

Mark 5

5 days into the Bible in a year. What I like about the reading list we are using is that it starts you off slowly. One Psalm, one chapter from a Gospel. It'll be a little while until we're cracking off 4-6 chapters per day. All that to say, enjoy your time in this Gospel. We'll be picking up the pace before you know it.

This morning, I want us to focus on the sermon text for this Sunday, which is Mark 5:1-20. We'll look at those verses in detail and then skim the rest of the chapter. Let's get to it!

5:1

Jesus has just calmed a dangerous storm, to the amazement of his disciples. The disciples have asked a question that no one has answered: "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" Look for an answer in this passage!

5:2

In typical Markan fashion, no time is wasted between events. No sooner does Jesus calm the storm than they are on the other side of the sea. And no sooner are they on the other side of the sea than they are confronted by a man with an "unclean spirit." Jesus has healed a man with an unclean spirit before (1:23). Unclean spirits have also identified him as the Son of God (3:11). The question I had when studying this that I could not answer from the text of context is: are "unclean spirits" in the Gospel of Mark synonymous with "demon possession"? Nevermind that... time to move on.

5:3-4

This man appears to be not only "unclean" in spirit, but also violent and a danger to those around him to such an extent that they could not contain him. He is dangerous and he is unrestrainable. We may not think anything about a man living among the tombs, except that he is homeless and banished from the community. But living among the tombs would probably have rendered him "unclean." This man is scary! So what will Jesus do? Will he dominate this man? Force him into subjection? Succeed in restraining him where others have failed? (And, by extension, what should our approach be to those who are dangerous and "unclean" that we encounter in our lives?)

5:5

The man was not only dangerous to others, he was a danger to himself. Maybe we begin to feel some sympathy for this guy. He is alone. His fellow countrymen have tried to tie him down with chains. He is unloved and unlovable. And he is not able (or unwilling) to take care of himself.

5:6

The man does not seek to harm Jesus; he falls prostrate at Jesus' feet. This is similar to how the other men with unclean spirits behave when they encounter Jesus (3:11).

5:7

The man speaks, and, in doing so, answers the question the disciples posed at the end of the previous chapter. "Who is this?" Answer: "Son of the Most High God."

But the question is: why would this man worry that Jesus has come to torment him? I don't think this matters so much as the underlying belief that Jesus has the ABILITY (if not the desire) to do this man harm. His fellow countrymen were unable to harm him. "No one had the strength to subdue him." And so what we have before us is a situation where Jesus can do what he wants to a man who is dangerous and unpopular. You'd think Jesus, on behalf of the people who tried but failed to subdue this guy, would bind him in some miraculous way. Jesus would become more popular and the villagers would live in peace and security. So how does Jesus use his power and authority?

5:8

Jesus desired for the demons to leave this man, to restore him to "normal." Jesus does not wish this man harm.

5:9

Jesus is greater than many demons. And while we can learn something about demon possession from this verse (it is real), it's not wise to establish too elaborate a "demonology" from this passage. Better to take the story as a whole than to focus too intently on the details at the expense of letting the whole story make its intended impact.

5:10

Why do the demons not want to be cast out of that country? Who cares. I could care less where these demons would prefer to take up residence. What impresses me is the demons' realization that Jesus has the power not only to drive them out of the man but to banish them to wherever he wants. The wind and the waves obey Jesus. So do demons.

5:11-12

Pigs were seen as “unclean” according to the Levitical Law, practiced by those in the region. (Beggars the question: what, then, were pigs even doing in the area?) It is actually not surprising that the man with the “unclean spirit” (identified as Legion, or “many”) would want to make its home in unclean animals. What does it say about human nature that unclean spirits would just as soon take up residence in us as in pigs?

5:13

We are not told why the unclean spirits drove the pigs into the sea. My best guess is that Mark is showing us the true nature of “unclean spirits.” Their job is to kill and destroy. I’ve heard messages on this passage that try too hard to explain the epic “swine dive.” Interpretations range from thinking the real tragedy here would be the loss of income the townies would suffer from the loss of a commercial product to seeing the death of the pigs (in which the unclean spirits dwelt) as actually something Jesus did. If I had to say, I would guess that the death of the pigs is mentioned to show the true nature of the unclean spirits. But more than that, we see Jesus’ absolute ability to control and command forces that are opposed to him. (An important lesson to remember when it comes time for his suffering and death.)

5:14

The herdsmen had suffered a significant financial setback. Two thousand pigs. More than enough to feed the village for a year. Gone. Seemingly at the hand of Jesus. It is no wonder that the people from the town want to investigate what happened.

5:15

Why were they afraid? Possibly because Jesus did what they were unable to do. (Including sending 2,000 pigs to their death.) If Jesus took the side of a man they tried to tie up, what was he going to do to them?

5:16-17

The people do not want Jesus to be among them. Why not? After all, Jesus has undone the curse and fixed what was broken. Yes, their local economy would have suffered a set-back, but Mark’s intended reader would not have focused on the economics and would have seen the death of 2,000 pigs a good thing. Less unclean animals to deal with.

The point here, I think, is two-fold. First, it shows that animosity against Jesus is not the property of the religious elites (Pharisees, etc); average townspeople align themselves against him here for failing to see that what he does is actually good, Kingdom stuff. (Which takes us back to what Mark said in the previous chapter

about people seeing but not seeing, hearing but not understanding.) Secondly, it shows that people do not perceive that what Jesus is doing is actually good stuff. In other words, as stated above, they cannot see that God is working through Jesus to bring the Kingdom, to fix what is broken and to make right what the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh have made wrong.

5:18

The formerly demon-possessed man desires to become a disciple. This is a hard verse because it shows that it is Jesus who gives vocations and we cannot take what has not been given. Instead of joining with him and his disciples, the formerly demon-possessed man will have a different purpose for the sake of the kingdom of God. (This is an important lesson for those of us who have been called by Christ to work for the sake of the kingdom today.)

5:19

Jesus casually links the exorcism and healing he gave this man to the Lord Himself. No doubt the man would have seen his healing as an act of God, as opposed to the reaction of the townspeople. Notice it is the Lord who has had mercy on this man.

5:20

The man goes over and above what was asked of him, even though it was not his first choice. His first choice was to accompany Jesus and the other disciples. Jesus had another plan for this man and he enthusiastically does what Jesus tells him to do. He does not begrudge Jesus for not accommodating his (the man's) initial plan to become like one of the twelve. However, the man ended up making more of a difference for the kingdom in proclaiming Jesus to the Decapolis than he would have had he been assumed into the traveling band of disciples. The lesson here for us is, again, two-fold:

- Jesus doesn't always give us what we want.
- We should do the work Jesus has given us to do enthusiastically.