

Who's Living In Your House?

Matthew 12:43-50

Mark Vroegop

43 "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. 44 Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. 45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

46 While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. 48 But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Over sixteen years ago and while in college, Sarah and I participated in premarital counseling. It was a defining moment in our relationship together and our relationship with the Lord. We saw how relevant the Bible was to our lives and our future marriage. We came to see the God had truly given us everything that we needed for life and godliness in his Word (2 Peter 1:3). It was in that counseling that I learned how to prioritize my life based upon being God's kind of person, partner, parent, and pastor. However there was another statement, reflecting the teaching of Ephesians 4:28, that deeply impacted me. It was in the form of a question and an answer:

"When does a liar stop being a liar? When he stops telling lies? No! When he starts telling the truth!"

The statement reflects a very important biblical principle that, tragically, many church people miss: **the absence of evil doesn't equal obedience**. Or to state it positively – real repentance embraces new actions that replace the old. In other words it is not enough just to say, "I'm going to stop lying;" real repentance starts telling the truth. It's not enough to say, "I'm going to stop committing adultery;" real repentance embraces Christ-like love for a spouse. It's not enough to say, "I'm not going to be materialistic;" real repentance makes the choice to give.

Today we are concluding our section in Matthew called *The Portraits of Jesus*. We'll be taking a break for the next two weeks so that we can focus on Global and Local Outreach. We have two great men who are going to challenge us about the importance of each of these areas. George

Chavanikamannil, president of Good News for India will be with us to talk about Global Outreach and what God is doing in India. The following week Dr. Charles Ware, president of Crossroads Bible College, will help us prepare our mind and hearts for SERVE|10. On May 2 we'll continue our study of Matthew with a new series on chapters 13-17 called ENIGMA.

Now our passage this morning brings to conclusion a really helpful section that began with the controversial text about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (12:22-32) and continued to examine the real problem of the heart (12:33-37). The main thought from our text today is simply that the absence of evil doesn't equal obedience. In other words, obedience is far more than just not doing the wrong things; true obedience does the right things.

We find this expressed through two different situations that give us two lessons.

Lesson #1: Half-hearted repentance leads to a worse condition

In verses 43-45 Jesus uses a strange illustration about demon possession to make a very important point about the problem of half-baked, external repentance. Jesus talks about an unclean spirit that has gone out of a person, but is still seeking rest. "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none" (Matt 12:43).

Now to understand what is going on here, you need to know that Jesus is not giving a theological treatise on demon possession. It is important to note that in this context the unclean spirit is an evil spirit who does evil things. Therefore, the point is not so much about demonic possession as it is about the presence of evil in the person. So don't make too much about a demon passing through waterless places or seeking rest. The main point here is that is a presence of evil that produces evil.

In verse 44 we "hear" the evil spirit speak: "I will return to my house from which I came." We are getting closer to Jesus' point. Apparently the discontented demon decides that he liked his former abode better, and he wants to return. So he goes back. When he returns, he finds "the house empty, swept, and put in order." This is important. He returns to find that his previous dwelling place (someone's heart) has three characteristics: 1) empty, 2) swept and 3) put in order. Each word is important. It is "swept" which means that it looks like a complete job has been done. It is "in order" which means that it has new decorations and furnishings. But the most important characteristic is the first one – it is empty, unoccupied.

Now the word for "empty" is an interesting word. It means leisurely or purposeless; it is the opposite of undivided devotion. So it is a word whose main characteristic is the absence of any real purpose, direction, or ownership. This is key. The demon returns to a house that is cleaned up with new decorations but it has no real purpose or direction. It has no owner; it is vacant.

Notice the effect in verse 45! “Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there...” The evil spirit saw the clean, tidy, but empty house as an opportunity. He turned it into a frat house with lots of demons living there. In other words, its cleanliness and its tidiness without any ownership made it an attractive target. No matter how clean or nice or decorated, the most important point was its vacancy.

Jesus is saying this to the countless people who listen to what he says and even make a few changes, but they never make a final determination over who is really going to live in their heart. He is talking about people who are content with lives that look clean, tidy, and presentable but there is no transfer of ownership. He is talking about people who make enough changes so that appearances can be kept up, but there is no real, lasting, and fundamental change. In fact, this leads to a worse situation.

The latter part of verse 45 drives home Jesus’ scary point: “and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this generation.” A clean and tidy house may be attractive and nice, but without an owner, it is an invitation for lots of unwelcomed tenants. Jesus paints the picture of a man who was so glad that the evil spirit left and was thrilled with the new appearance of his life, but never addressed the more pressing problem – who is going to live there. And his failure to deal with the vacancy of his heart led to a worse problem in the end.

Why a worse condition?

The man was bad off when he was possessed by one demon, but his half-hearted repentance led to a worse condition. How so?

First, it is so **tragic**. The person who goes to a lot of trouble and puts in a lot of effort only to have it do nothing, it is tragedy. Money, time, energy is often spent, and there may even be a change for a while. But in the end it doesn’t last. In fact it gets worse. And this is because of the second reason.

Second, sin is **never static**. It is so important for all of us to know that “once is never enough” when it comes to sin. The reason is because central to the temptation of anything is the offering of what a person doesn’t have. The next “fix”, the next “thrill”, “just one more” is always out there. Sin is never satisfied. And that is why it is so important for Jesus to change not only what we do, but to also change what we want. The hope of the gospel is Jesus’ ability to give us new desires and redeemed appetites. “...Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

Third, it is **spiritually myopic**. The worse condition is created because the person is spiritually deceived. He or she thinks that because there has been small, shallow progress that there is

real and lasting change. To use Jesus' analogy – they never consider that a clean, tidy, but empty house would be an invitation for even more problems. Spiritual myopia happens when a person convinces him or herself that real change has occurred when in fact the change has only been slight, temporary, and external. And the problem and the danger of this condition is not just the degree of sin; it is the degree of self-deception. The person is in trouble and has no idea.

