

“Jesus Frees the Captive”

Mark 5:1-20

Find your place with me this morning in Mark 5 where we will read beginning in verse 1. This is a text that reveals something about the reality of demonic activity in our world. Contrary to what modern culture will say, demons exist and wreak havoc in the lives of people. Our culture today has no category for demonic oppression because its worldview has been shaped by naturalism and secularism. It explains all human experiences in purely material or psychological terms. So that as a result, the notion that spiritual forces can influence and oppress people is often dismissed before it is even considered.

Having rejected spiritual categories, popular culture now trivializes the demonic. In our culture today, demons and devils are seen more as team mascots than they are as a legitimate reality. Movies portray demons as horror more so than real spiritual enemies. Which tends to make the subject seem fictional rather than a serious reality. And then people no longer recognize the spiritual warfare described in passages like Ephesians 6:12 which alerts us to the fact that our struggle is “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

As a worldview, naturalism has removed the supernatural from explanations of reality. If something can't be tested or verified empirically, it is often rejected. And as a worldview, it leaves no room for spiritual forces like demons even though the Bible presents them as real and active. Psychology has become the primary interpretive grid for human struggles. Conditions that might once have been understood in spiritual terms are almost exclusively interpreted through 'mental' categories. Let me be quick to say that while many of these diagnoses

are legitimate and helpful, today's approach often assumes that all our problems must have purely psychological or biological causes, which leaves no room whatsoever for spiritual oppression.

In earlier centuries, people sometimes attributed too much to demons. But in response, modern culture has swung to the opposite extreme, by denying their existence altogether. That reaction against superstition has gone too far in the opposite direction. But the Bible avoids both extremes! It doesn't attribute every problem to demons, but neither does it ignore their reality. In the gospels, Jesus regularly confronts demonic spirits as part of His ministry, showing us that the spiritual realm is indeed very real. And so with that in mind, let's look at this text in which we find the story of a man who was spiritually oppressed, but set free. (Read)

There are four miracles from the end of chapter 4 through the end of chapter 5. We saw in 4:35-41 how Jesus calms the storm. Here in 5:1-20, Jesus frees the captive. In 5:21-34, Jesus heals the sick. And then in 5:35-43, Jesus raises the dead. Each of these miracles demonstrate His power over nature, over the demonic realm, over illness, and over death itself. In each of these cases, Jesus is presented as the Son of God who has power to overcome all the hostile forces against God and man (Mark 1:1).

I like what one commentator has said:

David Legge — *“To put it very practically to us today, what Mark is showing us, and consequently the Holy Spirit is showing us, is that man's extremity is God's opportunity. God in Christ just loves to minister to us in our deepest need when we cannot help ourselves. We have a storm that sea-faring men couldn't overcome. We have a demoniac that no one could tame. We have a disease*

that no physician could cure, and we have a tragedy that no parent could avert. Yet Christ shows Himself as sufficient, absolutely sufficient, for every circumstance.”

At the end of chapter 4, Jesus has established Himself as the Lord of nature with power to calm the storm. He said to the winds and the waves, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And now in chapter 5, He establishes Himself as the Lord of man with power to dispel the darkness. In the pitiful case of this Gadarene demoniac, we’re given a frightening picture of sin’s degradation in the life of a man. He is under the tyranny of the devil. He cannot be held by society’s chains, but he is under the worst kind of bondage that there is. However, this same man will also become an illustration of the power of Jesus to transform a life. What Satan destroys and degrades, Jesus saves and transforms by His power. And only He can set such a person free.

1—The CAPTIVITY that held the man (5:1-5)

“They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.”

This same account is recorded by all three of the synoptic gospels, and each one adds certain details. Matthew says that there were two men, while Mark and Luke mention just one. The accounts are complementary, while Mark tells us

about the more prominent of the two. Luke mentions that he was a man from the city of Gadara or Gergasa which is one of the ten cities known as the Decapolis located south and east of the Sea of Galilee. It was a region that was made up predominately of Gentiles. If you remember from chapter 4, Jesus and His disciples had crossed over to the other side of the sea from where He had been preaching and teaching. So verse 1 now says that they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And upon stepping out of the boat, Jesus is immediately met by this man.

His description

Verse 2 describes him as a man with an unclean spirit who had been living among the tombs. Verse 15 refers to him as a demon-possessed man. The word that Mark uses to describe him is literally translated as ‘demonized.’ It is a word that describes those who are so thoroughly under the control of demons that they can’t control themselves. They engage in self-destructive and harmful behavior and exhibit strange strength and abilities.

Robert Lightner—*“One is demon-possessed when a demon (or demons) takes up residence in that person’s body, resulting in degrees of derangement and the inability of the possessed to free himself or herself from demonic control...*

Possession occurs when the demons go beyond exerting influence and actually indwell their victims.”

