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The Fearful Results of a Spiritual Relapse

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Text.--Matt. 12:43-45: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation."

The immediate occasion of these words was the manifest and great backsliding of the Jewish people generally after the temporary awakening which was occasioned by the preaching of John the Baptist. It is obvious from the history that the nation had been extensively moved under John's preaching. Great multitudes flocked to hear him--indeed the historian says, "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan." Public attention was aroused and a solemn impression made. More still than this, it should be said that their minds had been specially directed to One who should come after him--far greater than himself--indeed the same whom the good men of their nation had long expected as their promised Messiah. Yet when the great Messiah came, the people were unprepared to receive Him. A great change had passed over the spirit of the nation. No sooner did Christ begin to preach than a strong opposition began to be manifested. There had evidently been a great backsliding. We must suppose that many who had been aroused under John's preaching were now bitterly hostile to Christ's doctrine.

When this fact became apparent, the Savior illustrated its guilt and danger in the language of our text, by a figure taken from the then common occurrence of demoniacal possessions. An unclean spirit has had possession in a man; he goes out; finding no rest elsewhere, he returns, and here finding all things so well prepared for his reception, he is encouraged to get more company;--goes and gets to go with him, seven other spirits more wicked than himself; they all enter in and dwell there, so that the last state of that man is worse than the first. The poor man did not take advantage of the absence of the unclean spirit, and put himself at once in a position in which no such being could ever come near him again, but rather prepared himself the more for their reception. Consequently he soon had enough of them to make his last state worse than his first.

Thus does our Lord illustrate the case of the Jewish nation who had temporarily recovered themselves

out of the snare and the power of the devil--had given heed to the words of life spoken by John, but had suddenly and woefully relapsed, rejecting their great Messiah, and now were seven fold more under the power of the devil than ever before.

But theirs was no unusual experience. It happens to all who relapse in like manner, rejecting the truth which they had begun to receive. Hence the text reveals a general principle.

In discussing this principle and bringing out clearly its present application, we must,

I. Consider what is represented by the departure of the unclean spirit.

II. That the state of things consequent on his departure cannot continue long.

III. Point out the dangers and results of a spiritual relapse.

I. The first and great thing represented by the departure of the unclean spirit is, the breaking up of the spell of sin.

Sinners who can live stupidly in sin are spell-bound. Sin has a charm--a power of infatuation over them. They don't see their sins nor at all understand their spiritual condition. They can even say--"I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing; but they know not that they are wretched and poor and miserable and blind and naked." Poor souls! They do not know the first thing about their true condition as they ought to and need to know it.

But the thing represented by the going out of the unclean spirit is, the breaking up of this spell of self-delusion. The man becomes troubled on account of his sins. He is convicted and begins to bestir himself. Perhaps he sets about some external reformation, taking the greatest pains to make some clean spots on the outside of the cup and platter, yet leaving the inside full of all uncleanness. Pressed by conviction of sin, he comes towards the gate of mercy, yet pauses there and lingers long through indecision. He thinks; he prays some; he waits and deliberates on the very threshold of the kingdom of heaven. This seems to be precisely the state represented by the case of the man out of whom the unclean spirit has gone. There is a temporary suspension of the reign of evil; and a consequent opening for new relations with the good. The sinner might now have life, and he makes some approximation towards it; perhaps he does all, but the vital thing, viz., to close in finally and fully with the conditions of salvation. He is almost persuaded, does everything else but give his whole heart to God, yet failing of this, nothing is so done as to secure any permanently good results. The Jewish nation had gone so far that they seemed quite prepared to receive their expected Messiah--yet when He came, where were they?

This leads me to consider,

II. The fact that this state of mind, illustrated by the temporary absence of the evil spirit, cannot continue long.

- 1. The Spirit of God is soon grieved away. His convicting work is scarcely ever continued long

unless His monitions are heeded and obeyed. With awful emphasis God has declared--"My Spirit shall not always strive with man." When a man resists God's efforts through His Spirit to convict and save his soul, he may expect to be left soon to the bitter folly of his own infatuation.

