

“The First Gospel: Power over Spirits”

Mark 1:21-28, 5:1-20 ¹

It’s interesting to notice that the first action each Gospel writer records as Jesus began His public ministry gives a pretty clear signal about the angle of vision that particular Gospel will take on Jesus and His work. In **Matthew**, the Sermon on the Mount focuses on how Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. In **Luke**, Jesus teaches in His home synagogue about Good News for the poor and the outcast. In **John**, turning water into wine points to Jesus’ identity as the Eternal, Creative Word of God. And in **Mark**, Jesus teaches with unusual authority in the synagogue in Capernaum and demonstrates that authority by exorcising an evil spirit.

Jesus’ authority will continue to be a key theme for Mark. Not only does Jesus have authority as a teacher (1:21-22); He also has authority over the Sabbath (2:27-28), over forgiveness of sins (2:5-12), over unclean spirits (3:19-27), over nature (4:35-41, 6:45-52), over the law (7:1-13, 14-20), over the temple (11:12-33, 12:1-12), and over the mystery of the kingdom of God (4:10-11).

As you might guess, the question of Jesus’ authority is a crucial one. Just how seriously should we really take what Jesus said to us on the pages of the New Testament? Does Jesus actually have the authority to command our obedience, or is He really no more than a plastic dashboard Jesus or a safe and soft sanctuary-only Savior?

As I will point out in more detail in this week’s *Laptop*, biblical miracles are signs that authenticate the message of the person performing the miracle. Mark recorded eighteen of Jesus’ authenticating miracles, and we’re going to look at two of them this morning.

Last week we saw Jesus call the first four of His twelve disciples, and this morning’s text finds them attending services with Him at the synagogue in Capernaum. The PowerPoint background today shows the ruins of a fourth-century synagogue in Capernaum. I don’t think any remains from the first century synagogue have yet been found.

In Jesus’ day, synagogues were primarily places for instruction, while the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of the nation’s worship. Sabbath services in the synagogue were similar to such services today, in that there were readings from the Torah and from the Psalms, together with various prayers and blessings. But where synagogue teaching today is done by Rabbis, in the first century there were no professional clergy outside the Temple, and the reading and teaching could be done by any Jewish man whom the Ruler of the Synagogue might invite to that role.

So it was that Jesus was invited to teach in Capernaum; and “*the people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.*” The surprise was that Jesus taught as though He needed no one’s authority except His own. He cited no experts and quoted no traditions. He spoke as though He had God’s own authority, and the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 9, 2016. This encounter is also presented in Luke 4:31-37. See also Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

people were astonished as they hung on every word Jesus spoke. Jesus was doing what He had just called His new disciples to learn how to do—He was “fishing for people.”

Suddenly, the moment was shattered when one of the men present suddenly cried out, in a voice not his own, “*Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!*”

Mark tells us that this man was possessed by an “evil” or “unclean” spirit, and, rather than summoning the security guards, Jesus turned to the man and spoke to the spirit in a commanding voice, “*Be quiet! Come out of the man!*” At this, the spirit shrieked, threw the man into a convulsion, and then left him.

Now the crowd was *really* thunderstruck. “*What sort of new teaching is this?*” they wondered. “*It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!*” And the Galilean *Twitter* feed lit up like a Christmas tree with this news

It’s important to note that while persons sick with ordinary illnesses addressed Jesus as “Lord” (7:8), “Teacher” (9:17), “Son of David” (10:47-48), or “Master” (10:51), persons possessed by evil spirits addressed Him as “the Holy One of God” (1:24), “the Son of God” (3:11), or “the Son of the Most High God” (5:7). Although at this point in Mark’s account, we readers are the only humans who know who Jesus really is . . . the demons certainly know who He is, and they acknowledge Him as such.²

It’s also interesting that persons possessed by evil spirits are never said to be “healed.” Instead, the Bible tells us that the spirits were “cast out” of them. And Jesus never rebuked or offered forgiveness to persons afflicted with spirits. He didn’t treat their suffering as something for which they were either culpable or accountable.

Finally, the exorcists of that day made use of elaborate incantations, spells, and magical rites as they went about their work. But Jesus just spoke to the spirit and commanded it to leave the man. No one had ever seen anything like this before.

