

"Identity Theft"

Mark 5:1-20

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Introduction:

This past Friday evening, I was shopping at the new Target in Fitchburg, and I suddenly realized that Christmas is almost right around the corner—they have some of their Christmas decorations on display right next to the Halloween stuff, and so the holiday shopping has now begun. In fact, if you go into a Farm & Fleet, you will notice that Toyland is now set up in the middle of the store. It is still set apart and “hidden” by giant tarps, but you can tell that the toys are there. As the season gets closer, I would imagine that the media will once again (as their tradition has been in recent years) focus on the various dangers of shopping, and in particular, the danger of identity theft. I know that this rather recent phenomenon has affected several families here at this congregation, and I know that it is a major hassle, to say the least. About a year ago, we noticed a charge on one of our own credit cards for a spa in Milan, Italy. In fact, as I remember it, the charge might have even said something about concert tickets. Well, I know that I did not go to any concerts in Milan, Italy, last May, and so we contacted the fraud department at our credit card, and that, of course, set off a long series of events. We had to sign some papers, they flagged our credit report so that others would be alert for potential fraud, and it appears that the situation has now been resolved. It is a little disturbing, however, to think that someone out there used our name for some immoral purpose.

This morning I would invite you to think with me to an episode of identity theft from the pages of the New Testament, but it is not exactly identity theft as we know it today. I am referring to a man whose identity was overpowered by the influence of Satan, and the lesson this morning goes back to several requests that have been turned in over the past few weeks—requests for a lesson on demon possession, and specifically, a lesson on the demon possessed man in **Mark 5**. **»PPT»** This morning, then, I would invite you to turn with me to **Mark 5**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on **page 1565**. This is, in fact, one of the strangest stories in the Bible. As I was preparing this morning’s lesson, I kept thinking that this is the man for whom Tasers were invented—a dangerous, naked man who lived in a cemetery—and yet his life was changed, not by a Taser, but by a run-in with the Son of God.

This morning we will not spend too much time on what demons are or where they came from. There is a good article in the cubbyholes today addressing that issue. If you are not a member and are visiting with us this morning, I would encourage you to pick up one of the extra copies on top of the cubbyholes back there, and to take

that home and read it. The Bible does not spend a lot of time on this either, so it must not be too important, but I am personally working under the assumption that demons are fellow angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God at some point in the past—they are spiritual beings, they are eternal, and ever since their rebellion, there has been a spiritual war going on behind the scenes.

The account this morning takes place right after Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and after the storm, Jesus and the disciples come ashore somewhere on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee—most likely somewhere along the coast that is in the photograph back here. And as you can see, the hills slope down very steeply to the Sea of Galilee. For a little bit of reference, the Sea of Galilee is very roughly four times the size of Lake Mendota here in Madison—roughly 13 miles long, 8 miles wide, with an average depth of 84 feet. With this in mind, please look with me at **Mark 5**, and as we study God's word, I'd like for us to consider 1.) The influence of Satan, 2.) The power of Christ, and 3.) A challenge for us today. But first, the word of God from **Mark 5:1-20**...

¹ They came to the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gerasenes. ² When He got out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met Him, ³ and he had his dwelling among the tombs. And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; ⁴ because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones. ⁶ Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; ⁷ and shouting with a loud voice, he said, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!" ⁸ For He had been saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" ⁹ And He was asking him, "What is your name?" And he said to Him, "My name is Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ And he began to implore Him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there was a large herd of swine feeding nearby on the mountain. ¹² The demons implored Him, saying, "Send us into the swine so that we may enter them." ¹³ Jesus gave them permission. And coming out, the unclean spirits entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea. ¹⁴ Their herdsmen ran away and reported it in the city and in the country. And the people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the "legion"; and they became frightened. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it described to them how it had happened to the demon-possessed man, and all about the swine. ¹⁷ And they began to implore Him to leave their region. ¹⁸ As He

was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him. ¹⁹ And He did not let him, but He said to him, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

I. **As we start looking back over these 20 verses, I'd like for us to notice, first of all, THE INFLUENCE OF SATAN IN THIS MAN'S LIFE. »PPT»**

And speaking of identity theft, it is interesting that even when we combine all three gospel accounts, we still have no idea what this man's name actually was. In other words, the demons had completely taken over this man's life—even to the point where he was basically nothing—a nameless host. But even beyond that, please notice what the demons had done to this man. We notice right away (in **verses 2-3**), for example, that he was living among the tombs. This man was living in a cemetery—perhaps either a preoccupation with death, or perhaps this is just the only place he could live—snuggled up with these corpses in these caves along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We can hardly imagine living in a cemetery.

