

Cheap Religion is Worse Than No Religion

Richard Rohr, OFM

Lucifer means "light-bearer", and the problem of evil is that it carries just enough light to confuse you.

In our search for the true spirit of Jesus, and the search for authentic peace, I would like to tackle one of the most confusing, ignored, and problematic passages in the Synoptic Gospels. This passage could help us understand why peace is so hard to come by for most people and most groups, especially if they presume they can eliminate all evil from themselves or from the world. It is a story of false exorcism.

The precise text I am referring to is called "the return of the unclean spirit", and is found in both Matthew and Luke. It is a passage that has little track record of interpretation in church history. It is distant and esoteric to most people, based on a strange demonology that we no longer understand or agree with. Most commentators and preachers just choose to ignore it. I am convinced that it is not demonology that will explain this passage, but it needs a very astute analysis of human nature. Maybe it is only now that we have the language to unravel Jesus' spiritual genius. Let's quote one version at length to see what he is saying:

"When the spirit of uncleanness goes out of a person it wanders through arid lands looking for a place to rest, and it cannot find one. Then it says, 'I will return to the home I came from'. But on arrival, finding it unoccupied, swept and tidied, it then goes off and collects seven other spirits more evil than itself and they go in and set up house there, so that the person ends up being worse than he was before". (Matthew 12:43-45)

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I am going to give you a simple summary of how I understand each term:

"The spirit of uncleanness" = the inflated human ego demands that we divide and separate the world into clean and unclean, pure and impure, worthy and unworthy. This is a demon--an inner force that has a life of its own. The word that is used would be clear to Jewish people: "spirit of defilement". It is the most common demon of religion, because religious people tend to want to separate themselves from evil instead of transform it. We have inherent textual affirmation for this interpretation because of the immediately preceding passage in Matthew 12:22-32, where religious authorities try to justify their split world view between the pure and the impure. But Jesus says that "a household divided against itself cannot stand" and this delusion is actually a, "sin against the Holy Spirit".

"It goes out of a man" = you eventually lose your illusions about yourself, if you are growing in honesty and humility. The spirit of defilement leaves you as you grow up, as you learn that love is stronger than death, and you are stronger than evil. One learns one's mystery at the price of one's innocence, but most people, unfortunately, hold on to their false innocence and therefore never learn their true mystery.

"Wandering through arid lands, looking for [an oasis] rest, and cannot find one" = All spirits need a proper container, a credible host to inhabit, an oasis where your virus can hide and grow. You look for other people to hate or blame so you can project your inner anxiety and doubt elsewhere. The scapegoat mechanism is probably the single most universal and successful inner dynamic on this earth. It cannot work, of course, unless you are totally unconscious. Unfortunately, a high percentage of people are unconscious, and spend much of their life in

denial, avoidance, reaction formation or projection. We are largely unwilling to bear the dark/impure side of anything. We would rather pretend to be "light-bearers", and as this passage reveals, end up like Lucifer.

"I will return to the home I came from" = Finally evil has to come home to where it started, and one has to accept one's participation and cooperation with the evil of this world. This is the call to consciousness and truth that often hits us in the middle of life, after failure or defeat. It is the real meaning of that rare thing called repentance.

"On arrival, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and clean" = When you are forced to be brutally honest, and face your complicity in wrongdoing and evil, you come headlong into a very resistant confrontation with your pure and superior self image. The ego always wants to feel superior, clean, orthodox, and pure. But more importantly, notice the key word "unoccupied". This surely points to the person's unconsciousness and unawareness, not living inside themselves. They are split. But it also applies to the lack of contact with the Divine Indwelling. No one is dwelling there, neither oneself nor the Godself.

