

# The Crimes of Jesus

March 22, 2019



There are many crimes committed each day. The FBI reports that a property crime is reported every three seconds in the US, and a violent crime every twenty-two seconds. The most common are:

- Theft far outweighs any other crime, making up almost sixty percent of all reported crimes.
- Burglary (breaking and entering a house).
- Motor vehicle theft. More than a million cars are stolen in the US every year.
- Aggravated assault (causing serious bodily injury).
- Robbery (theft performed directly on a person).

There are crimes recorded in the New Testament. Some are associated with Jesus. The debate today is whether Jesus is the Son of God or only a good man. Few now think of Jesus as a bad man, but He died a condemned criminal. To His enemies, He was a bad man (John 7:12).

Jesus' "crimes" were not property theft or assault. They were not wicked deed but good things. In effect, He was killed for being too holy. Religious people, not atheists, murdered Jesus. Of course, He was condemned in a Roman court and executed on a Roman cross for treason (claiming to be a king), but this was just the cover story. He died for other reasons. What were Jesus' crimes?

**Jesus is unholy—He socializes with sinners.**

Jesus and His disciples once ate at Matthew Levi's house. This former tax collector (publican) invited "many tax collectors and sinners" to the meal. When the scribes and Pharisees saw

Him eat with those they considered to be unclean, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mark 2:15–17).

Levi's feast has been called the festival of a renewed soul. It celebrated the most important event in his life and showed joy, gratitude, and worship. Perhaps it was a classy way to part ways with his former friends (cf. 1 Kings 19:21). It was also likely held to introduce to Christ his sinful companions who also needed mercy.

These tax collectors are called sinners because they commonly were—the tax office lent itself to corruption, oppression, bribes, extortion, and false accusation (Luke 3:12–13). A faithful fair-dealing tax collector was so rare, that one publican named Sabinus who kept a clean reputation was honored with a tomb with the inscription, "Here lies an honest publican" (*Kalōs telōnēsanti*). Publicans were also called sinners because the Jews hated them. Their office represented Israel's oppression.

Jesus' crime was socializing with sinners. "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34). The Pharisees thought publicans were to be hated; Jesus thought they were to be pitied. They were sick and needed a physician; they were sinners and needed a Savior. The Pharisees thought a righteous person should be separated from publicans (Isaiah 65:5). Jesus said, "No, My commission requires Me to interact with them. If the world were righteous, there would be no reason for Me to come. I would not need to preach repentance nor purchase remission." Tax collectors were willing to admit sin and happy to be invited to repent (Isaiah 1:18; 55:7). Therefore, they were ahead of the Pharisees who were guilty of different sins but unwilling

to admit it (Matthew 21:31–32; Luke 15:1–7, 29–30; 18:11). Solomon said that there is more hope for a fool than for a man who is wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:12).

Jesus “crime” was a credit.

## **Jesus does not keep tradition—He heals on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10).**

“Therefore some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.’ Others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them” (John 9:16; cf. Luke 13:14; John 5:10). Religious leaders hated Jesus because He broke their Sabbath “blue laws.” (Years ago, most US states had “blue laws” that required businesses to be closed on Sundays. Jewish Sabbath tradition forbade Saturday activity.)

Jesus once went into a synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand. No one in that synagogue would have traded places with this disabled man. According to Jerome, the Hebrew version of Matthew here has, “Lord, I am a bricklayer, and have got my living by my labor; I beseech thee, O Jesus, restore me the use of my hand, that I may not be obliged to beg my bread.”

The Pharisees suspected what Jesus would do and asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” They taught that unless a life was endangered, doctors could do no medicinal operations on the Sabbath. This was disputed among them, but one would think it past dispute that a prophet who represented God could use divine power to heal on a Sabbath.

They thought they had Jesus either way. If He said it was lawful, they would accuse Him of violating the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8). If He said it was unlawful, they would accuse Him of inconsistency since He had just defended His disciples for plucking corn on the Sabbath.

Jesus said, "What man is there among you, who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not lay hold on it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11–12).

Does Christ care about sheep? Yes. "A righteous man regards the life of his animal" (Proverbs 12:10). Jesus preserves and provides for beasts (1 Corinthians 9:9–10), but He shows the proper valuation assigned to men over animals. We should be more concerned with the education, preservation, and supply of people than their horses and dogs. The poor are more important than the animals.

"Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other" (Matthew 12:9–13). He did not allow criticism to keep Him from helping those who needed Him.

## **Jesus upsets the status quo—He twice cleansed the temple (John 2:13–17; Matthew 21:12).**

When pilgrims arrived for Passover at the temple, the first thing they saw was sellers of all possible wares. The outer court was covered with pens for sheep and oxen.

No doubt this had offended Jesus for years. All healthy Jewish males were required to attend the three major feasts of the Jews (Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost); Jesus had come to at least eighteen Passovers before (cf. Luke 2:41). His Father's house had been invaded by a troop of mercenaries and hucksters. He was about to clean house.

With a small cord, Jesus drove out the sheep and oxen, and those that sold them. (Doubtless, He did not violently use the scourge on people but only on the livestock.) He never used

force to drive anyone into the temple.

He poured out the changers' money (*kerma*, the small money), showing contempt for it. They changed foreign currency into Hebrew coins for the annual half-shekel tax (Exodus 30:12–13). This was a necessary service, but moneychangers were notorious usurers and tricksters. In overthrowing the tables, Jesus showed displeasure with making religion a matter of worldly gain.