- 2. Restrained propensities, unless soon subdued by submission to God, will reassert their terrible sway, and if so, will do it with augmented force. They will not brook restraint long, unless grace comes and lends her strong arm for their subjugation. If the man will let Christ come into his breast and barricade his soul all around about to fortify him against all temptation, and withal, to become a fountain of strength within, then restrained propensities are brought under and victory is both sure and permanent. But not otherwise. It is all in vain for a convicted sinner to suppose that without divine help, he can keep his propensities long under such restraint as conscience and reason dictate.
- 3. The conscience soon becomes seared. It is found to be less and less active--less quick and less vigorous in its rebukes. He who has one day found its fangs almost intolerable, finds ere long that its voice is almost entirely silent. This result of resisting truth is a law of mind. It must take place where conscience is unheeded and truth, seen, is disregarded. How often do we see this terrible law of mind exemplified!

But I must hasten to speak,

III. Of the dangers and results of a spiritual relapse.

Of its dangers how can we say less than that it is infinitely fraught with danger, of the worst kind. The worst forms of evil are sure to follow. Seven other spirits more wicked than the first are sure to enter in, and what is more, they go in to dwell there, little expecting to be ever ousted from their secure abode.

The sinner's dangers will be as numerous as his temptations, for probably each temptation will now get the mastery over him.

After the action of the mind in its convicted state, there naturally comes on a reaction, and this is generally fatal. When persons, having been partially reclaimed, have relapsed into any particular vice, there is small reason to hope they will come up again. How often has this been seen in the progress of the Temperance Reform? Thousands have been caught hold of by the strong arm of affection and lifted up to the edge of the awful quagmire; but unless they have themselves caught hold of the arm of Jehovah's strength, they have in many, many cases slipped from their treacherous footing and slumped back in to that awful Slough of Death--A Drunkard's Relapse. You have seen such things. They are developments of a general law of mind. Unless the effort of reform is backed up by grace, reaction will certainly ensue and its power will be terrible. Let the dykes once begin to give way and the current set across the breach--all is over. Relapse bursts these flood gates of death. The power of the mind to resist temptation seems to be broke down. The mind seems to have given itself up to be overcome, and the genius of evil is not slow to seize his opportunity of making his victim sure. Nor is there an encouraging hope of deliverance. The mind has once met the question--Shall I give myself wholly up to God and take hold of promised grace to subdue all future sin? It met this question, but

failed to decide it right. It is henceforth averse to meeting the question again. A sense of shame perhaps forbids. A feeling of self-respect rises up and seems to demand that a position once taken shall be maintained. The mind is irked and vexed with the perpetual recurrence of an unwelcome question, once set at rest. Hence there is small reason to hope that the mind will return to the subject and make a right decision, and thus secure the deliverance needed and provided.

All these influences combine to put the relapsed soul on an inclined plane, down which it glides smoothly and swiftly to the gulf of ruin. The house does not stand long, waiting to be filled; soon a seven-fold evil comes in, and comes to dwell there.

The case as given by our Lord illustrates a great principle. If the Jewish nation falls back from the moral elevation gained under John's preaching, temptations rush in again with their augmented returning waves, and the fearful crisis of its moral ruin hastens on apace. The individual soul that gives way again to temptation after a partial rescue has less power to resist than before; the mind becomes chafed and restive, or perhaps discouraged; it hates restraint more than ever, and sometimes seems to come all suddenly to the decision--"I will not be restrained any longer."

REMARKS.

1. Everyone acquainted with the history of the Jews knows how aptly this illustration meets their case. Who ever has read Josephus' history of the Jewish Wars, and of the ensuing destruction of their beloved city, will recognize at once the moral features of the likeness drawn by Christ in our text. The nation perished because it was too awfully wicked to live any longer. Who that has read of their awful corruption does not see the seven other wicked devils in undisputed possession, and the last state of the nation worse than the first--ah! with a vengeance! Retribution came, as it always must when the cup of iniquity is full, and none who saw it as it measured out its terrible judgments upon the doomed city and people could forbear to cry out--"Verily, the anger of their God is heavy upon them and there is no remedy!" When they pressed into Pilate's court and cried--"Let Him be crucified."--they recklessly braved if indeed they did not invoke the vengeance of Jehovah--"His blood," they say, "be on us and on our children!" How terribly did it fall on them ere long!

