

Matthew 12:43-45

Introduction

We need to notice first of all that this story is not *about* demons. Within the story, the main emphasis is not the demons, but the person who has been possessed by the demons. But then even the story itself is only meant to be an *illustration* of the entire generation of Jesus' day (v. 45) – most of which had never experienced demon possession. So as we read this story, the demons must, and should fade into the background. We should not look to these verses for detailed information on demons and their ways. What are the waterless places and why was the demon passing through them? What kind of rest was the demon seeking? Why couldn't the demon find any rest anywhere else? Why does the demon bring with it seven other spirits the second time around? In what ways were the seven additional demons more evil than the first demon? What rights and powers do demons have over those whom they have formerly possessed? This little story can raise a whole host of questions for curious minds (which isn't necessarily bad in itself), but the problem is that none of these questions are ever answered. And I believe this is as Jesus intended – because the story is not about demons! We can easily understand the lesson Jesus is teaching us without any of these questions being answered. And so the application here for us is that we must always seek to submit ourselves in humble reverence to the agenda of God's Word. We need to avoid going off on rabbit trails and tangents, and making a big deal out of obscure and peripheral points. We need to submit to the Word of God not only on those subjects where it has spoken, but also on those subjects where it remains silent. Sometimes, even our *innocent* curiosity can end up leading us astray and reveal a heart that is more enthralled with idle speculations and always learning something *new* and interesting, than with the wonderful teaching and doctrine of the Gospel. So what is it that *God* would have us to hear and understand as we come to His Word?

I. Verse 43 – When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.

First of all, the demon did not go out of the person because it wanted to, but because a greater power *commanded* and *ordered* it to leave. This entire confrontation with the Pharisees began with Jesus healing a man who was demon-oppressed and the Pharisees' charge that when Jesus cast out demons, He did so by the power of the prince of the demons. Exorcism had been a significant part not only of Jesus' ministry (Mat. 4:24; 8:16, 30-32; 9:32-33), but also of His disciples' (Matt. 10:1). So now Jesus is describing the kind of thing that can happen *after* one of His exorcisms. In Jewish writings (Tobit 8:3; Baruch 4:35) and in the Bible (Is. 34:14 & Rev. 18:2), the abode of demons is occasionally pictured as an inhospitable desert waste, uninhabited by humans. But this demon passes through the waterless places and for some reason finds no rest. Is this because there were no humans there to inhabit and oppress? We really can't know, and it really doesn't matter. What matters is what happens next:

II. Verse 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.

So the demon decides to go back to the same person from whom he had been ordered to leave – perhaps by Jesus Himself or by one of His disciples. That may sound wrong and impossible to us. How could the demon go back to the same man from whom he had previously been expelled by the power of God’s Spirit? When the demon arrives at his former “house”, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. The NIV says that the house was: “unoccupied, swept clean, and put in order.” Other translations say that it was “tidy” (TEV) and “neat” (NCV), and yet it was still vacant and empty. Apparently, after he had been delivered from the demon, this person had “cleaned house”. He had made a whole lot of changes and become a much “better” person. Obviously, he looked a lot better now (more clean, and moral, and wholesome) than he had before. And yet in the midst of all this cleaning and tidying, the house remained empty. His life was swept clean and put in order, and yet because it was still vacant, it was an open invitation for the demon to return and take possession once again.

III. Verse 45a – 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.

We’re not told why the demon went and brought with it seven other spirits more evil than itself – and once again, it doesn’t really matter. The main point is that compared to how he ends up, this person was obviously better off *before* the first demon had ever been cast out. All of his cleaning and tidying and working to change and reform his life for the better had only created a playground for Satan’s demons. And so after the initial joy of his deliverance by the power of God’s Spirit and the satisfaction of becoming a better person, he was only plunged into a far worse state than he had ever been in before. That’s a pretty sad story. And for anyone listening who might comfort himself by saying that at least this story applies only to the demon-possessed, Jesus now concludes:

IV. Verse 45b – So also will it be with this evil generation

And so once again, Jesus is talking not about the Scribes and Pharisees specifically, but about the entire generation of His day (cf. 38-42). But how is the story of Jesus’ generation just like the story of this person who was demon-possessed? On another occasion, Jesus said to the Jews:

✓ John 5:33, 35 – You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth... He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while [lit. for an hour] in his light.

