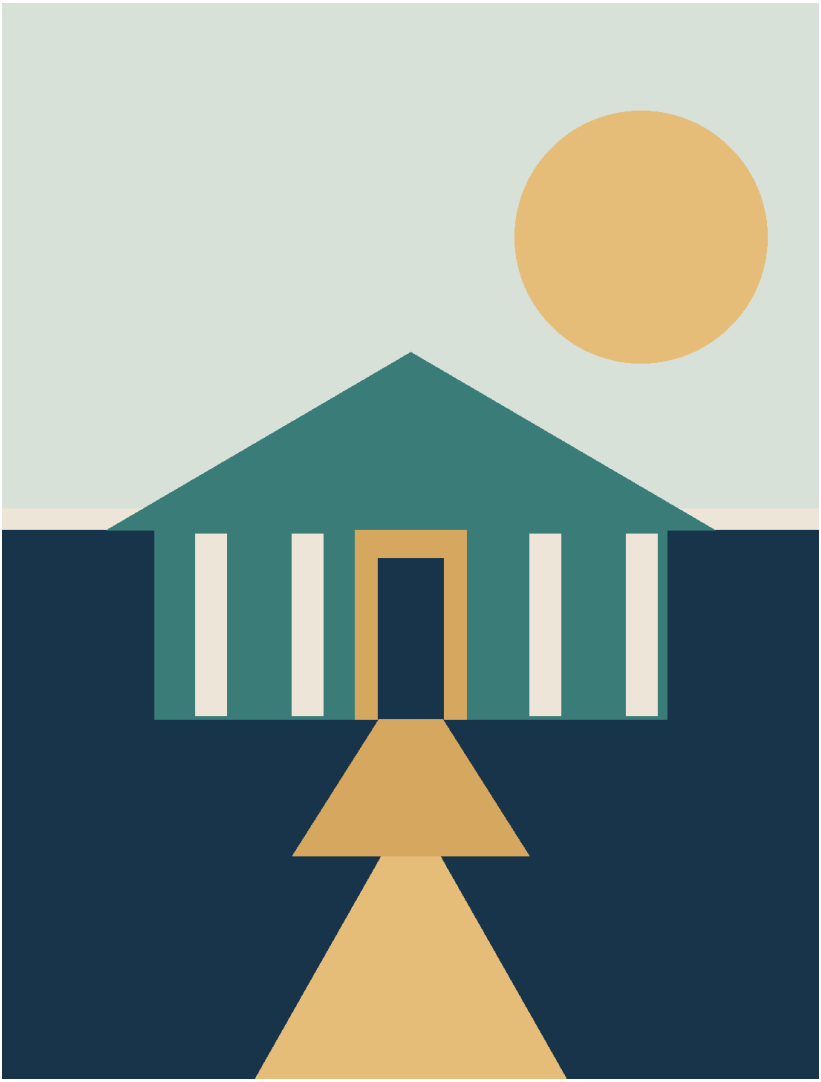


HOUSE OF PRAYER

A study in prayer, worship, and the presence of God

Gary Stebbins

STUDY GUIDE · MARK 11:15–17 | JOHN 2:12–22

Contents and study path

Jesus cleanses the Temple because a place meant for prayer, which was to be open to all, had become a barrier. This guide follows that scene into the New Testament vision of God dwelling in Christ and among his people. Use this guide for personal or group study.

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How to use this guide

Read the Scripture references slowly. Mark a phrase that stands out, then work through the six questions. For a group, invite everyone to speak from the text and leave room for silence. The verbs move from recalling and explaining to applying, examining, evaluating, and creating.

Big idea

God's house is meant to welcome people into his presence. Jesus confronts anything—religious or ordinary—that exploits people or obstructs that encounter.

Opening Scripture

Read Mark 11:15–17 and John 2:12–22. Mark places the Temple action near Jesus' final week in Jerusalem; John records an earlier visit. Both accounts show Jesus challenging the use of the Temple and pointing toward a deeper reality.

The sellers provided animals for sacrifice and exchanged currency for Temple use. Those services could support worship, yet the activity had come to dominate a space intended for prayer, including the Court of the Gentiles. Jesus' forceful response reveals how seriously he takes access to God.

SESSION 1 · MARK 11:15–17 | JOHN 2:13–17

A house for God

Jesus entered the Temple and overturned tables. His action may feel surprising considering Paul's call to live at peace with all men (Romans 12:18). Mark gives the reason in Jesus' words: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." The Temple's purpose had been obscured.

Presence, worship, sacrifice

The Temple recalled God's desire to dwell among his people. The Tabernacle, precursor to the Temple, was built so God could be present with Israel (Exodus 25:8). Worship there included sacrifice for sin (Leviticus 17:11) and a place where people came to seek God (Psalm 5:7). Worship is more than singing: it is agreeing with God about who He is and responding with our lives. It is agreeing that God is who the Bible says God is (Michael Miller).