Half-hearted repentance leads to a worse condition. The man apparently didn't see the danger of a vacant heart. He confused appearances with allegiance, and tidiness with total surrender. He was "all dressed up with no place to go," and he was "rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic."

The warning here is one that we all need to heed.

Lesson #2 - True discipleship is doing the will of God

I don't think that it is a mistake that Matthew puts these two accounts together. In fact, verse 46 seems to indicate that what happened next with Jesus' family took place "while he was speaking to the people."

In a same way that the former passage should not be taken as a theological treatment of demons, so this passage should not be taken in isolation about how to treat one's family. The point here is more about real discipleship than it is about family relationships.

Apparently Jesus' family showed up at this gathering, but they were outside and distanced from the conversation. This is an interesting fact and probably indicates that at the present time they are not part of those who have chosen to follow him. John 7:5 tells us that his brothers did not believe in him, and Mark 3:21 (a few verses before Mark's account of this event with his family) indicates that his family thought he was out of his mind.

Somehow they passed the word to Jesus that they wanted to speak to him. However, Jesus used their request as a teaching moment. He rhetorically asks a question (v 48), "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And then Jesus answers his own question by pointing to his disciples and saying (v 49), "Here are my mother and my brothers!"

Verse 50 gives us the real point that Jesus is trying to make: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus is trying to show here the extremely high value that he (and God) places on obedience. True oneness with Jesus is not a product of birth (as important as that is); real union with him comes through doing the will of the Father. I don't think that Jesus is trying to denigrate a person's loyalty to their family as much as he's trying to establish the greater importance of loyalty to God.

Jesus wants people to know that true discipleship is not produced by birth-right or riding the coat-tails of family tradition. True discipleship is expressed by doing the will of the Father.

So we have moved from a discussion about the unforgivable sin to the problem of the heart to the supremacy of Christ in the resurrection to what true discipleship really is. Why is Jesus talking about this?

Jesus is talking to the religious rulers who are near Jesus' message, hear his words, but fail to do anything significant about it. He is attacking their shallow, externally based spirituality that is really a fraud. He is peeling back the veneer of respectable people who want band-aid solutions and temporary fixes so that they can keep up appearances. He is bringing into the light the reality not only the reality of the heart, but the danger of shallow answers and actions.

Following Jesus was meant to produce something in a person's life. The real problem of the religious establishment during Jesus' day was a disconnection between a person's beliefs and his or her life. Being a follower of Jesus requires actions or fruit. We receive salvation by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone. However, genuine faith is never all-alone.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:8-10).

True discipleship is not just believing in God or certain spiritual truths, as important as that is. Following Jesus requires actions – doing the will of God. Spiritual leisure is a deadly sign.

What we've got to know:

In light of this passage, allow me to give you four pastoral admonitions or cautions. Consider these things that you need to know.

1. There is no such thing as a vacant heart

This is a very basic but very important concept that the Bible teaches. There is no neutrality when it comes to Jesus. You are either for him or you are against him. "Whoever is not with me is against me..." (Matt 12:30). The Apostle Paul used the analogy of slave to communicate the same thing: "you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Rom 6:16). Every person has some controlling influence in their heart. The question is not "if" your heart is being controlled; the question is by whom. And Jesus is the only one who can take it over and produce what is honorable and pleasing to God.

2. There is a difference between repentance and regret

Years ago I stumbled across a verse in 2 Corinthians that helped me understand that not everyone who says that they are “sorry” really is. I discovered two categories of sorrow – worldly sorrow (regret) and godly sorrow (repentance).

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done (2 Cor 7:10-11 NIV)

Regret is sorrow because of being caught, of consequences and of the pain that is caused. Repentance is sorrow because God has been sinned against and there is relief in being caught. Regret looks for the quickest, easiest, pain-free way to get out of the jam. Repentance looks for through, deep, and consistent change. Regret usually only lasts until the pressure is off. Repentance shows itself to be real by good fruit over time.

3. There is a real danger in surface or circumstantial change

Oh how often I have seen this happen! In fact, it happens more often than real, lasting change because people come to Jesus looking, not for a new master, but for someone to stop the pain. So often people end up with circumstantial change because they think their problems are their circumstances. They don't realize that the real problem is staring them in the mirror. As a friend of mine says, “Your problem is not Osama, Obama, or your Momma.” The warning from Jesus here is that simply tiding up your life is not only **not** going to solve the problem; it is actually going to make things worse.

4. There is a warning in “putting off” without “putting on”

You may have heard the quote that “all that is necessary for evil to exist is if good men do nothing.” Unfortunately some people have translated that into their spiritual lives with a different twist thinking, “all that I have to do to obey is simply not do what is bad.” Their equation is: the absence of doing evil = obedience. But when the Bible calls us to put something off; it calls us to put something on.

“...put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath,

malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:5-17)

Jesus transforms his children not just by helping them to stop doing things that are sinful. He gives them new hearts so that they put on a new person, a new life, and a new future.

Following Jesus is so much more than just cleaning up your act. It is far more than just have a proper appearance. Jesus came to die for liars not just so that they would stop lying but so that they would start telling the truth. That is the beauty of what Jesus can really do:

He can not only make you stop doing what is evil; he can replace it with what honors God!

He can do that...If you will let him come in.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com