

MORE THAN JUST MIRACLES: FILLING EMPTY HOUSES

Back in 1999, a 25-year-old young man by the name of Christopher Miller got in some real trouble with the law after he was caught robbing a Stride Rite shoe store located in the little Township of Toms River, New Jersey. He was convicted of this crime and sentenced to 15 years in the penitentiary. Fast-forward to March 21, 2014 and on that day, Miller was released from prison. He had served his time. He had paid his debt to society. All kinds of wonderful opportunities lay before him as he started a new life outside those prison walls. The direction that he headed was totally up to him. He was now free. Yet, the very next day following his release, the now 40 year old Miller made the conscious decision to board a bus from Atlantic City back to Toms River—and where was his ultimate destination? Believe it or not, it was to the same shoe store that he had robbed a decade and a half ago. And what was his business there—did he go to re-pay his debt or to ask for forgiveness? No, his intentions were no different from what they had been 15 years before. Mr. Miller came into the store and demanded cash from the employees. He then proceeded to take \$389 from the cash register drawer, ran out the door and fled. The police caught up with him a few blocks away, found the stolen cash, cuffed him—and Christopher Miller was on his way back to prison again. The Chief of Police didn't seem too surprised by this and commented: "Maybe [prison life is] the only life he knows, and the only thing he could think of was going back to the same store and doing the same crime again—getting caught and going back where he was taken care of and told what to do and getting meals and shelter and everything else."¹

Actually, I don't find this to be all that surprising either. I grew up with a guy, named Bo (his mother called him Bo-Bo)—and he was exactly like Christopher Miller. As a teenager he committed minor crimes—some felonies, and continued to do so as a young man. And so, he was sent to prison. But, as soon as he was freed, he'd go right out and commit some minor crime and virtually waited until the local deputies came around to arrest him. And back to prison he went. Whenever he got out of prison, it was the same routine over and over again. The last time that I saw him, he was probably in his 40's when State prison guards escorted him into Perkins Baptist Church to attend his mother's funeral. What a sad way to live your life—by choice, living it in prison!

For the past two Sundays, we have been considering a couple of the miracles that Jesus performed. So what do people like Christopher Miller and Bo-Bo have to do with any of these miracles?—A lot actually, because so many people act exactly like they do—and don't even realize it. And it's an appropriate time to think about such behavior because it's just three weeks until Easter. So, it is important to begin thinking about the greatest miracle of all—the Resurrection of Jesus Christ! That

most amazing of miracles gives you and me, and the Christopher Miller's and Bo-Bo's of the world, a chance for something other than the prisons we can so often put ourselves into.

Jesus hints about this in the passage that we'll read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. When you listen and read along, take note of Jesus' concluding remarks when He mentions demons that occupy vacant houses—it's a part of the Scripture that we tend to skip over, yet it is one of the most important messages that Jesus has for our world today. Matthew 12:38-45 (NIV) reads as follows: ³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here." [Now, take special note of the following part:] ⁴³ "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, 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 man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

Note that in the beginning of this passage, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to perform a miracle for them—presumably to prove to them that He was the Messiah. This was very strange because Jesus had already performed many miracles. And if miracles were all that they needed, then they should already have been convinced that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God. But, Jesus refused to meet their demands. Rather, Jesus told them the simple truth—they would never recognize Him for who He was unless they started to see with their hearts and not just their eyes. But their hearts were preoccupied with worldly things. They were too concerned with their arrogant status as Pharisees. They were too busy finding faults in others than to offer the love of God to them. They were spiritually blind and deaf and mute—as much so as to the two men who were physically impaired, but were healed by Jesus' touch as in the miracles we've considered in the past two Sundays. Yet Jesus does not leave them without hope.

Jesus tells them about the Prophet Jonah who lived three days in the belly of a whale, and then sprang forth to bring salvation to the lost people of Nineveh. The Pharisees must have been surprised to hear this reference to Jonah, and they probably had no clue as to why Jesus was referring to Jonah's

three-day stay inside that whale. In retrospect, we know exactly what Jesus was referring to. Jesus was comparing Jonah's resurrection from the whale to what He Himself would do following His crucifixion on the Cross. Jesus was pointing to what we will celebrate in just a few weeks—Easter Sunday. Jesus wanted them to know that the greatest miracle was yet to come in the form of His Resurrection from the dead. And just as Jonah's coming out of that whale sent him forth with the message that saved so many Ninevites, Jesus's Resurrection from the tomb would offer salvation to the entire world.

Yet, it is clear from Jesus' tone that He could see that the Pharisees would not be impressed with this "***miracle of miracles***". They would be just as blind to His Resurrection as they had been to His previous miracles of healing. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that "***this generation***" would be worse off than the ***people of Nineveh***. And, they would be far worse off than the "***Queen of the South***." What was Jesus talking about here? What does He mean by "***this generation***"? Who were the ***people of Nineveh*** or this "***Queen of the South***"? Well, let's answer those questions in inverse order.

Well, the "Queen of the South" was a reference to the Queen of Sheba. Her kingdom was likely located near the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula from the area that is now modern day Yemen. Others say her kingdom may have been in Ethiopia. Either way, she had traveled a great distance to Jerusalem just to see if the reports of King Solomon's glory were really true.² As it turns out, she came to understand that Solomon's glory had its source in the One True God.³ This one acknowledgment on her part elevated her small bit of faith high above anything that the Pharisees appeared to possess.

