hungry by yourself when you desperately want to come inside where it is warm and eat with family and friends who like you. Forgiveness is when you are allowed in.

The testimony of repentance and forgiveness that we proclaim to all people in all places is that the door is open and you're invited in! It's just that simple.

What makes it so hard is that people would rather devote their lives to having the substitutes. Prestige, power, looks and money are so enticing. They cleverly give the illusion of being allowed in to the meal. But those who do manage to eat at that table discover that the people they are eating with are

frauds. Caught in a similar trap for acceptance they throw away their lives on shallow misguided satisfaction.

Though the gratification and sense of wholeness is seldom instant, eating at God's table is long lasting and real. Proclaiming repentance, and also embodying it when we worship and commune with others, is deep and real nourishment.

Everyone on this earth wants to feel good about themselves. They want to feel welcome, accepted, and whole. God makes that into reality. And you know that well, because you too have been made welcome, acceptable and well; not by your own goodness, but by God's goodness.

Though temples come and go, and wars happen, and all sorts of calamities you proclaim this same testimony: God has made me whole. You too can have wholeness in Him. Amen