

Mark 5:1–20 (NIV)

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷He 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!” ⁸For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

⁹Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” ¹⁰And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹²The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” ¹³He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹Jesus did not let him, but 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.” ²⁰So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Have you ever received such astonishingly good news that you couldn't believe it was really true?

What monsters do you wrestle with in your life? Monsters that threaten to overwhelm you and often seem to have defeated you already? Addiction . . . depression . . . debt . . . job loss . . . a failing marriage . . . all these can drive us to despair. They can make it seem as if there is no hope, no way out. Nothing but darkness.

If you have never lived in such overpowering darkness, then you are blessed indeed. Those of us who have walked the path called No Hope, know something of the hopelessness Jesus meets in this week’s story.

The setting of the story says much:

- Jesus travels to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is an area populated by Gentiles, not Jews. In Jesus’ day, Jews didn’t mix easily with Gentiles, most even refusing to eat with them.
- Pigs figure in the story. These animals would have set any Jew’s hair on end, making it that much clearer that Jesus had crossed over to the “other side.” You can learn more about the place of pigs in the Bible in the page 4 textbox.
- There is a graveyard of sorts, an area where tombs are found among the caves. Jews would be ritually unclean if they even touched a dead body. If the first

two items hadn't put off any self-respecting Jew, this would have driven them over the edge.

- Then there is the demon. . . . enough said.
- Finally, we have the pointed reference to Rome, the oppressor of the Jews. The demons refer to themselves as "Legion," the largest standing unit in the Roman army, consisting of nearly 6,000 fighting men.

The whole story screams Unclean, Gentile, Other . . . and then we come to the mad man himself. He lives among the tombs in the caves. He has so lost himself that he cannot be restrained anymore. Even chains can't hold him. Day and night he roams the hills, screaming and shrieking, hurting himself and threatening all.

Surely this is a man who is beyond hope, living every day in misery and isolation. What hope could anyone offer him? What promises of help could possibly be kept?

Gentiles

(from *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*)

"Gentiles" is the general English rendering of the Hebrew terms *gôyîm* and *'ammîm* and the Greek term *ethnē* when these terms are interpreted to refer to non-Israelites or non-Jews.

This is the most basic social, ethnic distinction that can be made—"not us" (like the Japanese term for foreigners, *gai jin*). In Pauline letters the word *akrobystia*, "foreskins" or "uncircumcision," is used to describe the Gentiles (Rom 2:26–27; 3:30; Gal 2:7; Eph 2:11; Col 3:11; cf. Acts 11:3). This term was created by the Jews in contrast to *peritomē*, "circumcision." In the OT circumcision was the covenant sign for the people of God (Gen 17:11). As such, circumcision symbolized consecration to God (cf. Gen 17:1), and it naturally became a mark of Israel's distinctiveness. On the contrary, uncircumcision represented the Gentiles, those outside the covenant with God. Because the Gentiles were not dedicated and sanctified to God (Ezek 23:30), uncircumcision became a symbol for stubbornness and unbelief (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 6:10; 9:25ff). The Gentiles as uncircumcision were indeed the people of rebellion and disobedience, and they were thus viewed with contempt (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chron 10:4). In Christ, however, there is no distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15; Col 3:11).

. . . While there are "righteous Gentiles" who, though they do not have the law, paradoxically show by their actions that it is written on their hearts (Rom 2:14), the term *Gentile* would remind a Jew of his greatest enemies. The "table of nations" in Genesis 10 provides a "map" of the Gentile world—an introduction to the antagonists in this story. From them certain paradigmatic Gentile enemies will emerge: Egypt and Amalek of the Exodus story; the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites of the Conquest story (Deut 7:1; Josh 3:10; 24:11); the Assyrians and Babylonians of the Exile story (see Christensen, 4:1037–39). Furthermore, the Gentile rulers are characterized as "lording it over them" (Mt 20:25; Mk 10:42; Lk 22:25); Jesus is "handed over" to the Gentiles and they do their awful work on him (Mt 20:19; Mk 10:33; Lk 18:32; Acts 4:27); Jerusalem will be "trampled" by the Gentiles until the "times of the Gentiles is fulfilled" (Lk 21:24). Paul can tick off the situation for Gentiles: "Separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world . . . far away" (Eph 2:12–13 NIV), their thinking is futile (Eph 4:17). Gentiles (and governors and kings) are the focus of the disciples' (or a select person's, Acts 9:15) "witness," and they cannot be expected to receive it gladly (Mt 10:18). In fact, Gentile hostility is aligned with Israel's hostility toward Jesus.

