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THE MAN OR THE SWINE?

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I came across a rather surprising statistic recently. Did you know that 34% of Americans believe in ghosts and/or aliens? I guess it shouldn't be surprising since the cable channels are now carrying what would appear to be credible documentaries and reality television shows that cater to that appetite—shows like *Ghost Hunters* and *Ancient Aliens*. Now, you might think it strange that I would lump ghosts and aliens together like that, but it's not. The poll I quoted did exactly that.¹ But even beyond that, if you were to go to a bookstore and look for books about UFO's, do you know where you'd find them? You would find them in the occult section. It's true!

Now, I don't believe in aliens at all; but I do believe there's a reason for the connection between ghosts and aliens in the popular imagination. The reason is that both are deceptions perpetrated by demonic forces, whose goal, as you know from Scripture, is to lead people away from the truth. The Bible calls them "familiar spirits"; that is, they can assume appearances which are calculated to deceive. They can appear to be ghosts, and I strongly suspect that they can appear to be lights in the sky. According to the apostle Paul, the devil himself can even appear to be an angel of light! You do know that Lucifer means "light bearer," right? So when you pass by the New Age section in the book store, and you see books about how to "attune your energy to harmonize with angelic energy"—just keep walking. It's all a lie designed to ensnare you.

In truth, the Bible gives many warnings against trying to contact these spirits. The spirits might seem to be kind; they might even seem to be someone that you knew who has died; but human spirits, according to Scripture, do not remain on earth. That is why, as students of the Bible, we know better than to consult horoscopes or mediums, to play the Ouija board, or to play the "Bloody Mary" game. If you invite that kind of activity into your life, you're asking for trouble.

And that is what we find in the Scripture passage we are going to study today. If there is any lesson I can impress upon you today, it is that the spirit realm is real, and that much of it intends to deceive. Let's read Mark 5:1–7 together, shall we?

¹ *And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes.*

² *And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit,*

³ *Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains:*

⁴ *Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him.*

⁵ *And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones.*

⁶ *But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him,*

¹ Associated Press. "Poll: One-third of Americans Believe in Ghosts, UFOs." 25 October 2007. Available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,305277,00.html>.

⁷ *And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.*

Well, there's an eye-opener! Jesus gets out of the boat and is immediately accosted by a man we would describe as unstable. This man today would be put into an institution and would be kept under the influence of medication. He would have a case worker and all kinds of evaluations. You see, this man is not so very different, perhaps, than many people living today; except that today, they are neatly brushed away from society, and we forget that they exist. Sometimes a person like this will develop in such a way that he's not institutionalized. After all, you can't just go around locking people up because they seem a little strange, right? But then one day you hear about a man, for no apparent reason, severing the head of a tourist in a store,² or a milk man murdering Amish children,³ and you wonder, How could that happen?

I want you to notice in this story a listing of some elements common to this type of behavior. You've heard this behavior called "demon possession," but the Bible never calls it that. I do not know to what extent demons control or influence people; I don't know that I'm comfortable calling it "possession." But it is clear that demons do exert great influence over some people much more than they do others. So what do they have in common?

First, you'll notice there is something unclean. The man has an "unclean" spirit, and he lives in an "unclean" place—the tombs. These demonic spirits love filth. They love, not just physical squalor, but anything filthy, including moral pollution. They love pornography, the nastier, the better. But much of what we call entertainment—in mainstream Hollywood, network television, popular music and literature—is really this same sort of filth or moral pollution, full of lewdness and obscenity. It is an atmosphere in which these unclean spirits thrive.

Second, we find this man living in isolation. There's nothing wrong with being alone; in fact, you might enjoy a little time to yourself once in a while. And all the mothers said, Amen! But this is different. We know from the end of the story that this man had a home and had friends; yet he chose to live in isolation. You will find this withdrawal from society to be typical of those under the influence of these deceiving spirits. He became a "loner."

Third, we see that he had supernatural strength. Again, this is not unheard of in our own day in such cases. This man could break the chains that bound him. Chains! He was unnaturally strong. He could do what a normal person could never do. Before you think, "Hey, that sounds pretty great! I'd like to be strong like that!" I want you to think again. How was that great strength used?

And that brings us to the fourth issue: the man is tormented. His great strength was used in self-destruction, self-mutilation, and in rejection of all attempts to help him. As we read on we find out why the people had almost certainly tried to restrain him: he was a danger to himself. He's battered and bruised, and he spends his days wandering alone. He deliberately hurts himself. I don't know how many of you have known a "cutter," but a "cutter" is a person who cuts himself or herself, often very seriously, in order to try to release or relocate the real pain they feel, which is inside. That's what this man is doing: he's hurting himself outwardly because of the great pain he feels on the inside.

² Tom Worden and Tom Kelly, "Why Was He on the Streets?" *Mail Online*. 14 May 2011. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1386762/British-woman-beheaded-Tenerife-machete.html>.

³ "Amish School Shooting." Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_school_shooting.

The fifth mark we find is his recognition of the authority of Jesus. He immediately runs to Jesus and calls Jesus “the Son of the Most High God.” That is how the pagans and Gentiles referred to God: the Most High God. The Israelites called him *Yahweh* (“I AM”) or *Adonai*, “Lord,” but the Gentiles and demons called him *El-Elyon*, “the Most High God.

Another issue we commonly find with those who are under this sort of oppression is that the man exhibits multiple personalities. Please note that I am not stating categorically that every person with multiple-personality disorder is under the influence of a demon or demons. I’m not saying that. But I am allowing for the strong possibility that this is often the case. In this instance, the man definitely exhibits multiple personalities. There is that of the man himself, that of the leader of the demons, and then other demonic personalities. It’s important to understand this dynamic because it explains why the man’s dialogue shifts from singular to plural.

