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Jesus Sets the Demoniac Free Mark 5:1-21

Mark sets this merciful and glorious episode in the middle of a group of three storm stories. If there is one idea that connects all three, it is the power of Christ to transform chaos into shalom. With two words Jesus commanded peace to a raging sea. Here Jesus commanded peace to a man terrorized by demons. And in the next story Jesus granted peace to a father who suffered the sickness and death of his twelve-year old daughter. Jesus has the power to bring peace in the arena of threatening circumstances, in the presence of dark spirits, and in the overwhelming sorrow that comes with death.

The disciples must have been exhausted after fighting the raging storm right to the brink of death. As soon as they landed, another storm rose up as a raving demoniac raced to confront them. And immediately after that, they faced a desperate father whose daughter was terminally sick. At times the crises of life can cluster or come in bunches. However, notice that the Lord Jesus is sufficient for them all.

This morning I want us to consider the three scenes of Marks account. First, we will look at the *Misery* of the demoniac. Second, we will explore the *Might and Mercy* of Jesus who liberated him from his demons. Finally, I want us to look at the various *Responses* or for those who like alliterations, the multifarious responses to Jesus.

First: The Misery of this Man's Condition (vv1-6).

Various ancient manuscripts of the New Testament record different places for this story. Some say Jesus and His disciples sailed to the country of the Gergesenes, others have the Garasenes, and still others have the country of the Gadarenes. These differences do not suggest the gospel writers could not get their stories straight. The differences are designed to help different readers locate the story. If someone from Germany asks me where I live, I might answer in the USA. If someone from Florida asks me where I live I might say in Oregon. If someone from Oregon asks me where I live I might say Canby or even Portland. These different answers do not mean that I am confused or deceiving anyone. We often give different answers, which are appropriate to different audiences. The Decapolis region was a big region that stretched from the Golan Heights down to the southeastern tip of the Sea of Galilee. It included all these places. Mark's point is that Jesus crossed over the lake into a predominantly Gentile region of Palestine. And just as He encountered dark spirits at the outset of His ministry in Jewish regions, He also encountered dark spirits as He first entered this region of the Gentiles.

"Immediately, a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit confronted Jesus." Now some think belief in demons is irrational. Why is this so? If you can accept (and most do) belief in God or in supernatural good, why is belief in a personal supernatural evil so unacceptable? I would think the intransigence of evil throughout history might support such a conclusion. Moreover, some argue that since some ancient peoples attributed to demons things they could not explain this is what the gospel writers are doing here. The assumption is that ancient people were so naïve and primitive they could not distinguish between mental illness and demon possession and lumped all these together under the rubric of demon possession. Now, that may have been the case with some ancient peoples, but it certainly was not the case with the Greek, Jewish, or the Christian cultures of the first century. The evidence goes in the opposite direction. The Scriptures present us with a complex and highly nuanced understanding of psychological illness. Matthew 4:24 says that the people brought to Jesus "all who were ill, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures (epilepsy), and paralytics, and He healed them." So, the Scriptures differentiate between the demonized, the physically diseased, and the mentally ill. The Biblical picture of these things is complex. They can be intertwined and differentiated. This past week I read most of a sermon by a Richard Baxter, a 17th.c. English minister, entitled, *What Are The Best Preservatives Against Melancholy And Overmuch Sorrow*. He

offered four different causes for depression: physiological, moral, psychological, along with godly advice for each. Unlike my short sermons, it was a long and thorough treatment of these issues. So you have a 17th century minister offering a very nuanced and sophisticated understanding of depression. Some say all you need to deal with such things is a pill. Others say all you need is acceptance. Others exhort you to simply confess, repent, and you will be made whole. Still others are so superstitious they can only see demons behind every trouble. However, the Scriptures do not reduce the cause of mental illness to one source. They present a far more multi-dimensional understanding of disease. They present such things as differentiated and, at times, integrated and overlapping.^{1[1]} All of this is not to suggest that we neglect good science. Richard Baxter instructed the depressed to take medication, if prescribed by a good doctor.

In the demoniac's life, the conclusion that he was controlled by dark spirits does not seem so bizaare. The whole focus was dehumanizing. He was being robbed of everything essential to humanity, robbed of any relationship to his family or friends, his mental faculties, his emotional faculties, his instincts to preserve his life and care for himself. He was driven by behavior that was destroying his life. Twice we are told that he lived among the dead. He went roaming around naked, howling like a beast day and night, and cut himself with sharp stones. This sounds like some dark forces may be at work here. Something tells me that Prosac may not be a sufficient cure for what was troubling him.