Scripture often joins longing for God's presence with the language of home. Moses would not go forward without God (Exodus 33:15). David longed to dwell in God's house (Psalm 27:4). The sons of Korah describe a soul thirsting for the living God (Psalm 42:1–2).

Consider

Is a church a house of prayer simply because prayer happens there? Does the church culture produce an expectation that people can meet God there?

Discussion

- Name the three purposes of the Temple described in this session.
- Explain how worship is larger than music or a service format.
- Identify one practice that helps you become attentive to God's presence.
- Compare the Temple's intended purpose with what Jesus encountered.
- Assess what makes a church environment welcoming for someone seeking God.
- What can the church do to create and environment that helps people encounter God? What can we do personally to facilitate worship in our lives?

Notes / prayer:

SESSION 2 · MARK 11:17

A house of prayer

Prayer names the Temple's purpose: communion between God and people. It begins with trusting that God is present, listens, provides, and has power to answer. Prayer is not a technique for controlling God. It is an honest life of dependence on him.

More than asking

Prayer includes worship, confession and repentance, intercession for others, and seeking God's presence. It can hold both need and gratitude. To pray is to say, "God, I need you," rather than treating life as something we must manage alone.

The buying and selling in the Temple had a practical purpose: helping worshippers obtain what they needed. But the system was exploiting them through high prices and unfair exchange rates. Religious leaders had turned worship into a transaction. The danger remains whenever we assume that enough prayers, correct words, or a prescribed pattern can make God owe us a particular outcome. God is sovereign and personal, not a resource to use.

A helpful distinction

The Temple was meant to be a place where people met God, not a place where people used God.

Discussion

- List four ways prayer is practiced in this session.
- Explain why prayer is the opposite of self-sufficiency.
- Practice a short prayer of worship, confession, or intercession.
- Distinguish dependence on God from trying to manipulate God.
- Examine one belief about prayer against the character of God in Scripture.
- Compose a brief prayer that includes worship, surrender, and one request for another person.

Notes / prayer:

SESSION 3 · ISAIAH 56:1–7 | MARK 11:17

A house for all nations

Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7: God's house is to be "a house of prayer for all the nations." The setting matters. Isaiah speaks of foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord and of people who feared exclusion. God promises welcome to those who love and serve him and hold fast to his covenant.

The Court of the Gentiles was the Temple's outer area, where non-Jews could come. The commerce there likely crowded the very space that signaled welcome. Jesus' words insist that the nations are not an afterthought. God's promise to Abraham was that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 18:18).

Jesus welcomes the pushed-away

Across the Gospels, Jesus welcomes people others reject: a tax collector (Matthew 9:9), a leper (Mark 1:41), a Samaritan woman (John 4:7–10), a Gentile officer (Matthew 8:5–13), and sinners who draw near (Luke 15:1–2). Jesus loves people others push away.

The robbers' den

A den is a place where robbers retreat after wrongdoing. Jesus' charge suggests a religious setting where people could exploit others and then hide behind religious activity. The problem was not simply that money changed hands; it was that the life of the Temple contradicted its calling and concealed hearts far from God.

Make room

A house of prayer is a place where the broken can seek God, the guilty can find mercy, the confused can seek wisdom, the lonely can encounter his presence, and the nations can discover him.

Discussion

- Recall two groups Isaiah names as at risk of exclusion.
- Summarize what "for all nations" reveals about God's purpose.
- Name a concrete way your group could welcome someone unfamiliar with church.
- Trace how activity meant to serve worship became a barrier to outsiders.
- Assess whether any habits in your community make some people feel like outsiders.
- Plan one practical change that would help a newcomer seek God here.

Notes / prayer:

SESSION 4 · JOHN 2:18–22 | 1 CORINTHIANS 6:19 | EPHESIANS 2:21–22

A living temple

When leaders demanded a sign, Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John explains that Jesus was speaking about his body. In the risen Christ, God and humanity meet—not through a building, but through Jesus himself.

God dwells in a people

The New Testament extends Temple language to believers individually: the Holy Spirit lives in each believer (1 Corinthians 6:19). It also describes the church together as a dwelling of God in the Spirit, being built into a holy temple (Ephesians 2:21–22).

So a church is not defined as a house of prayer only because it schedules prayer. The gathered community is called to help people encounter God, hear Scripture, repent and find forgiveness, worship, pray for one another, and find healing and restoration. Teaching, fellowship, programs, and ministries should help to serve this purpose.

Zeal that clears the way

After Jesus cleanses the Temple, the disciples remember, “Zeal for Your house will consume me” (John 2:17; Psalm 69:9). Zeal is deep devotion to God’s honor and purposes. Jesus clears away what hinders people from experiencing God. The same question reaches us: what needs to be cleared from our personal lives or shared life?

