

August 9, 2009

I John 2:18-19 / John 5:1-15 / Luke 11:24-28

The Extreme Dangers of a Vacant Soul

If there is any truth I have seen worked out in the lives of people over my lifetime, it is this — that reformation without renewal is a formula for disaster! And when I say I've seen that truth worked out in the lives of people, I include myself in that category. Because at one point in my teen years (actually it was in my 8th grade year) I chose to clean up my life morally and be "more religious."

My brother and sister had both become Christians. They'd both experienced the new birth and been "born again." I had given it some thought, since it was constantly being preached at the Baptist church plant in town that my mother was bringing us to at that time. I even remember bringing my Bible to school that year (a public school in New England!) on at least two occasions!

Yet, at the same time, when it came to repenting, or believing the Gospel, or giving my life in trust to Jesus, or publicly owning Christ, I refused to take that step. I was more interested in what my friends would think of me and what I wouldn't be able to do any more, so I continued to keep Jesus at a safe distance.

Or using the imagery in today's passage, I "cleaned up my house," but "I also left it vacant." And as Jesus points out today, is a recipe for disaster! In fact, I became a living example that He was right! That a soul somewhat cleaned up, but left vacant ends up worse than it was before. Because it wasn't too long afterward that I started on moral slide downward that lasted until I was 23 years old — my behaviors and lifestyle getting progressively more sinful with each passing year (7 times more sinful, easily)!

You see, that's what many people often fail to understand — that moral reformation, that stops at nothing more than moral reformation and does not eventually result in a true conversion of the soul to Christ and the reception of the Holy Spirit through new birth, often leaves a person worse off (or a potentially more dangerous position) than if they had never tried to reform themselves at all.

The Apostle John speaks of this as well from a slightly different angle. He says of the "antichrist's" in his day: ***"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us, for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us..."***

In other words, these people whom he labels as “antichrists” (people now denying the deity of Christ and actively persecuting the church) were once church goers! *“They went out from us,”* he says. That is, they had been in our fellowship!

By all outward appearances they seemed like good Christian people! They had joined with them in worship, and listened to the preaching of the Word from the Apostle John himself, and probably seen people healed and witnessed the exercise of spiritual gifts and heard people give testimony of their conversion and may have even felt the tug of the Holy Spirit on their own hearts! They had surely reformed or cleaned up their lifestyle, and may even have had a demon expelled from their soul (since exorcisms were common in the early days of the church).

But as John makes plain: *“They never truly belonged to us.”* They never truly believed or experienced new birth by the Holy Spirit. They changed their behaviors enough to pass for Christians but they never really experienced spiritual renewal. That’s why John can say: *“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.”*

Some of the most anti-Christian people in history are those who grew up in the church, and even sensed the call of God, but then turned against the church with a vehemence that was shocking.

I don’t know how true it is, but I’ve been told that both Hitler and Stalin at one time pursued the priesthood and attended seminary. They were living examples of what both John and Jesus speak about in these passages.

That’s the **FIRST** thing we find in today’s passage in Luke: Jesus referring to people who have had a spirit of rebellion or defiance or anger or lust or some other vice cast out of them, but never really go the extra step to trust in Him and receive the Holy Spirit which would fill that inner void left by the departure of that sinful spirit. Thus they end up in a condition far worse than they were in before. Because a soul delivered, or a soul reformed, but left vacant and not renewed or filled with the Holy Spirit is a soul that stands in a far worse place than the one they’d been in before they were delivered!

My pastor in the Dominican Republic was right when he used to say: *“The human soul cannot tolerate a vacuum (And he didn’t mean the machine)! When you take something away,”* he’d say, *“you must fill it with something else.”*

He was speaking of the vices that the boys or girls in the program often came to us with — addiction to cigarettes, raunchy music, drugs, rebellion, foul language and so forth.

You can't simply take that stuff away, he'd say, without replacing it with something else — the cigarettes with a desire to be healthy / the raunchy music with Christian music / the drugs with the high of positive personal achievements / the foul language with words that edify and build up the hearer / and the drunkenness of alcohol with the joy that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit!

Paul speaks in similar terms when he says in Ephesians 5:18: ***“Do not be drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery, but RATHER (or INSTEAD) be filled with the Holy Spirit.”***

What were the Ephesians doing? Apparently some of them were using wine to assuage the sense of emptiness in their soul, or dull the pain of past hurts, or achieve some degree of temporary joy.

Like people today, they knew what the Psalmist and writer of Proverbs tell us: That wine makes the heart glad (Psalm 104:15), and that it can also dull the pain of physical or emotional suffering (Prov. 31:6-7). Yet they often forget that it can also lessen necessary moral inhibitions, and become addictive, and lead to more pain and sorrow.

