

## Introduction

The passage before us this morning has a distinct focus on the subject of demons. We have a record here of Jesus encountering demons, which is the title of today's message: "Encountering Demons at Gadara." A word of caution is necessary as we begin. We need to avoid speculation and the drawing of conclusions beyond the facts of the text. On the theme of demons, it is all too easy to become sensationalistic or even superstitious (Cf. movie's on exorcism). At the same time, of course, we must come to grips with the text as a historical record of an actual encounter between Jesus and demon possessed people.

**And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way.<sup>29</sup> And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"<sup>30</sup> Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them.<sup>31</sup> And the demons begged him, saying, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs."<sup>32</sup> And he said to them, "Go." So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.<sup>33</sup> The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men.<sup>34</sup> And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region. And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city.**

Did you notice in the reading that the two oppressed people are nameless, and for all practical purposes, the narrative is not about them as individual human beings? When "they" cry out (v. 29a), the subjects speaking are the demons (v. 31). This is an account of human beings possessed by demons, and the demons speak to Jesus as personal beings distinct from the two humans. It goes without saying that this narrative carries with it a load of many perplexing questions, most of which we cannot answer with any degree of certainty. Some questions are a) what are demons? b) What is their origin? c) What is their relationship to Satan? d) What are the limits of their control of human beings? e) What do they do, how do they do their work? The text before us from Matthew will help us in some ways and leave us in the dark in other ways. However, if we stick to what is revealed, then our meditations on this passage will be profitable.

Cautiously, then, we will cover this encounter with demons in three main points: we will consider their dominion, their acknowledgment, and their defeat. Following that, we will be in position to make some applications.

### 1A. Their dominion

The dominion of the demons, as far as this text is concerned, comes out in the statement that "no one could pass that way" because they were "so fierce" (v. 28). Here we have two men living in tombs and causing a measure of commotion in a Gentile area on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum (8.5). By their activity, they have isolated themselves. In effect, we have a two-man dominion of demons. This has a ring of the ridiculous. It seems ineffective and ill fitted for fallen angelic beings with qualities superior to man. What goal did these fallen angels accomplish by this possession and what is the nature and limits of their abilities? What did the demons gain from their possession of two men, just two in a secluded location?

Matthew 8 gives us some insight into the dominion of demons that will help us put the subject in perspective. The nature of their dominion and activity includes violent behavior, corresponding fear, and subtle deception (violence, fear & deception).

#### 1) Violent behavior

There is no supernatural element in the strength displayed by the demon-possessed men, at least, not necessarily. Apparently, what we have here is a stimulation of the human capacity for physical strength. Thus, there is a stimulation of ferocious and wild actions. These men do

not float in the air or turn their heads around a full 180 degrees. Where there is dehumanized violence, that is where demons rule.

## 2) Fear

Corresponding to the angry display of strength by these men is the fact that they became a witness to demonic powers, a witness that kept multitudes in fear. The demon-possessed men became notorious. The area where they lived became off limits to travelers. The Gentiles of this area feared the activity of spiritual powers evident in these two demon-oppressed men. Thus, we have a tacit acknowledgement of demonic rule, though at a distance, by a Gentile community living outside of acknowledgment of the rule of God. These Gentiles recognize spiritual authority, but it is not God's authority.

## 3) Deception

Even more significant about their dominion is the deception by which they maintained it. This deception comes out in the narrative as a whole. They request to be cast into the swine nearby on the assumption that Jesus will cast them out.

**Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. <sup>31</sup> And the demons begged him, saying, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs."**

Jesus says, "Go" and into the pigs went the demons and the pigs stampede into the sea where they all die. People from the nearby city hear of it and gather to oppose Jesus. Interestingly, and in a remarkable testimony to the hardheartedness of the depraved heart, the astounding miracle of freeing two men from demonic oppression is overshadowed by negative economics. What else can account for their reaction to the good work of Christ when you compare the value of human beings with pigs? When the town's people looked at the event, especially what happened to the two men, they were concerned about the destruction of animals rather than the deliverance of human beings! They wanted the herd of pigs at the cost of human life; they wanted pigs instead of Christ (so they asked Him to leave, He did leave, and apparently never returned).

Now we should connect this pitiable economic outlook with the activity of demons.

The grim determination of these demons to destroy the herd of pigs indicates something about their real stronghold. The isolation of the demoniacs of Gardara is itself deceptive. The idea that only two people are under their power is greatly illusionary. Physical oppression is decidedly secondary. At bottom, demons rule by deception. Furthermore, their rule by deception has an economic component to it. They use animals and what they represent (food provisions, trade, money, and all that money can buy) against the Lord Jesus, the Creator and provider of all things.

