

**A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010**  
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The teaching of Jesus in the gospel (Luke 11:14f.) about the departure of the unclean spirit and the return the seven more wicked spirits is primarily about biblical Israel. This is made clear in the parallel account of this story in Matthew's Gospel, which Jesus concludes with these words:

Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. *Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation* (Matthew 12:25, italics added).

God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and gave Israel the Torah. God removed the evil from Israel. However, the people were not faithful to the Torah. Israel's unfaithfulness came to a climax with her rejection of Jesus, the Messiah whom God sent. The rejection of Jesus opened the door for greater evil to enter. The last state of Israel was worse than the first because the judgment that came for rejecting the Messiah was worse than the condition of slavery in Egypt.

The error made by "this wicked generation" is that they claimed to be followers of God, but they rejected the Messiah whom God sent. This is a danger for religious people. We can be religious in disobedient ways. We can use the name of God, but fail to do the will of God. Religion can become a cover for sin rather than an answer for sin.

The kind of sin that hides behind religion is subtle and dangerous. Religion typically leads people to be aware of and turn from visible sins like lust and gluttony. But religion can often provide a cover for more serious sins like pride, envy and covetousness.

The religious leaders in Israel, who were the target of Jesus' critique, maintained an appearance of goodness. They were upholders of the Ten Commandments. This is why they felt self-righteous in relationship to the tax collectors and sinners who did not observe the Torah and were guilty of obvious and visible sins. However, Jesus revealed that more serious sins were lurking beneath the religious exterior. As he said,

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:27-28).

The point of the gospel is that nature abhors a vacuum. Turning away from evil is only half a loaf or one side of the coin. We must replace the evil with the good or else a greater evil will take root in its place. The good that must replace the evil is Jesus. We must accept him, put our faith in and allow him to do his work in our lives.

Jesus came as the light of the world to reveal what was wrong in Israel and to call the nation to repent and believe in him. But Israel was unwilling to see what the light revealed. Rejecting their ultimate good, they opened the door to the greater evil and to God's judgment.

The principal that nature abhors a vacuum applies to each area of our lives as well. Often, people will profess faith in Jesus Christ but will resist his will in one or more ways—perhaps with regard to sexual morality or money, or perhaps with regard to a difficult teaching like the command to love our enemies.

The problem is that when we do not accept and practice the teachings of Jesus in some area of life, we open the door to greater evil in that area of life. If we will not practice humility, we will fall into pride. If we will not be generous, we will become covetous. If we will not love, we will come to hate. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “He who is not for me is against me.” There is no neutrality on the issue of Jesus Christ or any of the commandments he gives us. There is no way of rejecting God’s will in some area of life that will not also lead us to greater evil in that area.

When we look at our lives and identify the areas of our greatest struggle, the areas where the devil is most able to tempt and test us, these are usually the areas where we are not yet fully committed to doing the will of God. In our lenten self examination, we need to answer the question that Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda: “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6)—which means, “Am I ready to accept God’s will in this area of my life?”

Our failure to make progress in the faith is a failure of the will. We languish when we are not really ready to do what God wants. As St. Augustine famously prayed before his conversion, “Lord make me chaste, but not yet.” We grow in the faith as we surrender our wills to the will of God, as the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” becomes the prayer of our hearts.

This is highlighted by the closing line of the gospel. A certain woman heard Jesus and offered praise. “Blessed is the womb that bare thee and the paps which thou hast sucked.” But [Jesus] said, “Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.”

The unspoken connection here is that the mother of Jesus is “blessed” precisely because she is the preeminent New Testament person to hear the word of God and kept it. As Mary said to the angel Gabriel, “Be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38).

The church calls Mary “the new Eve” because her faith and obedience correspond to the disobedience of Eve. Mary illustrates the principle that we overcome captivity to the evil one by faithfully doing what God tells us to do. It is not enough to say no to sin and evil. We must also say yes to God by putting our faith in Jesus and doing his will in every area of our lives.