



Last State Worse Than the First

The Danger of Rejecting Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 12:43-45

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Jesus, Demons, Satan, Judgment

Matthew 12:43-45 (ESV) 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.”

Introduction

These words are the concluding paragraph of an extended conversation that Jesus is having with the scribes and Pharisees.¹ The conversation began in 12:22 and it concludes with these words before us today.

The main idea is seen in the final sentence where Jesus says, “...*the last state... is worse than the first.*”

Outline of the Conversation

Let’s quickly review to see the structure of the conversation.

- Jesus healed a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute (12:22). Upon witnessing this miracle that “*amazed all the people,*”² the Pharisees publicly denied that Jesus was the “*Son of David,*”³ and rather declared him to be a servant of Satan.
- Jesus responded to this judgment upon him by warning the Pharisees and scribes in the strongest of possible terms. He first explained how ludicrous their accusation was (12:25-28).

¹ See Matthew 12:38.

² Matthew 12:23.

³ Matthew 12:23.

- Next, he plainly pointed out that Satan and his demons can only be cast out by a stronger and superior power, namely the power of the kingdom of heaven (12:29). Then, he explained that they were standing upon the edge of an unforgivable blasphemy (12:30-32).
- Jesus showed them that blasphemous words flow out of a blasphemous heart, which if not transformed will, on the day of judgment, would be eternal condemned by God (12:33-37).
- The Pharisees then demanded to see "**a sign**" from Jesus. Jesus described their request as being one that would only be asked by "**an evil and an adulterous generation.**" This phrase is the interpretive key for understanding the rest of Jesus' teaching, since it is repeated in the concluding sentence of the paragraph before us this morning. The reveals for us the primary purpose that Jesus has in mind while teaching. From the introduction of this phrase until the conclusion, Jesus is describing "**an evil and adulterous generation.**" He gives four characteristics of "this evil generation."

First, it **demand a new sign** while refusing to acknowledge the numerous miraculous signs that have already been given. Jesus refuses to comply with this evil request (12:39).

Second, it **will be condemned** at the final day of judgment, because the Gentile men of Nineveh and queen of the South both repented and believed though they were only given lesser signs.

Third, it **will be given a sign**, which will be the greatest sign of all. Just as Jonah was three days in the belly of a large fish, so Jesus will be three days in the tomb of the earth.

Fourth, it **will only get worse** if this great sign of the Son of Man is rejected (vs.38-42). Jesus is greater than Jonah or Solomon because God will do through him the greatest sign ever given to humanity; the resurrection from the dead on the third day. *All who reject this great sign will suffer greater condemnation.* This is the point of the paragraph before us this morning. We see this in the final verse of the paragraph, v.45, where Jesus says,

"...and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be with this evil generation" (12:45).

Those who witness the greatest work of God in the world through Jesus and chose to reject or ignore or fail to cherish that work with all their heart, will find themselves in a worse condition than those who have never known this great work at all.

This passage is a warning to leaders of Israel not to willfully reject the Messiah who was standing before them and through whom God had worked wonders never before seen throughout the history of Israel, and not even in the history of the world. Jesus was working miracles that no one had done—such as casting out a demon who had caused a man to be both blind and mute.

This passage (v.43-45) is among the most widely debated passages in Scripture regarding how it is to be interpreted, with at least five different views among biblical scholars being offered.⁴ However, the purpose of Jesus in this passage is not to teach a Demonology 101 class. Jesus is not here working up material for an article in the first century edition of “Unclean Spirituality Today.” There are lessons about demons to be learned, but we must keep Jesus’ primary purpose in mind to guard against misinterpretation or pushing the meaning too far. This is a parable of Jesus intended to teach one truth: *to refuse to wholeheartedly welcome God’s messiah into your life after having witnessed the power of his words and work, is to invite nothing less than spiritual disaster.*

The Parable of the Returning Demon (v.43-45)

To illustrate this point, Jesus tells a parable about a demon who has been cast out, but then returns only to find a clean, but empty house. This short parable serves as a warning for “the evil generation” that is persistently rejecting him, despite the abundant evidence to the fact that God had chosen and anointed him. This parable involves four movements; 1) an unclean spirit being cast out, 2) the unclean spirit returning, 3) the unclean spirit goes recruiting, and 4) eight unclean spirits enter and remain.

1) Unclean Spirit Goes Out (v.43)

The first movement entails an unclean spirit, a demon, being cast out of a person.

Matthew 12:43 (ESV) “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.”

The unclean spirit. Jesus uses an example of an exorcism of a demon, most likely because it was the exorcism of a demon which prompted this entire conversation (see Mt 12:22). This present controversy began when Jesus cast out a demon that had caused a man to be blind and mute and crowds responded with amazement and the question, “*Could this be the Son of David?*”⁵ Who else would have the authority and power to command demons?

⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 359.

⁵ Matthew 12:22-23.

