JESUS HEALS A DEMON-POSSESSED MAN

Mark 5:1–20

Key Verse: 5:9a

“Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’”

Throughout his ministry Jesus has been driving impure spirits out of people, but in today’s passage the man’s condition seems to be the worst he ever encountered. This incident is recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels, and it’s always right after Jesus calms the stormy sea. This demon-possessed man had a fierce *inner* storm raging within him, and only Jesus could completely calm it. In this study we want to think about the reality of impure spirits or demons. We want to learn how the devil can get such a hold on a person’s life. And we especially want to learn more about Jesus in the way he dealt with this man. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 1. “The region of the Gerasenes” is a reference to the major city of Gerasa, which was actually about 34 miles away from the Sea of Galilee. Verse 20 also calls the region “the Decapolis,” or Ten Cites. Gerasa was one of those Ten Cities (see map). These Ten Cities were on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, east of the Sea of Galilee. This region had become a center of Greek and Roman culture in the basically Semetic Middle East. The cities began to be settled by Greek immigrants after Alexander the Great conquered the area in 323 B.C. Then the Roman general Pompey conquered the area in 63 B.C., and the local Greek population welcomed the new Roman rule. The Romans rebuilt each of the Ten Cities with a Roman-style grid of streets, temples, public buildings and connected them with Roman roads. In this way they wanted to fortify this eastern frontier of their empire. Jews didn’t eat pork, but Gentiles did, so the large herd of pigs was obviously for feeding the Gentile settlers. This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus travels outside Jewish society. He wanted to go to this place with his disciples to have a brief rest from the crowds following him. But on the way, they’d had to deal with a furious storm. And now when they landed on shore, their hopes for rest suddenly evaporated.

Look at verse 2. Here he’s described as “a man with an impure spirit”; later we find that he has “many” demons in him (9b). It says he “came from the tombs.” Verse 3a says that he “lived in the tombs.” Jewish people considered tombs an unclean place, the haunt of demons. Why was this man living there? Verse 3b says that “no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.” Evidently, he used to live among people, but due to his impure spirits he was out of control, and people felt he threatened their safety. Efforts to control him didn’t work. Look at verse 4. It says “he had often been chained hand and foot.” But the man snapped the chains and irons as if they were spools of thread. People brought their strongest men to try to subdue him, but the demon-possessed man beat them all up and ran away. His supernatural strength came not from himself, but from the demons in him. The only place he would not be bothered was in the tombs. It seems the demons led him to dwell in such a dark, isolated, unclean place. But even there, he found no peace. Look at verse 5. The man was deeply tormented. He couldn’t sleep. He hated himself. He was crying out, in great inner misery. He was mutilating his own body with stones. Verse 15 implies that he no longer wore any clothing. He wasn’t keeping up any personal hygiene. In the twilight of early morning on the seashore we can only imagine how horrible he must’ve looked to Jesus and the disciples as he was coming from the tombs.

Read verses 6,7. Obviously this man has never met Jesus before, and may never have even heard of him. It’s the demons in him, as usual, who know Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God. We see here the man’s split personality. He runs to Jesus and falls on his knees before him, indicating that he’s desperate for his help. But then he yells at Jesus, basically, to leave him alone. Often we’re just like that—wanting Jesus’ help, but not really.

Since the Enlightenment Western peoples have stopped believing in the invisible, spiritual world. So they say that deeply troubled people have a chemical imbalance and merely need psychotherapy and medication. But honestly, there are so many people for whom these things have never worked. They’re modern “chains” and “irons” that neither really control these people nor solve their root problem. So then, they’re kicked out of families, hospitals, so many are homeless and begging on the streets, and nobody wants to pay for their care. Even among so-called “ordinary” Americans, right now there’s a national epidemic of abuse of pain pills and heroin, because people are so spiritually empty and dark. With post-modernism, people are now starting to believe in paranormal activity again, in small measures. In fact, cultural anthropologists the past 100 years have studied remote tribes from all around the world, and demonic activity has been recorded in most all of them. For a few people, being disturbed may be caused by genetic, developmental, physiological problems. But for many others, aberrant behavior comes mainly from the same impure spirits we see in Jesus’ day. How could this man have become so filled with demons? The Bible doesn’t say. But the Bible does say that demons come into a person when we disobey God. The devil and his demons are basically in rebellion against God, and they’re still working to get people to disobey God. Once they gain control, the freedom and happiness they promise morph into deception, torment and self-destruction.

