

Faith, Followers, and Failures
- The Emptiness at the End of Failure
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

If you wait around at the end of a rainstorm, you are often treated to one of the most beautiful products of nature - The rainbow. I don't know about you, but I always stop when I see one. Rainbows are a wonderful gift from the God who controls nature.

Now, like many things in our world, people have not been content to leave the rainbow be. We've surrounded it with all kinds of legends and fairy tales. One of the most mischievous of those legends is the way that the leprechauns of Ireland are said to use the rainbow. At the end of the rainbow is a magic pot of gold.

Whoever came up with that one really enjoyed playing with people's heads. You see, you can never reach the end of a rainbow. It's a kind of optical illusion. If you see one, it's because you're at just the right angle to see light being refracted by drops of rain. If you move around, the rainbow travels with you. It will always be the same distance away, even if you run as fast as you can.

But let's say that someone figured out how to reach the end of a rainbow. They hire the best physicists and engineers. And they invent a special vehicle that could travel at the right speed. Imagine after all that work, they got to the end. And lo and behold, they find the pot.

And it's empty. Well, that would be disappointing, wouldn't it? We're going to find today that you can spend your whole life running after things and come up empty. And the emptiness you find is worse than disappointing - It's dangerous.

Let's read about some important things that Jesus said. Here's a note: I often hear that people want variety in sermons. Well, Jesus was a very colorful speaker who used all kinds of different stories to make his points. We're going to get some real variety right now. Today, Jesus is going to use a ghost story. Oooohhh... Ready to be scared? Here we go:

43 When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. 44 Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. 45 Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation. (Matthew 12:43-50)

What's going on here? Let's find out.

Why a Horror Story?

Jesus frames what he's about to say with a story of an "impure spirit". Why would he do that? Well, tales of the supernatural seem to get people's attention. According to the Internet Movie Database, last year there were over 100 horror movies made in the U.S. alone. The average cost of a Hollywood style movie is a hundred million dollars. You can do the math. Supernatural horror gets people's attention. You've all heard the phrase, "Be afraid, be very afraid." That's from a movie. Well, Jesus is going to lead up to something that's much scarier than a movie - Something really serious.

Some side information

Although it's not the main point, Jesus is about to give us some helpful information on the supernatural world. And we'll learn something about Jesus along the way.

"Impure spirits" is another name for demons. There are good spirits, which we know of as angels. When angels go bad, they become demons. The idea of impurity is a helpful image. It's something like fruit. We all love a beautiful, fresh apple. It's appetizing and tasty and healthy. But then, something gets into that apple. It begins to rot. Now, it's impure. This makes the apple decidedly unappetizing. If you ate some, you'd get sick.

It's like that with angels. Angels are servants of God. They're tremendously helpful to him and to us. But when they go bad, they make the universe stink. Here's an interesting insight into these beings: Centuries ago, the first angel went bad. We know of him as Satan, of "**The Devil.**" Prior to his fall, the universe was a great place. It was great for the living things God created, and it was great for the spirit beings, the angels. But, after the fall, the fallen angels started to mess things up. And now, guess what? **They don't like living in the mess they created!** They prefer to possess a living thing and make their home in it - Humans are apparently preferred.

If a demon is forced to leave a biological home, it goes out into what Jesus calls "arid places." That's another term for a dry desert. Now, demons are spirit beings. This means they don't need food or water. So, this image of wandering through a desert is symbolic. In other words, the demons don't like living in the world they're creating. To them, it's empty. It's unpleasant.

Back to the human hosts. If a human somehow found the help to kick the demon out, perhaps it means they've then decided to deal with whatever situation made them look good to the evil forces in the first place. They've turned their life around. At some point, the demon wanders back to see how things are going with its old home. When the demon returns, it sees everything in order. Seeing the improvement, it grabs some friends and forces its way back in.

So we just saw an insight into the spirit world. In the process of getting some insights into the supernatural world, now, we also get some insights into Jesus.

Jesus has demonstrated power over the spirit world many times during his earthly ministry. Question: Why did he have this power? Was he just a normal human being, and one day, God said, “Hey, Jesus – I want you to be the Messiah. Do you see that sick guy over there? Heal him. The guy next to him as a demon. Tell that demon to hit the road.

Was that what happened with Jesus? No. Jesus was God visiting the face of the earth. He is an eternal being. He has total authority over all parts of the universe, natural and spiritual. He always has. So, he’s seen things like what he’s describing many times over the centuries.