I am reminded of a man who often took a shortcut through a cemetery on his way home every night, but one night, unaware that a new grave had been dug in his path, he fell in. For some time, he tried to climb out, but he couldn't do it. So finally, he settled in for the night. About an hour later, a farmer was out hunting, and he also fell into the same grave. The farmer also began a desperate attempt to get out, unaware that there was anyone else down there. The first man listened for a few minutes, then reached over in the pitch blackness, put his hand on the farmer's shoulder, and said, **"You can't get out of here."** But he did! But the point here is that it is not normal to live in a cemetery.

In **verses 3-4**, we find that the demon possessed man had often been bound with chains, but that the shackles were now in pieces—he could not be restrained. I should point out here, concerning the theory that this is merely a case of mental illness, that even the mentally ill can be restrained, and so there appears to be some kind of extraordinary or even supernatural power here.

At this point, Matthew's account tells us that there were actually two men involved, and that these men were **"...so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road"** (**Matthew 8:28**). He was a man committed to violence. He was a man intent on destruction. In Luke's account, Dr. Luke makes a point of saying that this particular man **"...had not put on any clothing for a long time, and was not living in a house"** (**Luke 8:27**). Mark goes on to tell us in **verse 5** that **"...constantly night and day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he was crying out and gashing himself with stones."** In other words, the man could not get any rest—this was something that happened **"night and day."** He was screaming and cutting himself—damaging his physical body.

Unclean, out of control, unsettled, unhappy, unstable—but let us never forget, this was not a monster, this was a man! This was somebody's son, somebody's brother, somebody's father. This was a human being. We assume that at one point in his life he must have been normal. Over in Luke's account, Luke points out that he, ***"...had not put on any clothing for a long time."*** In other words, this had not gone on forever, this is not something he was born with, but this situation had a starting point. At some point in the past, this was a normal man. But it all changed when the demons moved in. We are not told how this man came to be demon-possessed—that is not the point of this passage. But the point here in the beginning is to demonstrate *how bad things can get when Satan's influence starts to take over a person's life.* I might even suggest that this man was suffering perhaps more than any other person Jesus ever healed. We can hardly imagine being in this man's situation. This man's terrible condition tells us what a cruel being Satan is. There are many people today who worship Satan. There are those who dabble in the occult. I would respectfully suggest that they do not know what they are doing. They need to study this passage very carefully to understand what Satan can do to a person. In the same way, as our young people start to decide whether they will play with a Ouija board, or get involved in magic, or witchcraft, or tarot cards, they need to consider what Satan's power had done to this man.

As I understand the Scriptures, we do not have demon possession today in the same way that they did back in the time of Christ, Satan's power has been restricted, but we still have sin, we still have the influence of Satan, and the end result is basically the same: Sin can take over a person's life, and ultimately it results in some horrible situations—self-torture, insanity, hopelessness, pain, emptiness, despair. And that's only in this life—there is still the life to come.

Please think with me about a question: What sin today makes a person better? What sin gives enjoyment in the end? The end result is the same as what this man was going through—sin results in a ruined life. This is the influence of Satan. It has been said that Satan promises the best but pays with the worst. He promises honor and pays with disgrace. He promises pleasure and pays with pain. He promises profit and pays with loss. He promises life and pays with death.

II. With all of this in mind, let us please move on and consider THE POWER OF CHRIST—SPECIFICALLY, THE POWER OF CHRIST OVER THESE DEMONS. **»PPT»**

The confrontation starts in verse 6, where Mark says that, ***"Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, 'What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!'"*** How interesting! The man (possessed by these demons) comes running up to Jesus, begging not to be tormented!