So for a short while, the Jewish people were willing to rejoice in the light of John’s preaching. They were pretty excited to hear what John was saying about the coming of the Messiah. Not only was there finally another prophet on the scene after four hundred long years of silence, but this prophet was actually announcing the good news that the promised kingdom was now at hand. But the people weren’t just excited. They actually tried for a while to do something about their excitement.

✓ Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6 (cf. Mark 1:4-5) – In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ... Then *Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan* were going out to him, and *they were baptized* by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*.

- ✓ Luke 3:7-8, 10-15 – [John] said... to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance... And the crowds [who were being baptized and confessing their sins] asked him, “*What then shall we do?*” ... The people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ [the promised Messiah].

John the Baptist came as a burning and shining lamp as he bore witness to the truth, and the people were *willing* to *rejoice* for a while in his *light*. They were baptized as they *confessed their sins* and sought to bring forth the *fruits* of repentance. The generation of John’s and Jesus’ day had been greatly blessed with the light of God’s truth, *and they had responded* by working to clean up their act. But as we are finding out, this response was short-lived. It was only for a while. *Why?* Well, because the changes were only superficial... the reform was only skin deep (cf. Tenney; EBC).

Before John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness, the Jews were in bad shape. They were oppressed by the demon of despair and hopelessness under the rule of the Romans as a result of their sin and disobedience. But when John the Baptist came, that demon left them and they were filled with hope as they heard the announcement of the kingdom and began to work at reforming their lives and changing their ways – confessing their sins and being baptized by John. But the changes they made were on the outside, and not on the inside. They worked at moral reform and becoming new and better people, but without a true spiritual rebirth and the regeneration of their hearts. And so the demon returned, along with seven others more wicked than itself. The people that had initially responded to the preaching of John had now hardened their hearts against the preaching of the Messiah Himself. Now instead of simply being under the rule of the Romans, the same Jerusalem that went out to be baptized by John, confessing its sins and seeking to bring forth the fruits of repentance... that same Jerusalem will soon be destroyed by the Romans.

Conclusion

And so Jesus wants us to see the utter futility of responding to the Word of God and the moving of His Spirit with outward changes and moral reform when there is no true inward regeneration. For a while, we may rid ourselves of certain sins. We may become “better” people. We may get control of our tempers, we may overcome a sinful habit or addiction, we may clean up our language, we may become more generous and more kind, and we may do all of these things in response to the moving of God’s Spirit and in apparent obedience to His Word. But if there is not first of all an *inward* transformation of the heart, then all of our outward reform and improving and bettering of ourselves is only setting us up in the end for an even bigger fall into an even worse state than ever before. Of course, the worse state of the demon possessed man was not the fault of Jesus because He delivered Him from the first demon. It was the fault of the man who was more than happy to be changed on the outside, but was unwilling to be changed on the inside. He was more than willing to work at cleaning up his act on the outside in response to God’s Word, but on the inside, perhaps unknown to everyone else and even to himself, he was still the same person he had always been.

So the point of this very sad story is not to lead us to despair, but rather to call us to a true change of heart. This is how God exhorted Israel in the Old Testament:

- ✓ Ezekiel 18:31 – Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!

It is not enough to cast away from us all the transgressions that we have committed. It is not enough to work at being better people. By itself, this is just setting ourselves up for a greater fall! We need to go all the way, not just half way. We need a new heart and a new spirit within us. It is not enough to clean the house and then leave it vacant and empty. We must fill it up with the true love of God, a true delight in His ways, and a true and vibrant faith in His Word. These are the kinds of things that pertain to the heart. We must be occupied and indwelt by the Spirit of God. We need to be transformed, and changed *always* from the *inside out*. You can have a person who has lived a very wicked and perverse lifestyle, and then through some “encounter” with the Scriptures, he comes under the conviction of God’s Spirit, and is transformed into a very moral and upstanding person of integrity and character – and yet there is never any true *inward* regeneration and change of heart. Perhaps this person changed just because he was afraid of going to hell, or just because he wanted to make sure he would go to heaven, or mainly because he wanted to sooth his guilty conscience and feel better about himself. But it would be better for this person in the end if he had never been delivered in the first place. Because outward change apart from inward transformation is the devil’s playground.