Now let’s turn to a similar event in Mark 5. Jesus and His disciples have traveled by boat several miles across the Sea of Galilee, have been overtaken by a severe storm that threatened to sink their ship, and that storm was silenced by Jesus’ simple but powerful command, “*Be still!*” Like the people in the synagogue, the disciples looked at one another in terror, asking “*Who IS this man? Even the wind and the waves obey him!*”

Then, when they arrived at the far side of the lake, in a Gentile area, they were immediately accosted by another shrieking man possessed by an evil spirit. This man was so strong and so violent—as demon-possessed people sometimes are—that he could not be restrained even with chains. “*Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones.*”

Mark has told us that the voyage began in the evening, so by now it must have been fully dark. To be so attacked among the tombs in the blackness of night would have been unnerving for the stoutest of souls.

² The evil spirits’ acknowledgement of who Jesus was was certainly not worship, and may not have been submission, either. They may have been trying to gain power over Him by using the typical exorcists’ strategy of using the specific personal name of the spirit power with whom they were doing battle. Exorcists do the same thing today.

We have no record that Jesus had ever been to this area before, and there is no record that He ever went there again; so the possessed man had never seen Jesus before . . . but the evil spirit knew who He was. The evil spirit in the man ran screaming to Jesus and knelt down before Him, shrieking, *“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 tells us that Jesus was already commanding the spirit to come out of the man, but in this case, that didn’t work. Jesus continued talking to the spirits, who identified themselves as *“Legion, because there are many of us inside this man.”* The spirits begged Jesus not to send them to the Abyss before the appointed time,³ and asked to be allowed to leave the man and enter a herd of pigs nearby. Jesus gave them leave to do so, and the spirits entered the pigs and drove them over a cliff into the sea. There were about 2,000 pigs in that herd.

When the herdsmen ran into town to report what had happened, the townspeople ran to the tombs and found this man whom they had long feared sitting *“fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were afraid.”* Finding Jesus’ power more terrifying than their familiar wild man, the people begged Him to go away from their shores.

As Jesus and the disciples got back in their boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to *“Go home to your family and tell them everything the Lord has done for you.”* **In that one sentence, Jesus both identified himself as God and commissioned this man as the very first missionary to the Gentiles.**

There are many beautiful things in this story, but time allows mentioning only a few. The first thing to note is that Jesus did not limit His ministry to “one side of the lake,” or in our metaphor, to “one side of the tracks.” By crossing over into Gentile territory—unthinkable for a normal Jew—Jesus demonstrated that there is no place and no people beyond the power of God’s redemption.

And these two stories offer hope to many of us today as we struggle with family members who have been overcome by alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, or mental illness. These events show us that the condition of every person matters to God, and it is God’s purpose that each of us be set free through the power of God’s Spirit so that we can be “seated, clothed, and in our right minds.”

As encouraging and powerful as these two encounters are, we need to think for a bit more about the realities they portray. I’m sure you know that there are many today who regard talk about demons as archaic, pre-scientific, and muddle-headed. There are others who claim to see “demons, demons, everywhere.” Let’s look briefly at what the Bible tells us.

The words “demon” or “evil spirit” occur 89 times in the Bible. Eighty-three of these references are in the New Testament, and 70 of these (84%) have to do with Jesus. The fact of the matter is that Jesus Himself and the Bible as a whole treat Satan and demonic powers as though they are absolutely real.

There are several possibilities here. Jesus’ affirmation of the reality of demons could have been due to His ignorance of psychological realities that we now understand more fully; but ignorance is not attributable to an omniscient being. Jesus could have known that demons are imaginary, but “played along” with the superstitions of His own day; but that would have been a form of dishonesty unworthy of a righteous God. Or, it could be that Jesus was affirming something that is truly real. I submit to you that this is what the Bible teaches us to believe.

³ Matthew 25:41; Luke 8:31; Revelation 9:1-2, 11, 11:7, 17:8, 20:1, 3

The Gospels record eight different occasions when Jesus exorcised, or expelled, demons from people. On three of these occasions, Jesus seems to have healed a large number of people from demon possession;⁴ the other five occasions involved the exorcism of specific persons: a boy, a girl, a woman, and two men.⁵ On more than one occasion, the demons themselves authenticated who Jesus was, crying out, “*I know who you are—the Holy One sent from God!*”

As some of you know, my own vocational journey has included working as a pastoral psychotherapist for ten years and teaching the psychology of religion on the graduate level for five years. I am familiar with multiple personality disorder and with the various psychosomatic dynamics that lie beneath many of our afflictions and diseases. Virtually all of these modern diagnoses would have been considered “demon possession” in prior eras, but we understand them differently now, and our better understanding facilitates better care. I’m not one who looks for demons under every rock.