Jesus acted like he saw things like this all the time. In another place, Jesus said this:

17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” 18 He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”.
(Luke 10:17-18)

At one point, Jesus shared his authority over the spirit world with his disciples. The disciples were very impressed with their new-found power. Jesus said, “That’s nothing - I was there when Satan was cast out.” The fall of Satan from heaven happened millennia before Jesus appeared on the earth. And yet, Jesus was there to see it.

The Application

So, in sharing this story, Jesus gives us an insight into the spirit world. And he gives us an insight into himself. But why? Why is Jesus doing this? I believe Jesus is focusing on two categories.

A. Personal

The first application is personal. We should all care about this. Let’s pick up on the illustration that Jesus used: a home. Let’s say that you live in that home. One problem: You always forget to lock the door. One day, someone comes in. He sits on your favorite chair. You say, “Hey get out of here.” He pulls a weapon and says, “I’m not going anywhere.” He smokes cigarettes and cigars and leaves the butts all over. He eats bananas and throws the peels on the ground. Garbage piles up all over the house. He doesn’t shower.

It’s bad enough when it starts, but after a while you reach the breaking point. So, you decide to get some help. You get some friends and neighbors, and with their help, you oust the intruder.

Now, it's time to clean up the mess. You open the windows and turn on the fans. You sweep. You scrub. Everything is back to normal and getting better. One problem: - ***You still forgot to lock the door.*** The thug sees that your place is nicer than ever. He figures out that he can't just walk back in. So, he gets a bunch of his friends. Now, you're hosting a whole community of thugs.

Explanation

The home in this case is a symbol of our lives. In the same way that we lock the door to keep intruders out of our home, we have to watch what we let in to our minds and our hearts. We spoke about this a few sessions back. We talked about guarding our hearts. That means we can't just watch whatever we want on TV. Some of what we see there is toxic. The same goes for the Internet and the things we read.

Our world is full of seductions for the mind and the heart. Many people think this is great. They think they've arrived at the ultimate goal in life. They've got televisions and all kinds of devices. They think their lives are full of good things - And they've worked hard to get all that stuff.

In reality, our lives are like that pot at the end of the rainbow we talked about when we started. It's not full of magic gold. It's empty. And, although our lives are full of all kinds of activities, in reality, our lives are empty. If we fail to understand all the good things that Jesus offers to us, at the end is emptiness. That results in all kinds of bad things coming in.

Here's where we get back to the story. Let's say that one day, we begin to understand all this. So, we decide it's time to make a change. We turn off the TV. We put the devices away. Like the story we begin to put our house in order. But it's not enough to merely put the house in order. It's not enough to remove the bad things. We're still empty. You must replace the bad things with good things. Those are the things of God.

There's a prayer that the Apostle Paul prayed for his friends. He wrote about it in the book of Ephesians:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:14-17)

Paul prayed for his friends that the Holy Spirit would live in their inner being, so that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith. If this happened, what would the result be? Paul continues:

—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Paul wanted his friends to be “...filled with all the fullness of God.” This is vitally important. It’s even more important to understand the context of what Jesus is saying. Recall, he’s speaking to the Pharisees. What did they want in people’s lives? Rules! They led a life of rule after rule after rule after rule. We’ve talked about this in other sessions. Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers. That’s because their teachings were dangerous. Under the teaching of the Pharisees, people were filling their lives with rules, not God. And that was placing people in danger.

Rules can be helpful if they’re based on the wisdom of God. They can be useful if they grow out of a heart filled with God. But alone, rules can’t protect people from a broken and sinful world. So, it’s not enough just to get the junk out of our lives - We have to replace the junk with the Spirit of God and with the knowledge of the Scriptures.

B. Societies

There’s a second application to all this: Groups of people – Societies. It’s bad enough when individuals make the mistake of leaving God out of their lives. It’s sad when they fail to follow Jesus. But when whole societies do it, danger follows.

Sadly, we live in a society where God is being removed. Is it any wonder that we have increases in murders, drug addictions, thefts, and all other kinds of violence?

Many respond to this by calling for law and order, and that’s good. However, it’s not enough to demand that people behave well and that they be punished when they don’t. We need spiritual revival. We need people to invite Jesus Christ into their hearts. It’s not enough to give people rules. If a society does not have the Holy Spirit of God and the wisdom of the Scriptures, they’re doomed.

Why did Jesus demonstrate his principle with a ghost story? Maybe he wanted to scare people a bit? Maybe he wanted them to see how serious this is. When people reject him, their end is even worse than an empty life - It’s an empty eternity of judgement. Salvation only comes through the finished work of Jesus on the cross.