Has gone out. The unclean spirit “has gone out” because he has been cast out “by a higher power.”⁶ The more powerful kingdom of heaven had come among the weaker world of men. Jesus came bringing a greater power than the power of the kingdom of Satan. Jesus had entered into the realm of the “strong man” (Mt 12:29) and overpowered him. Jesus came **casting out Satan**. Jesus was been dominating Satan and plundering his kingdom. Jesus was going about throughout the region healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. Satan and all his demons are powerless in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

The notion of unclean spirits “**passing through waterless places**” reflects the traditional Jewish understanding that deserted and dry places were the abode of demons. Well-watered places were places where God’s blessing was present, but desolate, dry, and deserted places were indicative of the places that God had cursed⁷ (cf. Is 13:20-21; 34:14; Tob. 8:3; Rev 18:2).

There is “**no rest**” to be found for this homeless, tormented spirit.

2) Unclean Spirit Returns (v.44)

The second movement refers to the unclean spirit’s return.

Matthew 12:44 (ESV) “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.”

A Satanic Soliloquy. This may be the only instance in Scripture of a satanic soliloquy, where we are listening in on demonic inner dialogue.

I will return. The unclean spirit is not content to wander in a continual state of restlessness. Thus, it returns to its former abode. The enemy and his cursed accomplices do not give up easily. The desire to take back ground that has been lost is strong. John Owen notes, “What a picture of the eagerness of these malignant beings to afflict man.”⁸

My house. Notice the notion of ownership abides. It seeks to return to “my house.” Where it formerly lived, it still thinks of as its own. The “house” in this parable refers to the person (see 12:45) from whom it was originally cast out.

Empty, swept, and put in order. When the unclean spirit returns, it discovers the house is clean, but empty. The former mess has been tidied up, but the house is **empty**. Nothing has filled the space vacated by this demon. Some order has been brought, but a new owner has not be sought. There is no other occupying presence in the space to stop the return of this demon. There are no barriers in place and no new relationship to provide protection. Because this

⁶ John J. Owen, *Commentary on Matthew and Mark* (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1864), 151–152.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 328.

⁸ Owen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 152.

house is empty and not filled, “he is open to invasion.”⁹ Because there is available room, the demon hatches a plan. The *spiritual world hates a vacuum*.

3) Unclean Spirits Recruits (v.45)

The third movement involves the formerly cast out demon becoming an evil recruiter.

Matthew 12:45 (ESV) “ 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.”

Seven other spirits. The evicted demon seeks out “*seven other spirits*” to join him in his evil plan. The number seven is a number of perfection¹⁰ or completeness and in this case it points to the demonic power being sufficient for *complete* dominion.¹¹ The one demon has now become eight! This larger demonic band is strong enough to definitively take back control of his former house.

More evil than itself. Note the demonic delight in the increasing degree of destruction. The seven recruited are “*more evil than itself.*” There are degrees of evil among unclean spirits. Some demons are more evil than others. Just as there is a hierarchy of authority and responsibility in the holy angelic realm¹², so there is a similar structure in the demonic realm. This is a fact with which the apostle Paul agrees, as he describes the devil’s evil realm as being one structured by an ascending levels of hierarchy moving from lower levels of “*rulers and authorities*” up to “*cosmic powers*”¹³ and “*dominions.*”¹⁴

4) Unclean Spirits Remains (v.45)

The final movement in this passage is new group of eight evil demons return, move in, and remain.

Matthew 12:45 (ESV) “ 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.”

They enter and dwell there. The point here is that an empty house cannot repel this band of demons. This empty heart of this person has no defense against this greater evil attack. The demons “*enter in*” unopposed and “*they dwell there.*” The picture is that they make

⁹ Ibid., 329.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 329.

¹¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 357.

¹² Joshua 5:14; 1 Thes 4:16; Jude 1:9.

¹³ Ephesians 1:21.

¹⁴ Ephesians 6:12.

themselves completely at home. They have come to establish a permanent base. They have no intention of leaving. They are digging in and building a stronghold.

The last state of that person is worse than the first. This is the point Jesus wants the scribes and Pharisees and “*this evil generation*” to hear. Jesus’ ministry of driving out the devil and his dark kingdom is cleaning up the spiritual condition of Israel, but if their leaders are unwilling to receive and welcome him as Master and Messiah, then soon hereafter the nation will find itself doubly defeated by a demonic dominion. If the nation of Israel welcomes cleaning up of their external religious life by Jesus, but they stop short of fully welcoming him into the inner lives of their hearts, then they leave open a wide door for a demonic deluge of destruction.

There can be no ambivalence about Jesus. Either he is the Son of God, or he is a servant of Satan. Jesus will not allow anyone to be content by sitting on the fence. As he said earlier in this conversation, “*Whoever is not with me is against me...*” (12:30). If He is the Son of God, then throw open the doors and welcome him in fully. And to think that he is a servant of Satan is simply insanity. Look at his work and his word. He is obviously from God, therefore to reject him is to welcome demonic destruction.

This is Jesus’ message to Israel, but he is also speaking to all who have ears to hear.

Application

Here are a few points of application to consider.