- ✓ 2 Peter 2:20-22 – For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.”

Peter’s point in this last verse is that the heart was never changed. The dog remained the dog, and the pig—though it had had a bath—was still a pig. The unregenerate person may escape the defilements of the world through the knowledge of Jesus Christ for a while, but eventually he will be overcome by the old defilements of sin and the flesh.

So do you have a new heart, or are you really the same person you’ve always been – just cleaned up on the outside? Because of our own sin, none of us are ever willing to make for ourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Because of our sin, what we *ought* to do has become impossible. And so listen to what God says in Ezekiel chapter eleven:

- ✓ Ezekiel 11:19 – I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.

Only God can change the heart. Won’t you earnestly call out to God and ask Him to give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you? If you will do this, then you can know that the very “asking” is proof in itself that God has answered your request.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 5:17 – Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

What an amazing miracle of God’s grace! But now what about those of us who have already been given new hearts? There is still a principle here that applies to us. True and lasting change is *always* (even *now!*) from the *inside* out. We can get so caught up in the “Christian quest” to turn away from sin, and do better things, and speak better words, and be more obedient to God’s Word, and be more holy, and yet in all of this work and effort, we are not really seeking the constant renewal of our hearts – without which there can never be any true and lasting change. And so we read in the book of Proverbs:

- ✓ Proverbs 4:23 – Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us:

- ✓ Romans 12:2 – Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed *by the renewal* of your mind.

Why do we still sin? Because we still need the *renewing* of our *hearts!* Why don’t we have more victory over sin? Because too often we’re more focused on outward moral reform than we are on the inward *renewing* of our *hearts*. So Paul writes:

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

After his sin with Bathsheba, David prayed:

- ✓ Psalms 51:10 – Create in me a clean heart, O God, and *renew* a right spirit within me.

This is what we *most need* isn’t it? – Not just sometimes, but all the time. We need the constant inward *renewal* of our hearts – which only God can give. Therefore, we need to *ask God* to grant us this renewal so that we might *desire, and want, and delight in* the ways of God and not the ways of sin. The Psalmist prayed:

- ✓ Psalms 119:36 – Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!

David prayed:

- ✓ 1 Chronicles 29:18 – O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.

Brothers and sisters, this may seem elementary, but I think it’s something we forget. As we earnestly ask God to renew our hearts, we need to make sure that we are in God’s Word (reading

it, and hearing it preached, and thinking upon it), because God's Word is always the means by which He works to change us from the inside out. Have we been given a new heart? That is what matters most of all. If we have, then let us continue to guard against seeking outward moral reform and righteousness apart from the constant inward renewing of our hearts.

Teaching our Children

NOTE: I do not always envision the children being able to "recite" the answers to these questions by memory. Oftentimes, the questions are only intended to stimulate thought and open the way for you as a parent to provide more teaching and explanation appropriate to your children.

Q. What story did Jesus tell about a man who had been delivered from a demon?

A. Read Matthew 12:43-45

Q. How was the story of the people of Jesus' day just like the story of this man?

A. See Scriptures under IV. and last paragraph under IV.

Q. Can people change on the outside without really changing on the inside?

A. Yes, they can! – At least for a while.

Q. What is it about the heart that is so important (as opposed to just our actions on the outside)?

A. The heart is all about the things that we *love*, and *desire*, and *delight* in – not just the things that we do or don't do, say or don't say, etc.

Q. Can we make ourselves a new heart?

A. No. Only God can give us a new heart that truly delights in His ways. (See Ezekiel 11:19 on page 4)

Q. If we earnestly ask God to change our hearts, can we know for certain that our hearts will be changed?

A. YES, we can!!! (Read and rejoice in 2 Corinthians 5:17 on the top of page 5)

Q. Even after God has given us a new heart, what do our hearts constantly need until Jesus comes again?

A. Our hearts need constant *renewing*. We need God to continue giving us holy desires, loves, and longings. (See Scriptures on page 5)

Q. What is the means (or tool) that God always uses to renew our hearts?

A. God always uses His Word to renew our hearts. So must make sure to be reading and hearing God's Word as we ask God to change us from the inside out.

✓ Warn your children about the dangers of looking good on the outside where there has been no true inward change of heart. Encourage your children with the good news of God's promise to change hearts through Jesus Christ.