

## Discipleship According to Mark

*The Lord of Mercy* (Mark 5:1-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 8, 2026

### Introduction

- ❖ This morning's passage addresses a subject that our contemporary culture finds surprisingly fascinating. In Mark 5, Jesus and his disciples encounter a demon possessed man. Now you might think modern readers would have difficulty taking the idea of demons seriously.
  - **Demons are considered outdated vestiges of old-world superstition.** Back then, in a pre-scientific age, it made sense for ancient cultures to assign blame for any bad thing that happens to the malevolent machinations of evil spirits. They lacked the understanding of mental health and psychological disorders. If you exhibited strange, antisocial behavior, they wouldn't try to diagnose you. They would just deem you demon possessed. They didn't know better.
    - **So you would think that no one today**—in advanced societies like ours that have benefited from five hundred plus years of Enlightenment advancements in science and technology—**no one would take much interest in demons.**
- ❖ Tell that to Netflix, and they'll get a good laugh out of it. Then they'll tell you to go watch their most-watched movie of all time, *KPop Demon Hunters*. Which has wracked up 325.1 million views so far, which amounts to 541.8 million hours of people watching a movie about demons. Specifically about hunting them.
  - Who knew that a demon-themed movie would captivate such large audiences from kids to adults. And that's not even to mention the recent *Demon Slayer* movie that's based on an extremely popular Manga series and TV show. I honestly know little about it except for how popular it is. And I just read that they're doing an entire reboot on the *Exorcist* movie starring Scarlett Johansson. That's major star power. Apparently there are enough people out there interested in demon possession to the point that Hollywood wants to capitalize on it.
- ❖ Now stylistically there's a big difference between a PG-rated, animated flick about KPop demon hunting and an R-rated horror movie about exorcisms. They actually represent the two most common responses that people have towards demons and evil spirits. C.S. Lewis addresses this in his preface to his book, *The Screwtape Letters*.
  - **One reaction is to caricature demons as cartoonish and comical.** So that they're not all that fearsome or scary. **The other reaction is to feed "an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."** To depict them as monstrous and horrifying. Either way, the demons get their way. If you see them as cartoonish and entertaining, then you won't fear them or take them seriously. But, on the other hand, if you see demons as utterly terrifying, you'll be scared into paralysis. You'll be a slave to fear.
- ❖ That's why we need the Gospels to provide a necessary corrective to either reaction. In the Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus frequently encounters individuals who are possessed by demons. And he performs exorcisms. He casts them out. **So on one hand, we should be taking demons seriously. They are real, and they are scary.**

- ❖ **But, on the other hand, in the Gospels, the far more terrifying figure turns out to be—not the demons—but the One who wields sovereign authority over them.** Jesus ends up striking more fear in people than an entire legion of demons. That’s the reminder we need—that Jesus has the power *and mercy* to heal those assaulted by demons. If you keep your eyes on the Lord of Mercy, you’ll take evil spirits seriously, but you won’t be crippled by fear.
  - **As we study this passage, you’ll notice three sets of characters and all three beg of Jesus.** The same Greek words is used all three times. First, the demons beg Jesus for mercy in v10. Second, the crowd begs Jesus to leave—to depart from their region in v17. And third, the healed man begs to join Jesus and the other disciples in v18. We’ll use these three instances of begging the Lord of Mercy to frame our message.

