

Addictions – Is There Any Hope?
~ Mark 5:1-20

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Our family has lived in St Albert for almost 15 years. Over this time, I have wondered about the greatest issues facing the people here. This city is known as a desirable place to live. At first glance, it seems we don't have the most obvious needs that we see in other places. So, on the outside, it looks like much of St Albert is doing well.

Yet we know there is much more to the story. For the past few years, I have noticed a reality in our community that seems to cut right across economic, political, and generational. That reality is addiction. I have heard so many stories of parents struggling with their teen's addictions. I've heard stories about parents modeling addictions for their teens. We've talked about porn addiction in and outside the church. There are alcohol and drug addictions, which may have grown since the legalization of marijuana. Then there are more socially acceptable addictions like shopping, gaming, gambling, work, internet and social media.

I've also noticed that, most people, including Christians, go outside the church to get help with their addictions. The Alcoholics Anonymous model has become the dominant form of addiction recovery and maintenance. It has helped many. Since some churches are unsure

about how to handle those struggling. We can pass them off to AA and it's spin offs, or tell them to pray more and try harder. But might we be neglecting a crucial part we can play in the lives of those who struggle, those around us, and those in the community? I believe our greatest hope is found in Jesus Christ, no matter what we struggle with. So how might we connect the struggling with Christ in a way that goes beyond pray and try harder?

We start a new series of messages today entitled – Addictions: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel. I got this title from a book by the same name, which I will refer to throughout the series. The author's point is that worship is key issue in addiction. Who or what do we worship? Where do we turn for comfort, consolation, or coping, when life gets difficult? If you're a Christian and someone asked you "who do you worship," you would answer "God." But sometimes what we say with our mouths does not line up with what we do in our lives. We may say we worship God but when life goes wrong or we're feeling down we may turn to something or someone else for our greatest consolation. That's who or what we actually worship.

If this author is correct about this is a connection between worship and addictions, then the Bible comes alive for anyone struggling with addictions. It is full of questions about worship and issues of the heart.

Suddenly, we can see how God and His Word can be a very present help in trouble to those struggling with addictive behavior and their loved ones. So I invite you to join me as we go on a journey to hear from God and His Word regarding this over the next 12 messages or so.

Today, we will be reminded I want to remind you of the authority and power Jesus has to release any captive from the strongest chains. We will see how Jesus rescued someone who had no hope of saving themselves. Then we will consider how this series of messages might apply to us even if we don't struggle with a drug or alcohol addiction.

Our text today is Mark 5:1-20. Jesus and the disciples have just crossed the Sea of Galilee by boat. On their way, a fierce storm arose that terrified the disciples. So they call out to Jesus for help. He stands up and rebukes the storm with the words "Peace, be still." The storm stops. The disciples wonder "who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" We pick up what happens next in Mark 5:1.

Mark 5:1-20 (ESV)

5 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2 And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat,

immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. 3 He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, 4 for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. 6 And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. 7 And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." 8 For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 9 And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." 10 And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, 12 and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.

14 The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. 15 And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. 16 And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. 17 And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 And he did not permit him but said to

him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.

Jesus and his disciples arrive in a region populated by Gentiles or non-Jews. When Jesus steps out of the boat, Mark describes a man in great need. He had an unclean spirit that tormented him. We aren’t told how or why this happened. But, we do know his life was so out of control that he could only live in the graveyard. Mark gives us clues about how the community tried to deal with him. Verse 3 – No one could bind him “anymore.” So apparently they had tried to control him with chains. Yet he had such great strength that he broke their chains. Verse 4 – “He had often been bound with chains.” So the community attempted this treatment repeatedly, but it failed because of His great strength.

So he ends up living in the graveyard. He survives there maybe through food left there by compassionate people. Or sometimes people went to their ancestor’s graves and ate a meal there to remember them. Maybe he lived off the scraps.

Yet he certainly did not want to live like this. Verse 5 – “Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying

out.” His tortured soul expressed sorrow constantly. He craves release from his torment. In fact, the end of verse 5 tells us “he was always cutting himself with stones.” Maybe he did this to distract himself from the reality of his life. Maybe this was an attempt to kill himself. Maybe the unclean spirit provoked him to do this because they’re all about destruction.

But one thing is clear. **Point #1: This man had no ability to save himself from his situation.** From what I have read, those struggling with addictions may feel the same way. Edward Welch, the author of this book writes this:

“How do addicts feel? Addicts feel as if they are trapped and out of control. They feel like abject worshippers, devoted to something that can be very dangerous. They feel desperate hunger and thirst for something. They feel like they can’t let go, clinging even when the addictive behavior yields very few pleasures and a great deal of pain. They feel like they are in bondage. Addicts feel out of control, enslaved, stuck, and without hope for freedom or escape.

