Book 5

Sunday June 22, 1975

"THE DANGER OF EMPTINESS" Matthew 12:43-45

If you are going to leave your house empty while you are away on vacation, it is best to make it seem as if your house is occupied. Be sure to stop the daily newspaper delivery and other kinds of deliveries which would pile up and give evidence that the house is unoccupied. Don't pull all the drapes completely shut and if possible it's helpful to have an automatic timer which will turn on some of the lights in the evening and then turn them off later. This will help give the impression that the house is not empty. Why go to all this trouble? Because an empty house invites all sorts of unwelcome guests. It's an invitation to trouble.

It's true! Emptiness can be a dangerous condition. And not only with houses. Just as an empty house or building of any kind is an invitation to trouble, so also is an empty person, or an empty institution or an empty nation.

In the Bible passage just read, Jesus tells us about a man who drove an evil spirit out of his life. He cleaned up his life, but left it vacant. Not long after, the evil spirit was looking for a place to lodge and seeing his former residence empty and clean, went and brought seven of his best devil friends to live there with him. And said Jesus, "The last state of that man becomes worse than the first." Jesus was implying that this kind of thing can happen to any of us.

So this is much more than a story about devils. It's a story about all of us and about institutions and about nations. It's about the "danger of emptiness." But why is there a danger in emptiness?

1. First of all, there is a danger in emptiness because evil is very persistent. It doesn't give up easily. As soon as it sees a place where it can lodge, it moves right in. In this parable and in other places where Jesus talked about evil, he made it clear that evil is much more than just the absence of good. It is a force on its own, a power at work in the world, and seeking always to work in us and in nations and institutions and groups of people. It is always ready and waiting to move in wherever there is room. And above all, evil is subtle and cunning.

The person in the parable got rid of what he saw as evil in his life. He cleaned up his life. He had cleaned out the one thing in his life he wasn't proud of. And now he settled down to congratulate himself on his action. But the evil returned when he wasn't looking and worse than that because there was so much room, it brought seven new devils along.

Evil is persistent! Otherwise why is it that bad habits seem easier to form and harder to break than good habits? We renounce the sins of the flesh, only to fall prey to the more subtle sins of the spirit.

Alexander the Great was proud of his chastity--proud that contrary to the custom of his times, he refused to violate the wives and daughters of his captives. Yet Alexander's over-vaulting ambition to conquer the world was a much greater and deeper flaw. Hitler was a model citizen in many ways. He was sober, a vegetarian, and lived a spartan life. But seven other devils had moved into that empty life.

Some of the biggest swindlers and cheats in history have had clean personal lives which they were proud of. People with a lust for power, with an insensate desire for fame and glory, with a desperate need to manipulate and humiliate and harm others who get in their way, are the ones who cause the most trouble in the world. And they are often the ones who believe they have gotten rid of the evil in their lives and in the emptiness seven other devils have moved in. That's because we continually underestimate the persistence of evil.

Often, in other words, we replace one set of sins with another. I met a person who was converted from whiskey to Christ. The only problem was that the new convert went around being hyper-critical of everyone he met. Finally, someone said, "I wish you'd go back to drinking again. I liked you better then."

In the same vein, there is the story of the Franciscan Monk who was describing the merits of the various Roman Catholic monastic orders. He said, "We Franciscans do not have the scholarly abilities and the intellectual astuteness of the Augustininas; we do not have the practical and artistic abilities of the Benedictines, nor do we have the political skill and sagacity of the Jesuits. But when it comes to humility, we're tops!"

This parable which Jesus told touches every aspect of our living. It shows the fallacy of the "devil theory" of history. That theory wants to believe that if we get rid of the one evil leader in a nation, then the house will be clean and all will be well. Just kill the one devil.

Whether or not the CIA ever got directly involved in assassination plots to kill a leader of a country, we may never know, but the fact that it was discussed or considered shows a naive belief in the so-called "devil theory." Kill the one evil leader and the house will be clean.

I was delighted to note that William Colby the present director of the CIA had the wisdom to testify that not only was he opposed to assassinations because they're wrong but also because they frequently bring about absolutely uncontrolled and unforseeable results--usually worse results than by continuing to suffer the problem that you're facing. Remove one devil and seven more may come in to take its place. And worse than that, you become part of the devil itself as you use the devil's tools.

Yet many people and maybe some of us, still believe that if we could just put the right people before a firing squad and shoot them, the house would be clean and we could all relax. Evil would be taken care of. But such reasoning fails to take into account the persistence of evil. At the very time we are cleaning the house evil may be moving into our own empty lives.

One of the things that used to bother me about some of the extreme political radicals in this country and elsewhere is that they were ready to sweep the house clean, to destroy the present system, but had nothing to put into its place and thus what would follow would undoubtedly be worse. That's why "anti-communism" or anti-anything is never enough. It fails to take into account the danger of emptiness.