### **The Demons Beg Jesus for Mercy**

- ❖ Let’s start off by seeing how this scary legion of demons end up on their knees begging Jesus for mercy. We’ll get a real sense of Jesus’s authority over cosmic powers in this present darkness, over spiritual forces of evil.
  - The way chapter 5:1 begins harkens back to how chapter 4 ended with Jesus calming a storm as he and his disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee. *“<sup>1</sup>They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. <sup>2</sup>And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit.”*
- ❖ **I’m convinced that Mark is drawing a literary connection between the storm on the sea and the storm in this man’s soul.** With three mere words, “Peace, be still!” Jesus calmed the storm. Likewise, with just mere words, he calms the soul. The disciples ask themselves, after the wind and waves obey Jesus’s voice, *“Who then is this?”* And in this morning’s passage, they get their answer but from an unlikely source.
- ❖ We’re told that Jesus and his disciples disembarked their boat on the other side of the sea. In the country of the Gerasenes. There are some interpretative challenges in determining which ancient town Mark had in mind, but there was a coastal town around there, back then, located with the district of Hippos, which was one of the major cities of the Decapolis.
  - Mark mentions **the Decapolis** at the end of our passage in v20. **It means the “ten cities” and refers to a Hellenistic region of ten connected cities on the east side of the Jordan river.** The Decapolis was Gentile territory, and any Jews living in that region were largely Hellenized. They were acculturated into Greco-Roman society.
    - Suffice it to say, good devout Jews, in the first-century, would largely steer clear of traveling in this region. **So much potential contact with Gentiles and Gentile culture would put you at risk of contamination—of becoming religiously unclean.**
- ❖ **But Jesus was intent on coming to the Decapolis.** He explicitly announced his desire to cross the sea to arrive on this side, on the Gentile side (4:35). Now last week, Minister Melvin explained that there was a demonic element to that storm, as if the demonic realm was unleashed on that boat in a feeble attempt to hinder Jesus from landing on this shore. And the minute he arrives on land, a demoniac comes rushing at him from out of the tombs.

- **The demons clearly don't want Jesus in the Decapolis.** This has been their territory, their dark domain, for all this time. **Jesus is the Great Intruder.** He's a bright, penetrating shaft of light, cutting through the thick clouds of darkness that have shrouded the hearts and minds of all the people in this region.
- ❖ Now the way this man is portrayed is sad and pitiful. He's a man with an unclean spirit; residing in a unclean (Gentile) land; living among unclean tombs (Num 19:11-14); in proximity to unclean pigs (Lev 11:7). **He's not just unclean; he's mega-unclean.**
  - He was a societal outcast. Marginalized and banished from town to live among the mountain caves, which functioned as tombs for the dead. And because of those unclean spirits, he's described as out of his mind. **He was a wild man. Feral in behavior.** Which explains why townsfolk had attempted in the past to subdue him with shackles and chains. But the demons supplied him with extraordinary strength, and he kept breaking free. *"He wretched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him."* (5:4) The word for "subdue" is the same word used elsewhere for taming wild animals (Jas 3:7). No one had the strength to tame him. He was treated like a wild, feral animal.
- ❖ We're meant to feel sympathy for this man. He was in anguish. Look at v5, *"Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones."* Those demons in him hate God and wish they could kill God. **Since that's out of the question, they resort to defacing the image of God stamped on every human being.** They torture this particular image bearer of God and incite him to commit self-harm.
  - Now it says, in v6, that when the demoniac saw Jesus from afar, he ran to him, prostrated himself before Jesus and cried out in a loud voice, *"<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!""*
- ❖ **So once again in Mark's Gospel, the only characters who seem to recognize Jesus's true identity are the demons.** They acknowledge him to be the Son of God. They specifically call him the Son of the Most High God, which was a fitting designation in Gentile territory. The label "Most High God" could be seen as affirmation of God's unique status among all the polytheistic deities worshipped in the Decapolis.
  - **But let's not imagine these demons to be confessing Christ in this moment.** They're not expressing faith in Jesus as the Son of God. No, this was a desperate attempt by the demons to gain control over Jesus. In those days, it was assumed that using the precise name of your adversary granted you mastery or control over them.
- ❖ But that has no effect on Jesus. Jesus asks the demon for its name, and the demon complies. *"My name is Legion, for we are many."* **A Roman legion was the largest troop unit in the ancient Roman army. It was comprised of six thousand soldiers.** So the point is that there are many demons possessing the same man. They are abundant, and they are strong.

