

Sermon for Sunday, July 12, 1981 by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
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"WHY IT TAKES SO LONG TO BE GOOD"

St. Matthew 12:38-45

Text: "While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him."

St. Matthew 12:46

Do you have trouble being good? I do! Just yesterday I was having some work done on my car. I waited two hours for the work to be done and then they couldn't do it. I am ashamed to say I really lost my temper. Do you ever do that? Why do you think it is taking all of us so long to be good? I think it must be a problem with most people. Do you remember what happened to Judas? Judas had been with Jesus for three years. He had traveled in close companionship all that time. He had seen the miracles, he had heard Jesus speak of the kingdom of God with such clarity, he had seen the incredible compassion of Jesus as he ministered to all kinds of needs. Yet, in the end he betrayed Jesus for a handful of silver. Why was it taking Judas so long to be good?

Or look at Peter. Near the end of Jesus' career when he foretold how the disciples would desert him, Peter had blurted out, "though all men desert you, I will never deny you." Yet, before twenty-four hours had passed, Peter had cursed and swore that he never knew Jesus. Then, after the early church had gotten started, two of the members named Ananias and Sapphire got into trouble. They owned a piece of property. Now that land was theirs; they didn't have to do a thing with it. Yet, they sold the land and intended to give the proceeds to the church. However, they must have gotten a lot more for the land than they ever imagined they would. Now it was getting hard to be good with that much money. The fact is, they could have given a contribution and nobody would have questioned that. Instead, they gave a portion of what they got and then said it was the whole amount. They just lied! Why was it so hard for them to be good?

Well, I think Jesus gives us a clue to the answer to that question in our Scripture for this morning. The first thing I would call to your attention about the parable is this: evilness and sin is present in all of us. Jesus speaks of the unclean spirit being in a man. Well, I know that unclean spirit very well! I know what it is like to be on intimate terms with evil--I know what it is like to have uncleanness as a part of my life. And I suspect every one here this morning has the same experience. The fact is, I don't know anyone who is perfect--do you? We are all guilty of being unkind, of selfishness, of self-centeredness. There are times when all of us are jealous or critical and condemn others unfairly. As far as recorded history goes, there has been only one perfect person in the whole world--and they crucified him.

The second thing we might note about the parable is this: we all need a spiritual house cleaning. My wife is a fantastic housekeeper. Ever so often some sort of feminine urge begins to come over her. By now I can begin to spot when it is happening because she begins to make critical remarks about how the house looks. As a matter of fact now that I've learned the signals, if I time it right, I can manage a trip out of town when the house cleaning attack comes! Anyway, ever so often she attacks the house. She cleans out cabinets and drawers, she moves furniture, she dusts and cleans and washes windows and mops and woe to that person who puts a foot on a floor still damp.

Well, we humans accumulate a lot of rubbish and dirt and spiritual filth as we go along. We do things--we say things--that shouldn't be done or said. And we can sweep our spiritual failures under the rug just so long. Ultimately there comes a time when we have to meet the sin in our lives head on. Finally there comes a time when we have to do something about the trash in our lives or it just overwhelms us. Everybody needs a periodic heart-cleaning. That's why I think it is important from time to time to give Christians a chance to recommit their lives--a chance to rededicate themselves and to clean house spiritually.

The third thing I would call to our attention about the parable of Jesus is this: evil is persistent. It keeps coming back. If it can't get through a door it will try the window. I wish that were not true. I wish it were possible to commit my life to Jesus and be through with sin forever. But life doesn't work that way. Just when we begin to pat ourselves on the back for our spiritual maturity, we become guilty of spiritual pride. It's like the church that had a preacher who was the most humble man they had ever known. He was such a fantastic example of humility to them all that they decided to show their appreciation to him. So one Sunday morning they presented him with a medal for his humility. Then, the very next Sunday they had to take it back because he began to wear it?

You know, if evil would leave me alone I would do fine. But temptation comes--selfishness wells up in me--pride grabs me--passions and lusts and greeds tug at us all. Yes, sin is persistent. Isn't that true in your life, too?

