

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE LAST STATE OF THAT MAN IS WORSE

Matthew 12:43-45

In spiritual warfare, there is no room for neutrality. The Lord Jesus makes it plain in Matthew 12:30 where He says, *He who is not with Me is against Me*. This point is illustrated in a passage that is often called, 'The return of the evil spirit.' Let's read this passage.

Matthew 12:43. "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none.

44 "Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order.

45 "Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."

A restless spirit

The Lord Jesus speaks about an unclean spirit who, for some reason, has gone out of a man. This wicked spirit then travels through waterless places, seeking rest. The prophet Isaiah says, *The wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet ... 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'* (Isaiah 57:20-21). 'There is no rest for the wicked.' This is true of human beings. It is also true of spirits. An evil spirit is a restless spirit. He has no peace and he doesn't like that. That is why he wanders through waterless regions with the hope that he can find a place where he will be able to rest. You see, even the evil spirits don't like restlessness any more than the sinner who is restless enjoys being restless. What is a waterless place? It is a place where there is no life. And where there is no water, there is no life. From the spiritual standpoint, where there is evil, there is no life. There will be life only if there is righteousness. These two, life and righteousness, are always together. You cannot separate them. And where there is righteousness, there is peace. There is rest.

So this evil spirit, having wandered for some time, decides that he will go back to where he came from in order to find some rest. Here, there are some questions we need to ask. First of all, let's consider this. If the evil spirit wanted to go back to where he came from, why did he leave in the first place? Why didn't he just stay there? Surely, even a broken down place is better than the desert.

In order to answer that question, we have to look at the context of Matthew 12. Matthew 12 deals with the person of the Holy Spirit who, by His power working through the Lord Jesus, casts out evil spirits. This was one of the main points of discussion in that chapter. Jesus was being accused of casting out evil spirits by the power of Satan. He responded by refuting the Pharisees' charge and then declared that He drives out demons by the Spirit of God (v. 28). Now, when an evil spirit is cast out,

what happens to that spirit? Where does he go? Well, he wanders through waterless places seeking rest. You see, no evil spirit leaves of his own choice. No man can free himself from the power of the evil spirit. If we could, we wouldn't need the power of the Holy Spirit to save us from the evil one.

I will return to my house

We have to realize that we are engaged in a spiritual battle that involves forces which are far greater than us. Jesus describes Satan in v. 29 as a strong man, heavily armed, who has human beings under his control. How can we be set free from the power of Satan? Jesus says, *How can one enter a strong man's house ... unless he first binds the strong man* (Matthew 12:29)? Jesus is the stronger man. He came to bind Satan so that we may be set free. It is only through Christ, through faith in Christ, that we can be set free from Satan's power.

The word 'house', in the Bible, is a common picture of a human being. For example, the Lord Jesus speaks of building our house on the rock (Matthew 7:24). We put our house, our life, upon the teaching of Jesus. In John 14, Jesus says, 'If any man obeys My word, My Father and I will come to him and we will make our home with him.' In our passage, the Lord Jesus makes it very plain that the man whom the evil spirit left is the house in which he wants to dwell in again. *I will return to my house* (the man) *from which I came* (Matthew 12:44).

All these illustrations show that the human being is thought of as a house, a house which is either going to be the house of God or the house of the devil. We are either going to be the temple of God or we are going to be the house of the unclean spirits. In other words, there are only two possible situations: we live under God's power or we live under the power of Satan. Whoever owns the house is of course the person who runs the house. He has authority over his property. My house doesn't tell me what to do. I do with the house what I choose to do. So the question becomes like this. Who controls your life? Who runs your life? Is it God or is it Satan? In this world, nobody is master and lord of himself. Let us be clear about that. So who has authority over your life? God or Satan? Remember that there is no neutral ground between these two. The spiritual reality is that every heart is the residence of unclean spirits except those who are the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Now, you may be a vacant possession, but only for a short time. Soon the evil spirit will come back. Even though he was thrown out by the power of God, he will come back again, if that house remains vacant. Here is an important point of this passage. The fact that Satan has been cast out of your life does not mean that he will always stay out of your life thereafter. I would even make a stronger statement. The fact that you have been set free doesn't mean that you will automatically remain free. A half-hearted repentance will leave a vacuum that the devil is able to exploit.

