

Article of the Month
June, 2023

An Occupant for Our Hearts

In Matthew 12:43-45 and Luke 11:24-26, Jesus relates the parable of the unclean spirit. In this parable, an unclean spirit leaves a man and travels through waterless places seeking rest but does not find it. It returns to the "house" from which it came and finds things empty, swept, and put in order. It gathers seven other spirits more wicked than itself and again takes up residence, and the man (house) to whom the spirits returned is in a worse situation than before.

What does this parable mean?

Looking at the context of these verses, we see that Jesus is speaking here to the Pharisees, rebuking them for their hardness of heart in following the letter of the Law and not the spirit of it. They were the spiritual leaders of their nation, and they should have recognized through the evidence of the miracles Jesus was performing, and through their knowledge of scripture and prophecy, that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah. Instead, their envy and malice toward his superior teachings and growing influence over the people drove them to seek his death. They were in part responsible for blinding the nation of Israel; only comparatively few Israelites accepted the teachings Jesus conveyed about his true identity, the coming kingdom, and the opening up of the opportunity of the "high calling."

Jesus' message in this parable was a warning. If Israel was ready to accept him as their Messiah, the "unclean spirit" (unholy state of mind) would leave them and they would be spiritually healed, just as he had physically healed the demon-possessed man in Matthew 12:22 from his inability to see or speak. Their eyes and ears would have been opened to the glorious truths that Jesus was presenting. But if Israel as a nation did not accept him, or if they did not allow his words to take root in their hearts after their initial acceptance, the "unclean spirit" would return and bring with him seven other spirits who would find an empty house, bereft of the knowledge of the Lord, and ready to be occupied by even greater untruths and sinful influences.

As we know, Israel as a nation did not accept our Lord as the Messiah. The leadership and the majority of the people remained blind and dumb, and the result was devastating for them. Jesus, in grief for what he knew was coming, predicted the end of the nation in Matthew 23:36-38. In 70 AD their Temple was destroyed, and the people were dispersed, and the nation effectively came to an end until its promised restoration in 1948.

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But this parable, while certainly aimed at the Pharisees and Israel during Jesus' first advent, also applies to us today. It is a warning to us also, at this end of the Gospel Age. We also have the glorious opportunity to become justified before God by accepting, through faith, Jesus Christ as our Savior. We can come into a relationship with our Father by the justification process if we believe that Jesus is who he said he was, the son of God, sent to redeem the human race from the sin of Adam. This is clearly stated in many scriptures (Romans 4:25; Romans 5:18-19; Romans 5:1,9; Galatians 2:16).

But justification is not the end of the story. We may continue to believe in Jesus but not make that belief central to our lives. We may disavow the belief, change our minds and start believing in another philosophy. Or we can learn more, let the knowledge of God and His plan change our lives and our hearts, and consecrate our lives to follow our Lord as closely as possible. If we are trying to do that to the best of our ability, God tells us that our sins are forgiven (Ephesians 1:7, 1 John 1:9), and our house is "swept clean."

But in our present sinful state we can't keep ourselves clean. In spite of our good resolutions, we can't keep away the influences of the world and the Adversary by ourselves. These other "evil spirits" that are trying continually to occupy our house include pride (the first sin in the universe, committed by Satan, Isaiah 14:12-14, and an obstacle to God), affluence, covetousness, selfishness, behaviors that are considered an abomination by God, hatred, haughtiness, and others. The only way to keep ourselves from these things is to fill our hearts with Christ and his teachings -- to let him occupy our hearts. If we turn our wills over to him and let him work in our lives, he will abide with us. He will give us experiences that enable us to grow into Christlikeness. He will fill our hearts with the holy spirit and help us to develop the fruits of the spirit -- meekness, gentleness, patience, goodness, kindness, love toward others. He will make of us "New Creatures."

Let us follow the instruction of Philippians 4:8. Let us keep our hearts as full as we can with the wonderful plans our Lord has for the whole world of mankind. If we have Christ in our hearts, the "evil spirits" in the parable will be denied entry.
