

Sermons on Matthew

An Inconvenient Savior

Matthew 8:28-34

With Study Questions

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When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed *men*, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. ⁻²⁹⁻ And suddenly they cried out, saying, “_What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?_” ⁻³⁰⁻ Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. ⁻³¹⁻ So the demons begged Him, saying, “_If You cast us out, __permit us to go away into the herd of swine._” ⁻³²⁻ And He said to them, “_Go._” So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. ⁻³³⁻ Then those who kept *them* fled; and they went away into the city and told everything, including what *had happened* to the demon-possessed *men*. ⁻³⁴⁻ And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, __they begged *Him* to depart from their region (Matthew 8:28-34).

Preface

The Full Story

If you combine the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this story looks something like this: Jesus sails across the Sea of Galilee and is met by two demon-possessed men living in the tombs. Mark and Luke focus upon one of these men who didn't wear clothing, couldn't be held by chains, couldn't be tamed, was feared by the people and would continually cut himself with stones and cry out. Meeting Jesus he prostrates himself before Him, refers to Him as the Son of God and questions whether or not Jesus was going to torment him before the appointed time. Jesus asks the demon's name and the demon answers "Legion" for many demons had entered him.

The demons, not wanting to be removed from the country, ask Jesus permission to be cast into a heard of 2000 swine. The request is granted and the swine suddenly run off a steep place and perish in the sea. The feeders of the swine fled and spread word of this throughout the city. The people from the city go to meet Jesus, see the formerly demon-possessed man clothed and in his right mind, are seized with great fear and ask Jesus to leave their region. The

formerly demon-possessed man begs to go with Jesus but Jesus tells him to go home and tell what the Lord had done for him which he did throughout all Decapolis.

Universal Power, Universal Blessing

Having recorded Jesus authority over illness, defilement (leprosy), and the elements, Matthew now records Jesus authority over demons. Matthew is a gospel written primarily to a Jewish audience; people who viewed themselves as the particular recipients of God's favor. Matthew seems to be recording what you might call the two-sided universality of the Christian faith. The *blessings* of Christ are universal, not aimed at a specific people group; He has healed a gentile, a leper (unclean) and a woman (thought to be secondary in the Jewish culture). His *authority* is also shown to be universal; over illness/ death, the elements and now the devil himself.

This should not have been surprising to the learned Hebrew. The blessing promised to Abraham was that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Here we see the beginnings of the universal blessings and authority of Christ. In the case before us we specifically see His authority over demons.

I. Meeting Demons

The Fear of Christ

One cannot escape the creepiness of this event—exceedingly fierce demon-possessed men living among the tombs. Graveyards can be disquieting places; especially if they are inhabited by demon-possessed men. The whole town feared. But in this meeting with gentle and lowly (Matthew 11:29) Jesus, it is the demons who fear. They feared because they apparently had an understanding of the nature of Christ which exceeds that of Christians. That Mark and Luke record these demons prostrating themselves before Christ may give us a fuller picture of the encounter.

As the Transfiguration previews the glory of Christ, this event previews His authority.

...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth (Philippians 2:10).

In the great classic, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the small children watch their father try a controversial court case. The day of deliberation ends and all the people in the balcony stand as Atticus Finch exits the court. His own children remain seated, they don't understand. An elderly gentleman quietly says, "Children stand up." They ask why? "Because your father is passing by." O that we would learn from the reverence of these demons!

Doctrinally Accurate Demons

They knew Jesus was the Son of God. There is a doctrinal accuracy of demons.

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble (James 2:19)!

That doctrinal accuracy which is a source of life, awe and comfort for the Christian is a source of dread for the demons.

"What have we to do with You, Jesus, You son of God? Have You come to torment us before the time?" The fate of these fallen angels is set. Jesus did not come to save them (Hebrews 2:16) but is a bitter reminder of their fate.

_Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for __the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41)

Demons Begging

One can only guess why they wished to enter swine; perhaps because swine were repugnant unclean animals. More likely so they could do damage; destroying 2000 animals would be financially upsetting for the community.

Coming from demons, the form of their request is very curious.

So the demons begged Him, saying, “_If You cast us out, __permit us to go away into the herd of swine (Matthew 8:31)_”

There was simply no defying Christ. Their petition was a begging. The demons did not view themselves as autonomous. A legion of demons are asking permission! Rightly does Matthew Henry observe:

The devils are not only Christ’s captives, but his vassals; his dominion over them appears in the harm they do, as well as in the hindrance of them from doing more.¹

Absurd it is to view Jesus and the devil as equally matched opponents—two heavyweights exchanging blows with the hopeful outcome of Jesus’ victory. Satan would more accurately be understood as the glove on God’s fist of judgment—just as the evil king of Assyria was the rod of God’s anger and indignation (Isaiah 10:5).

