

Matthew 12:43-45
Luke 11:24-26

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It's easy to make a mistake at seventy miles per hour. You don't get a lot of time to decide. The repercussions can be devastating, and deadly – and not just for you. Ambling along a country road on foot or even on horseback, you could make a mistake of approximately the same magnitude, but the repercussions would be so slight you might not even notice them. You might nod off to sleep on the back of a horse and still find yourself safe at home, with the horse waiting patiently for you to wake up, take off the saddle, and do some feeding. If you fall asleep behind the wheel at seventy miles per hour – well, I don't have to explain it to you. It is a concern we carry that our ancestors never thought about.

Today we *live* at seventy miles per hour most of the time, so to speak. It doesn't take much of an error on our part to crash us big time – physically, emotionally, relationally, occupationally ... and oh yes, spiritually. We are making many more decisions each day, and with much less time to ponder them, than our grandparents did. Our intentions may not be as different from our forebears as we sometimes think, but most of us give ourselves far less time to think, pray, ponder, and prepare ourselves to keep our balance, and to keep our values and purposes clear and in plain sight.

The other side of the coin is that we can speed past the gifts, the blessings, and the benefits which the Holy Spirit is trying to give us. I am suggesting that the speed of life today makes some of the disciplines of the Christian Path more difficult and more necessary than ever before. In other words, a season like Lent is more important and more necessary to our well-being than ever before. So are retreats, vocatio workshops, and prayer time each morning when we wake up.

Even so, the principles are not new. The necessities have been there from the beginning. It has always been necessary for those who wanted to follow Jesus – for those who have wanted to walk the Christian WAY – to shield themselves from the outside world – from outside influences – in some ways. We hear the thread and theme from almost endless places in the New Testament. Here it is from Second

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Peter: “*With all this in view, you should make every effort to add virtue to your faith, knowledge to virtue, self-control to knowledge, fortitude to self-control, piety to fortitude, brotherly affection to piety, and love to brotherly affection.*” (II Peter 1:5-7)

Now that’s a formula and a half! Wouldn’t that be a great passage to ponder for an entire Lenten season? Well, one of these years ... I try not to get you into anything too deep until you’re ready for it. (I hope you are laughing!)

This teaching about a house swept clean is vintage Jesus. How curious that it reminds us of the standard approaches most Christians use toward the Lenten season each year – and why most of the time it doesn’t do them any good. You have noticed, I presume, connections between giving up things for Lent and making New Year’s resolutions. They both deteriorate before we barely get started because they are self-help approaches. Lent was certainly never *intended* to be a self-help program. Heavens, how can we be watching Jesus – thinking about The Passion and all it means to us – and still get into self-help antics? Nevertheless, Satan always tries to twist our good intentions to his ends. Satan doesn’t have to fight our evil intentions, only our good ones. Therefore most of our struggles with Satan are about the corruption, or twisting, of the very best motives and intentions within us.

On the inside, we are sincere and conscientious people. We know we are not perfect. Suggest that we should improve, and presto! – if we are not wide awake and full of faith (trust), we are soon engaged in yet another self-improvement program. And bingo! – Satan has us playing in his ball park. We are in charge and we are going to fix ourselves – and mess up God’s design in the process. And then either we will end up discouraged (today I think they call it “depressed”) and feeling worse about ourselves than when we started, or we will be filled with pride and a self-satisfaction that helps us look down on lesser mortals not endowed with the superior character traits that we possess. Doesn’t Satan win either way? Satan wouldn’t still be in business if he were as simple and obvious as most of us would like to think.

Lent can be a marvelous time. It reminds us of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness after His own conversion (baptism). It reminds us of the depth of prayer and pondering it took for Jesus to get clear about

His own identity and His own purpose. Not always, but often we need to get fresh and clear about our own Christian identity and purpose. Lent reminds us of the Christian Path or WAY, which we try to walk all the time but which sometimes gets fuzzy, and we need extra time to refocus. Lent is not laid on us from outside. We want to follow this WAY because we have watched and loved and wanted to follow Jesus. We want Lent to be a time when we open ourselves to receive the Spirit of Jesus our Lord in fresh new ways. This often crowds some things out of our lives that we no longer have room for, that we no longer have time or space for. But that's not the same as "giving things up for Lent." Making more room for Jesus is not the same as clearing things out just to get tidy. Of course, you cannot tell the difference from the outside looking in. But on the inside, if we experience more of His presence, there is no comparison. Sorry if the analogy bothers you, but a spring cleaning is not the same as making love.

Does "giving things up for Lent" sound a lot like the picture Jesus gives us of the man who swept his house clean? We would be hard put to find a phrase that could sound any more like "sweeping your house clean." Get rid of bad habits; drive some of your personal demons away. How is it possible that a Lenten tradition could develop which so blatantly falls into the very trap Jesus warns us about? Do we not know how the teaching ends? Do we not read the Scriptures? Do we not pay any attention to what Jesus teaches us? Actually, the notion of giving things up for Lent *does* come from a wing of Christendom that puts no emphasis on reading or studying the Bible.

