

## Chapter 47: The Danger of Neutrality

*Matthew 12:43–45*

In Matthew 12:43–45, Jesus’ clash with the scribes and Pharisees that began with his exorcism of demons comes to a head. It is not that Jesus is dangerous because he relies on the power of Beelzebul; rather, it is the unbelieving religious leaders who are in danger because they have encountered the Messiah and seen his power, but yet do not believe in him. Although Jesus’ presence alone brings various blessings, those blessings are temporary apart from genuine faith in him. In fact, for those who come to know Jesus to some degree, but do not believe in him, their condition will be worse than it was at the first. Here, Jesus draws a clear line: *whoever is not with Jesus is against him* (Matt. 12:30).

### **A Weakened Enemy (Matt. 12:43)**

In Matthew 12:43, Jesus begins one of his most enigmatic teachings: “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.” To interpret this correctly, we must keep the context firmly fixed in our minds. Earlier in this chapter, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of relying on the power of Beelzebul to cast out demons (Matt. 12:24). Jesus did not only deny the charge, but he also went further to accuse the Pharisees of having blasphemed the Spirit of God in their opposition to the coming of God’s kingdom into this world by his ministry (Matt. 12:28–32). Jesus was not the servant of the strong man who has tyrannized the world; rather, Jesus has bound that strong man in order to plunder his house by liberating captive souls from the devil (Matt. 12:29). Then, in the previous section, Jesus had told the scribes and Pharisees that he would give them no sign to prove his legitimacy except the sign of Jonah, by which he would rise from the dead after three days buried in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:38–42).

These two stories frame the background to what Jesus says here about the cast-out unclean spirit. It is not that Jesus is prophesying about the situation of the formerly blind and mute man whom he healed earlier in the chapter;<sup>1</sup> rather, this is a general statement that describes the result “whenever” a demon is cast out from a person, but that person does not repent from their sins and believe in Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Calvin, then, correctly perceives the true target of Jesus’ warnings: “He speaks of scribes and hypocrites of a similar character, who, despising the grace of God, enter into a conspiracy with the devil. Against such persons he pronounces that punishment which their ingratitude deserves.”<sup>3</sup>

In this section, Jesus offers some of his most detailed teaching on the activities of demons;

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<sup>1</sup> “This cautionary tale does not relate directly to any of the exorcisms recorded in the gospels, but is a comment on a danger associated with exorcism in general.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 493.)

<sup>2</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 328.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:83.

however, Hendriksen offers three wise warnings about our interpretation:

Three facts, however, must be borne in mind: *a.* Scripture tells us very little about the peculiarities and customs of demons, and to speculate too presumptuously about such matters would serve no useful purpose. *b.* The Lord is not giving us a discourse on demonology. He wants us to think not so much about these demons as about “this wicked generation” (verse 45, cf. verse 39), as symbolized by the man who was first possessed by one demon, then delivered, and finally repossessed, only this time not by one but by eight demons. *c.* If this illustration is in the nature of a parable, as it well may be, it would be wrong to press every detail as if it were to be interpreted separately and literally.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, should we take from this verse? Two main points stand out worthy of our consideration.

First, while the language and reasoning for the demon’s passing through “waterless places” has long puzzled commentators, Nolland aptly writes, “No good parallel has been cited for the journeying in waterless places, but the imagery is probably based on the idea that the demons will move naturally in realms where conditions are antithetical to human well-being, and devoid of the blessing of God.”<sup>5</sup> Even the language of what the unclean spirits do after they are driven out of their human hosts underscores the absolute perversity and viciousness of demons. They love nothing good, nor anything filled with beauty or life. They come to kill and destroy, and, when they fail, they retreat to places of death seeking to find rest.

Second, as Blomberg observes, “The ‘rest’ the evil spirit seeks here contrasts sharply and ironically with the rest Christ offers (11:29) and links this controversy with the Sabbath controversies of 12:1-4.”<sup>6</sup> The rest that Christ has come to give to his people is a rest that other supernatural powers cannot offer. Certainly, Blomberg is right that this description links with the Sabbath controversy at the beginning of the chapter; however, it also suggests one more argument against believing that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul: Jesus offered *rest* from the weariness of demonic oppression, when the demons cannot even find rest for themselves.

Why, then, cannot the demon find rest? Calvin writes, “we have here a description of Satan’s nature. He never ceases to do us injury, but is continually busy, and moves from one place to another....to dwell out of men is to him a wretched banishment, and resembles a barren wilderness.”<sup>7</sup> Hendriksen adds, “Satan is eager to send his demons into human hearts, for them to assume control over those hearts, always in subjection to the prince of evil. For a demon to dwell outside the earth’s atmosphere, and especially outside of the human heart where he can carry out his evil designs, is painful, for he is the arch-sadist.”<sup>8</sup> While this passage should not lead to over-speculation on the metaphysical comings and goings of demons, it should nevertheless provide us a

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<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 539–40.

<sup>5</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 514. Citing Nolland, *Luke*, 2:645.

<sup>6</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:84.