What we have in this account is capitalism against Christianity (or communism vs. Christianity, or any form of economics vs. Christ). At another time and place, this deception will become a capitalizing on Christianity, which also opposes it. Either way, the dominion is deceptive with a dollar sign at its heart and core. Apparently, and intuitively, this is a vulnerable spot in the human quest for survival. Sinful man is vulnerable to deception regarding how to make his way in the world.

Further, this is an area of great temptation for Christians. It holds the empty promise, the false promise, of pleasure and glory that carries with it the high price of embarrassment and shame. Earthly attachment, versus earthly detachment, is a matter of vulnerability of Christians who are ignorant of Satan's devices. We need to be on the alert for compromises that we may rationalize under the guise of our right to have daily bread and perpetual happiness. Here is a poignant warning: the dominion of demons in the present sinful age involves the constant effort on their part to drive a wedge between you and Jesus, between their lordship (or "rulership") and His Lordship. So should we fear demons? No, we should not fear demons in any superstitious sense, but we should fear being deceived by them through the deceitfulness of money.

How much of demonic activity is individualized? How much of it affects me directly? This is an open question, but we can say this: they influence us all indirectly if not directly. The devil is the prince and power of the air, that is, of ungodly thinking, of anti-Christian

philosophies and substitutions, and of “secular” cultures. Demonic deception is as tricky as it is world embracing. No doubt the myth of naturalistic evolution with its hold on both intellectual respectability and job placement in academia is an example of demonic schemes.

The next point shows, however, that they deceive in conscious recognition of the truth about Jesus.

## 2A. Their acknowledgment (v. 29)

They acknowledge three things about Jesus.

### 1) He is God

They call Him the Son of God. This is distinctive language that indicates that Jesus is of the same essence with God, that He is God, that He is God the Son. They acknowledge who He is in fact. Those in the realm of spiritual principalities and powers inescapably perceive the deity of Christ. The devils believe and tremble according to the book of James.

### 2) He is final judge

Torment is on their docket and they clearly acknowledge Him as the appointed judge.

### 3) He is intruder

He has come “before the time.” They have a domain. They have a dominion. They deceive the nations of the earth. Jesus intrudes and they acknowledge His power to judge them now as He sees fit.

The acknowledgement by demons of the deity of Christ, His office as final judge, and His power even now, ahead of the time (v. 29, “before the time”), shows that their deceptive activity is exactly that, deceptive, in stark contrast to what they know to be the truth. Their acknowledgement therefore leads us naturally to consider their defeat.

## 3A. Their defeat

First, Jesus did in fact cast out these demons and He did so with a simple word (Go). The demon-possessed men were delivered from the oppression and bondage. Human beings that are much more valuable than pigs were set free.

Second, Jesus exposed the deception of these demons. He not only exposed it, but He made them voice His essential divinity to the glory of God. Their concession is on record in the Gospels as a testimony against them and for Christ. They did not have the last laugh, even though they deceived the inhabitants of Gadara. They could only deceive these people by Christ’s permission, a point that permeates the record (they do not dispute the power of Christ to cast them out; they can only beg for what they want). Jesus chose to leave these Gentiles of Gadara in their sin and blindness under the deception of demons. In this respect, the work of demons and the devices of the devil serve God’s purposes of election and reprobation. The Lord Jesus as Sabbath Lord, universal Lord, and ruler of all, uses spiritual powers in high places to carry out His purposes as He hardens whom He will harden along the path of showing mercy to whom He will show mercy. How then can we fear these enemies in high places? We may have fear as a sense of danger, but there is no reason for servile fear.

Ultimately, Jesus used these demons to expose their devices and disarm them before the church (Col 2.15). We know, clearly, that the Lord Jesus came to bring restoration from all the effects of the fall including the evil workings of principalities and powers. This is the gospel that the church now has in her hand as a two-edged sword.

## Applications

Because of the nature of this topic, we need to develop some applications humbly, carefully, and wisely.

1) First, we must acknowledge the reality of demons, of demonic spiritual powers, of wickedness in high places, and of evil principalities and powers (cf. Eph 6.12).

Demons are real. They do exist. Life is much more involved than what we see and touch, than flesh and blood.

At the least, we must face the reality of demon-oppression today in our modern technological world. Modern preoccupation with scientific and empirical knowledge notwithstanding, we need to be emphatic in our recognition of spiritual influences that have trickery and deception as key devices. The dominion of demons is essentially a rule by deception.