The last state is worse

Let's continue to look at the passage. This evil spirit comes out of the man. He wanders around and after a certain period of time, he comes back to the house from which he was thrown out. When he comes close to the house, he likes what he sees. Why is he so happy? Well, first and foremost, it is the fact that the house is empty. What else do you want? You come back and the house is empty, ready to be possessed again. That is the dream of every robber. If there is nobody in the house, you can do whatever you want without worrying about opposition.

And on top of that, he notices that the house has been swept. Somebody has cleaned up the place. Really, you can't ask for more than that! This is just ideal! The house is unoccupied. It is clean. And thirdly, it is 'put in order.' The Greek word for 'put in order' is *kosmeo*, from which we have the word 'cosmetics'. It basically means 'decorated,' 'tidied up' or 'embellished.' So there is no doubt that the place looks really nice. The evil spirit comes back to his previous home and finds it beautiful. It is clean. It is swept. You know, even the person who is very untidy by nature enjoys what is clean.

As long as he doesn't have to do the clean up, he enjoys it. In the same way, even evil spirits like justice, as long as they don't have to submit to it. They like what is clean. And this house looks as good as new. It is literally waiting to be possessed.

This evil spirit, what does he do? Does he rush into the house and take possession of it? No. Why not? Instead of going into the house, he goes away and finds seven other spirits to come with him. He wants them to live with him. That is strange. Why does he want to share his house with seven other people? They are going to make a mess of the house! Wouldn't it be better that he has the house all to himself? Is it because he felt lonely the first time and now he wants some company? If we think like that, we have not understood this evil spirit. Think about this. Why did he go and get seven more spirits? The answer is quite simple. He was cast out the first time, right? Well now, he is bringing seven stronger evil spirits with him to make sure that the next time, he is not going to be driven out that easily. Eight spirits are certainly harder to get rid of than one spirit. And these seven spirits are more evil than the first spirit, which probably means that they are spiritually more powerful.

What is the situation now? The Lord Jesus says, *The last state of that man becomes worse than the first.* At the beginning, he was possessed by only one evil spirit. Now he is possessed by eight evil spirits. That is why the spiritual condition of this man has become worse.

Transient repentance

Let's return to the beginning of this passage and try to see how it applies to us. How was this person set free from the evil spirit in the first place? He was delivered by the power of God. Nobody can set himself free. Nobody can save himself. Now, God saves only the person who has faith. How could this person be set free in the first place if he did not believe in Jesus or called upon Jesus to save him? We saw that Matthew 12 tells us that God's power is now operating by the Holy Spirit to set men free. And the Spirit of God works through Jesus. There is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved. So this person represents someone who is set free from the power of sin because he believed in Jesus and confessed his sins – at least, to a certain extent.

Why would anybody ask Jesus to be set free from the power of Satan and sin? We mentioned earlier that even the sinner gets weary of sin. Even the sinner finds sin oppressive. There is neither joy nor peace when you live under the power of sin. If a person comes to Jesus and accepts the message of salvation simply because he wants peace and joy, his repentance might not be complete. This kind of situation can happen when a person is more concerned about getting something for himself than about knowing the truth. There are people who ask to be set free from sin not so much because they dislike sin but because they don't like the consequences of sin. They don't mind sin so much. They just don't want to deal with the mess that it makes. But the truth of the matter is that you cannot be set free from the consequences of sin without first being delivered from the power of sin.

And so, what happens? These people make a certain religious commitment and they go through a process of moral reform. Having been swept clean, they live a cleaner life. Some of the old sins are removed. And for a time, they actually look nicer than before. They go to church. Their behavior has changed to some extent. After all, the whole house has been put in order. It has been decorated, remember? Unfortunately, this might just be a 'cosmetic' Christianity. In this kind of Christianity, faith in Jesus does not involve a total commitment to the lordship of Christ. They seem to have been set free from the power of sin. But that is only for a time. It doesn't last. What they were delivered from comes back to them with eightfold its power; and their last state is worse than their first, i.e., before they had made any commitment to Christ. A person who allows his house to remain vacant is at the mercy of Satan. The devil will return again and this time, with even greater power.