The fourth thing we might note about our parable for this morning is this: not only must we be converted from something, we must also be converted to something. Does that make sense to you? It isn't enough to clean out your heart. It isn't enough to get rid of the bad, the rubbish, the spiritual trash in our lives. No, we must also fill the heart with good things. In physics we are told that nature abhors a vacuum. When a vacuum is created, all kinds of forces begin to work to fill that vacuum. Well, the same thing is true spiritually. Jesus said that if evil returns and finds a heart that is clean, but empty, that evil spirit returns with seven other spirits more evil than himself and the person ends up being worse off than he was in the first place.

So it isn't enough to quit being bad. We must also begin to be good--to do the things of God. One of my favorite passages of Scripture is the 8th verse of the fourth chapter of Philippians. It reads, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Now, that speaks to me. It tells me that rejecting the bad and the evil and the unlovely isn't enough. No, I must also be positive. In the Old Testament there is a story about a man who was working to build the walls of Jerusalem. Some enemies who didn't want the walls built tried to get him to come down so they could kill him. But he replied, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." (Nehemiah 6:3) He stayed out of trouble, because he was occupied with doing the good. We have an old saying, "idle hands are the devil's workshop." But that is a true saying, isn't it? For example, where is crime the worst today? Isn't it in areas of unemployment, where hands are idle?

Are you doing the things of God? Are you deeply involved in the things that are true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and gracious and excellent? It is interesting to me that people doing the things of God live longer. Did you know that? John Hopkins University did a study that proved churchgoers live longer. The death rate for weekly churchgoers was discovered to be 500 per 100,000, but for those who attended only occasionally, it jumped to 900 per 100,000. There is no big mystery as to why that is true. People who come to church regularly have more ordered lives. They are emphasizing the positive values of life. Religion is not only adding years to their lives, it is adding life to their years.

Yes, God wants us to clean out our spiritual houses, to rid our hearts of the accumulated trash. But he also wants us to fill our hearts with the joy of the Lord. You know, sometimes we get so focused in on the negatives--we get so concerned about the thou shalt and the thou shalt nots--we get so focused in on the cleaning out part of things that we never enjoy the good things of God. God wants us to have joy. God wants us to enjoy life, to have life and have it abundantly. Are you enjoying your religion? Are you having fun being God's person? To do that we have to emphasize the joy of the Lord. When you leave church God doesn't want you to look as though you had been sucking on a lemon! He wants you to have happiness and laughter and fun and excitement and joy in being his person.

So why is it taking us so long to be good? Well, when we clean house spiritually, too often we are not filling our hearts with the good things of God. But the starting place is first of all to clean house. Have you done that?

Let me tell you a story. In the interior of New Guinea is a river called the Sepik River. And way up that river lives a tribe called the Sepik Iwam People. A Wycliffe Bible Translator named Marilyn Laszlo had been living with that tribe for a number of years to learn their language so she could translate the Bible into their native tongue. However, she could not find an adequate word or expression for the word "forgiveness." Months went by and her frustration mounted. During this time she built a larger place to work and live. When the place was finished she wanted to dedicate it. Her idea was that all the people of the village would be invited to come. They would surround the lodge and hold hands as the local person working with her in her translations had a prayer and dedicated the building to the Lord. Her assistant, named Joel, wasn't too sure how many people would come. He felt the Christians would, but not the unsaved and he was afraid there wouldn't be enough people to complete the circle around the building. "That's okay," said Marilyn, "if we can't complete the circle, God knows." Well, the announcement was made and amazingly every person in the village came. Joel made the dedication prayer, "Oh, Papa God," he said, "we come to you with a big thank you in our throats" (in their culture, the center of the emotions is the throat as we refer to the heart.) During the prayer, everyone put their arms around each other. Marilyn had never seen this before and she asked Joel what it meant. He replied, "When someone puts his arms around another, it means, 'if you have stolen my canoe or robbed my fish traps, I remember no more the wrong you have done to me.'" Now Marilyn had her way to express forgiveness. "Joel," she said, "that's what God did! God sent His Son Jesus to put His arms around us, so that He would remember our sins, our wrongs, no more."

Well, what shape is your spiritual house in this morning? Do you need a housecleaning? God wants to put his arms around you--and even if you have stolen his canoe or robbed his fish traps, or done any other evil thing, he wants to remember it no more. Won't you say to him, " God, please put your arms around me!"?