

Something Greater than Reformation

Matt. 12:43-50

Intro. Not long ago ABC News produced a special report entitled...Want to Get Rich? Write a Self-Help Book. According to Marketdata Enterprises, in 2008 American's spent \$11 billion on self improvement books / CD's / seminars / life-coaching / and stress management. And there's no end in sight...the industry's annual growth rate is projected at 6.2%. In that same year infomercials raked in \$1.4 billion peddling everything from weight loss programs and wellness therapies to quick and easy real estate schemes. You know this from magazine covers at the checkout lane.

But a study by Steve Salerno raises questions about the value of all this. According to his study, the most likely customers of self-help products are the same people who purchased similar products within the previous 18 months. There's a message in that. Hello? It's not uncommon, for example, for those needing to get in shape to collect a dozen books on the subject. But Salerno insists self-help books don't deliver all they advertize. He says they offer "*a hopeful illusion of change*" that actually distracts and diverts people from making actual change because change requires something more than good thoughts. Reading a book on weight loss, for example, may cause us to feel good about ourselves. "*Hey look, I'm concerned about my health...I bought a book...I have good aspirations!*" "But aspiration is no substitute for perspiration." Reading a book isn't the same as getting some exercise and cutting back on fattening foods. Am I right about that? The same applies to the Christian life. Reading and even studying the Bible isn't the same as being changed by it. That's why **Jas. 1:22** says, **Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

Rev. Eric Butterworth was a popular preacher of self-improvement who died in 2003. In story featured in Forbes magazine in 1987, he summed up the creed that undergirds the whole self-help movement. He said, "*We alone have the power within us to solve our problems, relieve our anxieties and pain, heal our illnesses, improve our golf game or get a promotion.*" Did you hear that?..."***We alone have the power!***" The self-help mantra is "You can do it"...and millions believe it. It's the spirit of the age. The publications of big names like Suze Orman, Dr. Phil McGraw, and Stephen Covey, have blanketed bookstores and airwaves. Today the average person is so intoxicated by the possibilities of human potential we imagine we can change the climate / save the planet / and save our souls! While no one can fault endeavors to help people to be more responsible / healthy / and successful, there's great danger in philosophies that promise improvement without God and moral reformation without Christ. The human potential movement may well be the greatest placebo Satan is using to deceive our post-Christian generation. And the drumbeat of this deceptive message has even penetrated the walls of the Church. "*You can do it...you can do it...you can do it...You can do it.*"

Do you know why Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and why so many of His teachings seem radical and frankly, impossible to live by? Jesus raised God's commands to a level higher than the most conservative view at that time when He said, **For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven? – Matt. 5:20** He raised the bar so people would realize what holiness looks like and how far we fall short of it. His desire was to promote poverty of spirit / mourning because of sin / and hunger and thirst for righteousness. Why?...because these attitudes were missing and because this mindset leads to salvation and blessing. So in this period before the cross and between the Old and the New Covenants, His objective was to convince people of the inadequacy of their best religious efforts. I think it could be said that John the Baptist and Jesus actually preached bad news. Their mission was to demolish self-righteousness, to convince people they were lost and helpless, and to prepare them for the Gospel. When the religious leaders heard John and Jesus, they were offended to the core of their being. They were convinced God accepted them because they kept all the rules. But the truth was...no one was keeping the Law because no one has the power to keep it!

God cannot be approached on the basis of our performance or best efforts. Paul repeatedly stated that in verses like **Rom. 3:28 - For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.** And **Gal. 2:16 - ...by observing the law no one will be justified.**

And just like the self-help movement today, Judaism had books. But God's Word had been distorted and misapplied. In **Mk. 7:8** Jesus said, "**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.**" To feel better about themselves, the Jews were cheating on the essential commands God gave them. But they made another mistake. In **Jn. 5:39, 40** Jesus said, **You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.** The Jews had become just like the weight loss wannabe who reads a collection of diet books but never loses a pound. They were like a person saturated with Scripture knowledge whose life remains indistinguishable from his unbelieving neighbors. The answer to our issues isn't more Bible knowledge, though Bible knowledge is crucial and God's Word sanctifies believers. The answer is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. He is **the way, the truth and the life.**

When honestly confronted, Christ's teachings lead to an unmistakable conclusion...*"We have not lived according to these standards. We have failed in every department. In the strength of our flesh we are frustrated and powerless to keep these high and lofty ideals."* Yet from every bookstore and TV channel and chat room, the world is saying, *"You can do it! You can do it. Follow these guidelines ...incorporate these principles...dedicate yourself...be intentional...take these 12 easy steps."* We need to recognize that this help yourself philosophy is in direct conflict with Jesus who insists, *"You can't do it. You haven't done it. Nor will more concerted effort enable you to do it. You simply cannot do it in your own strength! The fact is...apart from Me you can do nothing."* - **Jn.15:5**

Friends listen...Do you get this? Do you understand that we don't have what it takes to change our lives? No matter how earnest we are to follow God's rules we can't make ourselves good enough to be accepted by God. We can't read, study, or church ourselves into righteousness and heaven. Butterworth spoke for the Adversary and for the self-help movement when he said, *"We alone have the power within us to solve our problems, relieve our anxieties and pain, heal our illnesses, improve our golf game or get a promotion."* But his way is a lie that will let you down. God has a better way.