There is a note of irony in this text. Though the man could not be restrained with chains, he is captive to something far worse. I imagine that to other people, he appeared to be the freest man in the region. No prison could hold him. No authority could control him. No human power could tame him. But that appearance was an illusion. Think of it—the man who could break every

physical chain could not break the spiritual chains that held him captive. He was enslaved to demons.

His dwelling

He lived among the tombs instead of with his family. He cried out day and night in torment and even cut himself with stones. Though he seemed unconquerable, he was ironically one of the most imprisoned men in all the world. That is both the tragedy and the irony of his life.

In our day, people often mistake freedom with the absence of external restraints. We assume that if there's no one who tells us what to do, we're free. However, the Bible teaches the opposite. A person may reject every authority, break every rule in the book, and resist every restraint, and yet still be enslaved to sin and Satan. Jesus said:

John 8:34—“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

External chains were not this man's problem—but internal chains were. The man who could not be chained was the most chained man in the country. I can't help but think about those people in our day who've bought into the lies of the sexual revolution in the name of freedom. What they think is their freedom is actually a heavy chain which holds them captive. And there's no worse bondage!

His despair

We don't know how this man got into such a state. There's nothing said about his life prior to this point. All we know is that he is being held in the grip of demonic power. And the result is that he is unrestrainable, irrational, dangerous both to himself as well as others, and he's living in a graveyard. That is what demonic influences have reduced him to. One person has said:

H.A. Ironside — *“We cannot but reflect on the possibilities of evil when we realize that one man could hold more evil spirits than 2,000 unclean hogs.”*

In other words, the evil potential of the human heart knows no depths. Jeremiah says that the heart is wicked and sick and deceitful above all things. It is this sinful propensity we are all born with. Satan appeals to the sinful tendencies of a person, holding them in bondage to the dictates of their own fallen appetites. In this way the devil constantly exploits this in us and through temptation solicits our fallen nature to do evil. Which is why Peter warns us:

1 Peter 5:8—“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

We don’t know how this man got into the awful condition in which Jesus found him, but Satan was devouring his life. Now, before we think to ourselves, “I’m glad that I’m not remotely like this man. I have my clothes on, I’m able to reason with things, and I’m not demon possessed.” And I would imagine that is true of everybody here. The Bible does not say that the human condition is that we are by nature demon possessed. But the Word of God does say, which is why this man is an illustration of the human condition, that men and women by their very nature are ruled by dark spiritual forces.

For instance, in Ephesians 2, where Paul describes believers in relationship to what they once were, listen to how he describes them:

Ephesians 2:1-3—“And you were dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out

the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

He’s describing what they were outside of Christ, before they had come to know Jesus and to trust in Him and to possess His life, His forgiveness, and His mercy. And this description is true of every man and every woman outside of Christ: “You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live,” past tense, “when you followed the ways of this world”—you just went down the same roads as everyone else, just doing the same thing as everyone else, with the same worldview as everyone else. This is the description of being outside of Christ as opposed to being inside of Christ.

You say, “What then is the difference now?” The very next verse, Paul says:

Ephesians 2:4-8—“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith.”

The legalist would have addressed the man’s appearance, the moralist would have addressed the man’s behavior, the psychologist would have addressed the man’s mind. It is only Christ who addresses the man’s condition. He was in prison to Satan, and therefore in need of deliverance. If ever there was a dead man walking, it was him. But what he experiences next makes all the difference in his life:

2—The COMPASSION that freed the man (5:6-13)

“And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before Him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, ‘What have You to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure You by God, do not torment me.’ For He was 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. Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged Him, saying, ‘Send us to the pigs; let us enter them.’ So He gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.”

Picture this man in your mind for minute. He must have been the biggest mess of a human being that has ever been seen. You need to picture what sin did to him, what Satan will do to you if you give him a foothold in your life. I mean he’s gruesome, though he was a man—he’s naked, a mass of bleeding lacerations, covered in scar tissue, living in misery. He is the most unlovable creature alive, and yet Jesus loves him. And the man who had long been terrorized by demons is about to be liberated by the mercy of Jesus. The darkness of the man’s soul is met with the light of Christ’s compassion. We notice first how:

Mercy confronts that which held him

Verse 6 says that when the man saw Jesus from afar, he ran and ‘fell down before’ Him. Pay attention to that. It is recognizing a greater authority.

