

## Kingdom Dynamics: Love you or Eat you?

Mark 5:1-20

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When I was about 11 our family was invited to party with a bunch of other church families. And as often happens in situations like this, while the parents were having a ruckus time upstairs doing whatever 40-year-old old people do at parties us kids were in the basement unsupervised. And this meant it was movie time.

Now I grew up in a house without TV – which is something I haven't told my kids because they would just think I'm older than I actually am. But this meant I was not the guy who got to pick the movie. And inevitably we ended up watching Ghostbusters.

Now most of the time my head was buried in the couch pillow, but I did peek a few times and to this day I can still remember the scenes I saw with vivid clarity – it was terrifying. Now fortunately I've stopped having nightmares, but as an 11-year-old I did spend about a week sleeping in my parents' room.

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Today we are looking at a section of text and a topic that doesn't often get addressed in circles like ours. It's certainly not a text I would choose to preach. But because we are walking through the book of Mark we have come face to face with it. And as I looked at it I found that it was a lot more relevant than I initially thought. What we have in front of us is the longest account in Mark, and in fact all of scripture, of an exorcism.

So with no further ado would you grab your Bible and open it up to Mark chapter 5. We are going to start in verse 1. And as you are locating that would you stand with me in expectation and hunger that God would speak to us? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 5:1-20]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now this is a very unique text. Here Jesus' comes face to face with evil and overcomes. And not everything in this story gets explained. But beyond the mystery there is insight into a surprisingly relevant issue as we all live in a world that is both natural and supernatural. So here we see the complexity of evil. The pattern it follows. And most importantly the way it can be defeated.<sup>1</sup>

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So first its complexity. Now 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadians love entertainment that revolves around the supernatural, but most people today don't really believe in demons. In fact I looked up "exorcism" on dictionary.com and here is what I found. "Exorcism – the ceremony or the formula used in exorcising."

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-defeat-of-evil-5452/> (Accessed April 27, 2021)

Well that's a definition of nothing. So I looked up exorcist to see if that would lend some detail and it spat back "A person who practices exorcism." The dictionary didn't even want to mention the demonic in its definition.

After all, believing in angels and demons feels a little primitive to us. I mean people in the olden days believed in this stuff because they didn't understand most of what was happening in the world so the demonic was a way to explain it - mental illness, epilepsy even certain grotesque diseases – it was demons.

We on the other hand are sophisticated and have names for things like schizophrenia and bipolar. We know about anxiety, depression and genetic abnormalities. And as our understanding about the world has increased the room for the supernatural has diminished. At least that's the way the world sees it. The supernatural is only involved in what can not be explained by the natural.

But the God we worship created the natural so for Jesus followers it isn't one or the other, everything is always both. Our world is both natural and spiritual. And this is the way Jesus lived. Every brokenness He encountered wasn't caused by demons, but they were part of the brokenness. So for example in Matthew 4 we read:

News about [Jesus] spread all over Syria, and people with every kind of sickness or disease were brought to Him. Some of them had a lot of demons in them, others were thought to be crazy, and still others could not walk. But Jesus healed them all. (Matthew 4:24 CEV)

So there were at least four different kinds of illnesses that Jesus healed: physical illness, demonic illness, mental illness and paralysis.

And this means that 2000 years ago people weren't nearly as primitive as we would like to think. In fact, in a lot of ways Jesus had a way more developed worldview than we do. He didn't think every illness was demonic, nor did He think everything could be healed with a pill. He differentiated between the different ills that He encountered.

And Christianity has acknowledged the multifaceted nature of our world for a long time. So while things like broken bones are simple, the world of mental illness, depression and anxiety is complex and needs to be treated as such.

On this point Tim Keller cites the Puritan Richard Baxter who was a pastor in the 1700's and worked with people who suffered from depression – that's pretty relevant to today!

And Baxter identifies four different kinds of depression that he encountered. He says there is physiological depression, moral depression, psychological depression and demonic depression. This is the 1700's!

And he goes on to prescribe different treatments for each kind of depression. So he says for depression with physiological causes the cures are proper nutrition, medication and rest – so a physical problem needed a physical solution.

But some depression is caused by moral issues, things like guilt and shame. This happens when a person is stuck in sin and isn't living the way they mean to. And nutrition or medicine won't help this kind of depression. It needs confession, forgiveness, and grace. Isn't that insightful?

A third kind of depression has psychological roots. And Baxter found that the cure for this was love, support and community. And finally he worked with depression that had a demonic root. And this kind needed prayer and the word of God.<sup>2</sup> Human illness is multifaceted.

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Now throughout history there have been all sorts of cultures that have had more simplistic views of reality than the worldview the Bible presents. So some cultures are materialistic and their answer to every ailment is natural – a pill or surgery or whatever.

