Lesson Five

A Disturbed Man: Freed from Being Out of Control

Focal Text
Mark 5:1-20

Background
Mark 5:1-20

Main Idea
Jesus freed a disturbed man from being out of control and sent the man home to tell what Jesus had done for him.

Question to Explore
From what do you need to let Jesus free you?

Quick Read
When we give our temptations to Christ, we can trust him for freedom and victory.

Commentary
In 1865, the Secret Service was established; its founding purpose was not to protect the president but to fight currency counterfeiting. Lately it’s been busy in this regard. Since 2003, the Treasury has released redesigned $20, $50, $10, $5, and $100 notes. They have new color schemes, background art, and other features designed to make counterfeiting more difficult.

However, criminals always have an answer. They “leech” the bills, bleaching out the ink and replacing it with higher currency features. Or they digitally reproduce them. So banks
still teach their tellers to fight counterfeit bills the way they always have: They give them so much time with the real currency that they can spot a fake the moment they see or touch it.

This week we’ll learn how to deal with spiritual counterfeits—attacks from the enemy that are intended to defeat, distract, and destroy God’s people. Scripture is clear: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We are told to “resist him, standing firm in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:9). Our study will show us how.

**Understand the enemy (5:1-5)**

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had already defeated a storm of nature (Mark 4:35-41); soon he would claim victory over disease and death (5:21-43). But first he would defeat a demonic army, demonstrating his authority over the spirit world.

Our Lord had already been engaged in the ministry of exorcism in Mark’s Gospel, beginning in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21-28) and continuing in Capernaum (1:32-34) and across the area (3:11-12). His disciples were engaged in exorcisms as well (3:15), leading to a controversy with the authorities (3:22-30). He would perform exorcisms later in Mark as well (6:7, 13; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). However, our text is perhaps the most vivid such miracle in Mark’s Gospel, given more than twice as many words as in Matthew’s account (Matthew 8:28-34).

Our text begins: “They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes” (Mark 5:1). Jesus and his disciples “went” (elthon, or were brought, chose to go to) across the Sea of Galilee to the “region” (chora, or land, district) of the “Gerasenes.” This area was under the jurisdiction of the city of Gadara (see Matt. 8:28), six miles from the lake, and was also known for the major Decapolis city of Gerasa (present-day Jerash) some thirty-five miles away. It was located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, a land dominated by Gentiles (see Mark 5:11, 19) where Jewish rabbis seldom went. But Jesus was no typical rabbi.

Jesus’ antagonist appeared quickly on the scene: “When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him” (5:2). When Jesus disembarked on Gentile soil, a man with an “evil” (akatharto, or unclean, impure) spirit “came” (the Greek could be translated, came immediately) from the nearby tombs to “meet” (kypentesen, or drew near as if to battle) him. While Matthew mentions two demoniacs (Matt. 8:28), Mark and Luke (Luke 8:27) focus only on one of the pair. This event likely took place at night (see Mark 4:35), heightening its suspense and macabre significance.
Mark’s description is both livid and frightening: “This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain” (5:3). “Lived” (eiken) employs the imperfect tense, indicating ongoing behavior. Tombs in this day were typically cut out of rock or located in natural caves; either would form a shelter for a man living in such isolation. He would be rendered ritually unclean as a result (Numbers 19:11-14), an ironic fact for one with an “unclean” spirit. Note that “bind” (damazo, meaning to subdue) is used of taming wild beasts in James 3:7. Mark’s Greek employs three negatives and could be rendered literally, not even by chains could anyone any longer restrain him.

Mark elaborates: “For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him” (Mark 5:4). Such supernatural strength was common to demoniacs; see Acts 19:16, “the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.”

Not only could no one control the man—he could not control himself: “Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones” (5:5). “Cry out” indicates ongoing action, shrieks that would pierce the night; such activity was common for demons (see 1:26; 3:11; 9:26). “Stones” were probably flint rocks with jagged edges. Pagan worship often employed such action; see 1 Kings 18:28, where the prophets of Baal “shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.”

Self-destructive behavior is a symptom of demon- possession, as with the demon that possessed a boy and “has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him” (Mark 9:22). This action on the part of demons may be seen as their attempt to destroy the image of God in humanity (see Genesis 1:26).

Gathering up what we have discovered, we learn four facts about demons. One: they are very real. Jesus and his disciples faced them regularly. Two: they are stronger than humans. Three: they isolate their victim from all that is life-giving and good. Four: they seek to destroy their victim, both physically and spiritually.

We ought not be surprised when the enemy attacks us today: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). But remember always: “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).
Trust the power of God (5:6-13)

Jesus came to this Gentile, pagan, demon-infested place with both the compassion to heal this man and the power to do so. What happens next indicates both Jesus’ love and Jesus’ omnipotence.

Falling before God

The demoniac acknowledged Jesus’ authority: “When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him” (Mark 5:6). The disciples must have been startled to see the demoniac rush at Jesus, and even more surprised to watch the man fall on his knees before their Master’s feet. “Fell on his knees” translates proskeynesen, meaning to prostrate or worship, an act of submission before a superior power (see Matt. 2:11; 28:9, 17).

