

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Matthew 12:43-45 “Is Moral Reform Enough?”

Intro. In the mid 1990s researcher George Barna startled the church by saying, “Half of all adults who attend Protestant churches on a typical Sunday morning are not Christian!” It is likely that about 95% or more of my in-person audience today considers themselves to be Christian. But what if Barna’s statistic was true of us? Is it possible that almost half of the people hearing me today *think* they are Christians, but are not? I doubt that only 50% of my audience today is truly Christian. However, I believe that in our text today, we will see one reason why that statistic could indeed be true of the broader Christian community.

I want us to examine the issue of a personal conversion. A conversion is a significant change in a person’s life. Literally the term refers to a change of direction. Many people have some sort of a conversion sometime in their lives. Perhaps they suffer the consequences of their actions and decide to change. They start going to church. They may go to drug or alcohol treatment. They experience some kind of a reformation. Most of you have already had some sort of a conversion, a significant change in your life. You may have stopped certain bad habits. Others of you are in the process of deciding about making a change. Do you need to make a significant change in your life?

Now the question I want to answer is this: Is moral reform enough? Is it enough to make a major change in your life, religiously or morally? Well let’s look to the words of Jesus Christ for answers. Far too many people fall short of a true, biblical conversion. So I want to start off by talking about what often leads to a conversion, and this is my first point:

I. AT TIMES WE KNOW WE NEED A CHANGE

Here in Matthew 12 our Lord gives a parable or an illustration of a person who really needed a change. He talks about the extreme case of a man who was demon possessed. That should not surprise us, for we have an example of demon possession right in the immediate context (v.22). Demons were once angels in heaven but they sinned against God in the very beginning. So God cast them out and they are now what we call demons. I have no doubt that demons are working evil in our world today, and they seem to prefer to live inside people.

Now in telling this story Jesus uses symbolism here. He compares the human life to a house. That house can have at least two occupants: the spirit of the person, and another spirit. That other spirit can be one or more demonic spirits, or the body of a person can be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Now let’s see what happened to the man in our story. He experiences a change in his life. Notice what happened. From his example we see first of all that:

A. Sometimes an Evil Spirit Needs to Be Removed – Jesus mentions such an example when He says in v.43, “When an unclean spirit goes out of a man...” The evil spirit was either cast out of the man, or less likely, it departed voluntarily. Either way, I’m sure the person felt a whole lot better with the evil spirit out of his life.

Today in America we do not have much of a problem with demon possession because of the dominance of the Christian faith for hundreds of years. But many people are plagued with another sort of evil spirit. I'm talking about a spirit of hatred, of bitterness, of anger, or of lust. You may have a spirit of addiction. It at least feels like an evil spirit within your mind. You may be plagued with such a spirit, and you know you need a change. You know you need to get rid of such an evil spirit.

Furthermore, Satan at least can have a strong influence upon you if you are not a Christian. I know you are not aware of it, and you may not understand it, but the devil has the power to control your life in many ways that you don't realize. Eph. 5:8 says, "For you were once darkness...." The word "darkness" there refers to the life of sin and spiritual ignorance, and the influence of the devil. I say this because God told the apostle Paul that his mission was to turn people "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..." (Acts 26:18). By nature, we are under the power and influence of the devil. He can so work in your heart and mind as to lead you in the wrong direction. His great delight and desire is to ruin you with evil thoughts and by dragging you under his influence and leading you astray. He tries to convince you that the only pathway to happiness is through drugs, alcohol, and ungodly entertainment. Often, people are ensnared and enslaved by the devil.

Do you feel the need to get rid of the spirit and influence of evil from your life? Well notice what often happens next:

B. Some People Sweep Out the Bad – In v.44 Jesus speaks of one whose life has been "swept," like a house. They reform. They clean up their lives. They get rid of some of the more destructive habits.

Have you swept out of your life lying? Have you swept away gossip? Have you swept away drugs and alcohol? Have you gotten rid of pornography or other sinful vices? If so, great! But is that enough?

C. Some People Try to Put Their Lives in Order – Notice in v.44 that Jesus speaks of one whose life has been "put in order." You know, a house or a room can become a mess. Is your house or room that way even as I speak? You can't even vacuum, sweep or dust for all the mess that is everywhere. Part of cleaning up is getting things arranged and back in order.

