

Good and Evil

Matthew 12:43-50

One of the dangers of preaching expository sermons on consecutive verses of a book is that sometimes you can lose the big picture as a result of dividing up a portion of Scripture into smaller sermon texts. So as Matthew concludes a section of his gospel, let me try to take a step back and look at this chapter as a whole. A particular theme of Jesus' ministry becomes prominent, that of a warning of judgment upon unbelievers. And with that warning of judgment, a recognition of the personal presence of Satan and his demons.

We have seen a lot of opposition to Jesus in this chapter from Pharisees, those self-righteous unbelievers who were most susceptible to Satan's influence and most in danger of God's judgment. They saw his miraculous healings, and would condemn him for doing it on the Sabbath. They conspired against him to destroy him. And when he cast out demons, they accused him of doing it by Satan's own power. Then they asked a sign, and received this condemnation in response: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign."

And this afternoon comes the climax, the climax of a judgment justly pronounced against those Pharisees. "So shall it also be with this wicked generation," he declares in verse 45. It was an ominous declaration, "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."

Why such a harsh condemnation? What had the Pharisees missed in their misguided zeal. To put it simply, they ignored,

I. THE SPIRITUAL DANGERS OF EVIL.

That's what they missed. They dismissed the thought of evil altogether, at least, evil that would be in them. They wanted a sign. They wanted assurances of Jesus' power. They wanted Jesus to prove to them his goodness and authority. And they missed the awareness of the evil that was within them, within their own hearts. They missed the awareness of that deadly danger. Essentially, they enter into conspiracy with the devil himself. And so Jesus has a message for them,

v.43-45

Let's look more closely at those words. First, an obvious point, very helpful to observe.

A. Evil is personal.

Evil is personified in Satan himself, the father of Evil. And it is manifested in the personal existence of demons, unclean spirit, fallen angels. And those unclean spirits are personal. They are creatures; real, living creatures.

Evil is not merely a force. It is not simply a philosophy. Evil is embodied in a created person, and that devil has his own devoted followers and disciples. Their future is certain, according to,

Jude 6 "And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; 7 as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."

But even so, their danger is real. Thus, the warning of,

1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

So it's personal. The unclean spirit goes into a person to make a home for himself. And the nature of evil spirits is that those who are not engaged in a personal attack on some particular victim are unsettled until they are engaged in such an attack. The words of verse 43 are not merely symbolic, but a description of reality. An unclean spirit without a victim is not at peace, not at rest. An unclean spirit without a victim is looking for trouble, looking to cause trouble.

v.43

Jesus has power over the evil spirits, that much we have seen clearly. According to verse 28, Jesus casts out demons by the Spirit of God. Luke identifies that power as the finger of God. Jesus acts with God's power over Satan and his demons, and thus he declares that the kingdom of God has come upon you. But even with that power, even when an unclean spirit has been put out of a person, there is always a plan to get back, "he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none."

That's the nature of evil, dear friends. That's the nature of the evil one. Never at rest, never at peace, unless it is causing someone great distress.

Calvin describes it with these words, both of warning and encouragement: "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."

Calvin continues, "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. In a word, he directs all his

efforts to accomplish our destruction; and above all, when he has been vanquished and put to flight by Christ, it only tends more to whet his rage and keenness to do us injury. Before Christ makes us partakers of his energy, it seems as if it were in sport and amusement that this enemy reigns over us; but when he has been driven out, he conceives resentment at having lost his prey, collects new forces, and arouses all his senses to attack us anew."

Evil is personal. And, going on,

B. Evil is opportunistic.

The evil one looks for opportunities to inflict evil. Such a dangerous condition is described in,

v.44

Again with his characteristic clarity, Calvin writes, "Christ is unquestionably describing those who, being destitute of the Spirit of God, are prepared for receiving the devil...The metaphor of a house swept and embellished is taken from men who find pleasure in the cleanness and neatness of their apartments; for to Satan no sight is beautiful but deformity itself, and no smell is sweet but filth and nastiness. The meaning therefore is, that Satan never finds a more appropriate habitation within us, than when, having parted with Christ, we receive Satan as a guest. His highest delight is in that emptiness by which the neglect of divine grace is followed."

"...that emptiness by which the neglect of divine grace is followed." Neglect of God, dear ones, brings an emptiness that attracts Satan. Do you know how that works even in your own life? When God is not in the house of your life, then Satan invites himself in. That's his opportunity.

James is clear about the promise,
James 4:7 “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

But what if you don't? What if you don't resist the devil? What if you don't draw near to God? What if your life is described by those chilling words, “...that emptiness by which the neglect of divine grace is followed”?

Well, then, continue on to,
v.45

C. Evil is aggressive.

Oh, the dangers of allowing, permitting, and even inviting Satan to come into your heart and soul. Oh, the dangers of the failure to resist the devil, the danger of indulging your vulnerabilities to the Devil. He doesn't leave you alone. And if you put him out, so to speak, when you resist him such that he flees from you, when you begin successfully to engage in this spiritual warfare, and then leave yourself unguarded and vulnerable, he will return with a vengeance! Evil is aggressive. It doesn't stand idly by, and when provoked, evil doubles down on its attack.

