

Missing Jesus

Luke 11:24-28 | Nov. 17, 2019 | Bryce Beale

We are more likely to miss what we're familiar with.

It is therefore always my battle as a preacher to bring out of this treasury of Scripture things both old and new. I am not at liberty to invent a novel idea and preach it—you might find such an idea interesting, but for me it would be treason against my God, and violation of my stewardship.

On the other hand, if I only tell you what you already know in the ways you already know it, I risk boring you with the familiar. There is nothing boring about this gospel, do not misunderstand me—I speak as a dying man to dying men and women; we wrestle at this Peniel of a pulpit with matters that amaze angels, and eternity holds its breathe as it were to see how we will respond. But it does not always seem that way. If we become comfortable and complacent in how we hear Scripture, and revert to our usual habits of how we think about its teaching, we may miss how massive it is in importance.

So what am I to do? I cannot invent something new to preach, yet if I preach the old as you have always heard it you may miss its significance.

This then is what I aim to do: to preach the old truths to you unaltered, but in fresh ways that are meant to drive your mind into them.

You could after all go home and read the passage I will preach today, and you could read it in less than a minute. So what are we doing here for forty minutes or more? I will tell you: we are reading the passage, and then we are all coming alongside it at this angle, and observing. What do we see from this place? Perhaps this is an angle we are accustomed to—so we also must walk around our passage to the other side, and see that angle too.

And round and round the passage we must walk until our natural lethargy and inattention is destroyed, and we awaken—not to something new or something absent from the passage—but until we awaken to the passage itself and see it for what it is, and feel the weight of it, and rejoice or fear or marvel, whatever the

appropriate emotions may be. And then as a consequence obey with reverence what we have found.

This is why we gather on a Sunday morning, and this is what we all ought to labor for in our private study of the Scriptures. We cannot be mere hearers of the word who deceive ourselves—we must wrestle with every text of Scripture and say what Jacob said before us: “I will not let you go until you bless me.” We must internalize the Scriptures so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we do them.

Jesus is our example in this matter, in our passage today, in two ways. First, by telling his listeners the truth not in a bland and logical way, but by shocking illustration. But secondly, by the content of what he conveys. His point is that we may come so close to him that we miss him for closeness—that is, that we may miss Christ because we are so familiar with him, if we do not labor to press beyond our familiarity.

Let us then labor together to see every side of this passage—really, these two passages we are considering—so that we do not miss what is there.

LUKE 11:24-28

Jesus addresses failure. There is, he tells us by way of illustration in verses 24 to 26, a sort of person whose demon leaves him, but when that person fails to fill the vacancy, the demon returns in force. And then right as Jesus is speaking, when a well-meaning woman cries out in admiration of him, he corrects her. She is looking in the wrong place, and missing what is right in front of her, what really matters.

So let us take these two failures in turn and look and look and look at them until we take in what Jesus would have us take from them.

Moralism

Observe again the surprising statement of verses 24 to 26.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than

itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.¹

Look hard enough at these verses and you will find, first of all, they are not what they appear. Are these lines persevered in Holy Writ so that we might know the danger of repossession by a demon? I do not think any here have been possessed a first time, so we would have nothing to worry about.

But we must walk over to Matthew's gospel and look back here from that angle. Matthew chapter 12 recounts the exact same statement, but it adds this one line to the end of it: "So also will it be with this evil generation."

He does not mean that every person in that generation would be demon possessed and then repossessed. This cues us in to the fact that Jesus is using this statement as an illustration of something deeper, something that affects you and me.

You can in fact find the same in our passage in Luke, if you look at our passage from the angle of what came before it. Beginning in verse 14, Jesus is accused of being himself possessed by the devil, and he responds by starkly denying it. He has come to destroy the devil's works, not to support them. And he concludes with this utterance in verse 23: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

Jesus draws the line in the sand and puts his enemies, that evil generation and its corrupt leaders, on the other side of the line with the devil.

From that angle, how should we think of our present passage? Is it about mere demon possession? No—it is using demon possession to point out something worse. Jesus is indicating the spiritual condition of those who were rejecting him, those who were not with him and were, therefore and necessarily, against him. These are those who either, like the Pharisees, boldly opposed him, or like the crowds simply did not embrace him fully by faith. They refused to labor past the wall of the familiar.

Now how were these two groups like a man freed from demon possession? Well, see those Pharisees there—they pride themselves on the thousand external sins of the Gentiles which

¹ ESV.

they refuse to touch with a single finger. They can pray with one of their number in Luke 18:11, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” These Pharisees had a category of sins they would not touch—specifically, the bigger and more visible ones. Jesus said of them that they cleanse the outside of the cup and dish: they rid themselves of visible wrongdoing.²

The crowds were somewhat similar. When John the Baptist came preaching repentance, many among the crowds did not dispute his claims about their sin. They went, were baptized, and even followed after Jesus in his retinue. There was what seemed to be a change, a putting off of old sins. The word of God appeared to sprout from their hearts—they received it joyfully.