Even so, your life will be a mess if you live an unordered, undisciplined life. So some people initiate some changes. They start going to church. That's good, but that alone is not enough. They start exercising controls over their time, including going to bed on time, getting up on time, and showing up for work or school. They start paying their bills on a regular and timely basis. That's good, but is that enough?

While some might be inspired to put things back and clean up your house after this message, it is more important to bring order back to your life. Will you do that?

D. Some People Try to Make Themselves Look Morally Good – I say that because the word translated "put in order" (*kosmeo*) in v.44 may be translated "adorned." The word is used in Luke 21:5 of the beautiful adorning of the temple. It is used in 1 Tim. 2:9 of the way women adorn themselves with their clothing, hairstyle, makeup, and jewelry. It is used in Rev. 21:19 of the New Jerusalem being adorned like a bride. So the picture we get is that of a house that is not only swept clean, but also painted, decorated, and made to look good.

Even so, when people go through a conversion, especially a religious conversion, they clean themselves up and make themselves look good and pleasing to others. They may make themselves look better outwardly in terms of dress and grooming. They may start going to church and sing our songs. Their outward conduct looks better. Their language sounds better. They are like a house that is swept, repaired, and has a fresh coat of paint.

There! That person has arrived. Surely such a person is now a heaven-bound Christian. Right? Hold on. In spite of the kind of conversion described here, Jesus teaches another important truth:

II. JESUS WARNS THAT THE CHANGES WE MAKE MAY FALL SHORT

This text is an example of the fact that not every conversion is genuine and lasting. The Lord Jesus is telling us what happens in the case of people who appear to become Christians for a while. They have a temporary religious conversion. They go to church for a little while and their lives change for the better. They stop their bad habits—they don't swear or drink as they used to do. But do you know what will happen if all you do is try to reform, clean up your life, and make yourself look better?

Well Jesus gives a fearful warning to those who only go part way in dealing with evil. He likens such people to a person who is possessed of a demon. Notice that the demon leaves. In v.43 we see that the demon “goes through dry places, seeking rest....” The “dry places” refers to the dry, arid wilderness of the Middle East, like the Judean wilderness. The desert was often thought to be inhabited by demons (8:29; Lev. 16:10; Isa. 13:21; 34:13-14). Isn't it natural to link demons with regions where desolation and death dominate? But the problem is the spirit does not find rest there. It appears that the demons are restless and seek bodies in which to reside (Matt. 8:28-31). So the demon decides to return to possess his original host. But this time, Jesus says in v.45 that “he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there....” The word translated “dwell” (*katoikeo*) means to dwell permanently. The evil spirit comes back and he comes back with a vengeance.

Now is the person better off with one evil spirit, or by adding seven others that are more wicked? Obviously, he is worse off with eight. So Jesus says, “and the last state of that man is worse than the first.” Even so, 2 Peter 2:20 the apostle Peter says, “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the *knowledge* of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.” Peter may have been thinking about this statement of Jesus. He is not talking about losing your salvation. He's talking about a person who makes a false profession of faith and returns to their old life. A person must fill the void created by the expulsion of the demonic, worldliness, or immorality lest these evils be replaced by something worse.

Now I want to apply the text to two primary groups of people. First:

A. The Application to Israel – I hope we now can understand a little more clearly what Jesus has in mind when He applies it to His listeners. He says in the last of v.45, “So shall it also be with this wicked generation.” The type of condition spoken of here might well describe Israel. The great sin of the Jewish nation had been idolatry. For centuries, they had copied the heathen by making and worshipping their idols of stone and wood. About 600 years before Christ the nation was terribly judged by God and they finally decided to give up their idol worship. But after a brief revival under Ezra and Nehemiah, they embraced an empty, legalistic, dead religion.

The Pharisees and rabbis cleaned the house and embellished it with their formalities and traditions, but they had sought no new tenant. They had cleaned “the outside of the platter,” but the inside was full of filth and uncleanness (Matt. 23:25). Then, they developed something worse than idolatry. You say, “What could be worse than that?” The answer is self-righteousness. The evil of idolatry had left the house at the period of their Babylonian captivity but he now discovered the nation to be swept and cleaned: there were no Baals; there were no Molochs standing on the market square. There were synagogues now. The whole place had been tidied up, cleaned out and swept. Then the devil came back in a different form, bringing other devils with him, including the demons of self-righteousness, pride, greed and hypocrisy.