They are a true threat and not something merely theoretical. Satan is like a roaring lion that goes about seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet 5.8). Devilish devices do in fact hinder us in our efforts to proclaim the gospel (1 Thess 2.18); these devices can give sin an advantage over us (1 Thess 2.11). It is most urgent that we take note of the fact that the prince of darkness appears as an angel of light and he has his deceitful workers and false apostles (2 Co 11.13; cf. Mat 7.15f). His is a strategy of camouflage in which he works even by “sentiments of laws, ordinances, and systems of ethics, the high and noble love of humanity” (Berkouwer, *Perseverance*, 165).

No doubt, demonic influence lies behind many cases of violent people who destroy themselves and others. Their influence is surely behind monks who burn themselves alive and fanatics who blow themselves up in the name of religion. Is it not even wiler to set in motion a global war that pits capitalism against terrorism? When that way of framing the conflict dominates, then do we not have a situation where evil triumphs, no matter which side wins? Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that a dynamic of demonic influence lies behind both national and individual self-deception.

2) Of course, certainty of judgment regarding particular cases and examples is limited. We must never forget just how bad we actually are in our fallen condition (this is even more complicated by the fact that sinfully blind people are blinded “further” by the devil, 2 Co 4.4-6; cf. Heb 2 on those taken captive; also 2 Tim 2.25f).

3) But *let us not forget what we do know*, namely, that the strategy of demons is a strategy of deception, a strategy conditioned by the love of money, and all it represents. Giving priority to animals over humans, to pigs instead of Christ, shows what it means to *not* seek the kingdom first; it means that we value animals, pigs, more than Christ. Knowing this strategy ought to prompt our diligence with respect to earthly detachment for the honor of Christ, lest we dishonor Him in this way. When we get overwrought about money and possessions, we value pigs more than Christ and His salvation of human beings. Then we have a demonic kind of mindset, we have a dehumanized outlook, we act pig-like ourselves, and we love neither God nor man as we should.

This is definitely another interesting and potent call to earthly detachment. We need to be doubly alert to the doubled deception that goes with earthly attachment. On one hand, money itself has a deceptive and illusionary quality to it (cf. the deceitfulness of riches). On the other hand, spiritual powers of darkness use money as a central tool in their deceiving of sinners.

Thus, though the kingdom of God has come, demonic activity continues as a very threat in our world, but believers are delivered from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear son (Col 1.13).

4) We must take up the weapons of our warfare

Evil spiritual forces in our world may buffet and hinder us. Thus, we face true tensions and real conflicts. For facing these tensions and conflicts, we have weapons. The gospel itself is a powerful weapon giving us the promise of our victory and Satan’s defeat. This is spelled out for our comfort and hope.

The reality of conflict on the way of course calls us back to prayer for deliverance from the evil one (6<sup>th</sup> petition of the Lord’s Family Prayer). We are to be vigilant, to be sober and alert, and to resist our spiritual enemies firm in faith (1 Pet 5.9; James 4.7). We are called to put on the whole armor of God and thus to engage this warfare as true soldiers of the cross.

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

We need the whole armor to be able to stand against devilish and demonic schemes. The armor includes the truth (v. 14a), righteousness living of it (v. 14b), the gospel (v. 15), faith (v. 16), and the word of God and prayer (vs. 17-18). Thus, we are able to counter delusion with truth. The value of sound understanding of the Scriptures cannot be overestimated. We are able to stand firm in the face of great, deceptive and evil opposition because we stand on the truth of the gospel.

5) Finally, we do not just defend ourselves as soldiers clothed in this armor, but more than that we go forward, and with the church at large, we proclaim the mystery of the gospel far and wide in such a way that the very gates of hell cannot defend themselves against us (Mat 16.18).

Thus, we must take courage from this narrative.

We must be encouraged by the certainty of our victory in Christ. Jesus came into the world as an intruder into Satan's domain. He has disarmed principalities and powers guaranteeing their utter destruction in the day of the wrath of the Lamb.

He says to the demons, "go," and they go. He cast them out with a simple word (cf. Luther's *A Mighty Fortress* on the fact that one little word shall fell the evil one). They flee from His presence as helpless foes, but they go still bent on deceiving and destroying. All of their activity, however, is under His Sabbath Lordship.

With Christ on your side, you need not fear. He won the final victory. The victory is a fact; it now manifests itself as a sign as in our narrative of Matthew 8 (cf. Ridderbos, *Coming*, 113). The defeat of demons is provisional, temporary, and promissory. Their defeat in His first coming is a symbol and guarantee of the final and definitive victory at His second coming. The restoration of our fallen world includes the conquest of the fallen angelic realm and the purging of the entire universe by the work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Let us fall down before the majesty of Christ our Sabbath king; let us seek to honor Him in all things; let us worship Him, for to Him belongs all glory both now and forevermore, Amen.**