

4. There's No-one Like Jesus: The value of pigs and men

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, we're continuing, finishing today, our little study in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 8. And if you'd like to turn with me to the reading, you'll find it on page 813 in our big Bibles.

Page 813. I'm going to read just the last paragraph of Chapter 8 as it's set out for us here. Verses 28 to 34.

And when Jesus 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.

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? Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them.

And the demons begged him, saying, If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs. And he said to them, Go. So they came out, and went into the pigs.

[1 : 09] And behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled. And going into the city, they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men.

And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region. Well, this is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord indeed make it a blessing to us today.

The value of pigs and men. That's our title. Now if you look back to verse 18 in our chapter, you'll see that Jesus was giving orders to his disciples to go over to the other side of the lake.

And the reason is given there in verse 18 that Jesus saw a great crowd around him. Now there had been a great crowd around him for a long time, and obviously he was tired, and the disciples were tired.

So they needed a few hours of downtime to recover from all their hard work. But did they get their peace and quiet? Did they get their tranquil egg sandwich tea on the water, and their quiet stroll on the beach in the evening sunshine a bit later on?

[2 : 24] Not a bit of it. First of all, a storm of great force launches itself at them on the sea, and as soon as Jesus has met that crisis and dealt with it, another storm is launched at them.

You'll see they land in verse 28 at the country of the Gadarenes. But this time it isn't a storm of wind and water, it's a human storm of two men who are possessed by evil spirits, who appear out of the local cemetery, shouting at Jesus.

Have you ever had the experience of a stranger coming running at you, shouting? It's a rather disconcerting thing if you have. Anyway, there were two of these men, and Matthew tells us that they were so fierce that no one could pass that way.

You can imagine the local mothers saying to their children, now darling, when you come home from the shops, don't take the shortcut through the cemetery, because you know who is there. These men were a very unsettling local hazard.

Now people born in the 20th century, and I think people born in the 19th century, though I doubt if we have any of those with us here today, you might say modern people in the Western world have often shied away from the idea that Satan and his minions are real, actual beings.

[3 : 44] But the Bible writers never show any of that kind of coyness or skepticism. The Bible writers never doubted the objective reality of demons, and of course in this they took their cue from Jesus himself.

Jesus knew better than anybody that Satan and his agents were real and malicious and powerful. The fact is that if you take Satan and his malicious schemes out of the Bible, the Bible no longer makes sense.

You would distort the story entirely. Just to turn for a moment from Matthew the Evangelist to John the Evangelist, John tells us in his first letter, chapter 5, verse 19, that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, which is rather a shocking analysis.

The whole world in the power of the devil, brother John? Are you serious? How can that be? I thought God was in charge of everything. But if you turn from 1 John 5, 19, to 1 John chapter 3, verse 8, John says the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

So at one level, yes, the fallen race of mankind is putty in the devil's hands and does his bidding as it lives its life without reference to God.

[5 : 01] But Jesus came not merely to oppose the devil's work, but to destroy it. Jesus also says in John's Gospel, chapter 14, verse 30, the ruler of this world, that's his description of the devil, the ruler of this world is coming.

In other words, the devil is on his way to do battle with me on Good Friday. But Jesus adds in the very same verse, he has no hold on me.

In other words, he can't lay a finger upon me. He has no power over me. So to go back to our story here in Matthew 8, when Jesus meets these demon-possessed men, right from the first moment of the encounter, there is no doubt about who is going to win.

Let me just use a simple illustration. A couple of weeks ago, you may remember that Andy Murray, our young Scots tennis player from Dunblane, got into the final of the U.S. Open tennis tournament and he had to face Roger Federer.

Now, Murray apparently had beaten Federer, I think twice in the last few months leading up to this tournament. So there was a real possibility that he might just bring it off a third time.

[6 : 12] Now, as it happened, he didn't. Federer was too strong for him. But he had a real chance of winning. Nobody quite knew which way it would go. However, if I were to go on court and face Andy Murray, there would be no doubt about the outcome from the very first ball.