Other cultures are more superstitious or spirit-focused than the Bible – they see a demon behind every door. But the worldview the Bible gives is balanced and multifaceted. It offers a complex picture of humanity with all sorts of different ailments and remedies. And that is the picture we get in today's text.

And this is the world we know. If there were a pill that would solve everything, we would all be on it, but that is not how it works. Instead every aspect of our lives – physiological, psychological, moral and supernatural – are all interconnected. And having this perspective makes sense of some otherwise impossible scenarios.

So we all understand nature and nurture. It makes sense to us that people who endure a broken childhood often end up perpetrating brokenness later on. And that's great in a textbook somewhere, but brokenness isn't an on or off thing. Everyone has some physiological and psychological and moral brokenness in their life.

And as these different brokenness interact there are all sorts of different outcomes. And they don't always add up. So some people from "good" homes end up with deep brokenness. And the demonic helps to give understanding in some of these situations.

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So, the way the supernatural interacts with the natural is complex. You don't catch a demon like you catch a cold. Instead the supernatural is intertwined with the natural in a web of relationships. And so the symptoms of demonic influence aren't like the symptoms of a broken arm, they show up in patterns in our lives.

So what do these patterns look like and how does the demonic get into someone's life?

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Right off the bat we need to say that Hollywood has some ideas about this that are not helpful. So haunted houses and demon-possessed dolls isn't what we get in scripture. The guy in this passage is as demonically influenced as anyone ever gets and he still recognizes Jesus and falls at His feet.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Tim Keller's sermon "The Defeat of Evil"

So we need to put away some of the sensational ideas surrounding this topic. But we also have to put away the idea that the demonic doesn't play into our lives at all – it's just for some super broken people. And that's because the Bible speaks very practically about how demonic threatens us.

So for example Paul warns that pride can open a door to the demonic. He says:  
 A church leader must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the devil would cause him to fall. (1 Timothy 3:6)

In other words unwisely putting someone in a position of spiritual authority when they aren't mature enough can open a door to demonic influence in their life. In another place Paul says bitterness and unforgiveness can do the same thing. So in Ephesians we read:

Don't sin by letting anger control you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Pride, anger, unforgiveness. These aren't strange or foreign ideas, these are things everyone bumps into. And Paul says these are the kinds of things that open individuals up to the demonic.

Now we aren't talking about Hollywood's demon possession, we are talking about an evil spirit influencing us and leading us into bondage. And that's the goal. The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy. There is an evil force that wants to permeate your life. And if you give it a foothold it will destroy everything.

And we have seen this. SO people who have an anger problem don't just have an anger problem, it spills over into everything. And people who have given into lust aren't healthy in everything else. Everything gets affected.

And that's certainly what we get with this man who runs out to meet Jesus. He's living in the tombs, so his relationships with people aren't great. And he's crying out and cutting himself so his relationship with himself isn't great either. And then when Jesus commands the demon to identify itself the response is:

"My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man." (Mark 5:9)

So this is a complicated situation. We don't know how it all got started, but his whole world has been thrown into turmoil. Turmoil and chaos in a person's life is a pattern or sign that points to demonic activity.

But turmoil and chaos isn't where it starts. It ironically often starts with success and strength. So notice how no one can bind this guy. He has some form of superhuman strength, but by the time we get to him no one is impressed by his strength because he's living in the tombs and cutting himself.

So he's not really living even though he's strong. He got something good but ended up with less. And ultimately his humanity has been eaten from the inside out.

And this is the pattern: a person wants something good – a strength, a relationship, a pleasure, a success – and they give themselves to achieving it with everything they've got. And they get it and also end up enslaved.

So in some ways the saying has it right. People talk about selling your soul to the devil. And the idea is that you trade your soul in exchange for something you want.

But don't think "demon possession." That's Hollywood sensationalism. That's not real life. But the Bible is. This is relevant. Jesus hasn't wandered off into some strange part of the kingdom to bump into some weird guy and do some irrelevant ministry. What Jesus does here is for us. Do you believe that?

Here's how it works, when our meaning and value comes from something other than God that thing masters us. So if your image is the most important thing to you then all your energy is spent looking as good as you possibly can. And you will gain physical attraction, but it will become lord in your life. It will master you. And this isn't only for weird dudes who live in cemeteries, this is for everyone.

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So what is the thing that makes you want to get up in the morning? Where does your joy come from? What gives you meaning? We live in a culture where everyone likes to think they are their own boss, but the Bible says no one is free. Everyone is controlled by something; everyone has a master. The only question is whether your master loves you or eats you.

