

John 2:13-22

“The hand that feeds you is the hand that controls you.” This is why liberals want a bigger government. The more people on welfare, the more control the government has. The bigger the government becomes by taking over the auto industry, banks, healthcare, and so forth, the less control its citizens have over their own lives. Anyone who lives, or has lived, under Communist rule knows this to be true. Big government means little freedom for them.

Or, just ask a nursing child...if you could. He depends upon his mother for everything--milk, warmth, protection. He has little control over his own life, if any at all, because the hand, or in this case the breast that feeds him is that which controls him. And this is God's design...for children. We are not hatched from eggs out in the world to fend for ourselves. We are born into families upon whom we depend for everything.

But the older we get, the less we depend upon our mothers and fathers, and the more control we have, therefore, over our own life. The more independent we become, the more reluctant we are to give up the control we have. Which is why older adults, in general, do not like to enter a nursing home even when it becomes necessary. They may truly appreciate having others take care of them now, but deep down they know that the hand feeding them is now the hand which is controlling them.

This may also explain, in part, why young adults drop out of the church at an alarming rate after confirmation. Not only do we want our independence from mom and dad; we want our spiritual independence as well. If God's hand is the hand that feeds us, then it is also the hand that controls us.

Natural religion--that which is inherent within us at birth, teaches that God is not, nor should He be, in complete control. It teaches that we are not born spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God, but that we have some control over our spiritual life; that we are able to either choose God or not choose Him; that we, in fact, have control over our own destiny and the fate of our eternal soul. This is not, however, what God's Word teaches. Rather, we are born “dead in our trespasses and sins.” We are not in control. We are able to reject God (and this is what our sinful flesh, from birth, is always doing), but we are not able to choose Him. *“You did not choose Me,”* says Jesus in John 15. We cannot “accept the Spirit of God,” declares St. Paul.

Not just young confirmed adults, but all of us struggle with what God teaches here. By nature we want to get rid of God's hand even though He is handing us the precious gifts of spiritual life and eternal salvation. Our flesh does not want His control over us, and so we have the sinful tendency to push His hand back away from us. Instead, we have the idea that we can control God. If we feed Him what He wants, then we can control Him. And so we make it our habit to point out all that we do for Him. We work hard for His church. We do our best at keeping His Commandments. We sacrifice to give Him our time here in worship and our money into His offering plate. Since our hand is giving God what He wants from us, then we rightly must have some control over Him. And so we expect Him to do things our way, at least now and then.

In our text for today Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem and acts more like a madman than a benevolent rabbi. He takes a whip and drives out all the animals. He overturns the money-changing tables. And He yells at them, *“Stop making My Father's House a house of trade!”* By these actions and these words Jesus challenges not only those Jews in the temple; He challenges us.

If you and I are here today in His Father's House to do trade, then He does not want us here. This is not like a grocery store where we exchange our cash in return for goods. God's House is not a house of business. No trading, no merchandising is allowed here. What God has here for you cannot be bought at any price because it was already bought for you with the blood of Christ. The hand of God is here for you, not to sell to you, but to freely give you the gifts Jesus purchased for you on His cross.

In Holy Baptism you did not choose God, but He chose you. He gave you birth into His family, the church, where you always remain His child. And as a child, this means you depend on Him for everything in body and soul. Now God did not give you the gift of Baptism and all its treasures of life and salvation upon the expectation that you give Him something in exchange. He did not make a business deal in your Baptism: *"I'll make you My child if you give Me what I want."* Does God desire that you and I live according to His commands? Yes. Does He expect us to live a life which is noticeably different from the unbelievers around us; a life where others see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven? Yes. But this is done in response to His gifts, not in exchange for them.

God's House is not a house of trade; it's a house of mercy. Jesus is given here--His life-giving flesh and blood, His words of grace and peace--not if you give God something in exchange, but Jesus is given to you here precisely because you have nothing in exchange to give! Except for your filthy sins. How would that work in Wal-Mart? You bring a cart up to the cashier loaded with groceries and you say, "I'll give you the dirt from my shoes in exchange for all of these." They would throw you out. But not God. He takes your dirt. He covers Himself with it and He dies on a cross. And now, here in His house of mercy, God gives you the gift of His forgiveness. He forgives you no matter how dirty your sins are. He forgives you not because you've been trying to obey Him; not because you give your time and money to Him. He forgives each one of you because Jesus exchanged His place in heaven for a dirty, splintery cross. You cannot buy God's pardon, because it is a gift in Jesus Christ. You and I will want to change our lives because of it. We will want to amend our sinful ways and desire to please God by how we live. But our response to God's mercy does not cause Him to forgive us; it flows out of His forgiveness for us.

Does this mean that God controls us, since His hand of grace is always here feeding us? As St. Paul declares, *"The love of Christ controls us."* And what a blessing this is for us! Not His Law, but His love controls us. When you want to make an exchange for goods, go to the grocery stores. The world is full of houses of trade. But when you come here to the House of God, everything is given freely to you through God's love for you in Jesus. Amen.