continued in the page three textbox

The Healer

When the madman sees Jesus he runs directly to him, falling on his knees and shouting, "What do you want with me?" It becomes clear that the man is not speaking for himself; rather, it is the demon possessing the man who addresses Jesus. "What do you want with me," the demon shrieks.

As with the man in the Capernaum synagogue (1: 21-27), Jesus orders the demon to go, to leave this man. But Jesus also asks the demon his name. The reply is "Legion," which is probably a pointed reference to Rome. The demon then begs Jesus not to send them away . . . so, in a moment of profound irony, Jesus allows the demon to go to a nearby

herd of pigs. When the pigs find themselves in the demonic embrace, they run headlong into the Sea of Galilee, all 2,000 of them. Imagine how this story would have been received by Mark's Jewish readers – demons and pigs all going to the watery depths! Many would have said they deserved each other.

And the man . . . he is healed? Can it be true? After so long in misery and pain and loneliness? Yes, it is true and when the residents of the area come, they can see it for themselves. The man is just sitting there, dressed, and in his right mind. And as the people hear the story, they grow fearful. Who has the power to accomplish such things? Who can drive out demons? Who can order them into animals that then fling themselves off a cliff? How could this be true?

Sadly, their response to the loss of their pigs (a lot of wealth!) and to what they can't understand is all too typical – they ask Jesus to leave their region, to go home and take all these strange doings with him. Lamar Williamson writes:

. . . The crowd's desire to be rid of Jesus, their discomfort in his presence, demonstrates that they, too, are in fact demon-possessed, subjected to a power or powers hostile to the Kingdom of God.

Was it really the loss of the pigs that prompted this reaction? The point is not made explicitly in the text, and to limit the interpretation to a condemnation of greed narrows the focus of the text. Yet the text does allow this interpretation; its persistence in our time reflects the fact that our love of material possessions is one of the demons that plague us.

The connection between verses 17 and 18a is significant in this regard. When the crowd begged Jesus to depart, he got into the boat to leave. For all his power, Jesus does not force himself on those who fear the cost of his healing more than they love the cure . . . or the healer.¹

As Jesus prepares to leave, the man asks if he can go with him. What sort of future was there for him in the area he had terrorized as a madman? Would he not always be ridiculed and even feared?

But Jesus asks the healed man to stay, to go home and tell people how much the Lord had done for him, how the Lord had mercy on him.

And the man did as Jesus told him, going into the region called the Decapolis and proclaiming the Good News. The Decapolis was an area largely on the eastern side of the Jordan River, comprised of cities very Greek in politics, religion, and culture. In other words, Jesus sent the man to proclaim the news about Jesus to the Gentiles. Thus, in a way, this man, whose name has been lost to us, was the first apostle to the Gentiles. God's promise that the entire world would be blessed through the family of Abraham was being kept in and through Jesus.

Gentiles (from *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*)
cont. from the page two textbox

Yet a dramatic reversal of fortune enters as the gospel is spread throughout the world, and now in Christ God is even the God of the Gentiles (Rom 3:29), whom he calls "my people" (Rom 9:24–25). The former black sheep of the human family are now the envy of Israel, the chosen son (Rom 11:11). Gentiles have become obedient servants (Rom 15:18) and share in the Jews' spiritual blessings (Rom 15:27). The Gentiles now join the congregation of praise as full members of the chorus (Rom 15:9–11), full citizens and members of God's household. As aliens from the "commonwealth of Israel," "strangers to the covenants of promise" and those who were "far off," they have now been made participants—even building stones—in a new temple of God (Eph 2:11–22 RSV). In Acts we find that God has poured out his favor and Spirit "even upon the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45; 11:1, 18), a gift which many of them receive gladly (Acts 13:48), though the precise terms of their inclusion in the people of God is a matter of dispute (Acts 15:5–20).

