

“Making a Messiah – Exhibit A: Unmatched Power”

Sermon 3: Power over Demons

January 20, 2019

Key Text: Mark 5.1-20

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Summary: Satan and his demons are incredibly powerful; Jesus infinitely more so. It's not just demon “possession,” sometimes it's “under the influence.” All of us allow him to slip in, and unless stopped, he will enslave us. And there is only one powerful enough to stop him ...

This stuff is really weird. I ran across three tidbits last week that might surprise you. First: even though more and more people are questioning the existence of God, especially the young, it may be that more and more people are accepting the existence of demons (again, especially the young). Which is weird! Although, the more you believe in nothing, the more you're apt to fall for anything. This article is a few years old (2013), but here's what it says. It says, even though fewer people attend church, the idea that invisible, non-corporeal entities called demons can take partial or total control of human beings seems to be growing. Huh!

Then there is this one: I saw an article that says that belief in demons and evil spirits is actually harmful to mental health. It's not that people who are messed up are more likely to believe in demons; it's that believing in demons can mess you up, they say. Which could explain a lot about me, I guess. Anyway, that study seems to me to be totally irrelevant. It doesn't really matter whether what we believe will mess us up; what matters is whether what we believe is true ... or not. Right?

One more. This article was actually kind of funny. Here's the title: “The Devil? Seriously? How can people believe the manifestly absurd?” This guy is flat out annoyed that 57% of us Americans actually believe in the devil. He says, “Only a completely uninformed, poorly educated mind with little knowledge of things like evidence, could believe in the devil.” In other words, you guys are messed up! He says, “The two largest religions in the world — Christianity and Islam — teach that there is a devil. And they are

wrong. (He says,) There is no evidence for such a thing. Not a shred. (Really?! He says,) It is simply something that germinated from the unscientific, irrational minds of early humans who tried their best to explain why bad things happen to good people, why good people sometimes do bad things, and why there is so much needless suffering in the world.” So we made up demons! Huh!

So, where are you on this stuff? Most of you believe in God ... not all of you, but most of us do. And I suspect, most of us probably believe in Satan, and demons ... But there may be even more confusion about Satan and demons than there is about God.

- Some of you guys are terrified of them. You’ve seen too many movies like Rosemary’s Baby, or The Exorcist, or The Omen, or The Conjuring, or Insidious ... right? Any of you guys love going to a movie that will keep you up at night for the next week or two?
- And then, there are some Jesus followers who think there is a demon under every rock. Every time you feel tempted to sin, that’s a demon, right? Every time you stumble and fall, the devil made me do it. Any of you old guys remember Flip Wilson?
- Others do think demons are bad guys, but only slightly more powerful than we are... unless of course, the demon tries to take on someone like Jason Stratham, or Dwayne Johnson, or even Ronda Rousey. Then the demon gets its tail kicked, right?
- Others kind of turn Satan and demons into jokes. They are almost cartoonish. There is even a TV show with Lucifer as the hero! Any of you guys seen it?

Maybe the best line in what my son thinks may be the greatest movie of all time: The Usual Suspects, is this one. He says, “Maybe the greatest trick the devil ever played, was to convince the world that he does not exist.” Or at least, if he does exist, he’s either not all that powerful, or he’s not all that bad.

So, do you believe in Satan? Not some symbol of evil, but an actual creature of God who is at war with God? And ... do you believe in demons? These minions of Satan who do whatever they can to nudge us towards sin? Not sure, maybe? So sometimes we are mystified when we run into a Jesus story about some clash Jesus had with a demon. These stories feel unreal to us sometimes. We’ve never seen anything like the Bible describes! Some people wonder whether these stories are simply

vestiges of an archaic, superstitious religion that resorted to mythological creatures to explain the evil in our world. So, do you believe in Satan? Do you believe in demons?

Maybe the better question is, why wouldn't we? We believe in a lot of things that can't be seen or proven. Why wouldn't you believe in Satan and demons? ... And maybe some of you would push back: Well, it's irrational, it's illogical! In this day and age? There's no scientific evidence for their existence, is there?

So let me throw it back at you: Why is it irrational and illogical? Why would it be irrational to believe in a devil, and his demons? Now, if you are absolutely certain that God doesn't exist, then it would be rational and logical to reject demons too. But you can't prove there is no God! You cannot make a rational case proving that God does not exist. In fact, it actually takes more faith to reject God than it does to believe in him. So, if you acknowledge the possibility that a personal, supernatural good God exists, wouldn't it be kind of crazy to argue that a personal supernatural evil being could not exist? Bottom line, if you believe in God, I think you have to at least open the door to Satan and demons ... whether you've seen one or not. Doesn't that make sense?