“Fell Down Before”—the Greek word is *‘προσκυνέω’* and is most frequently translated as *‘worship’*

The word implies bowing in reverence to something or to someone. The demons recognize the authority of Jesus, and such they are subject to Him. And in the

presence of Jesus, verse 7 says the possessed man cried out with a loud voice, “What have You to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure You by God, do not torment me.” Jesus wasn’t there to torment the man, but to liberate him. And upon asking the man’s name, notice the demonic spirit which possessed the man eerily replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” In those days, a Roman ‘legion’ was made up of approximately 6,000 soldiers. The idea is that he is not simply indwelt by a demon, he is infested with them. And so all of this tells us a couple of things:

- The demons are aware of Jesus’ identity

What the disciples struggled to understand, the demons recognized immediately. I mean going all the way back to the scene in the synagogue at Capernaum in chapter 1, the man with the unclean spirit cried out in recognition of who Jesus is, “What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God.” And now here, the evil presence within this man recognizes the identity of Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. Demons recognize the identity of the Son of God. And then:

- The demons are aware of their destiny

Notice how the demonic ‘Legion’ within this man beg for mercy and ask not to be tormented. In Matthew’s account, they ask the question, “Have You come here to torment us before the time?” In other words, they know their ultimate destiny is the lake of fire. In fact, these demons believed more than most people in our world believe today. They believed that Jesus is God the Son. They believed there is a judgment day coming. They believed that Jesus has all authority.

James 2:19—“You believe that there is one God; you do well: the demons also believe, and tremble.”

What further evidence would the disciples need to convince them of who Jesus is? He has authority over the elements, and now once again they see that Jesus has authority over demonic influences that oppress humanity. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus would later tell His disciples how there is an eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. The demons know that at some point, their ability to harass and afflict and oppress humanity will come to an end. I think about how so much of the misery of people today is due to the fact that people have bought into the ideas which have their sources in the demonic. It leads to misery and bondage, resulting only in destruction and death. But the time is coming when those demonic sources as well as Satan himself will be bound and thrown into the lake of fire. God's new creation will then be free from every evil influence. Mercy confronts that which held this man! And then we see how:

Mercy conquers that which held him

With a simple word, Jesus commands the legion, and they flee. Isn't that something? With a word, Jesus calmed the storm a few verses earlier. A few verses later, with a word Jesus commands disease and its effects on a woman are reversed. And then with a word, Jesus raises the dead to life again. Here, with a word Jesus commands the demons and they flee. There is no fight, no argument, no sprinkling with holy water, no spells or incantations. There is simply the authoritative word of Jesus. Martin Luther said it:

*And tho this world, with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph thru us.
The Prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him—*

*His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him!*

With one little word, Jesus 'felled' thousands of demons that held this man as their prisoner. What I find interesting is the fact that they desire to indwell something so much so that they request to be sent into a nearby herd of pigs. It may be that demons prefer inhabiting other living things on earth rather than remaining disembodied. Which is why they oppress humanity the way that they do. And the fact that the herd violently rush headlong off a cliff suggests the destructive ends that demons have in mind for their hosts. Such destruction is what they had tried to do to the man, were it not for the Lord's mercy in his life.

And so there is the captivity which held him, the compassion that freed him, and then notice:

3—The COMMISSION that marked the man (5:14-20)

"The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged Him that he might be with Him. And He did not permit him but said to him, 'Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled."

Upon seeing the herd of pigs plunge headlong into the sea, verse 14 says that the herdsman fled and told everyone in the city about what had happened, so that the people came from everywhere to see it for themselves. But I want you to notice what they observe in verse 15. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.

His transformation

What could possibly be the explanation for a miraculous change in the man's life? No doubt that's what everyone was wondering. The madman of Gadara who had been unable to be restrained, who had formerly terrorized the entire region, he's no longer the same. He's clothed, he's in his right mind. Jesus had completely restored what had been the wreckage of the man's life, giving him a new life and a sense of dignity. They had never seen anything like this. How do they respond?

Instead of bowing before Jesus, verse 17 says they beg Him to depart from their region. They want Him to leave.

Maybe they were more interested in their livelihood than they were in eternal life. Maybe they were more concerned about the state of their pigs than they were the soul of the man whom Satan had long held captive. Material things mattered more to them than the spiritual.

They witness a miracle, but instead of submitting to Christ, they urge Him to leave. "Away, Jesus! Leave our region, would You, please?" And I find that to be so sad. But our society has said the same thing to the Lord. The success of our business matters more than whether we're changing lives. An endangered snail matters more than the life of a baby in the womb, or making an impact on a

generation, and helping them find meaning and purpose. Regardless of the track record of Christianity to transform lives and whole civilizations, we have abandoned the very truth that our constitution and law was founded upon. We've taken the Ten Commandments out of our courtrooms, attempted to silence any mention of God from the public sector, and we've inherited a society in which we believe that we are the center of the universe. If there is anything that we've learned from science and the laws of physics, it is that nature abhors a vacuum. Unfilled spaces will always be filled by some surrounding element. Jesus said it this way to His generation:

Matthew 12:43-45—“When an unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also it will be with this evil generation.”