Now I've taken more time than usual to set up this final section in **Matt. 13**. But we need this backdrop to understand the application that emerges from these verses. Through a parable and then through a scenario involving His family, Jesus taught the difference between the dangers of self-reformation and a relationship with God established by the new birth.

1. **An Allegory about the outcome of Self-Reformation - vs. 43-45**

A verse in **Prov. 14:12** summarizes the impact of this parable. The verse says, **There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.** Self-reformation seems so natural, logical and right. I mean, who in their right mind would oppose a message that urges people to take charge of their lives? And who in that day could listen to the religious leaders and not be persuaded to clean up their act and try harder? The aspirations of self-reform seem so right. Our flesh nature loves to be told, *"You can do it!"* But as Paul confessed in **Rom. 7:18 - I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.** He didn't say *I may have difficulty carrying it out...*he said, **I cannot carry it out.** Because this is true of every human being, the parable Jesus gave exposed first...

- **the hidden dangers of a self-reformed life - ("There is a way that seems right to a man...") - vs. 43, 44 - "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.**

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.'

The other Gospel writers say Jesus was in a house with the same crowd who saw Him cast the demon from a man who was blind and unable to speak. This was one of hundreds of miracles Jesus performed. Yet among the many people Jesus healed and delivered from demons, only a few trusted Him for forgiveness and salvation. In the case of the 10 lepers, only one believed in Him. The other nine received temporary relief without forgiveness. Their quality of life improved, but they didn't move a quarter inch closer to heaven. So in the presence of Pharisees and law teachers Jesus gave this parable to challenge their self-improvement theology.

Now the parable doesn't say much to advance our understanding of demonism, yet certain facts are implied. First, evil spirits or demons seem restless when not inhabiting the body of human being. Second, like Satan, demons are intelligent opportunists whose desire is to rule whoever they inhabit. Third, some demons are more powerful and wicked than others. Then too, **arid** or **waterless places** had meaning for this audience since Jewish literature often has demons living in dry desert places.

We're not told what caused the evil spirit to leave the man in the first place. It seems reasonable to assume that Jesus cast him out. Yet being healed and delivered from a demon isn't the same as being saved from sin. When possessed by the demon, the man represents the crisis of humanity. **I Jn. 5:19** says, **We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.** Make a note...According to God's Word, there are two categories of people in the world...God's children and those under Satan's control. Satan's control of the unsaved is described in **Eph. 2:2** where Paul wrote, you **followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** We didn't realize it and most deny that it's true, but prior to faith in Christ, we thought we were doing our own thing. The fact is...we were under Satan's controlling influence and doing his thing.

Now from this passage we're not to assume every sin or sinful habit is directly caused by Satan or a demon. That's Flip Wilson's take on Satanism, but not the Bible's. When Flip's wife Geraldine bought a new dress without his blessing, Flip said, "*Why didn't you say get thee behind me Satan.*" And Geraldine responded, "*I did...and the devil said 'back here it looks good too.'*" Some blame everything on the devil. They give him more credit than he deserves. But like a virus, sin resides in every fiber of our being. Satan uses the attitudes and affections of the world to bring our sin out of hiding.

So the demon that was cast out was restless and wandering. In his journeys he returned to the **house** or the soul of the man he left. He found the **house** unoccupied or empty. The unoccupied house means God's Spirit wasn't there either. In **v.29** Jesus explained what must happen when He is believed and received. "**...how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.** Aristotle said, "*Nature abhors a vacuum.*" There's a spiritual side to this because Satan seems eager to find and fill an empty life. It's interesting too that **Gal. 5:20** and **Rev. 9:21** use the Greek term *pharmakeia* (which sounds like our word, *pharmacy*). *Pharmakeia* is translated **witchcraft** and means *enchantment by drugging*. So demons recognize the emptiness of a life. Yet as many believe and testify the use of alcohol and mind altering drugs open the door for demons to enter.

Beyond being empty, the **house** or the **soul** of this man had been **swept clean and put in order.** This means the man had cleaned up his act. He ditched some bad habits and turned over a new leaf. Maybe he stopped partying and using foul language. **Put in order** comes from a Greek word that sounds like *cosmetics*. This word suggests his changes were cosmetic and outward. The outward changes covered the man's inward sins. So the man was morally or outwardly reformed.