2. The same principle applies substantially to every reformation that has ever occurred. It has come with its hands full of blessings which some have received, and have found good, even to the extent of everlasting life; but others, rejecting these blessings, have become indefinitely worse. Their becoming worse is no fault of the gospel itself, but is altogether their own. It is no more the fault of the gospel now than it was in Christ's own age and under His preaching. Then as now, some rejected the counsel of God against their own souls, and as a consequence what came from God to bless them they turned into a terrible curse and cursed themselves with it for eternity.

Thus seasons of reformation in every age of the world are set for the fall and for the uprising of many in Israel--for the fall of many never to rise again; and for the uprising of many to life and blessedness eternal. The reformations are themselves faultless and may be conducted unexceptionably: but he who repels their influence will soon find his soul beyond the reach of good in this or any other world. There can be no good to those who scorn God's means of conferring it. How rapidly they go down to moral destruction when once by resisting truth they have lost the bottom of their minds, so that hence

forth they hear truth only as a tub without a bottom holds water!

3. The passage before us and the principle it illustrates should be compared with that fearful declaration of God which speaks of those that "perish, because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved," and of whom He says--"for this cause God shall send upon them strong delusion that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believed not all the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Discarding and hating the truth which God reveals in love to their souls, they were suffered to embrace errors more and more destructive. They chose darkness rather than light; what therefore could a God of light and truth do for them more? What else should He do but make them beacons to warn other sinners against the rocks on which they made shipwreck of their moral natures and hence of their eternal well-being? Time was in their case when the evil spirit went out of them also, but they utterly failed to improve their opportunity for God; the spirit came back, found all things to his mind; took seven spirits indefinitely worse; they all take up their abode in that sinner's heart; then follow infatuation and swift damnation.

4. We see the danger incurred by churches and families, if they fail to "know the day of their visitation."

The fearful woes which fell on the Jewish nation came on them, said their offered Savior, "Because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation." They had a visitation of mercy; God came near as He could to bless them; but the mass saw not, or at least heeded not His coming; practically they "knew not the day of their visitation." They ought to have known it. It was more their fault than their misfortune that they failed to know it.

So of churches and families in our day, to whom God comes graciously near but who fail to notice His presence, or are not quite ready to greet His coming, until He is gone! Alas! How many such cases occur both in churches and in families! They see not their hour of mercy till it has past. They are not in the secret counsels of the Most High--do not abide so near the Lord as to know His near approach. A few individuals may have such communion with God as to feel His special presence; but their testimony may be wholly unknown, and if known, may be unheeded by their brethren. Many such churches have I seen, which seemed in many respects just on the eve of being blessed with great power; but the cloud of mercy broke and passed off with only a great wind; Satan came back and with him legions of evil spirits, and their last state was seven-fold worse than their first.

5. From this point of our subject, we can see the great guilt of those who "come not up to the help of the Lord against the mighty," until the strength of the few who are in the battlefield is spent. In all cases where the Lord comes near to bless a people, many laborers are needed to co-operate in His work. If they are not on hand, the work flags, and soon the Spirit of God is withdrawn. This is the more certainly the case if the lack of laborers is the fault of God's professing people. If it should occur without their fault, the fact would not offend God and would not be necessarily a reason for the sudden withdrawal of His Spirit.

But as the cases commonly occur, the lack of laborers is wholly attributable to the spiritual apathy of professed Christians. All appearances indicate that God is about to work mightily through and by His people; a few observe these tokens and enter with all their strength upon the work of the Lord; but the

many are not ready for the sacrifice and effort called by the tokens of Jehovah's presence; they do not come up to the help of the Lord against His mighty foes. The angel of the Lord sends down His curse upon them. "Curse them bitterly," says He, because in the hour of need they would not help in the work of the Lord!. God called, but they came not. The crisis came, and the crisis went: they moved not: now therefore the wrath of the Lord waxes hot against them for their fearful disobedience to Heaven's high command.