So in Romans Paul tells people who have come to Christ:

Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living. (Romans 6:18)

This means there is no such thing as absolute freedom. We are all controlled by the master we serve. We are ruled by whatever we center our lives on. And it's always a trade. So if you center your life on your career you are going to do well in your field. You are probably going to do better than the people around you. You'll move up the ladder, but when you center your life on something you make a pact with it and trade your soul for it. And this is demonic.

And the demonic wants to steal, kill and destroy your faith. It wants to separate you from God. And so it trades material success for your humanity – humanity.

Here's what I mean: People are most human when we are living the way we were created to live, and that means imaging God. The less we image God the more of our humanity has been stripped away. But it doesn't happen right away. So Mark says:

This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. (Mark 5:3)

Notice the “no longer” in this. At the beginning he could be restrained, but not anymore. Evil enslaves slowly. So the devil never approaches us and says “You can have all the success you want, all you have to do is throw away your humanity. Throw away love. Throw away relationship. Just become evil and it’s all yours.” Nobody would take that trade. And yet many of us end up there.

And the reason is that evil enslaves slowly. The trades are small. People start out seeking something good, but as these things become all encompassing, inch by inch success is traded for humanity. Now hear me: not all success is evil. But eventually everyone who gives themselves to another god ends up destroyed by it. Some end up in the tombs cutting themselves and others end up in high rises surrounded by money and no love. But everyone who serves another god gets eaten.

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So evil is complex. And evil follows patterns in our lives as we trade our humanity to get what we want. But evil can be defeated. So how? How do we exorcise our demons?

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Well in this story Jesus comes face to face with a man full of a thousand demons and frees him. And there’s no struggle. There is no sweaty palmed Jesus tightly gripping the Bible and fearfully begging the demons to leave. He simply says “come out of this man you impure spirit.”

Now all religious tradition includes methods for how to cast out demons. And it’s always words to say, powers to call on, names to use. But Jesus doesn’t use any of that here. Actually the demon try to exorcise Jesus with those methods. So verse 6 reads:

When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw Him, ran to meet Him, and bowed low before Him. With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” (Mark 5:6-7)

The demons appeal to God to get Jesus to leave them alone. But Jesus doesn’t say: “No, in the name of God you come out.” He doesn’t appeal to anyone. Instead it’s just like we saw last week with the storm, Jesus is the higher power and He just speaks.

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And then we get the whole pig thing and it’s strange. So modern people and pig activists everywhere get all excited about the abuse of swine – like what does Jesus have against bacon? And actually there is no consensus among theologians as to what Jesus is doing. The only thing everyone agrees is that this has to be a real story because nobody would make this up. It’s weird.

So what’s Jesus doing? Just a couple guesses: Last week we talked about how the sea was the embodiment of chaos and evil. And pigs were unclean so Jesus could be sending the unclean spirits into the unclean animals and putting them back in the chaos. That could be part of it.

Or the Jews wanted a messiah who would bind their oppressors – the Romans – and throw them into the sea, but Jesus identifies the real oppressors – our battle isn't against flesh and blood – and throws them into the sea. And the pigs are just the physical sign of this spiritual reality.

Or the 2000 pigs represented a lot of money, and so Jesus could be saying all the money in the world is not worth one soul.

Whatever Jesus is doing it's not what anyone expected and just like in the boat last week, when sinful people come face to face with a Power they cannot control – even when that power is good – the response is fear. We read:

A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid.... And the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone. (Mark 5:15-17)

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There's a lot of unknowns here, but here is what we do know. This man bows in front of Jesus and ends up clothed, sane, and sent on mission. Jesus sends him back to his town to tell everyone "how much the Lord had done for him."

And so the answer to exorcising evil is not a mystery; it's trade the idols of our lives for the Living God of the universe. The answer to defeating evil is to stop making bad trades, stop trading our humanity for material gains, and start living the way we were created to live.

Simple right? But not easy. Oh, it's easy to identify the demons that control the people around us, but our own captors are always more complex. If only there were some magic words to break my chains... There aren't, but there is a picture – the answer to exorcising evil is seeing the Messiah that no one expected.

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At the end of Mark we see that the way Jesus saves is by trading places. So this man started out naked, crying and in the tombs and ended clothed, peaceful and on mission. Jesus in exchange started out clothed, peaceful and on mission and ended naked, crying out and put in a tomb. And this is the way Jesus deals with the evil we face. He takes it on Himself. He absorbs your evil and injustice into Himself so that you can be set free. That is the Master who loves you.

But don't be confused, Jesus is a Master. If you want the abundant life He offers you must take Him as Lord. You must serve Him. But Jesus is the only Master who loves you and wants the best for you. He is the only Master who will increase your humanity instead of taking it away. He is the only Master who will leave you with more instead of less. Jesus is the Master who will fill you with the joy you seek, clothe you in His righteousness, and then send you out as His ambassador – the only mission that will give you meaning in life. So come to Jesus.