Impossible to restore

That might be one reason why a person who has once known the Lord and turns away from Him is virtually impossible to restore to salvation.

This is the warning of Hebrews 6:4-6 where we read, *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance...*

This passage points to the impossibility of making a second beginning. When a believer returns to the world and to its sin, he puts himself in a very dangerous position. He cuts himself off from the blessings and the presence of God and he makes himself vulnerable to the temptations of Satan. He goes back under bondage again, under the bondage of sin and Satan. Eventually, he can go so far in sin that he cannot be brought back to repentance anymore. At that point, his state has become worse than his first state. A believer who falls away ends up being in a worse situation than the person who has never been a Christian at all.

The expression 'his state is worse than the first' is also found in 2Peter 2:20, a verse that is so similar to the story about the return of the evil spirit that it sounds like a paraphrase of it. This is what Peter writes. *For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, **the last state has become worse for them than the first.*** The person who makes an outward profession of faith without a genuine commitment to Christ is at great risk of returning to his old way of life. If he does return to evil, he is then compared to a dog that returns to its vomit or to a pig that is washed and then returns to the mud. His fate is going to be worse than if he had never known Christ. Why? Because he has accepted the word of God but has chosen to deliberately reject it. The state of apostasy is worse than the state of ignorance. God's judgment will be more severe on those who have known Him and have rejected the truth than on those who never knew the truth.

Our passage ends with these chilling words. *That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.* This is what is going to happen with this wicked generation. This is what is going to happen to the person who wants a Christianity that does not involve the kingship of Christ in his life. You see, a person may be swept from the filth of sin, and garnished with the paint of religion, but at the same time his soul is empty of Christ. The house is unoccupied when the faith in Jesus is superficial, with no real commitment to Him. The unclean spirit has left for a time, but when he returns, he finds that Christ is not there to shut him out. That is when the last state of the man becomes worse than his first.

Promises come with conditions

Let us understand this important point. No promise of God in the Bible is unconditional. There are people who talk a lot about God's promises but neglect to mention that these promises come with conditions. The conditions are clearly set forth in the Bible (both in the Old and in the New Testament), and they can be summarized in this way: every promise of God is given to us with the understanding that we remain faithful to Him.

We will look at one example of this. These are the words of God to a priest in Israel called Eli.

1Samuel 2:30a. "Therefore the Lord God of Israel says: 'I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever.' To walk in and out before God is the work of a priest. God promised that the descendants of Aaron would always be priests.

1Samuel 2:30b. But now the Lord says: 'Far be it from Me (God will now reject the priesthood of Eli); for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.' God honors those who honor Him but He disdains those who despise Him. Eli honored his sons more than he honored God. His sons were allowed to deal with the sacrifices but their misconduct shocked the people. Eli warned them of their shameful ways but he failed to rebuke them with the severity that their deeds merited and so brought upon his house the judgment of God. God told him that his priesthood would end.

1Samuel 2:31. 'Behold, the days are coming that I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. Eli will be the last 'old man' in his family line. In other words, none of his posterity will live long enough to be old.

Notice that God did not terminate the office of priest altogether. God had promised that the Aaronic priesthood would last forever (Numbers 25:13). However individual priests who sin can forfeit covenant blessing. That is why I said that we cannot claim a promise without fulfilling its conditions. Every promise in the Bible is on the understanding that we will be faithful. If we are unfaithful to God, we cannot enjoy God's promises.

The fact that God has set us free from the power of Satan does not automatically guarantee that we will always be free. If we decide to return to the corruption of the world, our last state will become worse than our first.

The story of the return of the evil spirit serves as a perpetual warning to all Christians and highlights the importance of allowing Jesus to fill our life. What was the problem with that house? The problem was that the house was left empty. It was swept clean and put in order, yes, but it was empty. Once we have been set free from the power of Satan, we must never allow ourselves to be left empty. We must let the Spirit of God fill us completely. And the evidence of this filling is that Jesus is Lord in our life. He has the control of our life. The meaning of this story can be summarized by quoting the words of Paul in Ephesians 5:18, 'Do not get drunk with wine but be constantly filled with the Spirit.'