And we see how confused the demons have gotten this man. They’ve got him thinking that Jesus would torture him. In fact, it was the *demons* torturing this poor man day and night. The devil still gets us to think that coming to God will be like torture. The demons are so strong, but now they’re trembling before Jesus. Read verse 8. In the context of what’s been happening in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus clearly was very tired, so tired that he even fell asleep during a storm. But he didn’t turn around and get back into the boat with his disciples, avoiding this troubled man. Instead, even when he was exhausted, he saw this man with compassion. As soon as he saw this man coming from a distance, Jesus immediately perceived that he was controlled by an impure spirit. Jesus differentiated between the man and the demons in him. He immediately rebuked the demons to come out. Jesus has zero tolerance, absolutely no compromise, for impure spirits. This still makes people uncomfortable.

Read verse 9a. Here Jesus was speaking to the man, not the demons. It seems like an odd thing to say to him at this moment, “What is your name?” It seems kind of weak, kind of a useless thing to do. But we can learn deep lessons from Jesus’ question to this man.

**First**, Jesus wanted the man to come back to himself and find his true identity. The man is not just a haunt of demons—he’s a human being. It may seem like it’s just his extreme problem. But actually, finding our own identity is a common problem for everybody. People are busy in life, working, buying and selling, and drinking and indulging in their spare time. But so often people don’t even know who they really are. Since the Enlightenment people have stopped asking questions about identity and the meaning of life and focus on pragmatic issues and technological development. People just want to be comfortable and convenient. This way of life has left many people feeling so empty, and crying out in their souls. Some people today, in great frustration, rebel against everything and find themselves in a similar situation to the man in this passage—isolated, tormented and extremely dark. Jesus’ question, “What is your name?” was not in an interrogating tone, like a policeman; it was the gracious voice of God to bring this man back to himself. Jesus believed that even this man, though his life had been so devastated, had a name, a unique identity. How could Jesus believe that about such a messed-up person? It’s because God’s truth is that each human being is made in the image of God. Our identity comes not from labels society puts on us; it doesn’t come from our family, ethnicity, gender, career choice, abilities or talents. We’re not defined even by our sins, mistakes or bad choices. Our unique identity, our personhood, comes from the image of God within us. We can find our true identity when we realize that the Creator God himself actually made us, and he made us to be like him. It’s the image of God that gives human life its dignity and absolute value. We can find our true selves only in God. It’s not easy to think about, but Jesus is still asking each of us this deep and probing question, “What is your name?” In other words, “Who *are* you, *really*?”

**Second**, Jesus wanted to have a relationship with this man. The question, “What is your name?” is usually the first thing we ask when we want to get to know a person. It’s amazing that Jesus didn’t see this man as an inferior creature, or as disgusting, but genuinely as somebody he’d like to get to know. He didn’t try to control him in any way, but treated him with dignity and respect. Asking, “What is your name?” was an act of grace to bring even this man into a personal love relationship with God. Actually, it’s true for everyone: only as we come to experience the love of God personally can we find true selves, our true identity. We learn from Jesus here the first step in helping troubled people. It’s to stop trying to control them and rather start treating them with dignity, respect and friendship, as precious human beings.