- ❖ **But now they are scared in the presence of Jesus.** They plead for mercy. They beg for Jesus to not send them out of the region. Again, that just reinforces the impression that the Decapolis was a spiritual dark and desolate region. The demons saw it as their domain. Jesus, don't torment us. Don't send us out of our land!
  - They beg to be sent into a great herd of pigs feeding on the hillside. *“Send us to the pigs; let us enter them.”* <sup>13</sup>*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.”*
- ❖ Surprisingly, Jesus granted their request. He showed the demons mercy. He didn't give them the torment they deserve. He permitted them to enter the pigs, and the demons immediately drove them off the cliff into the sea. Commentators suggest that that's what the legion wanted to do to the man. **They were inciting him to commit self-harm.** Trying to destroy the image of God. By God's grace, the man had, up to this point, resisted throwing himself into the sea. But those pigs were no match. They immediately succumb to demonic influence.
- ❖ **Now I realize the question many of you are wondering is if such demonic activity and demonic influence is present and active today.** There are no simple answers. **But we can say this with confidence—there is plenty of biblical evidence to assert that demons truly do exist within the spiritual realm.** And there is no theological justification to suggest that their activity and influence was limited to ancient times—as if they're no longer operative in our world today.
  - **No, there is theological reason to believe that demons are still active in attacking and possessing people today.** Now hear me out. I am *not* suggesting we revert back to the ancient practice of attributing every medical disorder to the work of evil spirits. Chemical and hormonal imbalances are real medical conditions. And there is a proper place for medication and therapy. I'm not discounting that.
- ❖ **But, as Christians, we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the role and influence of demonic spirits, especially when it comes to our mental health.** Think of the role that intrusive thoughts play in medical conditions like OCD. For Christians who take the Gospel accounts seriously, it's not a far stretch to connect intrusive thoughts with the active influence of demonic powers. Where did that demoralizing thought come from? Why did that sickening image pop up in your head? You don't want it. You didn't ask for it. **I wouldn't rule out the possibility of a spiritual attack.** Which calls for a spiritual response of desperate prayer (9:29) in addition to any appropriate medical treatment.
  - And here's where we need to be clear. There is theological justification to claim that—while demon possession is a real thing even today—**Christians (those indwelt by the Holy Spirit himself) cannot be possessed by an evil, unclean spirit.**
- ❖ **We are “possessed” by God. As in, he owns us.** He possesses us. We belong to him. So there is no way for a demon to take residence in our souls. **Christians have no need to fear demon possession like in our text.** But we need to take seriously demonic attacks, whether in the form of lies, accusations, intrusive thoughts, or other mental and emotional disorders.

- Now if you're not a Christian, I'm not saying you need to be worried all the time about demon possession. That results in the "*excessive and unhealthy interest*" Lewis warned of. But I do want to draw to your attention the reality of demon possession.
- ❖ Don't let it cripple you with fear. Let it humble you to realize not everything can be explained away by science. **This world is complex and shot through with spiritual realities that exceed our understanding.** Let that thought fill you with a healthy, holy fear of the Lord. I pray it leads you to put your trust in him and in his awesome power and abundant mercy. **Your best defense against demonic assault of any kind is to be filled with God's Spirit.** For him to serve as your refuge and fortress against the enemy.

### The Crowd Begs Jesus to Leave

- ❖ So we saw the demons beg Jesus to be sent into the pigs. As we see next, that results in the crowd of townsfolk begging Jesus to leave. **It's unfortunate that—instead of celebrating a clear display of Jesus's power and mercy—the crowd fears it.** They don't want to experience it themselves. They want it gone. They want Jesus to leave. Look at vv14-15, "*14The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. 15And 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.*"
- ❖ Everyone in town knew about the demoniac living among the tombs by the sea. So imagine their shock to see the madman sitting there, clothed and in his right mind. He was restored to a sound mind. **That's what Jesus's mercy accomplished in his life.** Later in v19, Jesus commissions the man to tell others about "*how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you.*" And the healed man goes around proclaiming how much *Jesus* had done for him. Mark is making it obvious. Jesus is the Lord. He is the Lord of Mercy.
  - **And the Lord of Mercy has now wielded his power over the demonic realm and restored this man's dignity as an image bearer of God.** And you would think that this was the greatest thing the townspeople had ever witnessed. That everyone there would be yearning to experience the same transforming work in their lives.
- ❖ Instead they were afraid. Yes, they were scared of demons. But they were more terrified at the One who held absolute power over demons. **The crowd was apparently more comfortable coping with a deranged demoniac in their lives than with Jesus himself.** A wild, possessed man was more predictable and more controllable than the Lord Incarnate.
  - When you're dealing with a demoniac, there are still workable solutions you can try. Maybe stronger shackles or thicker chains? There's something you can do, within your control. **But when you're dealing with the Lord God, there is nothing you can do but surrender to his authority.** You can't control the Lord. You can't contain him within your limits. He is sovereign over you.
    - When you come to grasp Jesus's lordship over all things—in heaven and on earth, seen and unseen, which includes your life and your thought life and what goes on in your heart—that will certainly strike a holy fear in you. You can see why Jesus would be scarier than demons.