So ... for now ... let's say it's true. Maybe we need to start by defining some terms: What is a demon anyway? Now, some people think demons are just the spirits of the dead, or maybe ghosts. You know, your uncle Jack was a hell-raiser a few years ago; now he's dead, so maybe his spirit is hanging around nipping at people. Kind of like a lot of people think angels are just the spirits of dead good people. Well, no. That's not what we learn in the Bible.

When you kind of stitch together the clues found in the Bible, you learn that before God created the heavens and the earth, he created these angels: these incredibly powerful supernatural creatures. And why not? And apparently he gave them the same kind of freedom he gave us. And apparently some of them used their freedom the same way we do – they pushed God away. We learn that the greatest of the angels was not content to serve God; he wanted to be served. So he led a rebellion and a third of the angels followed him, and they were defeated, they were cast out. Their leader was Lucifer, the one we call Satan (which means literally,

The Adversary – because that's who he is). And the fallen angels who sided with him are the demons. They are angels gone bad. And they still hate God. And they are still at war with God. And because they are not strong enough to defeat God, they go after whatever God loves.

Which is where we come in. When God created us, he created us as kind of ... hybrids. We are hybrids. We are physical creatures, but we are also spiritual creatures. We do life in a physical world, but we can also participate in the spiritual world. And we have become pawns in Lucifer's war against God. He can't hurt God, but he can hurt whatever God loves: He can hurt you, he can hurt your kids, your friends, your neighbors. And he does! There is an important verse over in the Gospel of John. Jesus says, "The thief (Satan, Lucifer, and all those demons who work for him, they) come only to steal and kill and destroy; (but, Jesus says,) I have come that you may have life, life in all its fullness. (John 10.10)

Now, my preaching partner, Randy (you saw him in the bumper this morning), Randy explains that their job is to infiltrate, contaminate, dominate, and the devastate. They infiltrate – they slip into the cracks we open for them; then they contaminate, they pollute, they corrupt; then they dominate -- eventually they gain more and more power over us; and then they destroy us, and those we love, if they can. Which is why ... listen to this ... which is why the very best time to say no to temptation is the first time you feel it. Because once you give in, he infiltrates. And then after you have sinned, you feel dirty, polluted, you feel contaminated. You know what I'm talking about! And the next time it's easier to say no to God and yes to sin – until your sin dominates you, it owns you. And eventually it will destroy you, and it will devastate those you love. You've felt it, and you've seen it.

Let me tell you guys: it's bad enough to be at war; it's worse to be at war and not even know it. There are forces trying to pull you away from God. And if you don't see that, you're fighting blindfolded (kind of Bird-box-esque). And here's what they do: they minimize sin on the front side, and then they maximize it on the back side. You tell me whether you've felt this happen to you. "You think those thoughts, you hear those whispers: "Everybody is doing it; it's not a big deal; you're not hurting anyone; it's your life, and it's no one else's business," right? So you go for it. You do that thing. ... And afterwards there is the guilt, and the shame. You think

stuff like, “Do you realize how disappointed God is in you? How could God ever really love a person like you? How could he ever use a person like you? You’ve messed up your life. You’re worthless!” Ever heard that, felt that? These demons are really good at what they do.

Creeped out yet? You should be. We are in a spiritual war. And if we don’t see that, we are more likely to casualties in that war. We have an enemy who is looking for a foothold. He’ll lean in to your depression; he’ll use that to gain a foothold in you. He’ll lean into your sexual sins; he’ll use those to gain a foothold. He’ll lean into your greed, into your anger and bitterness, into your prejudices. And then he’ll nurse that shame and that guilt we feel afterwards, seeding thoughts of worthlessness and self-destruction. He will work to divide a husband and a wife, to undermine your marriage. He will niggle you to make poor financial decisions, to wreck your finances. He will encourage you to ruin your bodies and destroy your health. He works on our kids. He works on them a lot. He wants to crush them; and he wins way too often. Ultimately he tries to steal your joy, and your soul. Because he hates God, and he hates what God loves, so he hates you.

Fortunately, Jesus is infinitely stronger than he is. Let me show you. Mark chapter 5. If you have a Bible on your phone or tablet, find Mark 5. If you have one of those old fashioned paper Bibles, it’s in there too. We kind of leave the lights up in the corners to make it easier for you to read. The verses will be on screen as well.

Mark 5, starting with verse 1. Mark says, “They went across the lake (the sea of Galilee) to the region of the Gerasenes,” which means they are in Gentile territory now. “When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit (that’s a pretty literal translation; a man with an impure spirit) came from the tombs to meet him.”

And that’s how Mark starts the most vivid, the most detailed Jesus story in his whole book. In fact, this is the longest, most detailed story in any of the gospels about Jesus going toe to toe with some demon. And there is a whole lot to learn in this story. It reveals the complexity of evil – which we need to know. It reveals how evil works in a life – including in our lives. And it reveals the only way – the only way --evil can be defeated.