Let’s turn back to our passage and read verses 8 through 13:

⁸ *For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.*

⁹ *And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.*

¹⁰ *And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country.*

¹¹ *Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding.*

¹² *And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them.*

¹³ *And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea.*

This is quite an amazing story, isn’t it? We find out that there are many demons oppressing this man, and one of them is the leader of the rest. A legion was a troop of 6,000 soldiers! To the people of that time and place, a Roman legion meant oppression by foreign rulers, which is exactly what these demons represent. I don’t think we need to take this to mean that there were exactly 6,000 demons; rather, it seems to be a metaphor for a very large number of foreign oppressors.

The demons know that Jesus won’t allow them to continue to torment this man. They beg Him not to send them away “out of the country.” Commentators seem to agree that the request, properly understood, was that He not send them to their eternal punishment early. The demons are destined for hell, and they know it. And being banished to hell was nothing less than what they deserved for what they had done to this man. But they are terrified of hell and begged and begged Jesus to allow them to stay.

In the end, Jesus did allow them to stay—sort of. He allowed them to enter a herd of pigs; but the pigs apparently weren’t too happy about that! They rushed down into the sea and basically committed suicide. I’ve often wondered about this: why did Jesus allow these demons to enter the pigs since the result was that the pigs died? Remember, the Bible tells us what we *need* to know, but it doesn’t always tell us everything we’d *like* to know. But I suspect that seeing those pigs plunge into the sea gave that man and everyone else around him a sense of closure: the demons were really gone.

And that, to me, is a lesson that we should draw from this part of the story: only through the power of Jesus can people be freed from this sort of oppression. Medication and institutionalization can blunt the

effects, but the only *cure* is the power of Jesus Christ. We have many, many uncured people locked away today.

There is more to the story, though. Let's read verses 14 through 17:

¹⁴ *And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done.*

¹⁵ *And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.*

¹⁶ *And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine.*

¹⁷ *And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts.*

I'm not going to rehash this part of the story. To me, this is the most revealing part of the story. Basically the people from the country all around came out to see Jesus and this now-healed man. They saw Jesus, and they knew the good that He had done, but they asked Him to leave. "Well, Jesus, it's certainly nice to see this man healed, but we don't want any more of that sort of thing going on around here. We're going to need You to leave."

Now, what's the problem? I'll tell you the problem: it's an economic problem. To them, the value of the swine exceeded the value of a life redeemed. In the push and pull between money and evangelism, money won. They asked Jesus to leave, and that's exactly what He did. He left—and so far as we know, He *never* went back to that area.

What's going on here? Why does the herd of swine go over the cliff? Why did these people respond to Jesus this way? You don't have to look very far. It's back just a few verses, the answer is back just a few verses. It's in Luke chapter 8, verse 18. It's just 8 or 9 verses before this passage. What does it say? Do you remember... – "Take care then, how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." They thought those pigs were theirs. They were not. They belonged to God. **Nothing we have belongs to us. It all belongs to God. But it was what they loved and they preferred it to everlasting blessing in Jesus Christ. And because they did not hear Him, they lost even what they had.**⁴

This episode reminds of a church in Revelation chapter three. That church thought they had all their problems sorted because they had money. But Jesus said to that church, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" in Revelation 3:20. Isn't that remarkable? Jesus was outside the church, knocking, trying to get someone to let Him inside! "Nobody get the door! If Jesus comes in, it's going to cost us something! He's going to want us to spend our money on missions and evangelism and the poor, and those things don't directly benefit us. No, let's just carry on and ignore the knocking."

In fact, Jesus whole message to that church started with a rebuke in that they were neither hot nor cold. Hot water is good for cleansing, and cold water is good for refreshing; but tepid water isn't good for much of anything. Jesus told that church they weren't a hot church, concerned with cleansing people from sin with the work of evangelism, nor were they a cold church, providing a place of refreshment

⁴ Dr. Jim Ligon Duncan III, "The Man Jesus Renamed." 13 December 2009. Available at http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Luke/12.13.2009_Dr_J_Ligon_Duncan_The_Man_Jesus_Renamed_Luke_8_26-39.html.

and relief for a weary world by meeting people's physical needs. No, they were lukewarm—self-absorbed and concerned for their own comfort.

If you really want to grow this church, get hot (that is, make evangelism and missions a priority) or get cold (that is, make efforts to meet people's needs). I think that if we'll get serious about our true purpose, God will supply more laborers to work with us. But if we're just in this to keep this church floating, this is about the best we're going to do. Get hot or get cold—either way, it's going to cost you something. Which will we chose: the healed man or the swine?

Gadara, A.D. 31

Rabbi, begone! Thy powers
Bring loss to us and ours.
Our ways are not as Thine.
Thou lovest men, we—swine.
Oh, get you hence, Omnipotence,
And take this fool of Thine!
His soul? What care we for his soul?
What good to us that Thou hast made him whole,
Since we have lost our swine?

And Christ went sadly.
He had wrought for them a sign
Of Love, and Hope, and Tenderness divine;
They wanted—swine.
Christ stands without *your* door and gently knocks;
But if your gold, or swine, the entrance blocks,
He forces no man's hold—he will depart,
And leave you to the treasures of your heart.

No cumbered chamber will the Master share,
But one swept bare
By cleansing fires, then plenished fresh and fair
With meekness, and humility, and prayer.
There will He come, yet, coming, even there
He stands and waits, and will no entrance win
Until the latch be lifted from within.

—John Oxenham