

The Empty House

Matthew 12:43-45

⁴³“When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”

Weird little parable, isn't it? But, remember, it is a parable, a story spoken in language Jesus' audience understood to convey truths about the invisible Kingdom of God. While on one level, it is the story of a demon and his seven friends, it is not really about demons at all. To discuss demons *per se* on the basis of this parable is to utterly miss its point. Still, given our fascination with the sensational, it is no surprise that the parable draws many people more to questions pertaining to whether or not demons are real and how they work than to the actual lessons of the story.

Perhaps, the tendency to get sidetracked is due in part to Hollywood and its bizarre depictions of Satan and his entourage of evil sidekicks. I suspect the devil is delighted with such ridiculous images. They serve as a nice cover for his subtle malevolence, work he typically attends to under the false auspices of goodness and light. Some blame for sensationalizing demons must be placed at the feet of modern faith healers who attribute every malady imaginable to demons. Nothing in the body ever just breaks down. Demons are blamed for deafness, blindness, lameness – you name it. Healings are jazzed-up with commands like “Come out!” or “I bind thee!” The need for a person to simply make a good life choice is not as glitzy as overcoming a demon that causes him to smoke, drink or use drugs.

Suffice it to say, I treat every demon story in the gospels as literally true and I am that sure demons are alive and well today. But, this is a parable, and it exists not to educate us about how demons behave, but rather, to convey some very practical lesson to Jesus' audience. And, if we make sound application, the parable conveys a number of very practical lessons to us today. Jesus spoke in words that reflected what His audience believed about demons. Let us try to understand the *Parable of the Empty House* as Jesus' audience understood it so that we can accurately apply what it is teaching us.

I. The Familiar Pictures behind the Parable

A. The Parable Reflects Ancient Jewish Beliefs about Demons

The Jews believed that evil spirits were so thick that a person could not drive a pin into the air without hitting one. There were two major rabbinic theories about the origin of demons: The first came from Genesis 6:4, which speaks of the sons of God marrying with the daughters of men. Some rabbis speculated that the children of these unions were demons. Others thought that demons were the spirits of evil dead people continuing their evil deeds. I believe the New Testament eliminates both theories and that demons are simply those heavenly beings that rebelled against God with Satan.

The ancient Jews held demons responsible for most diseases. They lurked around while people ate, hoping to jump on their food. They dwelt on food crumbs, near unwashed hands and in water offered by strangers. They enjoyed lonely wilderness areas or “arid places” as in verse 43. The only way to dispose of demons was to drown them. Jesus once delivered a man from a “Legion” of demons. The completeness of that exorcism was driven home to the people when Jesus sent the demons into a herd of pigs, which in turn, ran off a cliff and into the lake to drown (Mark 5:1-17).

Jesus acknowledged demonic powers but He did not fear them. Given what you now know of the people's beliefs about demons, Jesus' fearlessness becomes richly evident in many details of His life. After He fed great multitudes, He ordered His disciples to gather the fragments. He did not worry about ceremonial hand-washings. He had no qualm about asking a Samaritan woman, a stranger, for a drink of water. He often retreated to isolated regions. These details demonstrate that while Jesus understood His people's fears about demons, He also understood His dominion over them.

B. The Literary Setting for the Story Is Essential to Understanding It

Jesus told this parable one day when He had been healing. He drove out one particular demon, and the Pharisees accused Him of being in league with "Beelzebub, the prince of demons" (12:24). Beelzebub was the old Philistine god of flies, filth and dung heaps. Beelzebub became the most contemptuous name the Jews had for the devil. The Pharisees were not giving a reasoned analysis of the things they saw. They were just being nasty. Jesus exposed their embittered logic when He replied: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand (12:25). In other words, why would Satan run off his own guys?"

Next, Jesus spoke of something He called "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" which can never be forgiven. This is typically understood to be the rejection of Jesus as being from God, which many of these Pharisees would do. Then, Jesus was asked for a sign to prove Himself (12:38-42). Interesting, this exchange that began with a powerful miracle exorcism ends with a demand for a miraculous sign. Jesus refused to give them any sign save some "sign of Jonah" which would eventually prove to be referring to His Resurrection. He alluded to a great judgment that awaited them because, as godly as they believed themselves to be, they were failing to acknowledge Him for Who He really was, their *messiah*.