- ❖ **But in addition to fearing Jesus, you could argue the townspeople were irritated with him.** The herdsmen, in particular, were likely upset about the loss of two thousand pigs, since that would've been a significant source of income. The Lord of Mercy was threatening their livelihood, their bottom line. And they couldn't abide that.
  - Now some of you are similarly appalled that Jesus would permit the demons to enter those pigs but maybe for a different reason. The economic impact on the region doesn't concern you. **It's the environmental impact that bothers you. It's those poor little piggies you're concerned about.** I remember doing a bible study on this text with the youth in my former church in Vancouver, and one student was visibly troubled by this account. She was really upset that Jesus would let all those pigs die.
  
- ❖ I tried to point out that Jesus didn't command the pigs to jump off the cliff. He just permitted the demons to enter them. It's really the demons to blame. And I told her how, from a first-century Jewish perspective, they would've seen it as Jesus cleansing the man of unclean spirits, while at the same time cleansing the region of unclean animals. There's a reason it was pigs in particular and not sheep. But I'm not sure if that made any difference to her.
  - In the end, the point I made to her—which would apply to anyone bothered by the loss of those pigs for whatever reason—is that **Mark's purpose in recording this event was to highlight—not a cavalier attitude on Jesus's part towards animal life—but a deep concern and care on Jesus's part for human life.** To honor and restore the dignity and value of every single image bearer of God.
  
- ❖ I'll put it like this: **If the sudden loss of two thousand pigs moves you more than the restoration of the health and dignity of one human made in the image of God, then your priorities are not yet aligned with Jesus's.** I'm not saying you shouldn't feel sad about those pigs. I'm not suggesting God doesn't care about the loss of animal life.
  - **But if we have hearts after God's heart, then we should be overwhelmingly glad to see a fellow image bearer restored to wholeness.** That's what's happening here. Jesus brought true peace, biblical shalom, to this man. **As it's often noted, biblical shalom doesn't just describe the absence of conflict and fighting but the presence of harmony and wholeness.** That means this man didn't just stop crying out, stop cutting himself, stop scaring his neighbors. Jesus did more than that in his life. This man is now clothed, in his right mind, sitting calmly at Jesus's feet. That's shalom.
  
- ❖ **Isn't that what you want in your life? Don't you want this peace, this harmony and wholeness?** It's not enough for the intrusive thoughts to stop; for the anxious fears to go away; for the depressive emotions to disappear. Your heart, mind, and soul needs to be restored to wholeness. You need the presence of Jesus in your life. The Lord of Mercy.
  - But be aware: **Just as the dark comes before the dawn, the storm comes before the calm.** In other words, if you want to experience the peace that comes with Jesus's presence, you'll first have to face the existential storm that his presence brings.

- ❖ **You see, most people would say they'd love for Jesus to show up and display his power before their eyes.** Then they would believe. Or they already believe but they think that experience will overcome their unbelief. That's what we want Jesus to do. **But this episode should give us pause.** Because when Jesus shows up and displays his power, it frightens people. Whether the disciples on the boat or the crowd on the shore, they're terrified.
  - Because all of us know that our sins have corrupted the image of God stamped on our souls. **We know that that great power of his will be wielded in judgment against us for all we've done.** For that reason, we're rightly terrified of his presence.
  