So this generation was very much like a man freed from a demon. There were certain sins they stopped doing. There was an outwardly reckless way of life, enjoyed by some, that they cast away.

Perhaps you are like this generation Jesus describes.

We call these sorts of persons “moralists.” They have no problem with God (for the Pharisees), and not even a problem with Jesus (for the crowds). And what is more, they are trying to keep on God’s or on Jesus’ good side. They are pretty good and decent people, not involved in the baser pursuits of the world. They have fenced off one group of sins that they will not do, and therefore it seems their demon has left, that they are in a tranquil state, and that heaven awaits them.

But there is a problem with this sort of life.

Verse 24: “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’” Waterless places are wildernesses, void of vegetation and therefore void of people—and devils appear to prefer those places when they are disembodied. Yet if a demon had its own way, it would instead dwell, not far from people, but within someone to do him or her harm.

² Luke 11:39.

Verse 25: “And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order.” This is the heart of the problem; it is the death blow of moralism. The soul, once terrorized and trashed by this demon, is now at ease and in order. It is swept clean and tidied up. But notice—no one lives there. Matthew makes this explicit: the unclean spirit “comes,” he says, and “finds the house *empty*, swept, and put in order.”³

Moralism may kick out its rowdy squatters, may clear away certain unpleasant habits, but then what? You have dragged from the house alcohol and drugs, sexual promiscuity and foul language; you have swept and put in order that messy abode. You breathe a sigh, but then it hits you: why have you gone through so much trouble to clean the space? There is no tenant. No one lives there. It’s a clean but an empty heart.

Moralism may work to rid you of evil habits, but it will leave you empty. If you are unwilling to open the front door and welcome Christ in to your innermost being, and to offer him the keys to every room of your house to do as he pleases there, to be the tenant, then you will have merely a cleaned up empty heart.

It would be better to have a heart less tidy but with Jesus residing there. So when this demon returns and does not find a strong Savior living there to stand guard, he, verse 26, “goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

The moralist kicks out the one demon of open sins, but in the end sin returns more stubbornly and horribly. If you take the path of moralism, you will in the end only replace your more visible habits with equally evil but more secretive ones. Open immorality will give way to malicious pride; alcohol will leave, but now hidden under the bed is a cruel and critical spirit.

What has truly happened is the same as what happens when you try to clean a grease stain with a dry napkin. You only succeed in moving the grease around. You have traded sin for sin—and as this story makes clear, you have actually traded the lesser sins for the greater ones. What you need is not to keep rubbing with the napkin, but to wet the napkin, to introduce something positive that may dwell in the house.

³ Matt. 12:44; emphasis mine.

John Bunyan in his *Pilgrim's Progress* likens it to a woman sweeping a dusty room. The more she sweeps, the more the dust is cast into the air, clogging the atmosphere, and then settling back down again no different than before. But if something positive is introduced—water—it will tame the dust and clump it up, so that it can be swept and removed.

The moralist eliminates some of the negative, but there is nothing positive to replace it. You may yourself have thought you believed and became a disciple of Jesus Christ. You consider yourself a Christian. But you may be only half of one. And, as Jesus has just warned us, half is equal to none. “Whoever is not with me is against me”—if Christ is not wholly welcomed in, then the half you think you have is nothing.

And really you are put in a state worse than if you had not even been half a follower of Christ, for now you are so familiar with Jesus that you are numbed to him. Because you think you know him, you do not seek to know him truly. And it may be only a matter of time before, lacking all positive motivation for holiness, you abandon the pursuit altogether.

Peter adds his testimony to that of Jesus in our text, concerning moralists who eventually turn away, in 2 Peter 2:20-22:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.”

Friends, but we are convinced of better things for you, though we speak this way, things concerning salvation.

Moralist, you who have so long tried to be good enough for God, are you not yet exhausted? Is it not wearying to clean your heart over and over, only to leave it empty of joy afterward?

Know then that Jesus offers these verses because he wants things to be different with you from here on out. No more of this merely

negative religion of “Do not’s” and “Put off’s,” this saving of face and keeping up with the Christian Jones’s. He wants to enter in, to take possession, to enjoy your company and you his. “Behold,” he says, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”⁴

And if you find yourself in that worse condition which he describes, having lived so long as a moralist that you are numbed to him, inhabited as it were by seven demons, twice-hardened against the gospel—then remember Mary Magdalene, “from whom,” says chapter 8 of Luke, “seven demons had gone out.”⁵ The stronger is happy to come and bind these strong demons, and to plunder their goods—that is, to capture you! Why keep your door barred any longer? It is time he was welcomed in to claim what is his own by right.

