

Full House

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[0 : 00] I invite you to take your Bible and turn to page 818. We come to the last two little paragraphs in Matthew chapter 12 today.

Matthew 12, page 818. And both chapter 11 and chapter 12 feel like Olympic ski jumps. You know those Olympic ski jumps where people get up to 100 kilometers an hour jump 800 feet in the air. I've climbed one once.

I was going to tell you I went off one but I didn't. It was in the middle of summer up in Calgary. It gave me the willies. It's so high in the air. They go so far and so fast and both of these chapters, both 11 and 12, have felt like that.

So chapter 11 has gone downhill fast with the rejection of Jesus by the towns in Galilee and then suddenly at the end, whoosh, this invitation, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

[1 : 04] And then in chapter 12 it goes downhill fast again with the opposition and the religious leaders who call him the devil and want to kill him and then whoosh, this invitation at the end in the last little paragraph, become my true brothers and sisters.

And the last three verses are just this wonderful, out of nowhere high point. And we could take a very happy hour on what it means to belong to the eternal family of God.

The only problem is Matthew does not want us to read it that way. The beginning of verse 46 begins, while he was still speaking to the people, behold.

In other words, the invitation to become part of his family comes as an interruption while he is telling another story. And we have to read these two paragraphs together.

And the reason is Jesus' invitation for us to become his family is not a free-floating sentimental thing that's meant to make us feel good, even though it ought to make us feel better than good, but it stands in stark contrast to the only other spiritual condition, the only other spiritual option, which is having a life empty of Jesus.

[2 : 21] There's a deliberate contrast between a house that's spiritually full with Jesus and the family and a house that's spiritually empty, a house that has the presence of Christ and the power of Christ and a place where Jesus is not.

So I just want to look at those two paragraphs together. The first one I've called, The Strange Picture of the Empty House in verses 43 to 45.

And I hope you agree, it's just a very strange little story. There's nothing like it anywhere else in all the Bible. I mean, it's not really a parable. It's much closer to individual experience.

It's not really a metaphor and it's not really a specific event. Remember, Jesus is speaking to the crowd and to the religious leaders. And at the end of this little paragraph in verse 45, you read, So also, Jesus says, will it be with this evil generation.

So he applies it to that generation to whom he's speaking. But twice in verse 43 and 45, Jesus also tells us that he's speaking about an individual person's experience, that person, a person who has had some experience of Jesus, but who ends up expelling Jesus and reversing the work of Jesus in their lives.

[3 : 39] And it's a graphic warning that you can begin with Jesus, but end up worse than you started, in contrast to receiving his invitation. But the strangest thing of all about the story is that Jesus tells it from the point of view of the unclean spirit, from the point of view of the demon itself.

And as the story starts, the unclean spirit in verse 43 finds that he has been evicted from the person that he had previously possessed.

So the house in the story is like the inner life, the soul, the spiritual life of a person. And the unclean spirit has been evicted. He's been kicked out of that person. Because the normal work of Satan and

demons is to try and take up residence and gain footholds in people's lives and make no room for Christ.

And it takes the power of God to drive out the demon. We have no power to do this. So it's clear that this person, this individual has had some experience of Jesus Christ, perhaps like the young guy in verse 22 of this chapter who'd had the demon cast out of him.

But that's not the end of it. Being rid of the demon does not automatically lead us to salvation and eternal life. There's something missing. Yes, the kindness and power of God drive the demon out, do that in God's own power, but it creates a vacuum.

[5 : 04] And Satan and his servants prowl around like roaring lions, constantly trying to find ways to retake those who begin to follow Jesus or have begun to experience something of his power.

And being driven out infuriates Satan and so he collects his attacking forces and tries again. Now you know that people who become Christians, this is the common experience of young believers, new believers, that after the initial experience of forgiveness, they find themselves under sharper and fiercer temptation than even before.

I remember a friend of mine who became a Christian when he was in the Air Force as a cadet. After he became a Christian, he had all the sorts of troubles with sin he never had before.

And then the demon in verse 44 makes a little speech to itself. It says, I will return to my house from which I came. And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept and made beautiful, literally.

Notice the demon still thinks of the person as my house. And the reason he thinks of it as my house is because it's empty. It hasn't been filled with the presence of Christ. But since the demon left, the person has been very busy on self-improvement, on self-reformation, on making changes, on cleaning up things inside their life so that they're all in order.

[6 : 30] And Jesus is saying that without Christ, every spiritual improvement we try to make puts us in a more dangerous position because you're in a spiritual vacuum. See, in this person, there's nothing more powerful in their spiritual life than just their own individual choices.

And that cannot protect them from repossession. So the unclean spirit goes out and finds a posse of seven more unclean spirits. I'm not sure what the plural is for demons, but seven unclean spirits. And because there's no spiritual presence to block them re-entry, they find easy entry and take up permanent residence. Verse 45, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.

Question. What's missing from the story? What's the obvious thing missing from the story? It's Jesus Christ himself. He's the one who drove out the demon in the first place, right?

