

**The Unclean Spirit**  
**Matthew 12:43-45**  
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Matthew 12 is the climax of the opposition of the Jewish leaders to Jesus. They have criticized His disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-8 and criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:9-21. By denouncing the miracles of Jesus as coming from the ruler of the demons in Matthew 12:24, they committed the unforgivable sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32). Jesus responded with condemnation of the Pharisees in the remainder of Matthew 12 that will result in Jesus turning His ministry toward the disciples and away from the Jewish leaders in Matthew 13.

Matthew 12:43-45 concludes the condemnation by Jesus on the “*evil and adulterous generation*” that demanded a confirming miracle from Jesus when they had already rejected His abundant miraculous deeds (Matthew 12:38-39). His judgment expanded beyond the religious leaders to the generation of Jews who were represented by them. The only sign that they will be given will be the resurrection of the Son of Man

Gentiles from the history of Israel will testify against the Jews of Jesus day. The men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba (Matthew 12:41-42) will condemn these Jews for not responding to their Messiah. Jesus is greater than Jonah the prophet but the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. Likewise, Jesus is greater than King Solomon, but the Queen traveled a long distance to hear his wisdom while these Jews were unresponsive to their Messiah, even when He came to them.

Jesus follows this description of Gentiles condemning the Jews in the judgment with an interesting parable of an unclean spirit who leaves a man and later returns with seven other spirits to bring the man to an even worse state. He then uses this story to portray the Jews not receiving their Messiah. Their state of rebellion will result in a far worse circumstance for themselves in the future.

The connection of this passage to its context is what led to the charge by the Pharisees that Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of the demons. Jesus healed a demon possessed man who was blind and mute in Matthew 12:22, and in Matthew 12:43-45, Jesus used this type of miracle to further describe what would happen to “*this evil generation*” of Jews. This account of the evil spirit teaches about both the nature of demons and the nature of man.

### **The relief from the unclean spirit (12:43)**

Jesus gives a glimpse into the reality of demons after He casts them out. There is no information given about how the demon came into the man in the first place. Many speculate that some specific activity may lead a person to end up demon possessed, yet the Gospels repeatedly describe those who are demon possessed as in need of healing as one afflicted. Like disease is the result of sinful man living in a fallen world, so demon-possession afflicts mankind due to the fall of man in the original sin of Adam. We should refrain from paying "*attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith*" (1 Timothy 1:4).

The demon is described as passing through waterless places seeking rest. The point of this is that demons are seeking rest, which is found in people, not in water. In Luke 8:29 we see a demon driving a man into the desert, so we should not conclude that demons are adverse to water. Rather, waterless places are uninhabitable as life requires water.

In order to create destruction, demons seek out humans. Having been cast out of the man the demon was at rest in, it seeks someone else. This account describes the demon as unable to find any life to inhabit for rest.

### **The return of the unclean spirit (12:44)**

Because the demon in this story was unable to find rest in someone else, it returns to the person it resided in originally. The house is obviously a metaphor for the human body. This implies the possibility of demonic repossession.

When the demon returns, it finds the house unoccupied. This suggests that the person does not have a superior power dwelling within them and they are empty and available for rehabilitation. Jesus had cast out many demons but evidently not all had faith and thus were susceptible to continued demonic influence.

### **The ruin by the unclean spirit (12:45)**

This return of demonic influence is described as "*worse than the first.*" Seven other spirits represent a completely full number who "*go in and live there.*" More than one demon can possess a person and there are obviously degrees of such demonic influence. Only God's presence can protect us from demonic possession "*because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world*" (1 John 4:4).

The parable of this unclean spirit was told by Jesus in order to represent what faced the people of Israel, for *“this is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”* The kingdom of God was at hand and if the Jews did not receive their Messiah, they would be like the unoccupied and empty house, left in an even worse state of existence.

The preaching of John the Baptist called upon the nation to repent. Drove of Jews traveled to the wilderness to hear him. There was a sort of moral reformation in this movement of Jews, though certainly on a national repentance.

Jesus followed John with several recorded cases of casting out demons (Matthew 8:28-34; 9:32-33; 12:22). Also, He gave His disciples the authority over unclean spirits (Matthew 10:1). Yet the Pharisees concluded that these healings were by the power of the ruler of the demons. These leaders and their evil generation of followers will be left in a worse state by having blasphemed the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32) by considering their Messiah to be evil.

Apart from true faith in Jesus, men are vulnerable to the evil one. Satan has power over the whole world (1 John 5:19), and through the world influences the mind and heart of unbelievers. Our fallen, sinful nature is rebellious against God, and apart from God’s grace will serve itself. In our unbelief and selfishness, we want to sin, as Jesus said in John 8:44, *“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.”* This is the primary way that the evil one brings destruction upon the people of this world.

In certain cases in the Scripture, we find that some people are described as being demon-possessed. This circumstance was real, but our ability to discern this today is impossible. The primary reason that limits our ability to draw this conclusion is that neither Jesus nor His appointed apostles are on earth with the authority over demons. The present spiritual conflict with the power of the evil one is fundamentally different in the post-apostolic age, as we are taught in the epistles of the New Testament.

The Lord has been given all authority in heaven and earth, including over the power of the demons. He will ultimately deliver us from Satan (Revelation 20). Our present role is to resist the devil and he will flee from us (James 4:7). We do this by obediently adhering to God’s truth. We are not instructed by the word of God to cast out evil spirits.

## **Conclusion**

The evil generation of Jews in the first century rejected their Messiah. They were compared to a man who was delivered from demon-possession but who, in his unbelief, failed to be filled with the spirit of God and was thus in a worse state than before. These Jews would suffer the destruction of their nation at the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

This parable testifies to the truth of Jesus' words from Matthew 12:30, "*He who is not with Me is against Me.*" Being delivered from evil does not result in holiness before God. We must embrace faith in Christ or all we have experienced is temporary moralism and not redemption from sin. Our house may be cleansed, but the rightful owner has not taken up residence.

Any ministry that is focused on moral improvement rather than personal repentance by faith in Christ is following the path of this evil generation of Jews who saw their house cleansed but were truly in only a worse state in their unbelief. True repentance results in holy living but moral reformation results in temporary self-improvement that will only cloud the true nature of life change through faith in Jesus Christ.

By emphasizing external obedience rather than internal faith that results in holiness, we may leave people inoculated from the true presence and power of the Holy Spirit who leads us to conformity to the will of God. That is, people may think they have changed when in reality their improvement is motivated by the same self-service of our self-interests that brought our problems in the first place. Faith is the necessary prerequisite for any meaningful spiritual change in our life and it is only by faith that we can truly resist the evil one.