At the same time, I’ve had personal experience with occult and demonic powers on at least four occasions, in four different cities, over a period of forty years.⁶ While it’s possible that there are alternative explanations for some of these experiences, the most recent one seems inexplicable in any other way.⁷

So it seems to me that, while most of what passes itself off as sorcery, witchcraft, or psychic phenomenon is no more than fakery, the Bible does teach us that there is frightening and dangerous reality beneath the veneer of such activities. I submit to you that the universe is far stranger than we have imagined, and that its most significant dimensions are not perceptible to our ordinary senses.

Beyond this, it’s important to realize that many of the dangers that we face may not appear to be evil. Demons very seldom appear to us in their true form and figure. If we’ve learned anything at all from the war on terror, we’ve learned that things are not always as they seem. And in neither case can we say that we weren’t warned. The Bible has long cautioned that Satan himself can masquerade as an angel of light (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Further, the Bible warns us that “*your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:6), and that “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (Ephesians 6:12). Our adversaries know our weaknesses, and they use them shamelessly to their own advantage.

While our spiritual enemies need little help in their quest to destroy us, there are many ways in which we can make ourselves more susceptible to their power. There are many activities that present themselves as harmless fun, but that actually make us more vulnerable to the powers of Darkness.

As Moses warned long ago (Deuteronomy 18:10-12), those who toy with fortune-telling, mediums, sorcery, wizarding, witchcraft, and the like are toying with power beyond what they have imagined—or really wish to face. Other openings that lie on the borders of Darkness include *Ouija* boards, astrology, horoscopes, games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and similar

⁴Matthew 12:15-71; Luke 6:17-26, 7:18-35, and parallels.

⁵ Luke 4:31-37, 8:1-3, 26-39; Mark 7:24-30, 9:14-29, and parallels.

⁶ Newport, RI; Ft. Worth, TX; Carlisle, KY; Louisville, KY; also Columbia, MD.

⁷ See, for example, M. Scott Peck, M.D., *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist’s Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans* (HarperOne, 1976).

activities.⁸ Christians are not immune to these influences, and Christians who expose themselves to occult powers lose interest in the things of God and bring upon themselves many sorrows that were never God's intent.

Today, as in biblical times, the only cure for and the only release from any form of demonic influence or satanic control comes through the power of Jesus, our resurrected and victorious Lord. Jesus defeated Satan in His own experiences of wilderness temptation, and in His resurrection Jesus triumphed over the powers of Darkness finally and absolutely (Colossians 2:15). Beyond this, Jesus has made His own power over these spirits available to those who follow Him.⁹

In this Age of Terror, we do often have a sense that our world is haunted by powerful and arbitrary evil, and we are inclined to put our trust in the use of force, border walls, iron bars, cyberwarfare, and police crackdowns to keep that evil away. But the solution to our problems is not more government programs, better housing, or prison reform, though these are probably needed.

The fact of the matter is that we today are more likely to be controlled by legions of cravings, addictions, and other destructive impulses than by legions of demons. *What we need* is for every person in this world to meet Jesus and for them to allow that encounter to transform their lives.

We may even see a mirror of ourselves in this man sometimes called "the Gadarene Demoniac" – we may be beaten down by others, divided against ourselves, with a civil war raging within, living among the gloomy tombs of life, and feeling all alone. You and I may be just as battered as he was, though we may do a better job of hiding it behind our fancy words, our well-kept homes, and our smart attire. **But deliverance can come to us just as it did to him when Jesus lands on the shores of our lives.**

So, are there demons in the world today? Yes, there are. **Are they dangerous?** Yes, they are. **Is there any protection from them?** Yes, there is. And this protection is found in Jesus alone, at whose name "*every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11). Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

⁸ Dr. Merrill Unger warned that those who ignore God's warnings and enter these forbidden realms may indeed discover that they receive powers of clairvoyance, precognition, healing, divination, or the ability to produce other spiritistic phenomena, but that demonic "subjection and oppression are the inevitable penalties to all who traffic in the realm of evil supernaturalism (Merrill Unger, *Demons in the World Today: A Study of Occultism in the Light of God's Word* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971], p. 25). The Bible strictly prohibits involvement in the occult: Deuteronomy 18:9-13; Isaiah 47:12-14; Acts 19:13-16; Galatians 5:19-21.

⁹ Matthew 10:1; Mark 3:15, 6:7; Luke 9:1, 10:17; Acts 5:16, 8:7, 16:16-18; Romans 8:38-39; 1 Corinthians 10:13, 15:57; Ephesians 6:10-20; 1 John 4:4