So what is Paul's advice? That they should INSTEAD get high on the Holy Spirit or be intoxicated with God! That they should be filled with the Holy Spirit! God, Paul would say, is the only addiction that is good for you! He's the only addiction that is healthy and leads to a soul that is consistently full and gladdened by the joy of God's love and presence!

You see, in the context of Luke 11, Jesus is probably speaking from experience — the experience of seeing people from whom Jewish exorcists had cast out demons, or from whom He Himself had cast out demons, going back into things that were actually worse than what they'd been involved in before! (I myself have seen it numerous times!)

The spirit of whatever it is — addiction or deception or whatever — somehow gets cast out. The person's life is touched by God. But they remain resistant to the Gospel message, and continue to reject Jesus, and within a period of time return to their sinful habits — more hardened to the cure than they ever were before. They'd received from God the grace of liberation from some vice, yet they refused to place their full trust and faith in Jesus and be filled with His Holy Spirit.

They went from having a body possessed by an evil spirit, to a body possessed by no spirit (an empty soul). And Jesus tells us that's a dangerous, dangerous place to be, because "the human soul cannot tolerate a vacuum."

Then **SECONDLY**, the same can be true for sin we leave behind and then engage in again. In our reading from John chapter 5, Jesus heals an invalid (a man who may have been an invalid due to sexual misconduct — since the ravaging effects of Syphilis and other STD's or Sexually Transmitted Diseases accounted for many cases blindness and other debilitating physical ailments in that day).

Jesus has healed the man, yet later on sees him or overhears him talking at the temple, and somehow discerns that he is again engaging in the same sinful activity that got him sick in the first place! And so Jesus very pointedly says to the man: *"See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

Which brings us to our **THIRD** point. Contrary to common ideas at the present, it isn't enough to be touched by God. / One can be healed of some ailment by God and yet not saved. / Delivered but not saved. / Freed from some harmful, controlling, obsessive habit but not saved.

The blessing of that divine touch can actually place you in one of the most dangerous of all places or conditions, if your soul remains vacant or empty, or uninhabited by the Holy Spirit. An empty soul or a soul touched by God but not filled with the Spirit of God — opens itself to being filled with all sorts of malignant spirits — because it cannot tolerate that vacuum. It yearns to be filled with something!

And if it's not the Spirit of God, it opens itself to all sorts of other spirits — like the spirit of the world which is hostile toward God and the need for holiness / the spirit of greed or materialism that is never content with what it has / the spirit of doubt which causes one to question everything / the spirit of hedonism which drives people to indulge incessantly in sensual pleasures / the spirit of fear which dreads the future / or the spirit of self where a person is so self-obsessed that the only thing that really matters to them is them!

One of my best friends in the church I pastored in Westport, MA, told me how he trusted in Christ while watching an evangelist on TV at the age of twelve. He told the pastor of his church, and others, but no one took him under wing, or disciplined him, or helped him grow in the faith — and so he began to drift, until in the Vietnam War he got involved in drugs and narrowly escaped death.

He had an experience with God, but he never fostered it, or followed through with it (part of the fault being his church's). In fact, by the time he was 20 years old, everything in his life pointed to the fact that he had drifted away from it totally — until the bullet from a Viet Cong rifle grazed his helmet as he was crossing a rice patty, and he realized how close to death he had come!

You see, though a cleansed soul that remains vacant is the most dangerous of all spiritual conditions, inviting not only the return of whatever they were delivered from, but something 7 times worse, it is never too late to trust in Jesus.

It's never too late to receive Him and have your vacant soul filled with the Holy Spirit. As I told someone just the other week: ***"So long as there is breath there is hope."*** It was in the context of telling someone I had prayed for my dad's salvation for 22 years before he came to Christ.

I went in that downward spiral for a total of 12 years, before I hit rock bottom and had nowhere to look but up!

Don't make my mistake, and the mistake of so many others. When God touches your life, it's to show you He cares. It's to lead you to Christ. It's to help you see your need for Jesus. The need, not simply to have an experience with Jesus, but to live for Jesus!

That's where so many go wrong. They think: ***"I've had this experience with the divine and that must mean I'm all set."*** But what Jesus stresses in this passage is that THAT'S NOT SO! You can have an experience with God (the casting out of a demon in this case) and yet end up in a worse condition if you don't press on to follow Jesus by faith and surrender your life to Him, and be filled with the Holy Spirit, and live in obedience to His Word.

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. That too many people focus and rely on transient feelings, rather than a life of committed obedience. We see this when a woman in the crowd, hearing Jesus words, cries out: ***"Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."*** Why does she say it? Because His teachings have obviously touched a cord in her, and she affirms their truth. They've somehow helped her or uplifted her emotionally.