First stage religion helps many people to give up "drugs, sex, and rock and roll", but not really to seek Divine union. Many people give up humiliating defilements (being possessed by an addictive pattern) but have not really been "re-possessed" by God. The overwhelming amount of religion I have encountered is morality but not mysticism: people who want to feel that they are on higher moral ground, but not necessarily people "in love with God". The confrontation with both God or evil, are equally disastrous if one needs to retain one's superior self-image. Most people, as a result, find a way to protect themselves from both the humiliating goodness of God (grace) and the humiliating nature of evil (the hot sins). This is the danger of cheap religion.

"Goes off and collects seven other spirits more evil than itself" = The soul cannot bear the burden of its own impurity and emptiness, and so it gathers demons like smugness, denial, certitude, righteousness, false religion, pride, and delusion to cover its nakedness. They can all pass for holiness, and my self-image is secure. Lucifer, the light bearer, is in charge.

"They go in and set up house there and the person ends up being worse than he was before" = In other words, any kind of fortified purity, rationalized superiority, ends up being worse than one's actual mistakes or sinfulness themselves. This is one of the central insights and a constant emphasis in Jesus whole ministry. This is the final victory of the "spirit of uncleanness", which has gone out to "collect" seven very clever disguises. The ego seeks control at all costs. It cannot say yes. It never surrenders to any sense of its own impurity.

The psychological word for such a stance is "defense mechanism". The medieval spiritual word was "the noonday devil". The AA word is denial. The ego or soul, once exposed to its own emptiness, will seek endless disguises to avoid ever being discovered or threatened again. It does not want to be "occupied" by anyone but itself. It will not give up its self-enthronement. This is the common human pattern, normative for all of us, without the softening agent of grace. Thus most people cannot admit they are wrong.

People who remain too long with stage one religion actually retreat into a state of complacency. They know on some level that the cleanliness game is a lie and an illusion, but they have no other path they are willing to follow. They are unwilling to carry the burden of being impure, unclean, and unworthy. They will not be, as Jesus constantly boasted of himself, a "son of man" but want to be daughters of heaven. I see this in many fervent churchgoers, and unfortunately in

many ministers and religious too. They know their supposed separation from evil is all an illusion, but they do not have the courage to accept, weep over, and forgive the utter poverty of their soul. (Read Scott Peck's *People of the Lie*, which is a classic presentation of this phenomenon.)

Somehow many lifelong religious people end up worse than they were at the beginning, rigid and unloving human beings, while once setting out to be "good" and exorcise their unclean spirits. Their love of their own goodness finally became more addictive than their love of God's goodness. It is such "demonic possession" that is responsible for most of the killing, righteous revolution, and hatred in all of history. Peace is not possible inside of such illusion, only division and exclusion. Whether they be Taliban, Al Qaeda, Catholic restorationists, American fundamentalists, or liberal activists, evil must always be exorcized and eliminated, so my ego can feel superior and safe. It can take the form of either communism or fascism; the ego has both leftist and rightist disguises.

Jesus, in utter contrast, agrees to live "in the flesh", sharing the human fate in all its uncleanness: naked, failing, and poor. He identifies with the impure and the sinful people in this world and does not expel them or try to eliminate them. In fact, he lets the sinners eliminate him! Evil for Jesus becomes, paradoxically, the illusory and arrogant attempt to expel or eliminate evil. He himself is always shockingly patient with sinners. Jesus contains evil in a new way-- by refusing to give it his energy in actively opposing it. He lives in such a way that he is not beholding or dependent on power, prestige, or possessions. Most church people cannot fathom or tolerate this mere non-cooperation, even though it is actually much harder in practice. Pious folks are unconsciously "scandalized" in him (Luke 7:23)

Jesus becomes the problem to overcome the problem; he enters into solidarity with sin and pain to unlock it from within. His spirit does not try to separate from the unworthy world, but instead he accepts it, weeps over it, and forgives it. Instead of hating it, he absorbs it. This is the rare and doubtful way of Jesus. The spirit of Jesus is the exact and total opposite of the spirit of uncleanness. It will always be counter-intuitive, looking like weakness, while in fact, getting the job done in the long haul. But demons cannot wait that long.