In other words, in your rejection of Jesus, you may sweep the house clean, but it will ultimately be empty and vulnerable to an even worse condition. The human heart cannot merely be swept clean by morality, but must be indwelt by Christ. If a society rejects Him, it leaves itself vulnerable to a deeper spiritual darkness.

G.K. Chesterton — *“When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing; they then become capable of believing in anything.”*

His testimony

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged Him that he might be with Him. Isn't that something? His life is

changed by Christ so that he now wants to follow Him. But verse 19 says Jesus did not permit him to accompany them, but said to the man, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you.” In other words, Jesus sent him home with a story to tell other people. And that’s exactly what he did. Verse 20 says he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.

Before I finish, let me mention just a few closing thoughts:

- *Slavery to Satan is the worst form of bondage that there is*

The details of the man’s account, such as the fact that he was living among the tombs, unable to be restrained, and unclothed and giving himself over to self-inflicted harm—these were but symptoms. The real problem was that he was spiritually enslaved. And while his case is extreme, it is an illustration of what sin does in the life of a person. It will only destroy you and lead you to the grave. Satan is a liar and a murderer. And he would do everything he can to destroy your life and your family. Jesus said:

John 10:10—“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I’ve come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

- *The mercy of Jesus liberates those whom no one else can rescue*

Every human solution had been exhausted on this man but to no avail. People tried to restrain him chains, isolate him from society, drive him away from their presence, but there was nothing that could change his condition. That is, until Jesus shows up. His power reaches beyond what human effort can accomplish. With a word, He casts out the man’s demons, restores the man’s mind, gives the

man his dignity and returns him to a life filled with purpose. This is a powerful reminder to us that the mercy of Jesus reaches even the deepest places of human brokenness and offers hope to those the world has given up on. Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe you are someone like that. Friend, His mercy is greater than your mess!

What love could remember no wrongs we have done?

Omniscient, all knowing, He counts not their sum.

Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore,

Our sins they are many, His mercy is more!

What patience would wait as we constantly roam?

What Father, so tender, is calling us home?

He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor,

Our sins they are many, His mercy is more!

What riches of kindness Christ lavished on us,

His blood was the payment, His life was the cost!

We stood 'neath a debt we could never afford,

Our sins they are many, His mercy is more!

Praise the Lord! His mercy is more!

Stronger than darkness, new every morn,

Our sins they are many, His mercy is more!

- *Those whom Christ delivers also become those whom He deploys*

The man begs Jesus that he might remain with Him, but Jesus tells him to go home to his friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for him. Go and tell them how the Lord has had mercy on you. Isn't that the same message we

have to tell? You don't have to take a seminary course in apologetics, read a dozen books, learn a technique. No, just tell someone else how the Lord has had mercy on you. Friend, that's what it means to be a witness.

1 Peter 3:15—“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

The one who had been delivered is now deployed, sent on mission with a story to tell. And the same thing is true for each one of us who have been delivered by God's grace.

William Temple—*“It is clear that the church only fulfills its function as the body of Christ if it is constantly thinking how those who are outside can be inside. The preoccupation of the church should be with those outside.”*

Not in terms of the building, but the body. Those of us who are in Christ must be preoccupied with reaching those who are outside of Christ. That's why we send mission teams. That is why we host summer camps. That is why we have a rec ministry, discipleship groups, and so on. And whenever the church becomes an end unto itself, it loses its purpose for existing in the world. Jesus sends the man back home to his family and friends for the purpose of telling them about all that Christ had done for him. And we know that he had an impact based on what we read in Mark 7:31-37...

Can you imagine if just half of us who are here this morning took that challenge seriously? Having been convinced that the preoccupation of the church is with those outside, not with those inside. Telling people, “Christ has had mercy on me!” I can't answer all their questions and objections. But I do know this, “I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I can see.” I was a total wreck

of a human being, Jesus has had mercy on me. That's all you need to do! Because people are not looking for a religion. They're not looking for some system. They're wondering, "Is there any power truly able to conquer the forces that hold me in their grip?"

The gospel says that it is Jesus who frees the captive, and He does so by trading places with us. Satan tried to keep this man in bondage, but Jesus sets him free. For it will be Jesus who we will later find bound and stripped naked, led to a cross where nails are driven into His hands and feet, a crown of thorns beat into His brow. It will be Jesus who will cry out, "Father, why have You forsaken Me?" And then, "It is finished," as He breathes His last and is taken down from the cross and buried in a tomb. Friend, that is the gospel. There is hope for a guilty man who is tormented because there is an innocent Man who was condemned in his place and endured torment on the cross. So that Jesus died to save you from the wreckage that sin had brought about in your life. But the tomb doesn't have the final word over our Savior's life, it doesn't have the final word in this man's life, and neither does it have the final word in your life.