But Jesus deflects the compliment, because what He knows will help her, and others like her, most of all, is NOT being momentarily stirred by something He says, but learning to live a life of day by day obedience to what God says in His Word!

That's where consistent, continual, life-long change and solid transformation comes from! Not the fleeting emotional uplift one gets when they hear a truth that hits home, or makes an existential connection with them, but when they make a determined commitment to follow all God's truth as its revealed to us in the Bible!

That's why Jesus deflects her compliment and replies: *"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."* Having a truth "hit home" and "stir us emotionally" is good. It is! Jesus acknowledges that. But it's **BETTER** — the greater blessing comes --- when day by day, and year by year we commit ourselves to doing what God tells us in His word. That's where true happiness comes from!

As I've mentioned before, the closest equivalent to the word "blessed" as used here, and in the beatitudes, is the English word "happy." *"Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God."* And here we could translate it, *"Happy, rather, are those who hear the word of God and obey it."*

In other words, it's nice to be stirred by some speaker. In our culture that's what church has often become — little more than a weekly morning uplift. And that's ok, so long as that not all that happens! For what Jesus wants us to know is that the soul is most blessed, and becomes the most stable, mature, content and full when over time we progressively learn to put all of God's truth into practice.

It is necessary, says Jesus, that we move beyond simply hearing, or being emotionally moved by truth, to actually obeying it, if we are ever to attain the happiness or blessedness that we as human beings all so incessantly yearn for and pursue. (And Jesus (according to this verse) — encourages us to pursue!)

It's obedience that solidifies change in the soul! Which is why Paul in Romans 1 tells us that his aim is to call all people to *"the obedience that comes from faith."*

The goal of faith is not simply faith, but a faith that results in obedience! In fact, as James points out, "faith" that does not eventuate in obedience is not true faith. / It's faith held in check. / It's faith kept at bay. / It's atrophied faith or dead faith. / Faith that falls far short of doing what faith was intended to do!

So here is the progression: **FACT**, **FEELING**, and **FAITH**, followed by **OBEDIENCE**. And what Jesus wants us to see is that we must move beyond the FACT (of the grace of healing or

deliverance) / and the FEELING of liberation or uplift that it brings / to a FAITH that trusts in Jesus and surrenders all to Him / and results in an OBEDIENCE to God's word that brings true blessedness or happiness.

Which tells us what? That God does extend grace to unbelievers that is not saving grace. He bestows the grace of healing or exorcism or deliverance from some controlling spirit, but that "grace" does not save. It's a sign of His love and it's meant to point us to Christ but it doesn't, in and of itself, save the recipient of it. Nor does it result in lasting change or happiness.

So I conclude by asking to you:

Where do you stand with Jesus?

You want to be truly happy? You want to be different? Jesus tells you how — listen to the word of God and obey it day by day for the rest of your life! That's the way to happiness or blessedness!

Don't do what so many today do and look for the quick, effortless, emotionally uplifting but no need for commitment fix! They bring fleeting, momentary tastes of happiness, but on the whole it doesn't work!

Rather, commit yourself to a life of obedience. What Eugene Peterson defines discipleship as — *"A long obedience in the same direction."* True change comes as we commit ourselves to obedience over the long haul.

Christianity is like marriage! You don't try it on for size, to see if it fits! Led by the Spirit you commit yourself to it, come what may, for life, or it will do nothing for you! It requires a "till death do us part" type of commitment!

Jesus never says, *"Try me on for size and see if I'm right for you."* He says, *"Leave everything, and come follow Me!"* He doesn't present Himself as one among many viable options! He says, "I'm the only way!" There is no other way but Me! It's either Me or eternal destruction, so come to Me in faith or bear the coming wrath of God!

And don't just come to me as an "add on" thrown into the mix of everything else you have going on in your life! You must take me as Lord of your life or not at all. I don't come as a minor side-line addition to your already jam-packed life! You can't have Me as a mere attempt to achieve wholeness in life by adding a little religion to balance off your life!

LISTEN: Jesus' call is a call to give up everything and anything that would in any way prevent us from following Him completely and submitting to Him entirely and serving Him wholeheartedly. With Him it's all or nothing! It's first place in your life or no place! He won't accept second place, or third or fourth or fifth!

And only when we realize that, and surrender our lives to Him in that fashion, can the full blessings of His salvation flow down into our lives. *"Blessed,"* He says, *"is the one who hears His word and obeys."*

My prayer for each one here is that you will come to know Him in that way, and pursue Him in that way, and commit yourself to Him that way in that way in a life of life-long obedience. Because only then can you be filled with all the fullness of God, and find that blessedness that He promises in our text for today.

Don't put it off! A vacant soul; a soul in limbo; is in the most dangerous of all possible conditions!