Why such an extreme case? I think there are a few reasons. First, this was Jesus' initial undertaking in a Gentile region. If you know your Bible, you know that in Gen. 3:15 God predicted that the seed of the woman would "crush the head of the serpent and that the serpent would bruise his heel." Behind the scenes of our history runs a parallel spiritual battle between God and the forces of darkness, which would be dealt a fatal blow at the hands of the Christ. However, this defeat would not come as expected. That fatal blow would be struck on the cross. That Jesus would defeat Satan by an act of sacrificial love was unimaginable to anyone including Satan. Perhaps Satan saw his position among the Gentiles at risk and sent a sufficient force to protect his territory. During His wilderness encounter with Satan, Jesus did nothing to stop him. Here, Satan attempted to challenge Jesus in ways that he thought would be successful. The might and mercy of Jesus was the last thing he wanted the Gentiles to witness. As Jesus crossed into the Gentile territory, Satan immediately challenged His right to be there. So, he filled this man with what he thought was a sufficient force (a legion of his demons), to face down Jesus. However, as soon as the demons got close to Him and Jesus spoke a word or two, their courage and confidence melted like wax.

Moreover, by ordaining such an extreme circumstance, God gets our attention. It helps us to see our own situation more clearly. Although our stories and battles are written in smaller letters and with far less drama, we understand that this man is an extreme form of the spiritual condition of all humanity in varying degrees. Because often the more free we think we are –in reality the more trapped we may really be. Before I became a Christian, I concluded the reason for my wrongdoing was that I had just not really determined to do right. It was only after repeated failures and after resolving unsuccessfully several times to do right that I realized I might not be as free as I thought. It was only then that I cried out to God for help.

When A. Solzhenitsyn came to the West, after a while, he came to know that he that could not stay here. He felt like a man with two eyes in a nation of one-eyed people. Even though Americans enjoy a great amount of political freedom, he thought that we were blind, distracted, and enslaved to the pursuit of materialism. He was amazed at the intransigence of it all and how, like lemmings, we just follow the leaders unable to break free of the shackles of materialism.

^{1[1]}I am indebted to Dr. T. Keller for this analysis.

Notice the paradox of this man's life. He became the strongest and most powerful man around! Great strength usually brings freedom from threat and fear. No one intimidated Samson. This man was so strong that He broke Iron chains and shackles like tooth picks. However, at the same time, he was chained. He was enslaved to agony, loneliness, madness, and self-destruction. He had more strength than anyone around but he was enslaved to torment. He could break all the chains fastened to his wrists, yet he was chained to madness. Let me ask, if you could have one wish that would set you free and give you peace, what would that be? This man was the strongest person around. Perhaps physical strength is not your idol. But what if you could be the richest person around, would that make you free? Would winning the lottery really make you free? If you were the most attractive person around, would that make you free? How about the healthiest or the skinniest person? If you were the smartest or the most successful person around would you then have peace and be free? What about achieving the most leisure possible? Do you think that if you were the best parent around, the best employee, the best musician, or the best student that would make you free? If you had the most political power or the greatest power to persuade, would that make you really happy? This man was the strongest man around and yet he was paradoxically enslaved. I think what Jesus is showing us is that the only way to be free and at peace is to find your freedom in serving Him. When any other pursuit or any other god, goal, or ambition grabs hold of you other than the One for whom you were made, you may get the power you are after but that thing will enslave you. Do you see yourself to some degree in his symptoms? You begin to act in ways that alienate you and isolate you from those who love and care for you. You may begin to howl at the world. You may even begin inflicting self-destructive wounds. The practice of teenage girls cutting themselves did not begin in the 21st century. In time, the thing you pursue begins to control you and even speak for you and your voice can get completely lost in the idol you are pursuing. That ambition, in time, can become your voice.

Mary Becky Pippert wrote, *"The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by those she wants to accept her. But there is one thing that is certain. No one can control themselves"*.

We are all controlled by the Lord of our lives. Somehow, through some unclean pursuit, the demons came to control this man. The question for us is, "Who or what is the Lord of your life and who or what is pulling the strings?" If not Jesus, that lord will wrap you up in chains. It will show no mercy and you will never have peace as long as you serve it. It doesn't matter if it is power, beauty, your image, alcohol, drugs, sex, acceptance, success, wealth, or favorable circumstances. Jesus is the only One –you can call Lord –who will not enslave you. Also, notice how gradually this overtook him. Verse 3 says that no one was able to bind him *anymore*. That means that there was a time when they could. Evil comes after us in increments; it can sneak up on you. So, are you free? Or are you in bondage to your appetites and calling that freedom? This man lived in the extreme misery enslaved by demons and self-destruction. However, Jesus is merciful and mighty!