Murray would not score a point. I would just blow him away. Sorry, I got that the wrong way round. The truth is the opposite. Six love, six love to Murray all over in about eight minutes.

There'd be no contest at all, would there? I wouldn't be able to return a single serve. Now, that illustrates, I think, the outcome of the war between Satan and the Lord Jesus.

Satan is no match for Jesus. He can't win a single point in the battle. And the Bible teaches us, everything the Bible teaches us on the matter, speaks about the ultimate doom of Satan.

Now, if that is the case, if Christ is his complete master, we might well ask, then why does Satan appear to have a degree of success?

[7 : 15] I mean, why did he ruin the lives of these two men? And why are there so many people in the world today who seem to be suffering damage because of his malicious activity? Well, let me put it like this, and this is the first of two points I'd like to bring out of the passage.

The Lord allows Satan certain permissions, but finally, he will utterly destroy him. Matthew tells us that these two men were demon-possessed.

That's his phrase. Now, it's a rather odd phrase, but what is meant by it is that these two men, their bodies, their minds, their personalities, had been taken over by the devil's minions.

So, in some sense that we can't fully understand, the demons inhabited them. The men were giving them house room. They lived in these men. They possessed them, dominated them.

Now, the demons say to Jesus, in verse 31, if you cast us out, in other words, cast us out of our home, in these two men, send us away to another home, into the herd of pigs.

[8 : 21] So, the two men clearly are thought to be inhabited. Matthew is telling us they were inhabited by the demons. Now, Matthew is not for a moment suggesting that every person who is not a Christian is possessed by a demon.

Sinclair Ferguson puts it like this in his studies in Mark's Gospel. Not all men are demon-possessed, yet by nature, all men are ruled by dark and sinister forces.

I think that puts the balance very well. It's only, I guess, a tiny minority of people who are actually possessed by demons. Yet, the sinister forces of darkness do grip and control the life and thinking of the non-Christian world.

To quote 1 John 5.19 again, the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. So, this means that when people who are not Christians are making their decisions and organizing their lives and their priorities, they do so without asking, what is God's will for me?

So, they organize their work programs, their leisure activities, their use of money, their family life, their sex life, not according to biblical principles which express the mind of God, but according to society's prevailing fashions.

[9 : 39] And it's the devil that controls and shapes the way in which the non-Christian world thinks. Now, demon possession is right up at the sharp end of that spectrum.

It's the point at which a man is not merely being molded and fashioned by Satan's general influence, but is actually taken over by one of Satan's co-workers, a fallen angel like Satan himself.

And when a man is demon-possessed, his antagonism towards God will become enormously more focused and fierce. Now, your regular non-Christian man will have a general indifference towards God and a deep-rooted belief that even if God does exist, he's enormously unimportant.

But the demon-possessed man will hate God with a passionate hatred and hate the Lord Jesus and indeed hate Christians. And that's what we see here. These men come forward to meet Jesus and their words are filled with the absolute essence of hatred.

What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Now, people who love Jesus will run to meet him adoringly, but these men run to meet him with one aim only, and that is to get him out of their sight.

[10 : 52] But they not only hate him fiercely, they also fear him. He is their nemesis. He's their doom. And they know it.

They are terrified of him. Now, incidentally, that's very good news, isn't it? Jesus is their master. Now, just look at what verse 29 reveals about their understanding of Jesus.

First, they know who he is. What have you to do with us, O Son of God? They say. Now, isn't it ironical that if you look back two verses to verse 27, the poor disciples, foggy-brained, they ask each other, what sort of a man do we have here that even the wind and the waves obey him?

And they get their answer out of the mouths of demon-possessed men, scarcely an hour later, because the two incidents follow straight after each other in the same afternoon. It's strange, isn't it?

But the devil's cronies know the truth about Jesus only too well, and they hate it. But it's not only his identity that they understand.

[12 : 01] They also understand his power over them. And that's why they ask the second question, have you come here to torment us before the time? They know that he is their tormentor, their assailant, their master.