This sovereign power of God is often a source of consternation and rebellion, even among God’s own people. O that we, with the Psalmist, would sing in exultation how this knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is high I cannot attain it (Psalm 139:6). We ought to pause and wonder at God’s glorious ordination of all events.

It is this Christian world view which grants the comfort of knowing that all events, even the most horrific and tragic—even ones employing demons—are not random but have a morally sufficient and glorious design. Jesus grants the demons their request and the herd of swine summarily jumps into the sea and perishes.

Please Leave

The feeders of the swine make a rapid exit. They go to town and tell the story. One gets the impression that the announcement of the herdsmen is quite unlike the announcement of the angels concerning Jesus. There is no, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy __which will be to all people...the demon-possessed men are healed...the tombs are no longer a source

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 8:28). Peabody: Hendrickson.

of terror!” The message of Christ should always be one of good news.

This leads us to our second meeting and the second petition.

-And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, __they begged *Him* to depart from their region (Matthew 8:34)

Strangely similar is the language Matthew uses to record the two encounters. The demons went to *meet* Jesus and now the city goes to *meet* Jesus. The demons *beg* Jesus and now the city *begs* Jesus. By all accounts the demons are more excusable than the inhabitants of the city. They only know Jesus as a judge; their fate is locked. But to the inhabitants of the city Jesus is hope. Yet they do not bring out their sick, blind, deaf and infirmed. God’s common grace is sufficient to hold men culpable. The news of Jesus should invoke a response of praise and faith and repentance.

Or do you despise __the riches of His goodness, __forbearance, and __longsuffering, __not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? ⁻⁵⁻ But in accordance with your hardness and your __impenitent heart __you are __treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:4, 5).

Perhaps they were put off by the destruction of the swine. Perhaps this Savior was just too inconvenient. They would rather spend their days avoiding the tombs and its terror. The tomb can only be ignored for so long. It was a willing blindness which seduced them to jettison from their presence the solution to their fears and the only hope for their souls.

From Adam to the Israelites under Moses to Jesus to modern governments, “Please leave” is the uniform chorus of humanity. The vacuum is filled by seven demons and cultures reduced to massive sepulchers. As the pesky miracles of Moses incurred the temporary wrath of Pharaoh and the discontent of those he was seeking to deliver from slavery, the presence of the Panacea of all humanity can be a source of temporary inconvenience to His heirs. In some cases the illness is preferable to the treatment, but not so with Christ.

Oh, __taste and see that the Lord *is* good; _Blessed is the man *who* trusts in Him (Psalm 34:8)!

Who cannot perceive the utter foolishness of this town?
“We’ve learned to live with the demons, and you’ve caused a bacon-famine. Be gone!”

Insanity is too mild a word, yet the chorus continues. And lest we view ourselves as superior to infidels of this community, know that the alleviation of this madness comes only by the grace of God.

Because __it has been given to you to know the __mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given (Matthew 13:11).

An Agonizing Conflict

In completing this section I would like to observe the contrast between Jesus conflict with demons and the conflict He underwent in the Garden of Gethsemane. Against the demons we see no laboring in prayer; no sweating of great drops of blood; no need of the angel’s comfort (Luke 22:43, 44). Jesus did not agonize over the demons as He would over His Father’s judgment. Later in Matthew Jesus, speaking of His Father in heaven, will teach,

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather __fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in __hell (Matthew 10:28).

The fear produced by the demons is but a speck to the fear of God. Let us not be like these unwise villagers. They may have learned to cope with their demons but they will never cope with the judgment of God. Let us rather be wise. Begging Jesus to depart today means He will hereafter say, “Depart and be ye accursed” on the Day of Judgment.

The villagers were foolish accountants. They deemed their current condition superior to the estate of being in Christ. Wisdom would have called them to sacrifice a million swine for the sake of Christ. It wasn’t swine but his own esteem that Paul wrote of with the word,

-But __what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁻⁸⁻ Yet indeed I also count all things loss _for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁻⁹⁻ and be found in Him, not having __my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but __that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:7-10).

Questions for Study

1. What is the extent of Jesus' authority? What is the extent of His blessings (page 3)?
2. Discuss the demons response to Jesus (page 3). What can we learn from this?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between God and the devil? Can you think of some common misconceptions (pages 4, 5)?
4. What similarities do we see between the people of the city and the demons (pages 6, 7)?
5. Why do people ask Jesus to leave (page 7)?
6. Compare Jesus' conflict with the demons and His agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane (pages 7, 8)?