

The First Apostle to the Gentiles

Mark 5:1-20

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When we read the story of Jesus healing the demoniac it can be hard to get past the Hollywood notions of demon possession, but once we do we will see that this narrative, while true, also serves as an allegory for our own salvation. It shows us what we were once like and what we are now in Christ.

The setting of this story is one that most Jews would regard as unclean. It takes place in the Decapolis, which is Gentile territory. It takes place in a graveyard, which is unclean because dead bodies were considered unclean by the Law. And it concerns a man possessed by an unclean spirit. The story is set among people who are far from God, and the situation is one of hopelessness (vv. 1-5). The demon-possessed man is isolated in caves where people are buried. He is out of control and violent. He possesses superhuman strength but has subhuman dignity. He cries out in desperation and cuts himself either out of self-hatred or lack of self-control. The demons drive his extreme behavior through infliction of torment or through complete control of his body. And everyone around him treats him like a monster that must be chained up. This literal description of the man can also serve as a metaphor for who we once were. But Jesus seeks precisely those who are lost, isolated, outcast, full of self-hatred and lacking in self-control, and crying out for help. Contrary to popular belief, most of us are not essentially good people who occasionally make mistakes. Though created in the image of God, through sin we were hopelessly marred beyond recognition. Through Jesus, God doesn't just give us a second or even infinite chances to achieve righteousness, because we could never be righteous on our own. Instead, through Jesus, God gives us assurance, transformation, and salvation. He doesn't just give us the chance to change; He changes us.

The divine response to this hopeless situation we were in is to save us (vv. 6-13). The demons that tormented the man now beg not to be tormented by Jesus. Strangely, they ask not to be driven from the region. From the parallel story in Luke we can infer that this was a plea not to be sent to the abyss, the place of judgment. Remarkably Jesus agreed to send them into the pigs. Why would He do this? Because of this, the pig farmers' businesses were ruined and thousands of pigs died. Jesus did this to show first what would have happened to the man if the demons stayed inside him. They would have driven his life off the cliff as well. Second, Jesus wanted to

show that this outcast man was worth more than the pigs or the pig farmers' business. This is a picture of redemption. If those in the town really sought the lost as God seeks the lost, they would be willing to give up their business in exchange for gaining back this lost man. God truly longs to bring the lost back to Him; that's why He was willing to sacrifice His only Son in exchange for us. This is how much He values us. Jesus welcomes even those whom everyone else just wants to get rid of.

This leads to the human response to Jesus' salvation (vv. 14-20). They either disregard Him or become His disciple. Jesus saved this man, body and soul. The man who was once out of control is now sitting calmly, fully dressed. Yet the people were afraid. They didn't care that Jesus saved the man. Instead they felt threatened by such unprecedented power that they saw in Jesus. It's just like when my brother and I got our first BB gun and killed a bird with it. We realized that it was much more powerful than we thought and were afraid to use it again. Jesus had such power to command demons, ruin businesses, and transform people. The people would have rather Jesus listened to the demons' plea to stay, and so now they plea with Jesus to leave. They could keep the demon-possessed man hidden out of the way, but they couldn't exercise this control on Jesus. They wanted to keep living the way they used to, to have power and authority over their lives. They didn't want to submit to the power and authority of Jesus. So they disregarded Him.

Yet in v. 18 the formerly possessed man wanted to be Jesus' disciple and travel with Him. Instead, Jesus tells the man to go back home and share his testimony. Thus this man became the first apostle to the Gentiles. Home was not a place of comfort for him as we might think it would be for us. Home was a dark place of loneliness and hopelessness. Yet it is in these dark places where those who have been transformed by Jesus can shine the brightest. And the man agreed to spread the gospel back at home. Can you respond with such obedience? Can you take the light of the gospel to the darkness around you? The mission field is your home, your family, your workplace, your friends, and your school. Let us pray that God will give us the boldness to joyfully proclaim His salvation to all those around us, in response to all that He has done for us.