Now, I don't know how all of you would react to a naked bloody man in chains running up to you on State Street. Perhaps this is where the Taser would come in. I

wish I could have seen the look on the apostles' faces—here they barely escape death in a storm, they are barely out of the boat, perhaps they are still kissing the ground, and then this maniac comes running up. Perhaps some of them try to keep one foot in the boat. But it is interesting that the Lord reacts with compassion. The Lord did not see danger or inconvenience, but opportunity. In fact, when we piece the three accounts together, it appears that Jesus might have come all the way across the sea just for this man. They are engaged in meaningful ministry on the west side of the sea, Jesus suddenly says, **“Hey, let’s go to the other side,”** they have the storm, they barely survive, Jesus casts out the demons, and they get right back in the boat and go back over to the other side. Very strange! Nevertheless, it appears that Jesus is on a mission to save this man in particular.

But we do learn something about the power of Christ, because from the beginning, the demons very clearly believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This is certainly consistent with other passages. For example, the Bible says in **James 2**, ***“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and tremble.”*** In other words, there is more to salvation than merely believing in God—even the demons believe.

We notice in **Mark 5:9** that there were many demons in this particular man. In fact, their name is ***“Legion.”*** The word ***“Legion”*** goes back to the Roman military and it represents a group of around 6,000 Roman soldiers. So the demons' name is ***“Legion,”*** and they have an interesting request. In Matthew's account, we have a new detail as the demons ask the Lord, ***“Have You come to torment us before the time?”*** (**Matthew 8:29**). And then in Luke's account, Luke says that, ***“They were imploring Him not to command them to go away into the abyss”*** (**Luke 8:31**). Very strange! There's a lot we may not know here, but when we put it all together it appears that the demons were begging not to be sent to the waiting place of torment for those who are lost—the place of fire and torment that has been prepared for the devil and his angels (according to Jesus in Matthew 25). It appears that we have a large group of demons who were perhaps taking a break from their punishment, and apparently, as long as they could possess someone, they did not have to go back. And so again, we get just another small picture of the seriousness of sin, and what the end result of rebellion against God will be. They were begging Jesus not to send them back to the place of torment. How much time did they gain by living in the pigs? Not very long—maybe 10 or 15 minutes at the most—but the point is that in their expert opinion, living in a pig on earth was still better than living with Satan in torment. And so in **verse 13**, we see that Jesus allowed them to enter the 2,000 pigs that were grazing on the side of the mountain, at which point the pigs stampeded and ran over the cliff and drowned in the Sea of Galilee.

By the way, as you may remember from our study of **Mark** in the Wednesday night Bible class several years ago, I happen to know that these pigs were purple! And I know these pigs were purple because in my 1st Grade Bible class 30 years ago at the church down in Crystal Lake, I very clearly remember the visual aid from the Lambert material that was hanging in our classroom. On that poster, the pigs were purple. I don't know if it was a printing error or what, but the pigs on the poster were clearly purple. And so every time I think of this miracle, the first thing that comes to my

mind is purple pigs. Again, that was 30 years ago, and I point this out by way of encouragement to our teachers—children remember what they are taught.

Well, at this point, the people from the village start to figure out what happened, and Mark says (in verse 15) that they *“became frightened.”* These people were scared to death. Luke says that they were *“gripped with great fear”* (Luke 8:37). And what is interesting is that they were not scared by the demons, but they were gripped with fear because they saw this man sitting there clothed and in his right mind! In other words, they were terrified by the power of Jesus! Here was a demon possessed man who had apparently tormented that area for quite some time. He was attacking people on the road; he was running around naked, gashing himself with stones, living in the cemetery. They had tried to chain him up on multiple occasions but couldn't do it, and here Jesus came along and completely healed the man! That scared the people! And so we find that they asked Jesus to leave. How strange that they would have preferred to live with demon-man than to have to deal with a power great enough to be able to change all that!

I would say that many people today are in the same situation—they know the mess they're in, they know how bad it is—but as they look at it, it is so much easier than dealing with the Lord. The known is better than the unknown. Some may know that God has the power to make things right, but they are terrified of that power. How much will it cost? And so many chose to stay in some very painful situations.