1. **Rejecting Jesus will bring spiritual destruction.** Testimony, ancient and present, consistently affirms that Jesus was so anointed by God that he was unlike any other person who has ever lived. He worked miracles unlike any, he taught with authority unlike any, he was tender and compassionate unlike any, and he was bold and authoritative unlike any.

He boldly claimed to be greater than Jonah, greater than Solomon, greater than temple¹⁵, greater than Jacob¹⁶, and even greater than Abraham.¹⁷ About Jesus alone did God twice speak audibly from heaven, telling humanity to listen to him.¹⁸ Only Jesus alone did God raise from the dead on the third day.

To reject or ignore such a person as Jesus—through whom God has given the world such abundant evidence of His favor on Him—will bring sure and certain condemnation from God at the final judgment on the last day. It is one thing to fail to welcome someone you

¹⁵ Matthew 12:6.

¹⁶ John 4:12.

¹⁷ John 8:53.

¹⁸ Matthew 3:17; 17:5.

do not know, but to know all of this about Jesus and to choose to reject him will cause the last state of your life to be worse than the first.

2. **Half-hearted repentance will not bring lasting transformation.** Mere moral improvement of your life, will not result in lasting transformation of heart. The person in this parable had the devil removed for a season, which resulted in his heart being “*swept clean and put in order.*” But that alone was insufficient to repel the future demonic return. Having your life cleaned up of spiritual messes and tidied up and put right is good, but that will not in and of itself supply what is need for true and lasting spiritual transformation. Simply “trying harder” to “do better” or attempting to will-power your way to pleasing God is not enough to effect true transformation and lasting reformation. Merely expelling the bad behavior is powerless to enable permeant practice of good behavior.
3. **Ambivalence toward Jesus is spiritually fatal.** Eternal life with God does not depend upon doing religious duty, but rather on delighting in Jesus. The person in this parable cleaned up his life and ordered it well. For a season he became, we might say, really religious. He did what was right. He cast out the bad practices, but his heart was still **empty**. He cast out, but he failed to fill up! His heart was “clean and orderly,” but it was empty. His heart was empty because he hadn’t yet welcomed Jesus in. He liked the fact that Jesus helped him stop getting drunk and stop cussing and swearing, but hadn’t yet welcomed Jesus into his heart to fill it up with Himself. He was simply content to have Jesus cast out the devil, but then Jesus also had to stay outside until he could make up his mind about him. You see where this eventually led. He continued in ambivalence toward Jesus too long and then before he made up his mind, his empty heart was filled with eight, evil demons. His last state was worse than the first.
4. **Jesus is worth nothing less than whole-hearted, loving devotion.** Because Jesus is the Sovereign Son of God who willingly laid down his life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, he is worthy of nothing less than our whole hearts being filled with love for him. Because Jesus purchased the right to atone for the sin of anyone who would trust in him, at the price of his blood, our hearts ought to be filled with loving devotion to him and him alone.

To those who love Jesus above all, he fills their hearts with his own Holy Spirit. To those who cherish Christ above all, he fills their hearts with his peace and his joy. Those whose hearts are so filled Jesus—his love, peace, joy, and Holy Spirit—those are the hearts who repel the devils because there is no room for them. Demons may dance in empty hearts, but they are quickly dispelled from hearts filled with love for Jesus.

The **key to ridding your heart with the deadly poison of restless evil, is by filling it full of loving devotion to a dear, divine Savior.** When one fully surrenders to Jesus, and asks him to fill them with His Holy Spirit, Jesus then pays the debt of that persons sin, and fills the heart with His



Holy Spirit within. Jesus redeems that person having “*bought them with the price*” of his blood.¹⁹ Then Jesus says of that person, “His heart is now *My house*.” No demon can ever be at home in a heart filled with His Holy Spirit and of His love. No devil can ever dominate the heart wholly in love with Jesus.

Do not think that you are beyond this kind of total heart transformation. **Mary Magdalene** is the best example. We are told in Scripture that she had seven demons²⁰ when she met Jesus, but Jesus cast them all out. And she was whole-heartedly devoted to Jesus to the end and beyond. She loved him above all others. She faithfully worshiped him when the faith of the disciples was wavering. If your heart is filled with Jesus, then your last state—like Mary’s—will be infinitely better than your first!

Conclusion

If you have never confessed faith in Jesus, then do it today. Do it now.

If you have only half-heartedly repented of your sin, then whole-heartedly do it now.

If you have been ambivalent toward Jesus for far too long, then choose now to make it end.

If your heart is empty, then cry out to him now to fill your heart with His Holy Spirit and with his love.

Go now to members of the prayer team and they will pray with you.

Discussion Questions

1. To whom is this passage directed?
2. What phrase in this conversation is repeated (see 12:39, 45)? How does this help determine the audience?
3. What is Jesus’ main point in this paragraph?
4. What portion of this text speaks most to your heart?
5. Why does Jesus teach that having a “clean, but empty” house is spiritually dangerous?
6. How can you tell what “fills” a person’s heart?
7. What is the most difficult portion of this passage for you?
8. What portion of this passage gives you the greatest blessing?

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23.

²⁰ Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9.