A final note

There’s one more application for today. We’ve come to the end of this block of Scripture,

the one we're looking at in our series, "Faith, Followers, and Failures". The writer, Matthew ends with an unusual footnote:

46 While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." (Matthew 12:46-47)

This would appear to be an unimportant event. Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people. Apparently, it's a large gathering place like a synagogue. His family shows up outside. - His mother and his brothers. As a side note, Joseph, the father of Jesus, has probably passed on by this time.

What should happen? You would think that people would make room for the family of an important person. You would think that someone who is respected would take a moment to speak with his family - Especially his mother. How did Jesus respond to this?

48 He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:48-50)

As is often the case with Jesus, he did not respond to a situation the way most would expect. Why not? And why did Matthew include this little episode? We can answer that with a simple question: Who were these people visiting Jesus? Answer: They were human beings. Human beings can be flawed, no matter who they're related to. Physically, they were close relatives. However, they weren't close spiritual relatives.

Let's read in another place.

2 ...when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, 3 Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. 4 No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." 5 For even his own brothers did not believe in him. (John 7:2-5)

Look at that: "...even his own brothers did not believe in him." Let's look over in Mark's gospel:

20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. 21 When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (Mark 3:20-21)

So, not only did the family of Jesus doubt him, at different points they thought he was crazy. Apparently, they were even able to convince Mary, the mother of Jesus, to help them. Later, after the resurrection, the family of Jesus became believers. His brother James became the

leader of the church of Jerusalem, and the letter of James became part of the New Testament Scripture. But, during the life and ministry of Jesus, he had family members who got in the way. And so, Jesus gives us an important principle:

***It's not what anyone else believes. It's what you believe.
It's not what others do. It's what you do.***

Jesus told this crowd, “Yes, those people outside are related to me. In fact, one of them is my own mother. But, right now, they’re not supporting me. What matters is the people who do support me. What matters is the people who do my will. As a practical matter, they are my family.”

Some thoughts about Catholicism

A long time ago, I was asked to work with a team of teachers who went through important people in the life of Jesus. I was assigned his mother, Mary. Someone in the group I was working with asked me to be careful. They had a friend who was Catholic, and they were concerned that I might cause unnecessary offense. The way the Catholic church views Mary and the family of Jesus is very different than the way that evangelicals view those people.

So, on the morning that I spoke, I just said: “We’re going to be looking at a controversial person today. If you come from a tradition that holds a different point of view, then this is your opportunity to find out why people disagree on this topic.” Then, I simply walked through what the Scriptures taught about Mary. Afterwards, the person who was concerned told me that their friend was very glad to be there and appreciated what I had to say.

This is one of those topics where we as evangelicals disagree with the Catholic Church. The system of Catholicism includes many things that Jesus criticized. For one thing, it’s a rule-based system. Do this. Don’t do that. Many of the rules have nothing to do with the Scriptures. This is exactly what Jesus warned about when he criticized the religious leaders of his day.

Another problem with the Catholic church is its reliance on people around Jesus. When I read what we’ve looked at today, and I see the way that Catholics are taught to venerate Mary, I find it troubling. The whole system of venerating Mary and the saints is clearly out of line with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus didn’t respond to the appearance of his mother by saying, “Whoa! This is my mother. Stop everything and give her proper veneration.” No. He said she was a mortal. And in fact, she sometimes had failings.

Once again: It’s not what anyone else believes (Whether it’s Mary or the saints or whoever). It’s what you believe. It’s not what others do (Whether it’s Mary or the saints or whoever). It’s what you do.

Conclusion

Today, we close our series, "Faith, Followers and Failures." Some people heard Jesus and believed. They followed him. Some heard and did not believe. They failed spiritually. Today we've seen that, at the end of failure is emptiness.

Many people fill their lives with all kinds of activities and things. They may think that they've found riches. However, their lives are like those who chase the rainbow. They find that the rainbow keeps moving away. If they could reach the end and find the pot that legend says is there, they would see that it's empty.

It's not just activities and possession that fill peoples' lives. The Pharisees tried to fill their lives with rules. But instead of finding a sort of spiritual pot of gold, they became blind. So blind, they missed the Lord of Glory when he stood right in front of them. In fact, they failed so badly, they accused Jesus of working for the Devil.

It's wonderful when people realize that they need to get bad things out of their lives. It's great that they learn to guard their hearts. But Jesus warns us: If they fail to replace those bad things with good things, they will only fall in the future. And they may fall in bigger ways than when they started.

In order to succeed, our lives must be full. Our lives must be filled with God. They must be filled with the Holy Spirit. They must be filled with the Scriptures and the wisdom that we can only get there.

We want all our friends to succeed in their spiritual lives. Invite God into your life today. Let him fill you with his goodness and love. Then, you can avoid the empty path the world offers. Instead, you'll find the eternal riches of heaven.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