His life changes may have been motivated by a number of things...fear of imprisonment / disease / social stigma / or financial ruin. He was scared straight. Yet sometimes motives are more noble. The self-reformed may change their behavior to repair a damaged reputation or out of love for a spouse or children. But as MacArthur points out, *"Such self-cleansing...no matter how thorough and extensive and no matter what the motivation may be...is never permanent."* It may be commendable in the sight of others, but it's never thorough and God's forgiveness has no part in it.

Perhaps no one exemplified the futility of self-reformation more than Martin Luther. Fearful of the Almighty, Luther was a poster boy for self-help theology. Through fasting, praying, freezing himself on monastery floors, regular confession and repentance, he sought to reform his ways and put himself in right standing with God. Outwardly, he excelled all of his companions, so much so that he said, *"If any monk ever got to heaven by monkery, then I should have made it. All my monastery companions who knew me can testify to that."* But Luther discovered that *only by a faith relationship with Jesus Christ can we attain a right standing with God.* Next we see...

- **the final destiny of a self-reformed life** - (*"...but in the end it leads to death."*) - **vs. 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 man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."**

When people try to reform their lives without Christ and apart from the regenerating work of God's Spirit, they open the door to greater wickedness and become increasingly hardened to the gospel. The phrase **live there** is better translated *permanently settle down there*. Because of the deceitfulness of self-reformation, a person ends up farther from God than ever. How this happens isn't hard to understand. MacArthur writes, *"A religious, self-righteous, reformed person is subject to Satan in a way that a guilt ridden immoral person is not, because his morality blinds him to his basic sinful condition and need."* The most vulnerable people in the world are those who think their works and efforts have made them righteous! Pride and self-righteousness are like a drug. They desensitize people to personal sin. They anesthetize people to their need of Christ's salvation.

The fact is, we are powerless to rule our own lusts / to control our own passions / and to hold sin in check. External reforms can't affect the selfishness within. And truth be known, fallen man would rather be ruled by evil than by God. This is what happened to Israel. The Babylonian captivity cured the nation of idol worship. But after their release, the revivals under Ezra and Nehemiah were short-lived. Their house wasn't filled by God. In **Matt. 23:38** Jesus said, **Look, your house is left to you desolate.** As time passed, the nation succumbed to a different form of idolatry...the idolatry of legalism, performance and self-righteousness. The call to repent was like water off a ducks back. So Jesus said, **"That is how it will be with this wicked generation."** He prophesied that Israel would end up worse than before the captivities. As we found in our last study, **generation** here means the class of unbelieving Jews. So the nation's final condition would be worse than it was before the demon left. Some say the entrance of the **seven other spirits** and Israel in this **final** and desperate **condition** is being fulfilled during the **Times of the Gentiles** which culminates in the Tribulation.

Yet this same scenario affects many today. People are just as duped by self-help and moral reform as Israel was. From all outward appearance, they seem like good people. They're disciplined and responsible. In some ways, their lives may put Christians to shame. Yet a person who has never experienced the new birth and transformation by God's Holy Spirit, is lost. To paraphrase John Owen, *"We can sometimes think we have foiled sin in our lives, when really we have only raised a cloud of dust by moral reform so that we do not see it at the root of our lives."* There's an eternal difference between man-produced reformation and the miracle of regeneration only God can accomplish. Satan's business is to deceive, confuse and promote false hope.

- He wants people to feel good about themselves and ignorant of their sinful condition. Yet anyone who thinks they're OK without Christ is deceived and in great danger.
- And the Adversary wants us to keep us ignorant and unable to distinguish moral reformation from regeneration. But unless a person is made a new creature in Christ...unless we are brought from death to life and darkness to light by the work of God's Spirit, we have no standing with God.
- Finally, Satan wants to convince us our own goodness is all that we need to get into heaven. Yet God says, **There is no one righteous, not even one (Rom 3:10)** and **all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isa. 54:6)**. And **I Cor. 15:50b** adds, **flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**. The only righteousness God can accept is the righteousness that comes by trusting the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

The connection between these two sections isn't apparent so you'll have to trust me when I say it's there. But when the parable's meaning and the next scenario are taken together, a connection comes into focus. The parable is a warning about the danger of reformation. But through the scenario that developed next, Jesus declares the wonder of regeneration and relationship.