Then, during the days of John the Baptist, many in Israel swept out the evil from their lives. They accepted the baptism of repentance. But that revival had in many cases been very superficial. They did not take the next step in their spiritual journey. John the Baptist told of One coming after him whose sandals he was not worthy to loose (Mark 1:7). One time when he saw Jesus he said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). So the nation should have received the Savior and been filled with spiritual life. Instead, most people rejected Him. Then, what Jesus predicted came true: “the last state ... is worse than the first.” That was true in this life, but especially in reference to judgment. In just 40 years the Romans came in and destroyed the nation and their temple, and about a million Jews lost their lives. And Jesus warns in this very context of the great judgment before God after death, which will result in a state that is far worse.

B. What’s the Application to Us? - The point is a false Christian is worse off than a non-Christian. You say, “Why is that?” Well if a person just cleans up outwardly, then one of two things will happen.

First, such a state of being can lead to a false sense of security. They may remain outwardly changed, and since they have had what *looks* like a conversion, they assume that they are Christians for the rest of their lives, and they *never* become true Christians! You see, a person who is a non-Christian usually knows that they are not a Christian. The potential for a true conversion is still very much there. But if a person makes a *false* profession, then that person will likely never become a Christian. And in many cases, they are taken over by hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and pride. The hardest people in the world to reach are unsaved church members because they think they are all right. They have undergone self-reformation, but that is all.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. There are some well-meaning organizations that try to help people deal with alcohol and drugs problems, and I am sure that they do good work up to a point. But the danger is we simply heal people’s problems and leave them there. They may get the idea that they overcame their problem with self-help techniques. Now they’re OK. Now that they have conquered their problem, they feel they do not need Christ. They become self-righteous, and they *never* come to Christ. In such a case the end is worse than the first.

Now there is a second possible outcome: It can lead to returning to the old life, but even worse. Their so-called conversion will not last. They find that their new life is not satisfying because they do not have Christ. Then they revert back to their old life, but this time, they become hardened in their unbelief. They say to themselves, “I tried Christianity and it didn’t work.” Then they become even *worse* sinners. Either way, what Jesus warned about in v.45 will come true, “the last state of that man is worse than the first.”

Also, let me also give just a general application: Make sure that the actions you take don't make things worse! Let that sink in. Note some examples. Jesus said in Mt. 23:15, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." The Hippocratic Oath says in part, "I will follow that system of regimen which... I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous." In other words, I won't make the patient worse off! I wish our politicians would follow this principle. So many of the solutions they offer and implement just makes things worse, not better! They said, "We are going to make healthcare more affordable, more available, and better. Well, whenever the government micromanages anything from Washington it will not be better. And so will be fulfilled the words of Jesus, "the last state ... is worse than the first."

So what's the problem here in our text? Was Israel's problem due to some failure on God's part? When people make a profession of faith in Jesus, and then turn back to their old lifestyle, is it because Jesus really doesn't have the power to change lives? Notice furthermore:

C. The Reason for the Failure: We Are Empty! – Look at the text carefully. In v.44 we see that the demon comes back and finds the house "empty." And when we are empty, we lack the power we need to live a new life. Here we see that it is very possible to have some sort of religious experience but not the saving power of Christ in our lives. Listen, the heart doesn't remain like a vacuum. It will be filled with something.

The very great preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was one day walking along the street. I think it was in London where he preached. As he walked along, a very drunken man came up to him. Being drunken, he began to use inappropriate language; he saw Spurgeon and recognized him. "Ah," said he, "is that you Mr. Spurgeon?" "It is," said Mr. Spurgeon, "That is my name. What do you want?" "Oh," said the man, mocking, "I am one of your converts." What had happened is that this man had started for a while to go to the church where the great Spurgeon preached and the power of the Gospel had, for a time, influenced his life. He had stopped his drunkenness and become a sober man for a while but he had never been really converted at all. So he had gone back to his drunkenness. He said to Spurgeon, "I am one of your converts"—as much as to say, "So much for your religion. It did nothing for me." Spurgeon's answer was very clever. "Yes," he said, "I am sure you are one of *my* converts. The Lord would have made a better job of it." [Illus.#C-1559].