You know, some people may try to convince us that Jesus is too restrictive—that Jesus is all about bondage, and slavery, and rules, and control, but that Satan is all about freedom. Is that what we find in Mark 5? We have seen this morning that Jesus offers freedom, that Satan offers nothing but a life of slavery and pain. Nevertheless, Jesus does not go where He is not wanted, and so He steps back into the boat to leave.

III. However, before we close, let us notice what happens right here at the end as we discover A CHALLENGE. »PPT»

In verse 18, Mark says that, *“As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him.”* Jesus had saved him from such a horrible experience, and yet the Lord turned him down and asked him to do something even more important, because in verse 19, the Lord said, *“Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.”* In other words, this man was to share the good news with the people he already knew.

And here we are in Madison, Wisconsin, and we know this! We know that evangelism does not start with a newspaper ad or a complicated program, but it starts with the people right next door. As we learned in our Wednesday evening class just a few weeks ago, Andrew started with his own brother Simon. Philip brought his friend Nathanael. Barnabas went to Cypress to preach to his own people. Matthew worked with his own fellow tax-collectors. Certainly it takes great courage to learn a new

language and pull up everything to go be a missionary overseas, but we know that it also takes a great deal of courage to simply live a faithful Christian life in front of our own people—people who know our weaknesses, people who have seen us make mistakes, people who know how far we have come in our walk with Christ—it takes courage to stay in one spot and admit that we need a Savior.

And even today, the Lord continues to use those who are not worthy to be some of His most effective messengers. Go home and tell of the Lord's great compassion! Sometimes those who have been in trouble can be extremely effective in telling others how to get out of trouble.

Several years ago, I read about a man with a rather unique consulting business. Apparently, this man has clients who are about to be sent to jail—men and women who have been convicted of various white-collar crimes who are about to be sent to jail. Most of them have never been in prison before, so for \$125 per hour, this man will advise them on how to get along—how to make the best of their time in jail, how to survive. And as you have probably guessed, you can't really get a degree in this—he knows it from experience. And so he has taken his experience and has turned it into an advantage.

In perhaps a similar way, the demon possessed man wanted to leave, but the Lord told him to go home—go to those who know you best and tell them what the Lord has done. In the same way, if the Lord has allowed you to conquer something from your past (smoking, or drunkenness, or some other kind of addiction), go out there and tell somebody about it. If the Lord has brought you through a serious illness, go to your own people and tell them about it. If the Lord has brought you through a time of doubt, or a financial crisis, or some kind of oppressive grief, go out there and tell somebody about it.

Perhaps this is one of the most difficult things that God has asked us to do, but God has told us to invest in relationships—to meet people on their turf, to meet people where they are comfortable. Most of us will never preach to thousands of people. In fact, we may only influence a rather small circle of people. But that is exactly what Christ asked this man to do. He told him to go home. But as we think about this challenge, I just want to briefly point out the rest of the story. The Lord does leave the area, He gets back on the boat, and that seems to be the end of it, but several chapters later (in **Mark 7:31**), the Lord returns, and He is greeted in a much different way than when He left. In one of the parallel accounts, Matthew says, ***“And large crowds came to Him, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, mute, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel”*** (**Matthew 15:30-31**). What an amazing difference! Jesus went from being asked to leave to being welcomed by hundreds if not thousands of people all of whom were praising God and bringing their own people to be healed of various diseases. The testimony of one man made the difference! And so as Christians living here in the Madison area, I would suggest that God has left us

here for a reason, and that is the challenge of this morning's lesson—to tell people about the Lord right here where we are—right here, right now.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would also suggest that we help each other remember who we really are. Satan would love to steal our identity—not necessarily through some kind of demon possession, but these days he can still take over if we just forget that we are children of God. And so this morning all of us are faced with a choice: We can choose to serve God like that man who was relieved from such a terrible weight, or we can simply ask the Lord to leave like those from the town. We can trust God and obey His instructions, or we can turn away. Our hope and our prayer is that everyone here this morning will choose to accept the Lord's authority. The Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin, that we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and that we must go on from there to live the Christian life.

If you have stumbled and would like for us to go to God together on your behalf, we can do that. Write it down on a card, pass it forward and we will pray right now. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can also let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org