Look at verse 9b. Here we see that the demons were answering for the man. They’d taken total control. Sadly, the man no longer could even say his own name. A legion was a unit of the Roman army. A Roman army legion was actually stationed not too far away from here. They surely oppressed the local population. Perhaps this man had been victimized by them in the past. But the name “legion” seems to refer to the number of demons in him. At its maximum size, a Roman legion had 6,000 soldiers. So with this name, “Legion,” the demons seem to be mocking Jesus, challenging him to even *try* to get rid of them, because they’re way too many to deal with. However, we also see that they’re still cowering before Jesus. Look at verse 10. The man is begging on behalf of the demons to stay in this area. Why that is, we can’t really be sure. For some reason they like this dark place. Look at verses 11,12. Jews considered pigs an unclean animal. And in ancient accounts demons often would ask for a concession when being forced out of somebody they occupied. Here, the cost for healing this man was an entire herd of pigs. Most of us coming from towns and cities have no idea what that price really means. But a conservative cost today would be $500 per pig. Verse 13 says there were about two thousand pigs in that herd, so today they’d all be worth about one million dollars. They were probably communally owned by the nearby townspeople, who’d hired people to tend the pigs for them. This pig herd was the economic livelihood of an entire town.

How did Jesus respond to this request? Verse 13a says quietly, “He gave them permission…” Jesus surely knew what would happen to the pigs. Verse 13b says, “…and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.” Despite this tragedy to the pigs and the townspeople, Jesus didn’t hesitate to permit this to happen, if only he could ransom this one man from the torment of so many demons. What can we learn from this? We learn from Jesus the value of one person, even one badly damaged and troubled person. One person, created in God’s image, is worth more than the entire universe. Jesus’ action here is challenging our value system. What do we value most? Our possessions? Our money? Or a *person*? What are we willing to sacrifice to help somebody? Jesus didn’t just use other people’s property to help this man. He himself paid the ultimate sacrifice to ransom all people from the control of sin and Satan. The key verse of Mark’s Gospel, Mark 10:45 reads, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and *to give his life as a ransom for many*” (emphasis added). Jesus sacrificed his very life to ransom us, and, all troubled people. It was the greatest sacrifice ever made. He calls us as his followers to imitate his example. It may sound easy to value a person the way Jesus did, but it’s extremely hard to actually practice. If we’re really going to help somebody, we have to decide to sacrifice, and even give our own lives.

Look at verses 14–16. Those tending the pigs were so shocked by what happened. They immediately didn’t want to get into trouble. So they went and told the townspeople that this loss was caused by Jesus and that demon-possessed man. When they came and saw the man sitting there, dressed and in his right mind, they should’ve been happy. But instead, they were afraid. Partly they were afraid of the power of Jesus. Mostly they were afraid of losing any more. Look at verse 17. This is the only time it’s recorded that people actually pled with Jesus to leave. Why? They were too materialistic to accept his values.

Look at verse 18. No doubt this man was so moved by the love of Jesus for him. He’d found real healing and the joy of life in Jesus. No doubt he also was so reluctant to go back to all those people whose lives he’d wrecked. How did Jesus respond to him? Read verse 19. Jesus gave this man the direction to go and tell people about God’s mercy in his life. The words “how much” are repeated in verses 19 and 20. Perhaps this was what had gotten this man into so much trouble, not appreciating how much had been done for him. He must’ve been self-conscious and ashamed of how he’d lived. Though it must’ve been so hard for him to do, he obeyed Jesus’ direction. He went and told people all over the Ten Cities how much Jesus had done for him. Telling people again and again about God’s mercy in his life was essential to his own further inner healing. And because of his testimony, these people’s hearts began to change. Later, we see that they themselves *bring* to Jesus another helpless man (7:31,32). The power of one person’s testimony is still really influential. We all need to remember how much the Lord has done for us and how he’s had mercy on us.

Today we thought mainly about Jesus’ question to this man, “What is your name?” May God help us to find ourselves in Jesus, in a personal relationship with him. And may God help us to follow his example in helping people today.