Now turning to the identity of the people of Nineveh—they were an unusual example for Jesus to have picked. You see, the people of Nineveh during Jonah's time were the fierce and cruel warriors of the Assyrian empire. They were quite evil and very much in need of repentance. God sent Jonah there on a mission of divine mercy to urge them to turn away from their violent and evil ways and humble themselves before God. Much to Jonah's amazement, that is exactly what they did.⁴ And because of that, these Ninevites will enjoy much brighter prospects on Judgment Day than will the Pharisees—not to mention those today who are so very much like them.

It is interesting that Jesus is pointing to the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba when neither is noted as shining pillars of faith. Yet, they both are to be commended, whereas the Pharisees are to be condemned. Why?—because the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba responded favorably to God when they received their witness from those with considerably less authority than Jesus.⁵ And yet, Jesus had preached and healed people right there in the presence of the Pharisees, but they failed to believe. And Jesus says that they will pay dearly for this at the Final Judgment.

And, who is Jesus referring to when He talks about “**this wicked generation**”? Is it only those who were living during Jesus’ time here on earth? Well to answer that, we need to once again review that very odd ending to Jesus’ statement. The one where He said: “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. 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.”

What in the world is this all about? One might think that this is just some random thought pinned on at the end. But it is anything but random. Jesus refers to a man who seems to have gotten his “ducks in a row”—in fact, his house is “swept clean and put in order.” At first glance, we might think that this is a good thing—right? But, it is not good at all if that is all the man intended to do. You see, what Jesus is giving us here is the picture of a man who had, at one time, been possessed by an evil spirit—but the evil spirit had been forced to come out of the man.⁶ And so, there the man was—as clean and as empty as a broom-swept house. He was freed of this tormenting demon and could now pursue filling his house, instead, with good things. That is pretty much the position that you and me are in based upon Jesus’ work on the Cross. He took our filth-filled houses and made them clean and ready to receive the Holy things of God. But, like so many of those people who comprise that vast generation who have lived since Jesus’ Resurrection, including many today—they have elected to act like this man who did nothing with his clean house. And so we can see—the “**house**” is a metaphor for the man’s heart. And there was a vacuum of emptiness in that heart. But, a person’s heart can never stay that way for very long. The vacuum will always be filled with something no matter what. And when we fail to fill it with the Holy things of God, it will be filled with something else—the unholy things of Satan. It will be filled with, **and dedicated to**, the things of this world: Power, wealth, money, social status, sex, drugs, alcohol, etc. And when people dedicate their lives to such things, they separate themselves from God.

Jesus is trying to tell us something important here because people today are just as much a part of that “**wicked generation**” that He refers to as anyone else who has ever lived. But wickedness and sin, and the consequences of such evil, need not be our fate. We have the option to avoid the prison of Hell, because we have been freed by Christ. The question is: What will you fill your house with? For the lazy, apathetic person who might claim to be a Christian, but has kept Jesus standing at the door, their house will eventually become filled with some terrible things. When the doors are finally opened wide

to such evil, they will be far worse off than when they started. And there is no question about it—then, they will be prison bound.

People like that are really no different than that self-committed prisoner, Christopher Miller, or my neighborhood contemporary—Bo-Bo. They had every opportunity to remain free, but by their own volition they have repeatedly thrown themselves back into their prison cells—only their real prison is the dark dungeon of sin. That’s a shame.

It just doesn’t make any sense because God’s history with His people has been to always offer them freedom. Just as God offered to the Hebrews freedom from the chains of Pharaoh’s slavery, Jesus Christ offers you freedom from the bondage of sin. Since Adam’s fall, sin has tried to fill the houses of human hearts and to darken all of creation. Paul spoke of this when he said: ²⁰ “Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with **eager hope**, ²¹ the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious **freedom from death and decay**.” ²² For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Romans 8:20-22 (NLT). Yes, as God’s people, we do have an “**eager hope**” of “**freedom from death and decay**.” Jesus made this hope possible. His work on the Cross and His Resurrection from the tomb provided the only way in which the houses of our hearts could be made clean. Nevertheless, the Pharisees rejected Him and, in so doing, filled their houses with the evil of this world.

Is that the case with you? Is your house empty today? Will you allow the vacuum to be fully filled by Jesus? Or, will you just sit there until the evil spirit returns with all his fiendish friends? Jesus offers you freedom. But, will you just throw yourself back into Satan’s jail? These are fateful questions for that “**wicked generation**” that Jesus talked about. But, like I said—that generation includes you and me. And so, the choice is wholly up to you: Freedom . . . or a prison cell? Jesus . . . or the things of the world? Heaven . . . or Hell? With what will you fill your house today?

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
March 11, 2018
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2018

¹ Adapted from Brian Thompson, "Man Leaves Prison, Robs Same New Jersey Shoe Store 15 Years Later: Police," NBC News (3-26-14), <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition – Volume Four: Q-Z*, (Chicago, IL: Howard-Severance Company, 1915; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 8-9.

³ MacArthur Study Bible.

⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition – Volume Three: K-P*, (Chicago, IL: Howard-Severance Company, 1915; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 538.

⁵ Michael G. Vanlaningham, "Matthew," in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1475.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary – The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1: The King and His Kingdom (Matthew 1-17)*, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 223-224.