Now, this is one of those places where some people get squirrely. A man with an impure spirit?! How do you know he wasn't just crazy? Or how do you know he wasn't just sick -- epilepsy or something. Back then they didn't understand how things worked, so they just kind of blamed it on some evil spirit, didn't they? Disease, mental illness, just weirdness ... Weren't they just kind of simplistic and naïve?

Well ... maybe not as much as you think. Over in the Gospel of Matthew there's a verse that tells us they weren't as primitive as we think sometimes. Matthew says, "People brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them." (Matthew 4.24) So they knew the difference between that stuff. They knew the difference between those who were physically sick or epileptic, and those who were tormented by a demon. In fact, the verse may actually tell us they recognized the difference between mental illness, and demonic possession. The Greek word Matthew uses for those with seizures is literally, those who are moon-struck – lunatics, "lunar-tics," crazy people. So they knew there was a difference between physical disease, and mental disease, and demonic oppression. But they also knew something we forget sometimes: they can be linked (not always, but they can be). Sometimes the causes of our troubles have a physical side, and a spiritual side. So sometimes you have to treat both sides.

There is an old dead guy named Richard Baxter. He was a pastor in the 1600s. But what he said still holds true today. He was talking about depression. Ever been depressed? Most of us have. And he said that 4 things can contribute to our depression. Pretty smart guy!

- He says, sometimes it is physiological – it's physical. There is something wrong with your body. Sometimes, he says, what you need for your depression is some good food, and some good rest, and maybe some good medicine. Makes sense. It's a physical problem.
- Sometimes, he says, there is a moral cause for our depression. And you've been there. Sometimes depression is caused by guilt, and shame. You messed up, and you know it, and it's weighing on you. So sometimes what you need for depression is some repentance, and confession, and forgiveness, and grace.

- And sometimes, he says, our depression has a mental, or a psychological cause. We get mentally stressed, or we get flat out lonely, or we are overwhelmed and discouraged. For depression like that, he says, we need love, and we need support, and we need someone to talk to, we need community. We need a healthy family, and a healthy church family. He's dead on right, isn't he?
- One more. Sometimes, he says, there may be a demonic cause for our depression. Sometimes the enemy slips inside, and does everything he can to break us down. And for that, we need prayer, and we need the Word ... bottom line, we need God.

Now here's what we need to hear. Baxter says, sometimes there is more than one cause. Sometimes our depression has more than one root. And when we don't recognize that, it's hard to work through it. If your depression is caused by sin, and you try to fix it by eating right, and sleeping more, and maybe taking a few anti-depressants, it won't work. You need some repentance and grace. You see, we are hybrids. There is a physical side to us, and a spiritual side to us. You can treat the physical all you want. If there is a spiritual side to your problems, you need spiritual solutions as well. That's why some of you guys stay sick.

Listen to how the apostle Paul puts it. He says, "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) Did you hear that last part? Our anger, our bitterness, our unforgiveness gives a foothold to the devil, he says. We give him an opening, and he slips in and makes things worse. Your addictions can do that, your lusts can do that, your greed can do that. About any sin, unless we get it taken care of, about any sin can give Satan a foothold till he gets us more and more under his control. Do you buy that? ... I do.

So here is a guy with an unclean spirit, an impure spirit, a ... demon, apparently living in a cemetery. And he comes up to Jesus ... Now listen, it really doesn't say he was "demon possessed." That's kind of the way we phrase it. This guy is under the influence of a demon. Some people get absolutely under the influence of a demon – we'd call that possessed. Others of us just start by getting a little under the influence. You've been there, done that. I have too. We give Satan a foothold. We start buying into his lies. And listen: you are not strong enough, you are not smart

enough, you are not good enough to defeat Satan or any of his demons ... on your own. Bottom line, any of us can give the demons a foothold, we let them influence us. This guy was just way farther down that path – he was out of control, he was demon controlled.

And this is what Mark says about him. He says, “This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones.” (Mark 5.3-5)

Now ... if you look carefully, you see a pattern of how evil works in us: first this guy was empowered, then he was enslaved. First he was empowered: he was given amazing strength, and then he was enslaved, and his life was ruined (in fact, he actually became self destructive). That’s the pattern: First Satan empowers us (he makes life seem great), then he enslaves us. Ever heard of a guy named Faust? All the way back in the 1500s. According to the legend, even though he was a successful man, he wanted way more. So he made a pact with the devil: he was given unlimited knowledge, he was given all the pleasures the world could offer, in exchange for his soul. Would you make that trade? Be careful, sometimes we come pretty close. And it worked out great for Faust, for a while ... but that deal never closes well.

