

WORDS FROM BIGTOP

Weekly Devotional

August 08, 2026

Turning the Tables

Right before He died, Jesus walked into the temple, looked around at what “worship” had become, and lost it. Not a quiet correction — a table-flipping, whip-cracking, coin-scattering scene.

“He drove out all the people buying and selling animals for sacrifice. He knocked over the tables of the money changers... ‘The Scriptures declare, My Temple will be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves!’”

Matthew 21:12–13, NLT

Here’s what gets missed: the people He threw out weren’t pagans. They were running a religious operation. Sacrificial doves for the poor, currency exchange for the pilgrims — every booth existed because the system required it. Somewhere along the way, the structure built to help people meet God had become the thing standing between them and God. The building was full. The courts were busy. And Jesus called it a den of thieves.

That’s the part that should unsettle us. Dead religion doesn’t usually look empty. It looks productive. It has systems, schedules, and revenue. It can be running at full capacity and still have nothing to do with God.

I think about that every time I see a church run like a business — the tithe treated like operating revenue instead of what Scripture actually names it for. Look at Deuteronomy 14:28–29:

“At the end of every third year, bring the entire tithe... Give it to the Levites... as well as to the foreigners living among you, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, so they can eat and be satisfied.”

Deuteronomy 14:28–29, NLT

The tithe was never a light bill. It was a lifeline for the widow, the orphan, the one who couldn’t provide for themselves. When it came time to actually build something — the temple itself — Scripture is specific about where that money came from. It wasn’t the tithe. It was what people gave beyond it:

“Some of the family leaders gave additional offerings toward the rebuilding of God’s Temple on its original site. Each leader gave as much as he could...”

Ezra 2:68–69, NLT

The building fund and the care fund were never the same pot. One was obligation to the vulnerable. The other was generosity beyond it. We’ve collapsed the two into a single Sunday envelope and called it faithfulness — and somewhere in that collapse, the widow got quieter and the mortgage got louder.

But if I’m honest, the money isn’t even what troubles me most. It’s the distance.

I was ten years old the first time I stood up to preach — really just a ten-year-old’s recreation of a Leon Patillo sermon off his *Star of the Morning* tape, word for word, as best as I could remember it. I wasn’t chasing a stage. I was chasing the chance to stand in the same room as my pastor, a man on fire with a passion for sharing God’s word. He was my shining light. Everything I aspired to be.

Years later, that pastor — I’ll call him Tom — left the ministry altogether. Burned out. Divorced. Not even walking with the Lord anymore. I made myself a vow that day: that would never be me. And I was wrong to think the vow alone would keep me from it.

Here’s what I’ve come to believe: we fall from God’s grace when we try to do it on our own — mimicking somebody else’s calling instead of walking out our own with Him. Somewhere in there, pastoring had turned into preaching, and that’s the real issue, for Tom and for a lot of us since. A pastor shepherds a flock. A preacher just speaks to people. Our lives were never going to change because one man could preach well. They change when someone takes the time to actually connect with us, learn our hearts, and raise us up to what God designed us to be.

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

John 10:27, NLT

Jesus didn’t say His sheep know His stage presence. He said He knows them — and they know Him. That’s proximity. That’s a name, a story, a phone number you’d actually use. If you’ve never sat across a table from your pastor, if she or he couldn’t pick your face out of a hallway, if there’s no one in your life close enough to sharpen you the way “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17, NLT) — then what you have isn’t a pastor. It’s a favorite preacher. Someone you enjoy hearing, not someone who hears you. Someone who talks to a room, not someone who’s helping build a life.

A crowd will always be easier to manage than a congregation. But Jesus didn’t die for a crowd. He died for sheep He calls by name.

Turning the Tables Back to God's Way

So how do we actually get back? Not just conviction — a way forward.

“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had... He gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave.”

Philippians 2:5–8, NLT

Christ didn't scale up. He emptied out. That's the reversal the church needs — not less excellence, but a different aim for it. Excellence in service instead of excellence in spectacle.

“Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow.”

John 13:14–15, NLT

Before there was a stage, there was a towel and a basin. Jesus' example wasn't a performance for the room — it was a posture toward the person in front of Him. That's the way back: smaller rooms before bigger stages, leaders known for who they know rather than how many attend, giving tracked by who it reached rather than what it raised, staff who carry the posture of a shepherd instead of the title of an executive. Decisions slowed down enough to ask one honest question before the lights and fog get funded — does this serve people, or does this serve the show?

A friend of mine, Pastor Rob Jones, once taught me two words that reframed all of this for me: invite and invest. Invite the Lord into your life, then invest in the people He brings to you. One practice he taught me was simple and practical — budget for it. Put a line item in your monthly budget to take one family or friend out to eat after church, once a month. Learning who's actually in your flock, and becoming family with them, is one of the biggest pieces missing from the church today.

It used to come naturally, because life required it. There were no grocery stores or fast food on every corner. People sewed their clothes out of skins and had to build a life together because there was no other option. Now we just buy what we used to need each other to make — and we've built our own caves of solitude in the process, comfortable enough that nobody else has to get into our business. Phones and screens have only deepened it, giving us new ways to live out private fantasies instead of shared lives. We're living in a have-it-my-way culture instead of a have-it-God's-way one — taught to be our own god, to make every choice off feeling instead of faith.

“And let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another.”

Hebrews 10:24–25, NLT

If all we’ve built is a team putting on a show for a room of consumers feeding on a preacher’s thoughts, we’re not living life together — we’re just spectating. If we, the body, are all ministers, we need to be connecting with the people sitting next to us. We need to stop just attending a show, a sermon, a worship service, and start building an actual life with the people around us. Invite the Lord in. Invest in who He brings. That’s the way back to what convenience quietly took from us.

“The LORD has told you what is good... to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah 6:8, NLT

None of that is nostalgia for a simpler time. It’s obedience to a specific Person.

And here’s the hope in it: Christ never promised to build a production. He promised to build His church.

“I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”

Matthew 16:18, NLT

The show can fade, the fog can clear, the budget can shrink — and He’s still building, because He was never depending on the lights to begin with. He’s depending on people who’ll pick up a towel.

This Week

Look at your own tables — the routines, the budgets, the relationships you've let stay at arm's length. Pick one place to trade the stage for the towel: one name to learn, one table to sit at, one person to actually serve this week.

Lord, give us the courage to trade the stage for the towel. Strip away whatever in us has become performance instead of presence. Build Your church through people who serve, not a show that entertains. Turn our tables if You have to — and use us to wash feet when You do. Amen.

A Prayer

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All Scripture references in this devotional are taken from the New Living Translation (NLT) unless otherwise noted.