And they know that in the end, after a certain lapse of time, they're going to be locked into a state of perpetual, unremitting torment by him. Do you remember how Peter writes in his second letter of God not sparing sinful angels, but casting them into hell and committing them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment?

So these demons here in Matthew 8, they know full well that Jesus is their ultimate conqueror. And his sudden appearance before them in the country of the Gadarenes makes them terrified that he is going to give them premature marching orders to the place of torment.

I suppose they were hoping for a bit more license, a few more years, a few more decades, or even centuries, when they could torment different people and wreak havoc in their lives.

And yet suddenly looking at them in the face is the person who, from their point of view, is the most horrible, fearful being in the universe, the Son of God, who will inevitably bring them to the place of torment in the end.

[13 : 20] So for them, for these demons, it's an unspeakably awful moment. Here is the conqueror. Help! He's irresistible. What can we do? Well, they try a desperate throw of the dice, almost as if they say to each other, it's an old trick, but it might just work.

They say to him, please, please, please, if you must cast us out of these two men, do you see those pigs? Great big herd of them up on the hillside, grunting contentedly in the sunshine.

Can we please go into them instead? Please! And Jesus says, go. Is he having mercy on the demons? No.

He's merely saying to them, I will deal with you in due course. But he is certainly having mercy on these two men. He's releasing them from the devil's grip.

He's restoring them to their true humanity. And the fact that these two men immediately see the pigs rush over the hill into the sea and drown demonstrates to the two men that the demons really have left them.

[14 : 28] So they know now that they're free men. They know that they've been released. It's a picture really of what it means to become a Christian. To become a Christian is to be freed by Christ from the power of the evil one.

Now, why does Matthew include this story in his account of the good news? Surely, because he wants his readers to know and to be deeply assured that Christ is the absolute master of the evil one and all his minions.

So this means, friends, that if you're a Christian, the devil may well harass you and hassle you and buffet you, and indeed he will, but he has no power to drag you down into ultimate condemnation with him.

Why not? Because you belong to Christ and Christ is completely victorious over him. Now, once we see this, it will help us not to make a certain mistake in our thinking about these things.

And let me just try and outline what this mistake is. Christians will sometimes speak of the battle between Satan and Christ as if the outcome was still rather dicey. As if to say, well, yes, Christ will win in the end, but only by the skin of his teeth.

[15 : 48] They speak of it almost as if it's like a boxing match between two heavyweight boxers that runs for 15 rounds and Christ wins eight of the rounds and Satan wins seven of the rounds, so Christ only just about scrapes home.

It's like a victory on points. Some of you, I'm sure, will remember the name of David Watson from York. David Watson was a very fruitful evangelist in the 1960s and 70s and through his straightforward evangelistic preaching a lot of people were brought to Christ.

It was a very fine ministry that he had. He would go up and down the country preaching at university missions and town missions and internationally as well. And then when he was about 50, he developed a cancer.

He had a short battle, just a year or so, with this cancer and then died at the age of 51. Now, many Christians were saying, why did the Lord allow this gifted, fruitful evangelist to be prematurely struck down at the height of his powers?

and some Christians said, and I remember reading this in the church press myself, they said, ah, the devil won this round in the battle. Now, if the devil wins certain rounds, that means that Christ loses those rounds.

[17 : 07] Friends, that is eyewash, hogwash, and balderdash. Satan never has the capacity to win even one round. As Jesus says in John 14, he has no hold on me.

He can't get any kind of grip on me. Our story here in Matthew 8 perfectly illustrates the point. Charles Wesley understood it when he wrote these words in his great hymn, Jesus, the name high over all, in hell or earth or sky, angels and men before it fall, and devils fear and fly.

It means that if you belong to Christ, you are eternally safe. The devil will tempt you and try you and test you and cause you great difficulties at times, but he has no power to take you to the pit.

He belongs there, but you do not. And let me add this. If you are not yet a Christian, and this may apply to some folk here, you are not likely to be demon possessed.

That is a pretty rare condition. But you are still in the sphere of the devil's influence, and you need to come to Christ and allow him to transfer you from the kingdom of darkness, from Satan's kingdom, to his own kingdom of light and freedom and joy.