He said to those who sold doves (sacrifices poor people bought), "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" God's temple must not be made a pigeon-house, a barn, or a bank.

The purpose of these animals and coins was for sacrifice and offerings. It was for the convenience of those who came a distance and could not bring animals and did not use Jewish money. This relates back a provision of the law: "If the journey is too long . . . then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the Lord your God chooses" (Deuteronomy 14:24–26).

Although to buy and sell is lawful, there is a time and place. The key to understanding this event is that it was "in the temple." It occurred in the large court of the Gentiles, which was considered a part of the temple. Mount Moriah's stones were common stones until they were consecrated for God's house. Making money was necessary to living but not on the Sabbath. Sheep, oxen, and doves were common commodities that could be bought and exchanged outside the temple. It was bringing these things into the sacred area that made this activity wrong. Merchandise is good in the market but not in the temple.

This practice interfered with the worship of the Gentiles who were distracted by the noise of a market. Earlier the market had been by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2), but the chief

priests allowed the move into the temple to increase their profits. The moneychangers augmented the priests' revenue out of their unlawful gains. The priests charged expensive rent for setting up there as well as fees for certifying beasts to be without blemish (cf. 1 Timothy 6:5, 10). The priests themselves sold most of the doves.

When Jesus drove out the sheep and oxen, the owners could follow them; when He poured out the money, they could pick it up; however, if he had turned the doves loose, they would have been lost. Therefore He said, "Take these things away!" Matthew Henry notes, "Discretion must always govern our zeal, that we do nothing unbecoming ourselves, or mischievous to others."

Jesus cleansed the temple without the assistance of any disciples. He did it without the resistance of any enemies. Neither the market-people nor the chief priests that gave them their licenses resisted Him. What made them flee when they outnumbered Him? How could one man affect such a clearance—especially an unknown Galilean with no formal authority, priestly power, or large following? Surely it was at the presence of the Lord (cf. Psalm 114:5, 7; John 18:6), but perhaps its suddenness surprised them, and their guilty consciences took away their courage. A reformer had arrived.

Jesus cleansed the temple a second time near the end of His ministry (Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15; Luke 19:45–46). Hieron thought, "Of all Christ's wonderful works, this appears to me the most wonderful."

"They hated Me without a cause" (John 15:25; cf. Psalm 69:4).

R.C. Sproul wrote, "In the calculus of evil the only character faring worse than a Nazi is the Pharisee. These were the original black hats. In each of the gospel accounts they are the no-accounts, the foil of Jesus Himself."

The Jewish leaders hated Jesus because He threatened their

security, prestige, and income. The Pharisees hated Jesus not only because He made them look bad to the people, but also because He made them look bad to Rome. He was ruining everything they had worked for. He would get people killed. The Pharisees had brokered an uneasy peace between Rome and the Jews. Caiaphas showed what was on their mind when he feared that the whole nation perish (cf. John 11:50).

Jesus' popularity, His talk of the kingdom, His claim to be the Messiah, all threatened the peace. If the people got behind Him, Rome would notice, and their punishment could be brutal. Rome would allow any nation willing to submit to Rome's authority some latitude to govern themselves. Israel was not a nation that found that easy to do. Zealots had often arisen, who sought to remove Rome's yoke. Eventually (ad 70), this would lead to Jerusalem's destruction. The Pharisees were trying to keep that from happening—and they were making good money doing it.

John the Baptist never preached in the temple, but Jesus began His ministry by going there, where He found money exchangers and people selling oxen, sheep, and doves. Making a small scourge, He cleaned house. John records it:

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up" (John 2:13–17).

Since the temple was the center of religious life, reformation must begin there (cf. 2 Chronicles 30:14–15; 2 Kings 23:4). He aimed only at reformation (cf. Romans 13:3–4; 2 Corinthians

10:8). The temple cleansing was one of Jesus' first public acts. The last book of the Old Testament had prophesied about it:

"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi" (Malachi 3:1-3).

His cleansing the temple was a preemptive shot across the bow. He was showing that He had arrived and would be a force to be reckoned with. This alarmed the Pharisees. It startled the Sanhedrin.

His actions showed how much Christ disapproved of irreverent behavior in God's house. We could be guilty of making God's house a house of merchandise:

- If our minds are filled with cares about worldly business when we are attending religious services (Amos 8:5; Ezekiel 33:31). Sir William Cecil, Lord Treasurer of England, would throw off his judge's gown when he went to bed and say, "Lie there, Lord Treasurer." It was his way of leaving the troubling cases he was facing behind so he could rest quietly. So should we do when we go to worship. We should say, "Stay outside, world; stay away work and games and shopping and troubles and family and finances and plans."
- If we perform divine offices for filthy lucre (Acts 8:18; cf. Acts 19:24-27).

"Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." The disciples were surprised at first to see Jesus doing this bold act. They had been directed to Him as the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and Him



whom they believed to be the King of Israel was making enemies of many powerful people (Psalm 69:9). The latter part of Psalm 69:9 is applied to Christ in Romans 15:3, and the first part is applied to Him here.

David was a type of Christ in that he, too, was zealous for God's house (Psalm 132:2-5). What he did was with all his might (1 Chronicles 29:2). Christ was zealously affected for God's house. It was his Father's house (cf. Hebrews 3:5-6). He loved it and was always jealous for its honor and welfare. In calling God His Father, Jesus insinuates that He was the Messiah, of whom it was said, "He shall build a house for My name . . . I will be his Father" (2 Samuel 7:13-14).

He set an example for His followers, who are told by Paul: "It is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you" (Galatians 4:18).