Perhaps, then, they have an excuse, albeit a lame one, for being off the mark. "We don't know the Scriptures very well because we never intended to know them very well." On the other hand, what is *our* excuse? Protestants, Puritans, and Congregationalists have always put enormous emphasis on reading and studying the Bible. We have always maintained that the Bible should be the overt rule and guide of our faith communities – outranked only by the Holy Spirit of God in Christ Jesus. And yet, for over fifty years now, our churches have been neglecting the Bible, despite our claim that it is supposed to be our rule and guide, and the central focus of our worship. Almost none of our churches today put any emphasis on Bible study. Even in worship, our denomination uses the Bible in the most cursory fashion, often making it clear that no one should take it very seriously – reading small

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sections, often out of context, and saying nothing about them even after they are read. A few of our churches are wonderful exceptions, of course, or our denomination would be dying even faster than it is.

The vast majority of members in the United Church of Christ do not crack a Bible for months on end. And I kid you not: When I first arrive at one of our churches, very few members can tell me whether Elijah comes before or after King David, or whether Hezekiah is one of the books in the Old Testament. That is far from true *here* any longer. But it is still true of some of you. Some people think they are so smart that they don't have to read the Bible to know everything they need to know about being a Christian. They prove the point, too, but not in the way they think.

When I was a young pastor in New England, most of our sanctuaries were still designed around a central pulpit. It wasn't because our pastors had big egos, though that was *sometimes* true, and we were accused of it far more often than *was* true. We had central pulpits to remind ourselves that the WORD was central, and that preaching the WORD was the most important part of worship. Obviously, liturgical churches don't agree with this. In Catholic worship, it doesn't matter whether there is a sermon or not, and usually there is not. Even if there is a homily, it has none of the stature or import of a Protestant sermon. What is central is the Eucharist – the communion meal.

I was raised, as most of you know, in the East Whittier Friends Church. Do you think there was an altar or a cross? Communion was every Sunday, and consisted of five minutes of silence. Toward the end of my high school days, we moved to Long Beach and joined the First Congregational Church. It had a central pulpit, of course. That was back in the '50s. Emerson G. Hangen was a strong and devoted preacher. He lifted up the importance of the WORD by memorizing the Scripture reading each Sunday. He recited the passage (and often it was lengthy) with fervor and feeling, and often it was the highlight of the service – which was exactly what he intended. “If I have a good sermon – well and good. If I have a poor sermon – I'll try again next Sunday. But as for you: STAY WITH THE WORD.” Of course, the true WORD is never just what is printed on the page. It is what lurks behind that – and pondering what the Bible says is one of the best ways to get to it. But I digress ...

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We then moved to New England for ten years. I saw many Congregational churches there, and nearly all of them had central pulpits. Where I worked and preached – Amherst in New Hampshire, and Paxton and Andover in Massachusetts – all had central pulpits. But a new trend was coming: redesign our sanctuaries so they would have a divided chancel, and then we could make the altar central *and* have a cross. This caused a fight within our denomination. No self-respecting Congregational church in New England would allow a cross in the sanctuary back then. Too Catholic; don't get the focus off the WORD. In the years following, more and more churches remodeled their sanctuaries to have divided chancels, like ours is today. Much better for weddings. So we lost the fight. And then we lost Congregationalism. And then we lost the Bible. And in most places we lost the Faith – and now we are losing more and more of our churches all the time. Of course, as a denomination we've been too busy with important things to notice any of these connections. But then again, maybe there are no connections; it's just the way life happens, and nobody is responsible.

By now you may have forgotten the point. The point is that if we pay any attention to what Jesus teaches us, we cannot do Lenten disciplines in the traditional manner. Giving up things for Lent is the cart before the horse. It deteriorates into a self-help program. It misses the real purpose. There are many people who enter Lent year after year and reenact this very teaching about a house swept clean – and end up with more demons than when they started, yet still they don't catch on. In one way or another, most of us have tried it too. So we do not feel superior, just sympathetic. On the other hand, why would we ever allow ourselves to get caught in such a fruitless and counter-productive bootstrap operation ever again? Christ have mercy!

Whether you realize it or not, we are heading toward the gifts of the Spirit. At least that has been my hope since this Lenten season began. But I have wanted to put the gifts in a better context, for reasons I will mention in a minute. If we go directly to contemplating the gifts themselves, wondrous as they are, many people get thrown off track. Over the next two Sundays, we will only have time to touch on a couple of the gifts. But I know you. You are not a WORDless, prayerless community. It will be enough for most of you to open yourselves to whatever gifts you are willing to receive. Meanwhile, one last chance to get the ground ready.