<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 540.

window into the insatiable desire of demonic forces to torment human beings who have been created in the image of God. Calvin adds a word of pastoral exhortation: “Satan views with deeper hatred, and attacks with greater fierceness and rage, those who have been rescued from his snares. Such an admonition, however, ought not to inspire us with terror, but to arouse us to keep diligent watch, and to put on the spiritual armor, that we may make a brave resistance.”<sup>9</sup>

### **A Worthless Neutrality (Matt. 12:44)**

After finding no rest, Jesus describes the reasoning of the demon: “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” (v. 44). Hagner notes that, by calling the human being “my house,” the demon is using “imperialistic language” to express its dominion over the host.<sup>10</sup> Upon returning, the emptiness, cleanness, and orderliness of the demon’s “house,” signs that the human being has been working to put his or her life back together after the devastating presence of the demon left. Yet, for all the reformation that this person has accomplished by the absence of the demon, the idea Jesus suggests here is that the demon’s presence has not been replaced by the presence of the Holy Spirit: “His highest delight is in that emptiness by which the neglect of divine grace is followed.”<sup>11</sup> As Morris writes, “Jesus is talking about a pleasant, moral reformation, but with the man thinking that he is still in control of himself and with no reference to the Spirit of God. The man is empty; he is open to invasion from all kinds of evil, and in fact the original spirit comes back with reinforcements.”<sup>12</sup>

The point Jesus makes here is that neutrality is not a sign of strength and improvement. Whatever caused the demon to leave the scene, this person believes to have tidied their lives in order to the page to a new chapter of their lives. As bad as things had been, however, this person has not sought any lasting refuge by finding God’s protection for the future. There really can be no spiritual neutrality, since spiritual forces have power over us that we cannot really understand in this life. The question is not *whether* we will be under the dominion of a spiritual force, but *which* spiritual force will exercise dominion over us. If a demon, then reprieves from that demonic influences will be temporary, if at all, as Jesus will explain in the next verse.

### **A Worsened Condition (Matt. 12:45)**

All the person’s efforts to tidy up his or her life are short-lived: “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” (v. 45). Demons do not lose interest in tormenting human captives; if they are driven away for a time, they will find a way to return, if possible. As Lenski notes, “Even after the vain attempt against Jesus, Satan departed from him only ‘for a season’ (Luke 4:13).”<sup>13</sup> This time, the unclean spirit will not return alone, but will

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:85.

<sup>10</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 357.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:85.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 329.

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 499.

come with overwhelming force, bringing “seven other spirits more evil than itself.” Certainly, it is also the case that a demon who formerly held possession of someone possesses intimate knowledge to form a plan of attack against us: “he has knowledge and experience of all the approaches by which he may reach us; and that, if there be no open and direct entrance, he has dexterity enough to creep in by small holes or winding crevices.”<sup>14</sup>

In this story, Jesus does not explain the solution for how to avoid this situation. Nevertheless, he clearly identifies the problem, in that the person’s heart is “empty,” or “literally ‘at leisure,’ nobody is occupying it.”<sup>15</sup> By this problem, Jesus implies the solution: “Something else, which is not specified, must take the place of the demonic occupation. We can only assume in the light of Jesus’ teaching elsewhere that the void is to be filled by discipleship, and more specifically by the Spirit of God, a link which is suggested in this context by the Spirit’s role in exorcism in v. 28.”<sup>16</sup>

Leon Morris, then, explains what Jesus means when he closes this section by warning, “So also will it be with this evil generation”:

Clearly he was now pointing out the danger in which his conversation partners stood. They had been confronted with divine power, and if they tried to live empty lives, lives that did not replace evil by the presence of the Holy Spirit, there was nothing before them but the grimmest of prospects. If it continued on its self-opinionated way, the generation that refused the opportunity presented to it by the appearance in its midst of the very Son of God, the generation already characterized as “evil and adulterous,” faced a future that was bleak indeed.<sup>17</sup>

The miraculous signs that Jesus performed—especially in casting out demons—marked the entrance of the kingdom of God into the world. As much temporary benefit as Jesus would accomplish by his presence and activity, all of that would result in a state “worse than the first” if his hearers did not respond to him with repentance and faith.

## Discussion Questions

1. What has happened in Matthew 12 that leads up to Jesus’ story about the exorcised demon? What do you think the “waterless places” Jesus describes here signifies? Why is the demon unable to find “rest”? What does this tell us about the relentless cruelty of Satan and his unclean spirits? What do you think about demons and demonic activity in this world? How does Jesus push against our low view of demonic activity here?
2. What is it that the demon calls “my house” (v. 44)? What is the condition of that house when the demon returns to it? What does this condition suggest about what this person has done after finding

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:86.

<sup>15</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 499.

<sup>16</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 493.

<sup>17</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 330.

some relief from his or her demonic oppression? In what ways are you tempted to pursue spiritual neutrality? Why does Jesus teach us here about why spiritual neutrality is so dangerous for us?

3. Why does the demon go to recruit seven more demons? What does this tell us about the power and persistence of demons to torment human beings made in the image of God? How does this lead to a worse state than at the beginning? In what ways do you think this might show up in someone's life? What is the solution that we need in order to defend ourselves against the power of future spiritual attacks?

4. Jesus said a few verses earlier that “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30). How does this story teach us more about that claim? What tempts you to try to retain some degree of independence from God's Holy Spirit? Where are you tempted to put our trust instead? What does Jesus warn us about the powerlessness of those other sources of protection against a demonic onslaught?