We put all of these exchanges together and we are logically compelled to conclude that primarily, this little parable must be understood as some sort of an indictment against the so-called holy men of Israel who believed they had it all together when, in fact, they had nothing together. There was something about their spirituality, their take on religion that resembled the events described in the parable. Perhaps, something good had happened to them once upon a time, but, in the meantime, for some reason they were now at a more perilous spiritual state than they had ever known before.

II. The Fundamental Purpose for the Parable

A. The Surface Story Reflected the Common Practice of Exorcism

Other exorcists in Jesus' day demonstrated a degree of success. Such exorcisms included prayers, fasts, weird rituals and the like. Jesus' power over demons was breathtaking by comparison. He simply spoke, and the demons did as they were told. Perhaps, that gave birth to some of the pettiness of the Pharisees. When Jesus was accused by them of working for Beelzebub, He asked: "And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?" (12:27).

Jesus acknowledged these other exorcists, but He was vastly more effective than any of them. Some people flocked to Jesus because He was the best healer, the best teacher and the best exorcist in a land of lesser healers, teachers and exorcists. People always love a good presentation. However, this parable raises a more important question than simply, "Can demons be whipped?" It asks, "Once demons are whipped, then what?" Once evil is purged from a man's life, something must fill the vacuum. Otherwise, that man is rendered more vulnerable to evil than he ever was before.

Jesus likened a man delivered from a demon to a house. The demon leaves the house, spends some time in the desert, perhaps for a little “R & R”, and then, returns to his previous abode to see if he might “re-possess” it. No other demon has moved in. There are no barriers erected. The house has been cleaned up. It is freshly-decorated, which is the meaning of the phrase “put in order.” So, the demon finds seven of his homeless buddies, and the whole gaggle of ghouls moves in. The seven new spirits are even more “wicked” than the original demon which means they can each cause the man more labor, pain, sorrow and suffering than Demon #1 could alone. Just think of the trouble they could cause the man were they to pool their resources to torment the man in concert.

Jesus added, “they go in and live there.” *Oikeo* translated “live” means “to dwell.” Here the word is *kataoikeo*, which means “to dwell down.” This is an intensified idea for dwelling somewhere. The evil spirits move in, settle and entrench themselves. They now possess what appears a permanent home. Is it any wonder that Jesus added, “And the final condition of that man is worse than the first”? All the benefits of that initial cleansing have been foolishly and thoroughly squandered.

B. The Driving Point of Jesus’ Story Was Intended for His Audience of Critics

The Law of God was good, and the Pharisees had made a good commitment to it. They had dedicated their lives to fulfilling the Law’s demands and they were determined to be found righteous in the eyes of God and men because of their fastidious compliance to all God’s rules and regulations. But, in spite of all that religious discipline, they never emptied their hearts out to God. They never saw that the real estrangement between themselves and God was due to their sinful hearts. Rather than grow more humble before the holy God that the Law revealed, they became more deluded about their own spiritual safety. They became proud and arrogant. They observed more and more legal minutiae, but their hearts grew colder toward their countrymen and more distant from God.

It is good whenever a man resolves to eradicate the bad things from his life. It is always noble to turn over a new leaf and commit oneself to a higher morality. The new problem begins whenever a man concludes that he can just abandon one vice cold turkey without filling the newly formed void in his days. He is foolish to believe that a vacuum of purity can remain. A life that is swept clean of bad things must be quickly filled with good alternatives or that life will become even more infested with entrenched problems than ever. This is the relatively simple lesson of the *Parable of the Empty House*, and it was directed toward the self-righteous, falsely religious enemies of Jesus.

III. The Far-Reaching Implications of the Parable

A. The Parable Makes a Powerful Case for Discipleship

The Great Commission is a call to make disciples, not simply to secure from people a vocal statement of faith followed by baptism. The commission requires that we not only baptize people but that we also teach them to observe everything Jesus commanded. In other words, the real challenge of the church is to win people to a faith, which includes learning to live under the Lordship of Jesus.

Many believers do not understand this. They think that a mere intellectual consent to the Gospel facts is all that faith requires. Others believe that if you tack on baptism, you’ve really gone above and beyond. Demons believe the facts of Jesus. Such people begin their Christian lives with a bang, but their commitment to Jesus fades because they never surrender themselves to His cause. They never offer their bodies as living sacrifices to His service. Their relationship with Jesus may have begun with some momentous event, so they cling to that “salvation experience”. Nevertheless, when commitment to Jesus fades, the chosen priorities of their lives make their situation very clear.