But that initial work of grace is not enough if you do not have the ongoing presence and power of Christ inside your spiritual house in your soul. You can go through every spiritual exercise in the book.

[7 : 37] You can tidy yourself up morally. You can write a book on virtue. But it's not going to do you any long-term spiritual good. Searching, isn't it?

I mean, somehow this person has had experience of something, but they've not welcomed the ongoing presence of Christ. Perhaps they had heard the preaching of Christ and they received his word with joy, but there was no root in them.

And when difficulties arose, they immediately fell away. Or perhaps Jesus is picturing someone who had been healed by Jesus in their bodies, had a direct experience of the Holy Spirit, but they didn't give their whole lives over to Jesus.

And they didn't really become members of his family. And they're so busy reforming their lives in their own strength and keeping themselves tidy, but their spiritual life really is a transaction with themselves all the time and not a closeness or a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And that's the best thing religion can offer. This is the religion of the Pharisees, a self-reformation major project without the presence and power of Christ.

[8 : 43] And it's the default religious preference for every single one of us to have a kind of a spiritual Marie Kondo going on inside us, making everything neat and cosmetically beautiful.

We want to be rid of everything that pollutes us. That's a good desire. So we make lists of rules. I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm not going to do that. And we keep certain religious observances. We even go above and beyond what the Bible calls us to do.

But in the end, you have a very clean, a very neat and very tidy vacuum. Christ is a stranger. We're not saved by spiritual mindfulness. We're not saved by living in the moment or self-actualization or the seven habits of highly tidying, effective people or whatever it is.

We're not saved by decluttering our minds or thinking positively and eating well. We're not saved by anything we do. We're saved by Jesus Christ himself in his active power and presence in us. Last weekend, 65 women went on retreat and had a terrific time. My wife has come home and all week she's been practicing rolling potatoes on the floor with her nose. And I need an explanation of that.

[9 : 51] And she's also gone to the cupboard and found Oreo cookies and put them on her forehead and gradually got them down into her mouth. They had fun. The women, tell me what that was about, will you please?

But they looked at the passage in John's Gospel, that lovely passage, where Jesus commands us to abide in him as he abides in us. It's a great word.

This is dwelling, living, having fellowship and communion with Christ. He's the vine. We are the branches. Apart from him, we can do nothing. If we try to live our spiritual lives apart from him, it doesn't matter what we do, our last state will be worse than our first.

Because frankly, God is not all that interested in the tidiness of our lives. He's not all that interested if we keep the rules. He's interested in us. And not just getting an occasional text, but dwelling in us and drawing us into his family.

And that is why I think the strange picture of the empty house is so powerful. And so we turn secondly to the wonderful picture of the full house. And this is where the chapter takes off on the ski jump, verses 46 to 50.

[11 : 04] He does not, Jesus does not want to just leave us empty, struggling on our own. He wants to fill us with his fellowship and with family. So in verse 46, apparently Jesus' family is outside the house.

He's inside the house with Pharisees and with a crowd around him. And they are seeking him. They want to interrupt him. And his mothers and brothers demand to speak to him.

And you know, in the New Testament, Mary and Joseph had other children after the birth of Jesus. They didn't come to believe Jesus was the Messiah until after the resurrection. But the message comes to Jesus and he turns the message into a perfect teaching moment.

And he answers the interruption with two questions and one statement. He says, who is my mother? And who are my brothers? And then in verse 49, stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he says, here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my father who is in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Now, of course, he's not repudiating family ties.

[12 : 17] Only three chapters later, Jesus has fierce criticism for the religious leaders who are undermining family commitments, raising money for the temple. He's very strong on that. But there's something greater than family here.

Jesus has come to his own people and his own people have rejected him. And since the start of chapter 10, he's begun building a new people who follow him for life and who he makes into a new family.

And the one defining mark of being a member of this family is that they do the will of my father who is in heaven. It's an invitation, Jesus says, whoever does the will, irrespective of background, irrespective of behavior.

It's an invitation to call God, your heavenly father, to enter into this connection with him, to have him enter the spiritual house where he will be a truer brother to you than anyone and in a way that's deeper than a natural family.

Now, if you've been a Christian for a while, the idea of having brothers and sisters in Christ can lose its shine. Partly because we're very sinful and we let each other down and hurt each other.

[13 : 29] We're in the middle of our newcomers course and we said last week to folk who are thinking about joining St. John's, we promise you we will let you down. I think it's important to get that out right at the beginning, right?

But I think it's also partly because we're so independent and busy and pretend we don't really need each other. You know when you visit someone who's dying, you know what's on their minds? It's never how much money they've made or how many houses they've had or where they've travelled to.

It's never whether they've been recognised or famous or successful or how morally tidy their lives have been. It's always family. And here the focus is not so much on the great honour of calling each

other brother and sister.

Here the focus from Jesus is having Jesus as our brother and God the Father as our God. It's very personal. You see again, he says, here are my brother, my mother.

Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, sister and mother. He just hasn't come to give us neat and tidy lives. He's come to fill our lives, to be our brother so that we can call God our heavenly father.

[14:44] He's not come to give us just an initial burst of forgiveness so that we can get on and do the rest on our own. He wants family. He wants to be able to say, you are my brother.