6. Reaction is disastrous in proportion to the extent of the partial reformation. It was obviously so in the case of John's preaching. Those who learned from him most fully the way of salvation and who when Jesus came rejected Him were most deeply guilty and most awfully cursed by the returning power of other unclean spirits.

We who are parents may see what you have to expect if you allow this spiritual relapse to come upon your children. Perhaps you will not realize their danger and will fail to press them to the final and full decision for Christ until the precious season is past: until the unclean spirit returns and legions more, yet worse, come in and dwell there. Depend upon it, you will find the illustration given in our text but too fearfully true. Just in proportion to the light sinned against and to the nearness with which the kingdom of heaven is brought to their hearts, will be the terribleness of their relapse and the uncertainty of their being ever again brought even so much as near to Christ's kingdom. O how fearful a thing for a Christian parent to suffer a child to slip past the sealing time, and go on his broad and easy way towards remediless woe. How carefully should they watch the hour when the unclean spirit is gone out, and bar the door forever against his return! For, once returned and admitted--once reinforced with the presence of seven other more wicked spirits, the state of one who is even a child of praying parents becomes fearfully perilous. Let parents think much of their responsibility to seize now the favoring moment. Never wait till sin gets entrenched in the heart. Take care against even one relapse from a convicted state into unconcern and stupidity. You can scarcely conceive how terribly one such relapse augments the difficulties in the way of sound conversion ever afterwards.

7. The relapse is usually more or less sudden, always more or less obvious and apparent, according to the tone of general influence which prevails in the place. For under a strong moral influence, the most hardened sinners are often kept morally decent for a long time. But go into a place where sin takes to itself free scope and ranges at will; there you will see the legitimate workings of a spiritual relapse. There you will see how terrible is the tendency of sin to drag its victim downward, downward, to the very depths of hell. You can there mark the fearful reaction which follows deliberate rejection of offered mercy, especially if done despite of the powerful action of divine influence, seeking to persuade the sinner to repent. If you have never seen these developments in so strong a light as I have represented them, you need only go where external restraint is chiefly or wholly withdrawn, and you will surely see it, and will say the half had never been told you.

8. How terrible, therefore, must be the moral state of those who profess to be religious, but who yet have relapsed entirely in heart and are only kept in moral decency by the force of involuntary habits or that of public sentiment. How appalling is their danger! Every physician knows what a relapse is in his patient; he has seen them till he has reason to dread them as his most dangerous adversaries. He thought the crisis of danger was nearly past--all seemed to be doing well; hope had sprung up in his bosom and become almost settled into assurance, when suddenly the awful fact of relapse--flashes

upon his eye! Ah, now there is peril! Now let medical skill do its utmost; there is scant hope at the very best. There is scarce a more fearful event in the whole range of medical practice than this of relapse. The system has perhaps rallied itself to its utmost strength to throw off disease and it seemed about to conquer; but now, its powers exhausted, its enemy charges again as with fresh forces and the conflict if not fatal is at least terrible.

Not less so is the conflict between the seven-fold forces of sin and the retreating and half-crushed moral energies that remain after a spiritual relapse. Alas, how many have found the conflict short and feeble, and the issue forever fatal. My dear hearers, it is a fearful thing to suffer a deep moral relapse. Woe to those upon whose backsliding souls it shall fall!

What then will you do? What will you do today? Are you aware of the state of things among yourselves, of the degree in which the Spirit's power is manifested here even among you? If you were fully so, you must see that this is no time for spiritual trifling. You would see a stronger emphasis than ever you have seen before in the language--"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation." From many of you the unclean spirit has gone out, and in the deep calm which ensues, you might with hopeful ease, escape the snares of Satan and place yourselves under the shadow of the Savior's wing; will you do it? If still you are tempted to linger,--I say unto you, beware of those seven other spirits, more wicked than the first, for they need only this very lingering of yours to be their signal for returning with more awful power to take such a possession of your soul as your efforts, thenceforward faint and feeble, will never avail to disturb.

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite

benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.

4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.