

“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

Mark 5:1-20

Key Verse: 5:9a

“Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’”

From the beginning of Mark’s gospel, Jesus drives out demons (1:23-26,34; 3:11). One of Jesus’ purposes in calling his disciples was to give them authority to drive out demons (3:15). Jesus fought a spiritual battle against the forces of evil to advance the kingdom of God. Up to this point in his gospel, Mark has simply stated the fact that Jesus drove out the demons. But in chapter 5, Mark gives a detailed account. He describes how demon-possession affected one man, and how Jesus restored him out of his mercy. It is the most specific case in all of Scripture. Through this passage, we can learn Jesus’ view of human beings, and his motive in serving one terribly damaged person. At first glance, this man may seem to be an extreme case with whom we “normal” people cannot relate. We may say, “I never lived in the tombs! I never cut myself with stones! This passage is not relevant to me.” But when we study this passage carefully, we find that fundamentally we can all relate to this man. In the course of serving him, Jesus asked, “What is your name?” It was to help restore his true identity. Some think that only young people struggle with an identity problem. But since Adam’s Fall, it has been a serious one to all people. Without knowing who we truly are, we suffer a great deal in many ways. Let’s listen to Jesus’ question, “What is your name?” and find our true identity.

First, a man with an impure spirit (1-5). Jesus and his disciples had just crossed the lake, coming through a violent storm. They landed on the eastern shore in the region of the Gerasenes, which was Gentile territory. This was one of the Ten Cities, known as the Decapolis. Historically, it had been a part of Israel, but in the year 331 B.C. Alexander the Great occupied it. Later this region was taken over by the Roman army. Many veteran soldiers lived there. In the late night or early morning, Jesus got out of the boat and stepped ashore. The disciples were expecting a chance to catch their breath. But as soon as they landed, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet Jesus (2). Seeing his ghastly appearance, and hearing his shrieking and shouting, the disciples felt they had met another storm. Luke tells us that this man had not worn clothes for a long time (Lk 8:27b). Why? Was it because that area was too hot and humid? Not really. Clothes are necessary to live in society; they are a symbol of culture. Most likely, he was rebellious toward culture like Hippies of the 1960’s, some of whom lived naked in

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communes. Verse 3a says, **“This man lived in the tombs....”** Most people do not like to visit the tombs, let alone live there. Why did this man leave society and home and live in the tombs? Maybe he felt that social constraints had bound him like a prison. Actually, many young people avoid others like this, even in their own homes. They stay in their rooms and interact only with the computer. Their rooms are like a tomb.

How did people try to deal with this man? Verse 3b says, **“...and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.”** People regarded him as a dangerous person. They never considered why he became the way he did. They did not value him as a human being. They only wanted to defend themselves from him. But the more they tried to subdue him, the more violent and uncontrollable he became. He tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him (4). Here, “chains” or “irons” may represent man-made laws, regulations and social systems which are backed up by a police force. These things may help somewhat to restrict a person’s behavior. But they are limited; they do not address the inner problem at all. Sometimes they are overly restrictive and arouse rebellion unnecessarily. That may be why this man got worse instead of better. He really wanted to be free from all restrictions. So he went to the tombs, thinking that no one would bother him there.

Did this man enjoy freedom in the tombs? No. Verse 5 says, **“Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.”** He could escape from all people and systems, but he could not escape from himself. The real problem was not society or other people; it was within himself. Of course, there were many factors that had contributed to his terrible condition. Perhaps he was treated unjustly and violently by Roman soldiers. Or he may have had a dysfunctional home life. Or maybe he had been bullied by his classmates. In our society, some young teens have been so humiliated by bullies that they have ended their precious lives. The family, school and social environment one grows up in are extremely important. But we cannot say that the man’s real problem can be found in his environment. Rather, it stems from the sinful desires inherent in every human heart, such as lust, greed, pride, rebellion, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, and so on. When these desires fill a person’s heart, he or she becomes vulnerable to the work of evil spirits (Eph 2:1-2). When we give in to our sinful desires, demons creep into our hearts one by one until we can no longer control ourselves. We can understand this by thinking about water. If water becomes contaminated, it makes an environment for bacteria to grow. Some