2. An Affirmation about the Outcome of Regeneration - vs. 46-50 First we see...

- **A request from family – vs. 46, 47** (a "teachable moment") **While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."**

It's tough to be interrupted or distracted when you're teaching or preaching. When someone gets up to leave during a sermon, I immediately begin to wonder how I offended that person. I wasn't blessed to have a mind that runs on more tracks than one at a time so I'm easily distracted. On Sunday mornings in my former church, the back two rows would empty out promptly at 11:45 AM. Ask Peggy. You could set your watch by the exodus. It wasn't that I preached long (I never do that)...they were headed to a Cleveland ball game! Because good parking was limited, they felt they needed an early start. As you can imagine, the sight of them getting up to leave blessed my socks off. Some may recognize the name Percy Crawford. Percy was an evangelist and leader from the first half of the last century. He was a great evangelist, but he was so earnest about his message, he didn't handle distractions well. My dad told of a time when Percy's message was interrupted by a crying baby. He abruptly stopped preaching and said, "*Madamme, would you please remove that child from this auditorium!*" He then proceeded to expound on the mercy of God and unconditional love of Christ.

Utilizing this interruption instead of reacting to it, Jesus created a teachable moment. **Someone told Him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."** One of the deep hurts Jesus endured came from His earthly family...those closest to Him. His family didn't believe He was the Messiah sent to save them. By the way, those who teach Immaculate Conception and insist Mary had no other children haven't believed this verse. Actually, the brothers of Jesus are named in **Matt.13:55** and **v.56** mentions his sisters. **Jn. 7:5** says, **For even his own brothers did not believe in Him**. And despite the angelic revelations and her magnificent confession at the time of His birth, Mary didn't yet trust Jesus as her own Lord and Savior either.

We can only guess why Jesus' family showed up. But remember, hostilities against Jesus were mounting and His rebuke of Israel's leaders was intensifying. **Mk. 3:21** lends support to the idea they came because they were concerned for His welfare. It says, **When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."** But Jesus didn't go out to meet them. We shouldn't take this to mean Jesus was unsympathetic, unloving or rude. But at this moment, Jesus sensed an opportunity and refused to be interrupted.

His family's arrival created a scenario through which He could teach something critically important for every person to understand. And even though the Bible doesn't say so, I'm wondering if Jesus met with His family when His message was finished and the crowd dispersed.

- **A revelation about family – vs. 48-50** (a relationship with God is what you need) **He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."**

In the culture of that day, family relationships were paramount. A person would find his whole world directed by intimate relations with family. So in this teachable moment, Jesus wanted the crowd to understand something vital. *"There is a relationship more significant, intimate and lasting than flesh and blood relations."* **Pointing to his disciples, He said, "Here are my mother and my brothers."** Pointing to this rag tag group of fishermen and tax collectors, Jesus, *"This is my forever family. The family waiting outside is temporary, but these disciples who believe in Me, are my family forever."* Here Jesus was beginning to declare the miracle of regeneration. The New Covenant was beginning to unfold...a covenant that would provide a new spirit and a new heart for those who by faith would receive Him. This new covenant would enable sinners to do the will of God from the heart. So Jesus said, **For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.** What is the will of God? God's will is for each of us to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of mankind. God's will is for us to trust Him for salvation and the forgiveness of our sins.

Remember Nicodemus? This ruler of the Jews had come to Jesus at night. He was surrounded by self-help theology and self-produced righteousness. But God's Spirit was at work in Nicodemus. Unlike his colleagues, he saw that God was in Jesus. And Jesus said to him, **"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. - Jn. 3:5, 6** Here Jesus spoke of the new birth that establishes the relationship with God where He becomes our Father and we become His children...a relationship based on faith, not best efforts! **Jn. 1:11-13** say, **He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.**

It's only through this relationship that our lives can access the power that affects change for time and eternity. **II Cor. 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!** Books can't do it. Self-help strategies can't do it. A life coach can't do it. Best intentions and aspirations can't do it. Religion and behavior modification can't do it. Jesus said we need a relationship with God that transforms us from the inside out. Why is that?...because outward reformation can never remove the sin rooted in us. If we could improve ourselves, the sacrifice of Jesus was unnecessary. So Jesus said, **You must be born again.** Self-help books and CD's and seminars may have some value helping you become a better you. They may help improve your memory / help you achieve a ripped torso / help you be more successful in many ways. But what does a better you matter if you miss heaven and forfeit your soul in Hell? Jesus reasoned just that way in **Mk.8:36** when He said, **"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"** We need Jesus! Our friends and family need Him. If we have ears to hear it this way, the self-help movement is a cry for help. People are reaching out. They're spending billions in search of a magic bullet. Yet we have the truth...we know where the true help is found. The Psalmist said, **My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. - Psa. 121:2** In **Phil. 4:13** Paul didn't boast, *"I can do it"*. Instead he wrote, **I can do everything through Him (Christ) who gives me strength.** But each person must come to Him in faith believing He is the way, the truth and the life.