At the same time, the man “shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won’t torture me!’” (Mark 5:7). He “shouted” (kraxas, meaning to cry out, shriek, scream) “at the top of his voice” (phone megale, or with a great voice). He acknowledged Jesus’ true status as “Son of the Most High God,” a position Satan had challenged in Jesus’ wilderness temptations (Matt. 4:3, 6). “Most High God” was a common title for the Lord in the Old Testament, used to distinguish him from false gods (see Gen. 14:18-20; Numbers 24:16; Deuteronomy 32:8; Psalm 18:13; Isaiah 14:14; Daniel 3:26; 4:2). It is noteworthy that he knew Jesus’ name and position, although the two had likely never met before.

All the while the demoniac implored Jesus to “swear to God” (horkizo theon, meaning implore or put under oath before God) that he would not “torture” (basanizo, or to harass or cause anguish). Swearing by God’s name was the most binding of oaths (see 1 Kings 2:42; 2 Chronicles 36:13). The demon might have been referring to his eventual, eternal destiny in hell, but it is unlikely that he could have expected Jesus to forego such punishment.

More probably, the demon was asking Jesus not to cast him out of the man, as the next verse states, “Jesus had said to him, ‘Come out of this man, you evil spirit!’” (Mark 5:8). “Come out” translates exelthe, meaning to go out, proceed, depart, go away from. To exert further authority over his enemy, “Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘My name is Legion,’ he replied, ‘for we are many’” (5:9).

The name referred not to the man but to the demons possessing him. A full Roman legion contained 6,826 men. The demoniac was not speaking mathematically, for the demons eventually went into a herd of 2,000 pigs (5:13; conversely, each hog could have been possessed by several demons). Rather, he was making it clear to Jesus that our Lord confronted not a single demon but a demonic army. To subjects of the Roman Empire, such a term would have suggested both oppression and power.
But the demons knew that they were in the presence of a power greater than they: “And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area” (Mark 5:10). By now the demons had abandoned their attempt to stay in the man, but they wanted to stay in the region. They “begged” (parekalei, meaning to ask for earnestly, exhort, request, implore) Jesus “again and again” (polys, meaning many times) not to “send” (apostello, or send away, send out) them out of the “area” (chola, or land, district).

The text does not specify the demons’ reasons for wanting to stay in this area; perhaps they were afraid of being sent to a more remote area where there would be few if any people to possess and torment. It is possible as well that they wanted to stay in this area where tombs were numerous and attractive to them. Their request could also indicate that the pagan Decapolis was a favorite haunt of demons, so that these wanted to stay in its region. And there was an ancient tradition that demons were assigned to specific locations and would lose their power if they left these borders; perhaps this fear was behind the request as well.

Submitting to God
Meanwhile, “a large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside” (Mark 5:11). The herd was “large” (megale, or numerous, great) in number. “Pigs” (choiron, or swine) were unclean to Jews (Leviticus 11:7; Deut. 14:8), further indication of the Gentile nature of this region. Such a large herd indicates commercial use, demonstrating that those who raised the pigs and those to whom they would be sold were Gentiles.

With the pigs in view, “the demons begged Jesus, ‘Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them’” (Mark 5:12). They “begged” (parakaleo, or implored; same word as in 5:10), asking to be allowed to go into the herd. There was no question that they must leave the man as ordered by Jesus, for Jesus’ authority over them was supreme.

And so “he gave them permission, and the evil 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” (5:13). Jesus “gave them permission” (epetrepson, or permitted, allowed) to do as they requested, and they left the man and possessed the pigs.

The herd immediately “rushed down” (hormesen, or rushed headlong) the “steep bank” (kremnou, or steep slope, cliff) and were “drowned” (pnigo, meaning to strangle, choke) in the water. “Drowned” is in the imperfect tense, indicating an ongoing, continuous action; we can picture the pigs disappearing one after the other into the Sea of Galilee. Two miles south of Kersi/Gergesa there is a ridge that extends from the eastern slopes of the Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. It ends with a steep embankment fitting Mark’s description.
The death of the pigs would not mean the death of the demons. Rather, it rendered them “homeless” until they found something or someone else to inhabit (see Matt. 12:43-44). But they would no longer be able to trouble the man whose plight had so concerned our Lord.

What Jesus did to this legion of demons, he can still do today (see Hebrews 13:8). Satan and his demons are our enemy, but they are a defeated foe. Martin Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” reminds us:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure.

Luther was right: “The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Revelation 20:10). I once saw a t-shirt with the words, “The next time the devil reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.”

**Value people over property (5:14-17)**

When Jesus chose to heal a man on the Sabbath, he said to his critics, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep!” (Matt. 12:11-12). Here the same point was made negatively by those who responded to Jesus’ gracious miracle.

Our text in Mark continues: “Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened” (Mark 5:14). They “ran off” (ephygon, or fled, escaped, disappeared) and “reported” (apangello, or announced, proclaimed, informed) in the “town” (polis, or city) and “countryside” (agrous, or open fields) what had happened, presumably so they would not be blamed for the loss of the herd. The people of the area were shocked by what they heard, for it had no natural explanation.