Personal and corporate

Personally, prayer belongs in the fabric of our lives. Corporately, the gathered church should make room for everyone to encounter God’s presence and power.

Discussion

- Identify the two New Testament passages that call believers God’s temple.
- Explain how Jesus becomes the meeting place between God and humanity.
- Choose one ministry or discipline and connect it to helping people draw near to God.
- Examine how individual and congregational life shape one another.
- Consider whether a particular church activity serves relationship with God or has become an end in itself.
- Develop a personal or group rhythm of prayer, Scripture reading, fellowship, and service.

Notes / prayer:

SESSION 5 · ACTS 2:42–43 | REVELATION 3:20

Make room

The first believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). Their shared life was marked by awe, and signs and wonders took place (v. 43). Prayer was part of a whole community oriented toward God.

Reflect and respond

- Name the four practices to which the first believers devoted themselves.
- Describe how shared spiritual practices shaped their community.
- Choose one practice to deepen this week: prayer, worship, Scripture, confession, or intercession.
- Identify one barrier that keeps you—or may keep someone else—from coming to God.
- Consider how the church can better provide access to doubters, the unchurched, the broken, young and old people, and those from other cultures.
- Write down how you can make room for a closer relationship with Christ and encourage others to seek him.

My next step

I want to draw near to God by...

_____

I sense God inviting our group to...

_____

One barrier we can remove for others is...

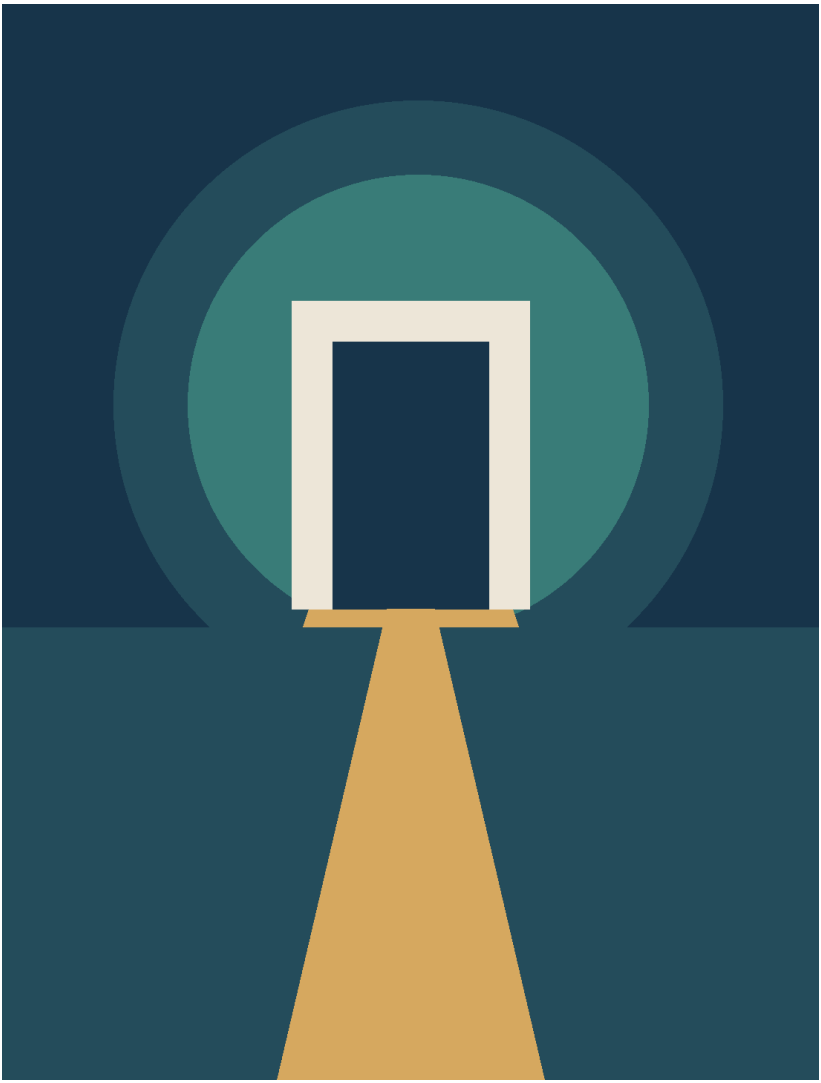
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Closing prayer

Jesus, you are the living presence of God among us. Draw us into a real relationship with you. Forgive us where we have used religion to hide from you or made it harder for others to come near. Cleanse our lives and our church of whatever obstructs your presence. Teach us to pray, welcome, worship, and serve with love. Make room in us for all who seek you. Amen.

Take this with you

God has initiated relationship with us. Respond by opening the door: in personal prayer and in a gathered life shaped by worship, repentance, intercession, Scripture, and openness to receive others.



MAKE ROOM FOR HIS PRESENCE

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations."
— Mark 11:17