2. This leads us to a second reason why emptiness is dangerous. And that's because emptiness cannot be maintained. It's impossible. A vacuum is a highly unstable condition. "Nature abhors a vacuum," we learned in physics. Something is always rushing in to fill it and it may be something we do not want.

An empty life, an empty faith is an invitation to trouble. It does not greatly help a person to know what he or she

does not believe, unless that person also knows what they do believe.

Sometimes I hear people say, "We're not going to indoctrinate our children in any religion. Let them grow up and decide for themselves. Leave the mind empty. But if that is done, then we should not be surprised when some unwelcome beliefs and values fill that empty clean space.

A large part of the reason that so many people, both young and old have become addicts to all sorts of weird, heretical and fanatical cults is because there have been many empty persons just waiting to be filled. And if hungry people are not fed good nourishing food, they will eat whatever else is available.

We have been for some years in the midst of a spiritual vacuum particularly among middle and upper class persons. Minds have been left empty of positive values and committed religion. And it's still happening. I see many members of this congregation not filling their children's lives with a vital Christian faith and not asking the church for help in doing so. We have not yet understood the danger of emptiness.

Many marriages go sour because of emptiness. One of the most critical periods in a marriage is the time when, after maybe 25 years of married life or sooner, a couple looks at each other and finds their marriage empty. They may have stayed together across the years for the sake of the children, but now the children are grown up and gone. A young teen-age girl said to me recently, "My folks say they live for us kids. I think that is kind of sad. They should have something else to live for also." And the emptiness comes. Then all sorts of unwelcome guests move into that empty house, extra-marital affairs, alcohol, drugs, boredom and many more.

So the parable warns us that it is not enough just to be rid of some evil tendency, some bad habit, or to reach a plateau and think, "Now I've got it made. My life is all clean and nice." It's just at that point that we are most vulnerable. Into the emptiness move seven more devils and we may be worse off than before.

3. The only way to counteract the danger of emptiness is to be constantly filling our lives with what is good.

It means such things as building good human relationships with persons who will bring something positive and constructive to our living. It means filling -our leisure time with constructive activities. It means taking definite steps to build and strengthen our spiritual lives and not just sitting back and waiting for it to happen to us. It means such simple things as being regular in our attendance at worship and bringing our children with us.

Now of course none of this sounds very sensational or exciting. But preventative measures have never been as exciting as saving someone who is already at the bottom. Rescue is always more dramatic but is only short lived.

Few people note the processes by which fires are prevented. They are commonplace, dull and drab. But when a fire is raging and some brave person risks his or her neck in a thrilling rescue, that is dramatic and the papers are full of it. We rarely read about those quiet people who go about daily supporting preventative measures which in the long run may save thousands or even millions of people.

Not too many people are interested in daily exercise and preventative measures necessary to keep their hearts and lungs strong and healthy, but nothing is so dramatic and exciting as a heart rescue team, sirens screaming, rushing in to try to save someone's life who has just had a heart attack.

It's an old story, we would rather buy ambulances than build fences. A poem states the point --

Twas a dangerous cliff as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.
So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally;
Some said, "put up a fence around the edge of the cliff,"
Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day,
For it spread through the neighboring city;
A fence may be useful or not, it is true,
But each heart became brinful of pity
For those who slipped over that dangerous cliff;
And the dwellers in highway and alley

Gave pounds or gave pence, not to put up a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.

"For the cliff is all right, if you're careful," They said,
"And if folks even slip and are dropping,
It isn't the slipping that hurts them so much,
As the shock down below when they're stopping."
So day after day as these mishaps occurred,
Quick forth would these rescuers sally
To pick up the victims who fell off the cliff,
With their ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked: "It's a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing results than to stopping the cause,
When they'd much better aim at prevention.
Letus stop at its source all this mischief," cried he,
"Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally;
If the cliff we will fence we might almost dispense
with the ambulance down in the valley."

"Oh, he's a fanatic," the others rejoined,
"Dispense with the ambulance? Never!
He'd dispense with all charities, too, if he could;
No! No! We'll support them forever.
Aren't we picking up folks just as fast as they fall?
And shall this man dictate to us? Shall he?
Why should people of sense stop to put up a fence,
While the ambulance works in the valley?"

But a sensible few, who are practical too,
Will not bear with such nonsense much longer;
They believe that prevention is better than cure,
And their party will soon be the stronger.

Better guide well the young, than reclaim them when old,
Better close up the source of temptation and crime
Than deliver from dungeon or galley;
Better put a strong fence round the top of the cliff,
Than an ambulance down in the valley.

Filling the emptiness with positive and good things is like building fences at the top of cliffs. I ask you to join me in building more fences in your lives and in the lives of those around us. Then we will be dealing with the danger of emptiness in the right way. Amen.