Second, Jesus' Might and Mercy (vv 6-13). *Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell down before him and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "what do I have to do with you, Jesus son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me. For He had been saying to him "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit." And Jesus asked him, "What is your name? He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many and he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. (v 6)*

When Jesus said, "What's your name?" the demon was compelled to answer "Legion." A legion was a Roman battalion with up to 6,000 soldiers. And what did Jesus do? He granted them permission to enter a herd of 2,000 pigs who hurled them to their deaths and set the man free. Why did Jesus allow the demons to do such a thing? We do not really know. I think Jesus simply outwitted them. They overestimated their ability to control a herd of pigs in a panic, who then forced them back to the abyss! More importantly, I think Jesus was demonstrating to this tortured man the power and might of His word. This was a fitting visual aid to the power of Jesus over the forces of darkness. Jesus ran this man's tormentors away for good to trouble him no more. He wanted this man to know without a doubt that he was free and safe. The demons would never trouble him again. With the breath of His mouth Jesus removed the threat of their darkness.

If Jesus demonstrated the power to dismiss 6,000 demons in a man's body with a few words –let me ask you this, what threat or dark troubles do you have that Jesus cannot deal with? I think Jesus did this to show us that there are no threats to our souls too big for Him to handle. Please don't misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that He doesn't use means: medical professionals, counselors, prayer, and getting the word in your mind. But, I cannot help but notice how immediately subservient 6,000 demons became in the presence of Jesus. In His presence their knees buckled. If you have believed in the Lord Jesus and He resides in your heart by the Holy Spirit, the demons must also cower at His presence in you as well. Yes, the devil has power. However, in the presence of the real Jesus his knees turn to jelly. Notice that these demons have to get Jesus' permission to do anything! And Jesus gave them permission to enter 2,000 pigs who proceeded to rushed down the steep bank and were drowned in the sea. Mark's report of Jesus is that he is Mighty and Merciful to those who trust Him.

Lastly, The Diverse Response to Jesus (vv 7-20).

At first *the demon* speaking attempted to intimidate Jesus, “Who do you think you are, coming to me ” (my paraphrase). Then the demon demanded or adjured (to command under oath and threat of penalty) that Jesus not torment them. Then he brazenly pleaded for mercy. The demons care nothing for the man. They are completely narcissistic. When they speak Jesus' real name here, they were not confessing personal faith in Jesus. They were attempting a classic form of exorcism on Jesus. They were attempting to void Jesus' power by naming Him and commanding him. And when they asked to go into the pigs they overestimated their control over the pigs. And Jesus said, “Fine, go to the pigs.” who then panicked and gave them a one-way ticket back to the abyss.

What about *the herdsmen's* response (v14)? The herdsmen left and told everyone they could find to come and see all the excitement. And when they did, they found this man who was previously crazed now sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. What a miracle of grace and mercy! However, the crowd became frightened and they begged Jesus to leave. Why? Perhaps they believed the rumors of the Pharisees that Jesus was the devil casting out demons. Perhaps they were motivated by financial factors. Could they afford to take such financial losses even if one soul was saved? When you come to the Lord Jesus so does your pocket book. This cost of Lordship is too much for some to bear. Moreover, because Jesus is holy, His presence exposes our sin and wrong doing. When Peter recognized Jesus for who He was. Peter said, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man.” The real Jesus makes sinners like us uncomfortable until we confess, acknowledge His lordship and receive His mercy. The crowds wanted Jesus to leave them alone. Jesus was disturbing the status quo in a big way.

How did *this newly liberated man* respond to Jesus? He asked Jesus if he could go with Him. And Jesus refused his request. Note that you may have the best and most noble desires imaginable and yet, Jesus may say, “No!” He may have something better planned for you than you could imagine. Jesus said, “Go home and tell your family what the Lord has done for you.” Go and tell. The next time Jesus was back in this region there were so many people coming out to listen to Him that He had to do a miracle to feed them. Someone had a story he told about Jesus' love and care for him.

Beloved we defeat the schemes of the dark forces by recognizing both the might and mercy of Jesus. Jesus deals with 6,000 demons the way He would deal with one. He simply commands the demons to come out and they do. There was no struggle, no fight. He did not have to take His coat off or roll up His sleeves. There were no theatrics. Moreover, the demons had to get His permission to do anything. How did Jesus ultimately deal with the darkness? On the cross, He absorbed darkness, sin, and death into Himself. He lowered his head and ran straight into the darkness and became sin and darkness, for us, so that we could have the light of God. He did it to pay for our sins so that some day He could wipe out darkness without wiping us out along with it. When we hear and believe what it cost Him to defeat the darkness we will be able to defeat the darkness in our lives. And there is nothing sweeter than knowing and believing that God uses His power and might to love you

and save you from all ultimate harm. When we receive this grace, no matter how messed up you are, God sends you back to your family and friends to become agent of His mercy and love. So Lord, “Take these chains from my heart and set me free.” Amen.