Do not miss Jesus just because he is so close to you. Wake up! Wake up—the bridegroom is knocking at the door, and you must open to him.⁶

Religious trappings

We see then the danger of missing Jesus when he is so close, because we choose moralism over him. But Luke adds for us another warning quite similar, in verses 27-28. If we do not miss Jesus for moralism, we may miss him for religious trappings.

As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

We imagine these lines will continue whatever has been said before them, because they begin, “As he said these things...” And our suspicions are confirmed.

A woman raises her voice—this is unusual in that day, but only serves to underline her enthusiasm. She is caught by a burst of excitement and admiration. So she cries out: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” She is

⁴ Rev. 3:20.

⁵ V. 2.

⁶ Song 5:2-4.

so amazed by this rabbi that she blesses his mother, as if she were saying, “Wow, God be thanked that your mother bore you and raised you, for look how you have turned out.”

And we should first admit that she is not wrong. She is speaking of Mary, the mother of Jesus. And, strictly speaking, was Mary blessed? Yes, very much so. Luke recorded this in his first chapter. Her cousin Elizabeth cried out, “Blessed are you among women,” and Mary in her Magnificat realized that “from now on all generations will call me blessed.”⁷

So why does Jesus seem to disagree with this woman in the crowd? When he answers, he includes that word of disagreement: “rather.” “Blessed *rather*...” he says.

And here is the answer: Jesus did not want her to be so close to him and yet to miss him. He must shock her by his disagreement, and shock us by the same. He wishes to wake us from our sleepiness. Yes, what the woman says is true and we may all nod our agreement, but are we really grasping what is at stake? Are we truly sensing the significance of this rabbi?

In simple terms, the woman in the crowd is throwing her darts all around the bullseye, but hasn’t hit it yet. She is still caught up in the externals, in the merely human, or what we might call the religious trappings. She has no doubt a high opinion of this teacher; and perhaps a mother herself, she summons a way of speaking familiar to her, to speak her admiration. She blesses the mother that brought this rabbi into the world. “How good to have a teacher like this among us!” she thinks. But from Jesus’ reply we can surmise that she is stuck in the realm of the immediate, the physical, the visible, the familiar.

She sees the things around Jesus—his mother, his teaching, his admirable qualities. But she hasn’t taken hold of Jesus yet, or better, hasn’t let herself be taken hold of yet by him.

See Jesus’ reply: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” In other words, it is possible to hear Jesus’ teaching and to hold him in great admiration, even to be amazed by him and all the hype surrounding him, without his words sinking into the heart. He came to call disciples into total allegiance. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself

⁷ Luke 1:42,48.

and take up his cross daily and follow me.”⁸ Perhaps you feel the weight and wonder of that call, and sense the boldness of the one who speaks it. Maybe it amazes you. But what Jesus is saying in effect is this: “It is not enough to be amazed by everything about me. You can be amazed by my power, by my love, by my influence in the world, and yet miss me. What I want to know is this: will you take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me? Will you obey God’s word, will you keep it? Will you be a hearer of my word, even an amazed hearer of my word, or will you be a doer of it?”

It is a strange coincidence that this woman’s statement, after two thousand years of church history, has become its own best illustration. For one great example of getting so close to Jesus but missing him for the trappings around him is found in devotion to Mary, a central feature of Roman Catholicism. Mariology is almost Christian, but it just barely misses. Whereas Christ would have our hearts fixed on him in adoration and devotion, the church not long after his departure began to offer that adoration and devotion to his mother, Mary. Christ would have us obey God’s word, which states plainly in 1 Timothy 2:5 that “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” but soon the visible church moved its sights just barely off the mark, from Jesus onto Mary, and said, “there is another mediator between God and men, the woman Mary.”

The irony in all of this is found in why Mary is called blessed in Scripture. Elizabeth tells us, again Luke chapter 1: “blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”⁹ Mary was blessed not only because she bore the Christ in her womb, but also because she heard God’s word and obeyed it. Her response to the announcement of Gabriel was this: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”¹⁰

Mary, the precious mother of our Lord, would no doubt shudder at how far afield we have gone from God’s word in our esteem of her. She is a religious trapping. To adore her may feel right to the religiously minded, because she is so closely associated with the Savior—but she is not the Savior. We must give more careful

⁸ Luke 9:23.

⁹ V. 45.

¹⁰ V. 38.

attention to the word of God that we have heard, that we may keep it.

Conclusion

Friends, Jesus Christ is very near to us—he is every week set before you in the preaching of his word. He is daily available through the Scriptures, through prayer.

He is familiar.

Good! Only, we must labor to move beyond the wall of lethargy that our flesh presents for something so familiar. We must get up, and walk about what we think we know, and consider it anew.

And we must, above all else, ensure that if one were to open the door into your heart, he would not find it clean and empty, but instead, he would find there Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sole object of our devotion.