- ❖ But thank God, Jesus is the Lord *of Mercy*. And as the Gospel story goes, in mercy, he set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem. He gave permission to the devil to do his worst. To incite friends and foes to betray him and arrest him. Jesus allowed for it. **By his mercy, Jesus went headfirst into the storm of God's wrath poured out for our sins, as he died on the cross.**
  - For that reason, we can be at peace in his presence. His perfect love will cast out fear. **Like the healed man in this story, we can experience a similar transformation and enjoy that same shalom.** But that means going through that existential storm. Confronting our sin. Accepting God's judgment. But, in the end, receiving his mercy and trusting in his grace, as poured out on the cross.

### **The Healed Man Begs to Join Jesus**

- ❖ I pray that all of us can leave here identifying with this healed man. Filled with his Spirit and with his peace. Calmly, gladly sitting at Jesus's feet. **But notice that this man is not just going to sit there at Jesus's feet all the day long.** He gets up and gets ready to join Jesus and his band of disciples. Here's our third observation: The healed man begs to join Jesus.
  - Look at v18, *"<sup>18</sup>As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. <sup>19</sup>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."*
  
- ❖ There's some irony here. Jesus answers the plea of the demons. He answers the plea of the crowd. **But he says "No," to the plea of his newest disciple.** That's just a needed reminder for all of us. To remember that God can love you and still say no to your pleas. You can be begging him for all the right things. The man wanted to be with Jesus, to follow him wherever he goes. You can't ask for anything more pure and holy. **And yet, God might say no to your good request. Because he has something even better in store for you.**
  - Let's consider the something better he had planned for this healed man. Jesus tells the man to go home and tell his friends and family all about what the Lord of Mercy has done for you. **Go home and share your testimony with all who will listen.**
  
- ❖ Now that's a bit surprising considering how in previous episodes in Mark—after Jesus heals someone or casts out an unclean spirit—he silences them. He tells them not to tell others his true identity. **So why is he telling this healed man something different?** Why is he commissioning him to go and tell his story?

- ❖ Remember the setting. They're in the Decapolis, Gentile territory. Jesus intentionally landed on this side of the sea. Why? **Because there are plenty of Gentiles and Hellenistic Jews who need to hear about the gospel of the kingdom.** And they either don't have any concept of a Jewish messiah, or even if they do, they're not caught up with messianic fervor, urgently expecting one to arrive any moment. So Jesus is not as worried about false messianic expectations around here as he is back home.
  - So Jesus sends this man back to his people; to share his testimony of God's mercy at work in his life; to broadly sow gospel seeds throughout this region. Because Jesus plans to return. He's coming back to the Decapolis. This happens later on in Mark 7:31. **So at this time, the healed man is sent to sow seeds in advance, so that Jesus and his disciples can arrive later to reap a harvest.** In a sense, this healed man becomes the first Christian missionary, commissioned and sent out by Jesus himself.
  
- ❖ I would argue that that was a part of his healing. **Not only did he need Jesus's presence and Jesus's peace, he needs Jesus's purpose.** To go and preach the gospel. And I would argue the same for anyone struggling with their emotional or mental health today. You need a purpose greater than yourself, to help keep your heart and mind focused on God and on others—and not just on yourself and your struggles.
  - I think that's what Mark is hinting at by the way he ends this episode. Like other episodes where Jesus performs a miracle, people are amazed. They marvel. But this time they're not marveling after seeing Jesus's power on display. **They're marveling after hearing a believer share about how much this powerful Lord has done in my life and how he has been merciful to me.** They're marveling at a believer's testimony about Jesus.
  
- ❖ Friends, this story ends with an implicit challenge. **For each of us to go home, to our friends and family, to our neighbors and colleagues and to share our testimony about all that the Lord of Mercy has done for you.** If you don't know how to do that, then I want to draw your attention to that insert in your bulletin and an evangelism training that we're putting on in a couple of weeks. Teaching you how to share your micro-testimony. We want to equip you to do what this healed man was sent to do. To go back home and share your testimony with all who will listen.