[18 : 25] Don't resist the Lord Jesus if you are not yet a Christian. Come to him. It is the only safe place to be. And you will find that like these two men in Matthew 8, your own true humanity will be restored.

The process may be less dramatic than it was for these two men, but it will be just as real and just as lasting. So there is Matthew's first reason for including this story.

He wants us to be assured of Christ's complete mastery over Satan. But I think there is a second lesson for us in the final two verses, verses 33 and 34.

Let me read them again. Now that is an interesting reaction to the healing of the two men, don't you think?

All the city came out to meet Jesus, says verse 34. Now it might have been only a couple of hundred people or so. The word city doesn't necessarily mean Glasgow sized city or huge population.

[19 : 38] I've been in some out of the way places in the United States of America where you're driving along the road and you see a sign at the edge of the road which says something like Porkerville, Oklahoma, city limits, population 173.

It's a great thing, isn't it? It might have been the same sort of thing here in Porkerville, Gadara. But think of the population of the town. They knew these two men, didn't they?

Their brothers and sisters and cousins would be amongst those people. These people who came out to meet Jesus, they'd played with those two men when they were all children, years before the demons came, when those two men were nice little boys in short trousers with dirty knees.

They knew them. Don't you think they should have been deeply happy to see them utterly changed, salvaged from their bondage and ruin and miraculously brought back to sanity, restored whole and happy, back to their people, to their community?

And don't you think they should have been deeply thankful to Jesus for coming and doing this thing which nobody else could possibly have done? And yet, that's not their reaction at all.

[20 : 47] There seems to be no joy at his power over Satan, no joy that the wonderful, lovely, incomparable son of God had come to visit them. All they can say to him is, please leave, go, we don't want you here.

It's almost what the demons said a few minutes before, get away from here. Well, why is this? Matthew doesn't precisely tell us, but I don't think it takes much to read a bit between the lines.

Surely the problem was that they valued pigs more than men. Now, the pigs were valuable. We're told here that there was a large herd and if you read Mark's account of this same incident, we discover that there were about 2,000 of them, a very big herd of pigs.

And 2,000 pigs, then just as today, will produce a lot of meat for the market. It's a very valuable commodity, part of the local economy. But Jesus' decision to forfeit the pigs and save the men shows the relative value that he places on pigs and men.

the restoration of two men is infinitely more important to him than the lives of 2,000 pigs. Just turn across the page to chapter 10, verse 29, Matthew 10, 29, where Jesus says, Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

[22 : 12] And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. The Lord greatly values even the sparrows, doesn't he? And a pig is much bigger and much more intelligent, much more valuable than a sparrow.

So we can assume that the Lord cares for pigs a great deal. Therefore, how much more does he care about men? The loss of 2,000 pigs in his sight is a light price to pay for the restoration of two wrecked men to their proper humanity.

But the people of Gadara were more interested in their bank balances and their profit margins than in the saving work of Christ. Isn't there a lesson for us here as well?

It's possible to be a Christian and still to be more concerned for our bank balances and our possessions, our pigs, our houses, our cars, a hundred other things that are utterly transitory.

To be more concerned for those things than for the work of the gospel. May God help us to see what is really important. The thing that Jesus values above all, the thing that he was prepared to pay the ultimate price for himself, was the restoration of ruined humanity.

[23 : 29] He values two men, more than 2,000 pigs. So friends, let's invest our energies in the things that he values. If he died for the salvation of human beings, let's put our backs into the work of the gospel and follow his example.

Let's pray together, ask for his help. Dear God, our Father, we thank you that the Lord Jesus perfectly expresses your mind and concerns.

We thank you therefore that you loved those two men very deeply and were delighted at their restoration and the victory of your son over the demons and indeed over the whole sphere of the works of the devil.

We pray, dear Father, that you will put into our hearts a deep assurance of your power and your good purposes and we pray too that you'll enable us to love the souls of men and women and indeed to seek for their restoration because of the gospel and because of what Christ himself has done.

And these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.