¹ Williamson, L. (1983). *Mark. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (106). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

The Bible and Pigs (from *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*)

The law of Moses considers pigs “unclean” and not to be eaten by the people of Israel (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8). While this puts them in a category containing many other creatures, in practice they were a prominent member of this category, since in many other parts of the ancient world pigs were kept as domestic animals and valued as food. Thus eating pork is instanced as a key example of unclean, pagan practice in Isaiah 65:4 and 66:17, which attack Israelites who participate in pagan cults. Especially in view of Isaiah 66:3, which refers to the offering of pigs’ blood in sacrifice, it is likely that in these verses the eating of pork pertains to a sacrificial rite, even though the eating of pork offered in sacrifice was not common in ancient Near Eastern religion. For a biblical writer, of course, the association of pigs with holiness, which these apostate Israelites claim to gain from their pagan rites (Is 65:5; 66:17), is heavily ironic.

In the later biblical period, Jewish abstention from pork was a notable distinctive that marked them out from Gentiles. In the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes, which aimed to eradicate the distinctives of Jewish religion, loyal Jews treated abstention from pork as a test of their loyalty to God’s law. The Maccabean martyrs died for refusing to compromise on this point (2 Macc 6:18–20; 7:1). Part of Antiochus’s desecration of the temple consisted of offering pigs in sacrifice (1 Macc 1:47), since pigs, as unclean, were not among the animals used for sacrifice according to the law of Moses.

Although the classification of pigs as “unclean” is a technical one that does not refer to their physical dirtiness, in the ancient world pigs were generally considered dirty animals. They were often allowed to roam loose and scavenge in the streets, as dogs did. This increased the symbolic association of uncleanness with pigs in the Jewish mind, and in a later period both pigs and dogs became derogatory terms for Gentiles. An obvious association of pigs with Gentiles appears in the NT, where when pigs appear as domestic animals it is a clear indication that the story has entered Gentile territory, as in the cases of Jesus’ encounter with the demoniac Legion (Mk 5:11–14) and the prodigal son’s degradation to swineherd (Lk 15:15–16). . . .

The association of pigs with dogs occurs both in Matthew 7:6 and in 2 Peter 2:22. . . . Some interpreters have seen here a prohibition on preaching the gospel to Gentiles (symbolized as dogs and swine; cf. Mt 10:5), but it seems more likely that simply unreceptive hearers are in view, people who treat what is supremely valuable (like pearls) as worthless and contemptible. Such people need not be Gentiles, but the saying may compare them with typical Gentiles, regarded by Jews as contemptuous of the holy and precious things of God’s law.

In 2 Peter 2:22 two proverbs are applied to the case of Christians converted from a pagan background who return to their immoral pagan way of life. Once again the traditional association of dogs and pigs with Gentiles may be in view, as well as the more general association of these animals with dirt.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the discussion questions for Mark 2:1-12, I suggested you set aside your thoughts on whether demons actually exist and concentrate on what Mark was telling us. This week, however, you might spend a few minutes sharing your thoughts on the existence of demons, Satan, angels, and all the rest of the spiritual world.
2. When the residents of the region learn what has happened and what Jesus has done, they ask Jesus to leave.
 - a. Why do you think they asked him to leave?
 - b. In what ways do we ask Jesus to leave? Where and when do we want Jesus to leave us alone?
3. The words “Can it be true?” must have been on the lips of the man who was healed and the many people who heard what happened and came to see. These words are sometimes our own words, for we Christians make many extraordinary claims.
 - a. Of all the claims we make, what do you find the hardest to believe?
 - b. What can you do to help others to understand and to embrace our truth claims?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 3:13-35 Jesus appoints the twelve (why 12?) and then is accused by his own family!</p>	<p>Tuesday, Mark 4:1-20 The parable of the sower.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 4:21-34 More parables. Why do you think Jesus teaches in parables?</p>	<p>Thursday, Mark 4:35-41 Jesus calms the storm.</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 5:21-43 After sending the demons into the swine, Jesus returns to Jewish lands and restores life to a young girl. He also heals a sick woman.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