Faded commitment to Christ is a serious issue in the Bible, but it is seldom taken seriously today. Indifference to Jesus opens a door to horrible consequences. It is no minor matter when a believer refuses to surrender his life to the transforming hand of Jesus. Such a man believes he is safe. In fact, his salvation may be a self-delusion and his spiritual peril never greater. To come to Christ demands obedience to His commands. It demands a commitment to serve and to build up the body of Christ.

B. The Parable Makes a Powerful Case for Good Deeds and Accountable Relationships

The religion of the Pharisees, a list of rules prefaced with “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not”, is a poor substitute for the gospel of the grace of Christ. Commandments not to sin are good. In fact, they are essential. In *John 8*, Jesus came to rescue of an adulterous woman. According to Moses, her crime was a capital offense. Jesus ran off her self-righteous accusers and assured her that He did not condemn her. But, He also told her to knock it off: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (*John 8:11*).

“Just say, ‘No!’” is good advice, and Paul writes that God’s grace “teaches us to say, ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions” (*Titus 2:11*). But, there are realistic ways to say, “No!” and unrealistic ways. One unrealistic way is to try to battle sin by the sheer force of will. Human nature is such that we need to replace old bad habits with new good habits. A life cannot simply be cleansed of evil once and remain clean. The empty places must be filled with worthwhile endeavors, and no endeavors are more worthwhile than those that engage us in the work of God’s kingdom.

Another unrealistic way to attempt to live a godly life is in isolation from others. Pride compels us to try this, as though our struggles with sin would somehow surprise others, but people who struggle with sin need other people who struggle with sin to help them bear their burdens. This parable is valuable for any church that is willing to think realistically about the human struggle with sin.

A drunk finds Jesus, and his church tells him “Stop drinking!” An addict finds Christ, and his church tells him, “Don’t do drugs!” A sexual offender repents, and his church counsels him, “Stop that!” Is the church’s advice proper? Absolutely. Is the advice adequate? That is doubtful. A drunk may stop hanging out in bars, but he needs help to find worthy ways to fill his time. An addict may stop doing drugs, but without support and direction, he will revert. An adulterer may mend his ways, but if his life is empty, he will fall again. The role of the church must be more than simply to state the obvious.

Disregard the addictive and compulsive behaviors in others for a moment. Let’s talk about our thought lives that evidence sin in all of us - worry, bitterness, envy, *etc.* Have you ever tried to just say “No” to such things? Resolve to just not think about such things and whatever is at the root of that negative emotion will preoccupy your mind. You may try to outdistance the issue with activity. Eventually, you get tired. You have to set down and rest. You have to go to bed. That “something” always catches up with you at the end of the busyness to steal your sleep and rob your rest of its restfulness. We are better served to actively reflect on good things. This was Paul’s advice:

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. - *Philippians 4:4-9*

Consider the virtuous. For instance, consider the elderly lady who was known throughout her church of fellow-retirees in Florida for her ability to make positive and graceful comments about every facet of the church program and ministry. However, the church choir, comprised of her elderly peers, defied positive but truthful comment. She finally solved the problem one Sunday morning. As the choir members filed into the loft, she leaned over to her neighbor and whispered, "Aren't they walking well this morning?"

C. The Parable Makes a Good Case for a Deep Sense of Dependence on Jesus

When God cleanses a man, He offers that man something better than what he ever knew before to fill the void. He gives His promises. He gives His Holy Spirit to assist that man in working out his Christianity. We must embrace these gifts of God. It is not enough that we hate evil. We must love righteousness. We must love Christ with a passion to know Him and to become like Him.

The Empty House is an odd little story. We trust that it spoke clearly to the ancients as did all of Jesus' parables. Once we have resisted the urge to spring-board ourselves into the topic of demonology, the parable proves itself to be a remarkably practical and down-to-earth story. It is proven by common sense and by the experience of each one of us. It is pointless to receive a cleansing from sin if we are not also willing to open our lives to God's transforming power.

If you have ever tasted the goodness Christ, know that it was not so that you might be free to do your own thing. That only got you in trouble the first time around. God's grace brings forgiveness of sin so that you might begin life anew by yielding to His transforming hand as you embark on a journey that will lead to conformity at last to an image free of every sin stain, the very image of Jesus Himself.

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