So we have seen today that many people realize that they need to make a change in their life. But too often, the changes we make are inadequate. Repentance and self-reformation are not enough. My friend, you can quit doing many things, but that won't make you a Christian. Outwardly practicing a religion is not enough. And you can end up worse off after such an attempt to change. So what is the answer?

III. WE MUST REPLACE EVIL WITH GOD AND GOODNESS

Though not directly stated in this text, there is a clear implication of the need for something more, and that is biblical conversion. Repentance is necessary, but that alone is not enough. What else do you need to do in order to have a true conversion?

A. Be Born Again – Trying to live a new life, without having new life *within*, is doomed for failure. Reformation means death and destruction. Regeneration means life and liberty. Right

before Israel turned from idolatry, God said in Ezek. 36:26 God said, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you...” That is what they needed, but that is not what they sought for. Let’s not make the same mistake. Jesus said in John 3 that we must be born again. God does not remodel us, He does not repair us, He does not overhaul us as we would an automobile. God puts within us a new heart, a new spirit—and we are “new creatures” when we are born again. And there is no change in a person’s life which in any way resembles the greatness and magnitude of a new birth conversion to Christ. In 2 Cor. 5:17 the apostle Paul said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

And do you know what happens to you when you are born again? You are cleaned up from the inside out. Titus 3:5 talks about the “washing of regeneration.”

Have you been born again? That is not something you can do for yourself. You did not cause your own conception and birth. So if you have not experienced the new birth, a true change of heart and life, then repent of your sins, trust in Christ as Lord and Savior, and then take the next step:

B. Receive the Spirit of Christ – Don’t settle for a conversion that leaves you empty. You must replace sin and evil with the presence of God. Otherwise, the evil will come right back in. The apostle John said, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God...” (1:12). This is what most in Israel failed to do. The Apostle Paul speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). You and I need to make sure that we have nothing less than Christ Himself dwelling in our hearts. And when you receive Christ, you also receive the Holy Spirit. In a true conversion the Holy Spirit comes to occupy all the rooms of our heart. When He comes, He brings wonderful blessings with Him. He will replace sadness with joy, hatred with love, turmoil with peace. Only with Christ within will you have the capacity and power to live the Christian life. Only Christ within can help you resist Satan. The apostle John said in 1 John 4:4, “... greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (KJV). James 4:7 says to believers, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

Have you received the Holy Spirit? Don’t try to fake it. These blessings can only come from God. Trade your emptiness for the fullness of God in your soul! So if you haven’t received Jesus into your heart, this is what you must do:

C. Place Your Faith in Jesus –You see, this was the failure of many in Jesus’ day. They reformed, they were religious, but they would not place their faith in Jesus as their Messiah. Jewish exorcists assisted in casting out demons, but they usually did not point people to Jesus as the only Savior. We must not make the same mistake. Only Jesus can fill the emptiness of your life. So place your faith in Jesus as your Savior. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace are you saved through faith. And this not of yourselves; it is a gift of God—not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Then, continue to live by faith. Trust God to protect you and provide for you during this pandemic.

D. Replace the Old Life with New Practices – Paul said in Eph. 4:22-24 “that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,... and that you put on the new man...” Yes, you need to get rid of lying, profanity, immorality, drunkenness, and the many other sins of the old life. But you also need to put on

new practices. You need to spend time each day reading the Bible and praying. You need regular Christian fellowship. You need to replace sin with positive good works.

Conclusion: Have you had a religious conversion? Well how do you know if it's the real thing? Well real conversion is not just outward, but it transforms us from the inside out. Do you and others see the *lasting* evidence of a changed life? The apostle John says in his first epistle that two of the most important evidences are love and righteousness. Do you love God and others? Are you seeking to live a morally righteous life by the resources of God's grace? Do you abhor sin? If not, turn from sin and self, and place your faith in Jesus today! Don't settle for anything else that will make you worse off in the end.

Sources: Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); John Philips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; Rev. Maurice Roberts (notes from his sermon on this text); Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Luke* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 333-334; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Nothing to add from Matthew Henry & A.T. Robertson.

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