That story has become a pattern for so many other of our stories – people who sell their soul to the devil, then he gives them some great gift, and then they are trapped. Remember the guitar player in the movie, “O Brother, Where Art Thou”? Or if you are old enough, “Damn Yankees”? Or maybe Constantine; or Star Wars, Revenge of the Sith; or Ghost Rider; or The Witch. This theme is all over our movies, our songs, our TV shows, our books.

Because it’s how they work: they infiltrate, then they contaminate, then they dominate, and then they devastate. At first it’s great, it’s fun, it’s empowering. And gradually you lose control, until finally they destroy you. For this guy: now he’s living in a cemetery, mutilating himself. You see guys, evil nearly always sneaks up on you. Satan never tells you, “I will

give you such an obsession with your career that eventually you'll destroy yourself and your family." He never tells you, "Just give in, just do it, just take her. I'll give you such an obsession with her that eventually you'll lose your wife, your kids, and your faith." He never tells you, "Do you want power? I'll give it to you. Do you want pleasure? I'll help you find it. Do you want acceptance? I'll help you ... just follow my lead. By the way, eventually I'll own you, and eventually you will devastate everyone you love." No. He sneaks in; the takeover is usually gradual. And at some point you're sitting there wondering, "How in the heck did I get here?"

In fact, there are people in this room who are right now falling under his influence. Maybe right now it all seems good, it sure feels good! Maybe right now you feel empowered, you feel great. Others of you are a little further down that path. You're beginning to feel trapped. You're beginning to hurt, and you're beginning to hurt some of the people you love. But you're not sure how to break free. Because your sin is stronger than you are; and your enemy is way, way stronger than you are.

Well ... there is a way out ... the last piece of this Jesus story, verse 6: "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!" For Jesus had already said to the spirit, "Come out of the man, you evil spirit." Then Jesus demanded, "What is your name?" And he replied, "My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man." Then the evil spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place. There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. "Send us into those pigs," the spirits begged. "Let us enter them." So Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about 2,000 pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water."

So, whether this poor guy knew what he was doing or not, he did exactly the right thing: He ran to Jesus, and he bowed before him. He ran to Jesus, and he bowed before him. He ran to Jesus, and he bowed before him. Maybe that was the demon, running up to Jesus to surrender before Jesus went to war. I don't know. All I know is, now the man has a chance.

And the demon starts begging Jesus: "Please don't hurt me!" Now don't miss this; this is funny. There were exorcists back then; just like there are exorcists today. They would use all these magic words, and all these magic formulas. They would call on the name of God, the power of God, the help of God... Not Jesus; Jesus just says, "Get out." That's all; that's power. No chants, no formulas, no magic. He didn't call on the power of God. Do you know why? ... He was God!

On the other hand (this is so funny), the demon actually calls on God to help him against Jesus! He really does! This is great. Verse 7: Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God – in the name of God – I beg you, don't torture me." "In God's name, please don't hurt me." You've got to admit, that's pretty funny!

Then Jesus demands its name. I suspect that's for our sake. I think he already knew. And the demon says, "My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man." In other words, this is not one on one. Legion was a military term. During that time there were about 6000 men in a legion. In other words, this is one on thousands, Jesus against thousands of these powerful spiritual creatures ... and it's no contest. Listen guys: I don't care how many there were, Jesus wins. He still does.

By the way, if you are wondering about the pigs, some back on Wednesday night. We dig a little deeper into these stories on Wednesday nights, and we'll play with that part of the story then.

Anyway, when it's all said and done, verse 15: The guy is sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane. And everyone watching ... they were what? ___ They were afraid. Now they are really scared. Which is pretty smart. Who is this guy? Who is this guy with irresistible power over disease? Who is this guy with irresistible power over nature? Who is this guy with irresistible power over demons even? Next week, who is this guy with irresistible power even over death itself? And why is it ... Why do they all bend their knees to Jesus, and some of us ... don't? Guys, you are going to have to make a call. Who is this Jesus?

Listen guys, Jesus came to set the captives free. He's talking about us. And listen: this is deadly serious. Some of you are sitting there wondering whether you are under the influence, not of God, but of Satan and his

minions. Some of you have already given him a foothold, some of you know he has started to control you, some of you already recognize that he is already destroying you and hurting those you love. And you know you are not good enough, you are not smart enough, you are not strong enough to defeat him on your own. Listen ... Jesus came to set you free. Why don't you let him? He is infinitely more powerful than anything else in your world. Why won't you bend your knees to him?

We'd love to pray for you ...

For those who need to make Jesus Lord of their life ...

For those looking for a family of Jesus followers to plug into ...

Song: In Christ Alone ...

Reprise on Invitation – church our size, someone ought to be convicted or joining

If not here – shame on you

If it is you ... why are you waiting?