Just look at this language in verse 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.” That's a warning to the unbelieving Pharisees to whom Jesus is speaking. And by extension, it serves as warning to all of us. Don't let your guard down. Don't allow your house to be swept and empty, unprotected. That is, your soul. Don't arrange everything within your own soul such that you fail to be engaged in this mortal combat against an evil enemy.

The point is the safety and security of your soul. And the ever present danger which Satan poses in that very context. Again let me use John Calvin's words to describe this situation: “By these words Christ shows that if we fall from his grace, our subjection to Satan is doubled, so that he treats us with greater cruelty than before, and that this is the just punishment of our slothfulness. Let us not then suppose that the devil has been vanquished by a single combat, because he has once gone out of us. On the contrary, let us remember that, as his lodgment within us was of old standing, ever since we were born, 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. We must, therefore, endeavor that Christ, holding his reign within us, may block up all the entrances of his adversary. Whatever may be the fierceness or violence of Satan's attacks, they ought not to intimidate the sons of God, whom the invincible power of the Holy Spirit preserves in safety.”

There is the encouragement, dear friends. And with that let's move on to the next section, very much more positively. Enough with the dangers upon the evil and adulterous generation. How do we avoid that danger and escape that judgment? How do we help one another to remain safe in the midst of that evil and adulterous generation? Simple. We emphasize the benefit of our true family,

II. THE FELLOWSHIP OF A FAMILY.

Our Christian family. Our brotherhood with one another in Christ. But what is our solidarity? Where is the source of our strength as we live in this evil and adulterous generation? Our family. Our Christian family. Our brothers and sisters. Our mothers and fathers. Here, as we live that out in our church.

Is that stating it too strongly, the importance of the church? I don't think so, because just look at what Jesus says about,

A. The true identity of a family.

He looks at his own mother, a godly woman against whom he never sinned. He looked at his mother, with perfect honor and respect befitting her identity as his mother, he looked at her and refused her request to speak to him. Along with his brothers.

v.46

That seems so harsh, doesn't it? Mary and her other sons, Jesus' brothers according to his human nature, were "seeking to speak with Him." And Jesus' words are a denial of that request. Because he has this point to make, that even your human family is not as important as your family defined by your brothers and sisters in Christ! So we read,

v.48-49

Now, I can say absolutely that that was not a sinful act of disrespect toward his mother, because the Bible tells us that Jesus never sinned. Thus the point is valid, and is obviously emphasized. Your family, the identity of your family, in the greatest and most profound sense of the word, is this family. Look around at your brothers and sisters. Look around at your mothers and fathers. People of God, this is your family!

To add emphasis to that idea, just consider Jesus' words in Matthew 22 about a woman who married subsequent brothers as each one died. The question was,

Mat. 22:28 "In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her." 29 But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God:32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

So in heaven, we won't live in families as we do now. We won't live as married couples, but as the angels. But in this age, until Jesus returns, God puts us into families. And they are significant, important. They do establish our earthly identity, and God's covenant promises of the gospel are even extended to generations within those families, "I will be your God and the God of your children." We are to live in families, delight in families, and remain faithful to those families. Unquestionable and undeniably.

But here is the point Jesus makes in that very context, in the presence of his own dearly beloved mother, his disciples are his family. And our deepest true family identity is the body of Christ. Our earthly family identity is actually derived from our Christian family, not the other way around, for our true family begins when identify our true Father.

Eph. 3:14 "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

That's why the church is so important, because it shows forth that family identity even now, here on earth. That family is nothing less than the household of God. That family is the dwelling place of God, a holy temple in the Lord.

Eph. 2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the

household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Again, beloved, the church is the clearest and most obvious outward evidence and demonstration of your true family. The local church. The visible church. This church. This family. So who are my mother and who are my brothers? And sisters? You are. Who are my children? You are. Where is my family? It's right here.

Jesus then gives one further, obvious identification of who belongs to that family. It is a very practical identification of,

B. The outward evidence of a family.
v.50

In other words, perhaps more simply, “by their fruit you will know them.” As we read and studied in,

Mat. 7:17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

That description comes with a warning as well,

Mat. 7:21 “Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”

There has to be evidence. Not just words. Not just a family heritage, in terms of this world. In the context of Matthew 12, not

just the Jews. Who are the true children of God? Who are the true believers in Jesus Christ? Who are the brothers and sisters of Jesus? Those who show themselves to be his disciples. Those who follow him. And what a blessed position that is.

Again, Calvin: “By disparaging the relationship of flesh and blood, our Lord teaches a very useful doctrine; for he admits all his disciples and all believers to the same honorable rank, as if they were his nearest relatives, or rather he places them in the room of his mother and brethren.”

So whom does Jesus identify as his family? His disciples. And God's work in our redemption is just this, that he makes us to be Jesus' brothers and sisters.

Rom. 8:29 “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

Such a privilege is ours, to be called brothers and sisters of Jesus. And that is what we are, we who are being conformed to Jesus' image, we who are being made like him. And that is who you are, if God is at work making you more like Jesus.

That privilege is never more obvious than here at the Lord's table, because it is around the dinner table that brothers and sisters sit together. As it was in my home growing up, the dinner table is the center of family life. There were all were together, every night. And here we are this afternoon, brothers and sisters of Jesus, gathered around his table. And so we sing in that great sabbath song of,

Psalms 92:1 “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; 2 To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night.”