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bacteria can be fatal. Last week, one man went swimming in the Gulf Coast. Through a cut on his leg, he contracted flesh-eating bacteria that caused his leg to swell. This led to massive organ failure, and he died four days later.¹ In the same way, when we give in to sinful desires, we can be invaded by demons, which ruin our lives. When one is caught by demons they lose their identity. They do not do what they want to do, but what the demons drive them to do. Then they become extremely frustrated and begin to hate and torture themselves. This kind of self-torture happens in our times. Some people actually cut themselves. Some curse themselves or others, either audibly or silently. Some try to drown their inner anguish with drugs or alcohol. Some people cut all of their relationships with others and withdraw into their own world. They may watch television or play video games night and day without eating or sleeping. These days there are so many movies about creatures who live in tombs, such as zombies, vampires and the like. People enjoy these movies as entertainment. But this is not something to be entertained by. It is a serious matter. The work of demons is not theory; it is reality. That is why people cry out and torture themselves. The man in this passage gravely wanted to escape his nightmare existence. But he could not escape from himself, nor the demons within. He desperately needed a Savior.

Second, Jesus restores a demon-possessed man (6-20). When this man saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him (6). He shouted at the top of his voice, **“What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!”** (7). He recognized Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. It is because the demons knew who Jesus was. But his act was not worship; it was an expression of horror with the fear he would be destroyed. The characteristic of those possessed by demons is rebellion against Jesus. They are afraid of having a relationship with Jesus. This response came after Jesus had said, **“Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”** (8) When Jesus met this man, he immediately confronted the impure spirit and began to drive it out. Jesus could have avoided him with a good excuse that he was too tired, or that the man was too extreme, or that it was not the right time to engage in Gentile ministry. Others always avoided him, but not Jesus. Jesus had a great shepherd’s heart for him. Jesus began to wrestle with him out of his great mercy.

Here we can learn how Jesus saw and helped this man. Jesus said, **“Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”** Jesus did not rebuke the man, but the impure spirit. Jesus did not treat them as one, but as separate entities. Jesus loved the man

¹ <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2014/07/15/ocean-springs-bacteria/12667293/>

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and rebuked the impure spirit. People’s view of the man was different. They did not distinguish between him and the impure spirit. They blamed him for everything that the impure spirit did. They thought he was useless and worthless because of the power of evil working within him. There is a saying, “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.” When a baby becomes dirty and smelly with pooh, he or she needs a bath. So his or her mother washes them in a basin. The wash water becomes very dirty and needs to be thrown out. But the mother never throws out the baby with the bathwater. When doctors examine patients, they distinguish between the disease and the patient. Doctors believe that with the right treatment the disease will be healed and the patient will get well. In the same way we should see people driven by evil spirits as human beings who need help, distinguishing them from the evil spirit. The problem is that evil spirits are invisible and hard to detect. We cannot discover them with an MRI or a CT scan. They are exposed only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Not all behavioral, mental or emotional problems are the work of evil spirits. But we should not ignore the possibility that evil spirits may be at work. How can we discover if demons are at work? We need spiritual discernment. This comes only to those full of the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14). This is why prayer is essential in healing diseases and sicknesses.

Usually, when Jesus commanded evil spirits to come out, they left immediately. But in this case, they did not. So many evil spirits had occupied this man for a long time. They had become so entangled with him that it was hard to distinguish them. Restoring this man required more effort than in other cases. Jesus was not discouraged, nor did he hesitate. He took the next step. Let’s read verse 9. **“Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘My name is Legion,’ he replied, ‘for we are many.’”** A Legion was a unit of 6,000 soldiers in the Roman army. This does not mean that 6,000 demons were inside the man. But there were many and they were like a cruel army. Why did Jesus ask this man his name? First of all, Jesus exposed the truth about his demon-possession. It is not easy to expose a demon. As Satan is a liar and a murderer (Jn 8:44), so demons try to confuse people in order to shift blame for their evildoing. They hide in the darkness because they don’t want to be exposed before the light. For once they are exposed, they lose their power. When Jesus said, “What is your name?” it was the word of God which compelled the demons to identify themselves before the Son of God.

The main reason for asking the man his name was to have a relationship with him by restoring his true identity. A person’s name represents their identity and entire being. When this man was occupied by the demons his own identity was

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lost and he took on the identity of the demons until he could not but call himself “Legion.” He did nothing according to his own idea or initiative. He was controlled by the demons to do what they demanded. So he was crying out to be released from the demons’ cruel manipulation. His cry was like that of the Israelite slaves, groaning under the power of Pharaoh (Ex 2:23-24).