You are my sister. You are my mother. That's what Christ wants. He wants to dwell in our hearts by faith. And it's not a one-off injection where then you're on your own, but it's a growing, ongoing, deepening connection of love and fellowship where he dwells in us and we draw on him and we grow to know him more deeply.

And we've sung about this in every single hymn we've sung this morning. But what on earth does Jesus mean when he says that those who are his family do the will of God, his father in heaven? Does he really believe that I can do the father's will? Well, apparently he does. And you'll be pleased to know that there is one other place, only one other place in Matthew where he uses this phrase five chapters back in Matthew 7.

So if you keep your hand in chapter 12 and go back to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7, verse 21. Jesus is warning us about true and false believers.

[15:59] He's distinguishing between the two. And he picks up the judgment day because he is the judge of the living and the dead. And in verse 21, he says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but, here it is, the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven.

So here are people who are orthodox and keen. Lord, Lord, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my father in heaven. What does he mean? Verse 22.

On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Here are people who are orthodox, engaged in ministry, and effective as well. They've done many mighty works in the name of Jesus.

They've got tidy and virtuous lives. And Jesus says, there's only one thing missing. I never knew you. There was no reality to the relationship.

[17:09] You've never really given yourself to be mine. Your life is not about knowing me. It's about you improving. And now as we come back to chapter 12, what Jesus is doing is taking that picture and deepening it and extending what it means to do the will of the father.

To do the will of the father is not just to know Jesus and be known by him, but it's to have Christ dwell in our hearts by faith. It's to have Jesus Christ at the heart of your heart, if you will.

It's to daily and hourly draw on him for spiritual strength and comfort. It's not self-reformation. It's increasingly turning over the show to him for his transformation.

It's not striving very hard to try and change yourself and improve yourself. It's looking at the glory of God in Jesus' face and being transformed in that way.

It's not rearranging the spiritual furniture on your own. It's hearing his voice and having your heart enlarged by his love and his glory.

[18:18] It's abiding in him and by him abiding in us. That's what it's about. One of my favorite Christian authors, 400 years ago, John Owen, he wrote 14 volumes and he decided the first one should be called The Glory of Christ.

And he says this, he says, Who can declare the glory of Christ? Who can speak of these things as he ought? I'm so far from designing to set forth the hollow that I'm deeply sensible how little a portion I can comprehend of the least part of it.

Nor can I attain unto any satisfaction in these meditations but what issues in a humble adoration. That's what it means to abide in Jesus.

So the basic question the passage asks us this morning is this, is your heart empty or is it full of Christ? Is your soul, if your soul is a house, are you your own cleaner?

Or is the focus and energy Christ's action? And you can, we can apply this to any area you like. I mean, take decision making. If your house is empty of Christ and you're trying to lead a good life,

the questions will be, what is it about this decision that's going to make me peaceful?

[19 : 36] How can I invest in my own development here? What will serve to make things neat and tidy for me? How will I be authentic to myself and look good to others? But if the house is full and you're making a decision, the question is, what is the will of my Father in heaven?

So that if I'm choosing whether I'm going to live in Ottawa or Oshua, the question is not, doesn't really matter to God where I end up but how I decide. Whether during the decision I draw nearer to Christ and how in that decision I invest in eternity.

Or take the issue of suffering. You know, if the house is empty, you've got to avoid suffering at all costs because it just makes things messy. It's terrible.

And you'll be stoic and you'll try desperately to keep things in order. You'll say, yes, it's fine. But it just doesn't work. And when it doesn't work, you've got choices. You either become bitter or you blame others because tidiness doesn't help with suffering.

But if the house is full of Christ, suffering becomes an opportunity for Jesus to become real to me. As my brother, he's the man of sorrows, deeply acquainted with grief.

[20 : 48] And I have a family who's going to walk with me because they belong to him. Or take the issue of aging. If you have an empty house, it's just impossible to keep everything in its right place.

It's harder and harder and harder. And if you're empty of the power and presence of Christ, those losses can be absolutely overwhelming. So what do we do? We try and nail things down harder and busy ourself with more distractions from Christ and the inevitability of death.

But if the house is full, we have a sure and certain hope that grows. And though my outer body wastes away, my inner nature is being renewed day by day and we can prove Christ faithful a thousand times.

And gradually, Christ will turn us outward in patience and example and prayer and care for our younger brothers and sisters and gradually my longing for Jesus may increase and be satisfied.

I finish with this. This is just a wonderful invitation and we are way more important to Jesus than we could possibly imagine.

[22 : 07] After his suffering and his death and his resurrection, the risen Christ sings a song of irrepressible joy. It's recorded later for us in the New Testament. And the lines go something like this.

Jesus sings, Look, my father, behold, your children who you've given me. I'm proud to call them my brothers and sisters, not just in this life but in the life to come.

We're far more important to him than we could imagine. He loves us more than we could imagine. He takes joy in us. He desires to have us and be in communion with us more than we can imagine. So brothers and sisters, there is nothing to fear with Christ in the house. Amen.