Then the people encountered an even greater miracle: “When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid” (5:15). As the disciples had been afraid when Jesus calmed the stormy sea (4:41), so the people were “afraid” (phobeo, meaning to
become frightened or reverent) when they witnessed his power over the demonic. The man was likely known to the entire community, since many had tried unsuccessfully to “bind” him in the past (5:3). Now he was in “his right mind” (sophronounta, or reasonable, sensible, of sound mind), a state no medicine or human action could have produced.

The crowd was soon told what had happened here: “Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well” (5:16). Again, those tending the sheep were likely trying to deflect blame for the loss of the herd.

Tragically, “then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region” (5:17). “Plead” translates parakaleo, meaning to implore (the same word as in verses 10 and 12, “begged”). They wanted Jesus to “leave” (aperchomai, meaning depart, go back to one’s place). Jesus experienced the same rejection from the Jewish people as well: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11), beginning with his hometown (Luke 4:14-30).

In this case, their dismissal of Jesus may have stemmed from a desire not to lose more property to his power, or from their pagan rejection of his divine presence. He honored their request, as he always honors our free will (see Rev. 3:20, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me”). There is no biblical record that Jesus ever returned to this area again.

The Gerasenes’ rejection of our Lord mirrors the materialism and greed of our culture today. It is easy to love and serve Jesus as long as no price is required of us. But when we are faced with the loss of popularity, advancement, or possessions, our commitment to Christ is tested. When last did you pay a significant price to obey and serve your King?

Tell others what God has done for you (5:18-20)
While the population of the region missed their opportunity to know and serve the King of Kings, the demoniac was much wiser: “As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him” (Mark 5:18). For the fourth time in this passage we meet the word “begged” (parakaleo), this time reflecting redemptive behavior. The man desperately wanted to leave the scene of his possession and pain. If these people would reject Jesus, they would likely reject this one who had been healed by him.

But our Lord knew that those who have been changed by grace are its best emissaries: “Jesus did not let him, but said, ‘Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you’” (5:19). God “had mercy”
(eleesen, or had compassion or pity) on this man—now the man would be living proof of its transforming effect.

We meet a similar witness in John 9, where Jesus healed a man born blind. The man’s healing was powerful witness to all that something miraculous had happened to him. It would be the same for this man, wherever he went in the region. If he had returned with Jesus to Galilee, his story would have retained little of its compelling power.

In obedience, “the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed” (Mark 5:20). The man went to “tell” (kerysso, meaning announce, proclaim, preach) all that Jesus had done for him. And God’s larger redemptive purpose was accomplished when the people were “amazed” (ethaumazon, or to wonder) at the work of God. Jesus could not minister there, but the man he healed would carry on his Kingdom advance.

Changed people change the world. When we are transformed by God’s power and grace, our lives are proof of the relevance of biblical truth and divine omnipotence. But we must tell others what Christ has done for us, or they will not know the source of our experience.

Many years ago I read about a high school wrestler who became a Christian before his senior year. He wanted to tell his best friend, another member of the wrestling team, but was afraid of embarrassing himself or offending his friend. So he resolved to live as godly a life before his friend as he could, hoping his actions would be his witness.

Years passed. Then one day, he received a letter from his high school buddy, telling him that the friend had recently become a Christian. The man told the story of his new faith and urged his friend to accept Christ as well. The long-time Christian wrote back, expressing his delight in his friend’s conversion and explaining that he had made the same decision years earlier.

His friend wrote back: “How I wish you’d told me that in high school. People back then would tell me that I needed to become a Christian, but I would look at your life and think, ‘If he can be so moral without being a Christian, I don’t need Christ, either.’” The man’s exemplary life without his verbal witness had been more a hindrance than a help to the Kingdom.

Others deserve to know what God has done for us, so God can do it for them as well.
Conclusion
This week we’ve watched Jesus liberate a man possessed by a legion of demons. What Jesus did then, Jesus can still do today. As a Christian, you need have no fear of demonic possession. You belong to Jesus and cannot belong to the enemy.

At the same time, you and I can be imprisoned by other spiritual foes. Hebrews 12:1 encourages us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” The Puritans, referring to this verse, warned of “besetting sins,” those repetitive temptations that can entrap and enslave us.

Is there such a recurring temptation or sin in your life? Are your class members likely to be facing such spiritual struggles? Today is the day to claim your liberty in Christ. Name the spiritual opposition you are facing, give it specifically to God, and ask God to defeat this enemy in his power and authority. Claim the fact that God has met “your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19, KJV). The next time the tempter comes, remember the moment when you received liberty in Christ and stand firm in such freedom. Claim the redemptive power of God, and it is yours.

If you have been dealing with repetitive sin for a period of time, you may need to speak with other Christians who can help you break the cycles of habit and bondage. Christian counselors can guide you in taking therapeutic steps toward healing emotions, body, and relationships. The key is to begin, today. It will never be easier to find freedom in Christ than it is now.
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