The terrible consequence of breaking one’s relationship with God is to lose one’s own identity. After Adam’s fall, God called out, **“Where are you?”** (Gen 3:9) It did not mean God was trying to find Adam’s location. Rather, God wanted Adam to realize that he was now lost, and to come back to God to restore a relationship with him. When Jacob had reached his limitation after obtaining honor, love and wealth, he fell into what we might call a “mid-life crisis.” He was not satisfied with what he had obtained. So he asked God for a true blessing. Then God asked him, **“What is your name?”** **When he replied, “Jacob,” God gave him a new name, “Israel.”** This was his true identity in God. Real blessing is to find one’s true identity in God. Numerous people are living without knowing who they truly are. As Alex Haley, the author of “Roots,” traced his ancestry in order to find his identity, so many people have tried to find their identity in their family background. Some people try to find their identity in their ethnicity, or their nationality. Others try to establish their identity based on their own character traits, talents and gifts, or in terms of career or achievements. Still others try to find their identity in terms of a gender, age, religious, or affinity group. In some sense, we can find identity in these ways. But fundamentally our true identity can be found only in God the Creator. God asks each of us, **“What is your name?”** We need to examine ourselves: Who am I truly? When we know our true identity in God, we can find the meaning of our lives and life-purpose and direction. We can have a right relationship with God and live a fruitful life. Furthermore, we can have a vision and hope of the kingdom of God. This satisfies our souls and gives us true peace.

What was the man’s response to Jesus’ question? In verse 10, he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. The demons were still trying to hide behind the man. Jesus did not respond. Then the demons begged Jesus directly to send them into a herd of pigs, and Jesus gave them permission. Then this herd of pigs, which was happily feeding on the nearby hillside, were suddenly invaded by the impure spirits (11-13a). The pigs lost their simple joy of eating and had a meltdown. They no longer wanted to live in this world. So they decided to commit mass suicide. They rushed down the steep bank into the lake

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and were drowned (13b). As a result, the man was set free from the power of demons. He was sitting there, before Jesus, with a big smile on his face. He was also dressed and in his right mind (15a). Here the question is, why did Jesus sacrifice a herd of two thousand pigs for this man? If an animal rights activist was there, they would protest, “Why did you do that?! The pigs are important too! Oh, I am sorry for the poor pigs!” Was Jesus protesting against the distorted value system of the Gentiles? Perhaps so. Anyway, one thing is clear: Jesus valued this one man more than the herd of pigs. In order to restore this one man, Jesus was willing to sacrifice even more. Eventually, Jesus sacrificed his own life on the cross. As he said in Mark 10:45, **“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

What was people’s response? When they saw the man’s miraculous restoration, they should have thanked God and had a big party to celebrate with a lot of ham and bacon. They should have welcomed Jesus and invited him to lead a Bible school. But they were afraid. They pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. They were very sorry that they lost a big herd of pigs. Because of that, their hearts were hardened and their spiritual eyes were closed. Then they made a big mistake and cast out the Savior of the world. Jesus was very sorry about their unbelief. But he did not argue with them. He got into the boat to leave. The man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him (18). He wanted to follow Jesus anywhere, and be with Jesus forever. He was ready to make a life commitment to Jesus. But Jesus did not let him go with him. Perhaps Jesus was mindful that he was a Gentile. He could not bear living in Jewish society. But more importantly, this man needed a mission. Jesus wanted to reach out to the people who had rejected him, not knowing who he was. Jesus wanted them, also, to be saved from their sins. In order to hear the good news, they needed a missionary. So Jesus appointed the man as a missionary to the Decapolis. Jesus said, **“Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you”** (19). So he went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed (20). Here we see that Jesus’ motive in helping this man was his great mercy. Jesus is not only powerful enough to drive out any demon, he is also merciless toward the helpless. Jesus hears the heart’s cry of the helpless and responds to it with mercy, love and power. When we have the mercy of Jesus, we can we help others. James emphasizes obedience and doing in his epistle, yet he said, **“Mercy triumphs over judgment”** (Ja 2:13).

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In this event, we learn that Jesus not only saves us from our sins, but also gives us a mission (Ro 1:5). Those who have received God’s grace are called to declare his praises for bringing them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pe 2:9). When we carry this mission, we can grow spiritually and bear God’s grace well. This mission makes a person’s life meaningful and great. Jesus came into the world to break the power of Satan, and to free us from slavery of sin. Jesus wants to restore our true identity and have a personal relationship with us. For this Jesus asks, **“What is your name?”**