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The gifts are not morals. The gifts are not commandments, rules, or laws. This is an extremely important point. The gifts are not morals, they are GIFTS. I have done sermons and retreats and workshops on “The Gifts of the Spirit” off and on for many years now. What I have noticed, over and over, is that people end up thinking about the gifts of the Spirit in “normal mode.” That’s horrible! We cannot “learn” the gifts of the Spirit like we learn geometry or accounting. Hearing in “normal mode” – that is, in the way we tend to hear and react to most other information we contemplate or acquire “in the world” – will only leave us further off track than ever. Without warning, most people try to deal with the gifts of the Spirit as if they were a list of character attributes they ought to have – and if they don’t have them, then they better rush out and get them. Even worse, we can hear the list of the Spirit’s gifts as a kind of religious report card: a morals checkup; a test of how well we’re doing. If I don’t have these qualities in my life – if they are not big enough in my life – it means I am inadequate, or bad, or wrong. Shame on me! I better shape up before I go to Hell ...

The old construct dies hard, doesn’t it? In truth, these gifts take us *out* of Hell – they release us from our present bondage. And that is not something we can do for ourselves. Not to jump the gun, but the gifts of the Spirit are LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, AND SELF-CONTROL. (Galatians 5:22) Obviously we cannot have these gifts in our lives *and* have bad, boring, or useless lives at the same time. But they are a grace thing. They are *given* to us by the Holy Spirit – as gifts.

If I can find, purchase, produce, or manufacture such things for myself, they are not gifts – certainly not gifts of the Spirit. I don’t mean to imply that you are slow, but do you get it? I have been pretty slow to catch on myself, which is why I am so eager for *you* to “get it.” If we can take care of such things for ourselves, we don’t need Jesus – we don’t need His Holy Spirit. If we can take care of such things for ourselves, then these are not gifts at all. And most of you know very well that the way the church usually approaches the gifts of the Spirit is that they are not gifts at all, and they do not come from the Spirit. We try to turn them into just another self-help program. And where does that lead us? Straight into the teeth of this teaching Jesus uses to try to warn us. Straight into the trap of the seven demons worse than the first. Isn’t that cute!? No, it is Satan.

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What happens when we go after the gifts of the Spirit as if they were something we could get for ourselves? We play-act, of course. We *pretend* we have them. We put them on as if they were spiritual cosmetics – religious makeup. We try to *act* like we have these gifts – try to make it look like we have them so other people will *think* we have them. But smiling all the time doesn't mean we have joy. Do we imagine that it doesn't matter if we really *have* peace, as long as we can get people to *think* we have peace, or as long as we can get a reputation for being “peacemakers”? Or that it doesn't matter if we actually have peace in our homes, as long as we can get people to think that we live in happy homes? Hey, if that's all we're after – the veneer, the makeup, the pretend love, the friendly smile that hides the true venom – then the critics are right: we are just a bunch of hypocrites. They are right to want nothing to do with organized religion.

Well, we all know that there is plenty of pretense in this broken world, but some of us know that that's not all there is. The gifts really *do* exist. The Spirit really *does* want to give us these gifts. The wheat and the tares grow together.

Back to us and our own Lenten devotions: What does the Spirit have to do to get a “date” with us? To get time, friendship, and a setting and an opportunity to give us anything? That is what Lent is really about – saying “yes” to the Spirit's invitation: “Come with me. We need to spend more time together. I have some things I want to give you, but I cannot do that unless we spend some time together. I'm not going to propose in this mayhem you call your life.” The gifts commemorate our bond of love with the Holy Spirit. We accept the invitation – we make and keep the date. We even decide to “go steady” with the Spirit. Just as soon as we do, we are given gifts. Jesus is a great giver, as we should know by now. But I'm jumping way ahead of things, I suppose. On the other hand, the truth is, “The church is the bride of Christ.” So I am not way ahead – I am way behind.

In any case, the gifts all come from the interior life – from our relationship with the Spirit. They are the blessings of knowing the Holy Spirit of our Lord and Savior. Any other approach is merely play-acting, a charade. We don't want the gifts because they are useful in the outer world or because we are trying to impress anybody. We want them because *He* gives them to us – because they remind us of His presence

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and His love. If they sometimes spill over into outer life, so what? It was just an accident – just the overflow. I am certain the Spirit knows that these gifts will bless us greatly, and sometimes help us through very difficult outer circumstances. But we do not receive them or cherish them because they “work” in the world. Sometimes they *do* “work” in the world. Sometimes they make things ever so much more difficult – just like they did for Him, and for all His sincere followers. We receive and cherish the gifts because *He* gives them to us, and because they are so appropriate to who He is, and what He is like. And that happens to be far more important than anything going on in this fickle and broken world.

Back to the house swept clean: “House,” I remind you, is a primordial symbol of the soul. It appears as such in dreams, fairy tales, visions. It is a universal symbol in the language of the subconscious. And clearly that is what it stands for in this teaching. What do we put in the place of any departed demon? Time and life and relationship with Jesus (Holy Spirit). Of course! Only if Jesus comes more and more into our lives will the demons find no room to get back in. Who else could fill such a void – flood our “house” with light and joy – until we have no more desire for demons, or the fake gifts they offer us? Come, Lord Jesus ...