Something or someone other than the living God controls them, and the controlling object tells them how to live, think and feel.”¹

Maybe you or someone you know feels that in their struggles. The man in this passage experience much of what Welch describes.

But Jesus has just shown up on the shoreline. So in verse 6, the man sees Jesus from afar and runs to fall down before Jesus. This unclean spirit in him discerns Jesus’ great spiritual presence. The spirit cries out “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” The demon has stepped forward to defend it’s turf. Yet it recognizes the authority Jesus has over it. So it demands non-interference in it’s realm.

But Mark tells us in verse 8 that Jesus actually addressed the spirit first. “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asks the spirit, “what is your name?” The spirits answers “My name is Legion, for we are many.” So we learn that this man’s state is worse than we first thought. Mark told us in verse 2 that the man had “an unclean spirit” – One. Now we discover there are many unclean spirits in this

one man. A legion was a Roman army unit of 6000 soldiers. That’s a lot to torment this poor man.

But Jesus is not threatened by this. In fact the spirits recognize His great power and authority. So they beg him to send them into a herd of pigs. They are no longer making demands. They are begging for requests because the Son of the Most High God stands before them. Jesus permits it. So the unclean spirits leave the man and go into the pigs. True to their nature, the spirits drive the pigs to destruction. The herd rushes off a cliff and crashes into the sea below.

This would be a major economic disaster for that region. So the herdsman run off and tell the townspeople. They come running out to see what has happened. They see the man who once had this legion of spirits. “And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.” So, remember, this man had no ability to save himself from his situation? **Point #2: Jesus declares and displays His authority to release the man from that which held him captive.**

¹ Edward Welch, Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave; Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel, P@R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2001, 11-12.

Notice the transformation in this man. One who roamed the tombs and mountains day and night crying out, now sits down. One who often ripped off his clothes according to other gospel accounts, now is fully clothed. One who cried out in torment and often cut himself with stones, now sits in his right mind. Jesus has completely released this man from that which held him captive.

You might say, "This is an inspiring story. But it doesn't have much to do with real life today." The road to recovery from addictions is long and hard. Most people do it with the help of a group of others around them. God doesn't do this today.

Well I don't know if we can declare that as absolute. There are accounts of some who have encountered Christ and had their lives dramatically changed. But, God often chooses not to do the instantaneous complete healing thing. Why? He wants us to see the deep issues of our hearts that need exposure, correction and healing. He wants us to see the issues that cause our addictive behavior and damage. With the abandonment of belief in God, the world has had to come up with its own solutions. Some of it is good. Some of it has helped. But it's missing perhaps the biggest piece – that is the healing and help of God Himself. That includes the redirection of our hearts worship to God.

Though we marvel at the man's instantaneous healing, he still had a life to live. He still had choices to make. So look what happens to this now healed man. Verse 18 – "As Jesus was getting into the boat (to leave) the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he (Jesus) did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him and everyone marveled."

So the man wanted to come with Jesus. That's a pretty noble goal. Yet Jesus instructs him to do something different. "Go home and tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you." Can you imagine this man's return to his hometown? People go about their business that day and he walks into town. People check out the stranger and then they stop. This is the guy who used to terrorize them. They recognize him as the guy they tried to chain up but he broke the chains. Maybe they start reaching for their weapons. But there's something different about this guy. His eyes no longer look crazy. He speaks with humility, apology and thanksgiving. Everyone gathers around and marvels at the change. He not only went home but through the whole region of the 10 cities to proclaim this news.

Point #3: The man obeys Jesus command and proclaims how much Jesus had done for him. We don't get any more information but it will be amazing to hear what happened when we meet this guy in heaven one day and he tells his stories. Yet his story is not just something from the past. God loves to rescue people struggling with addiction today. Jesus had the authority to deliver this man from whatever held him captive.

Jesus has the authority to deliver us from whatever holds us captive. Does something hold you captive? Is there some place you turn or some behavior you run to when things go wrong? Like Alcohol, or Anger; Binge Eating or Binge Watching; Caffeine or Chocolate; Cocaine or comfort; Drugs or Exercise; Gambling or Gaming; Nicotine or Nose Drops; Opium or OxyContin; Pain or People; Pornography or Risk; Sex or Shoplifting; Social Media or Sports; Success or Sullenness; TV or Weightlifting. Jesus has the authority and power to release us from whatever holds us captive.

This account certainly describes spectacular moment of sensational warfare with demons. Yet most of us face a less exciting daily spiritual warfare in our own hearts. **Since Jesus has the authority to release us from whatever holds us captive, we must call out for His rescue and follow His lead to wholeness.** Jesus

knew that the best way for the man to live out his healing was to go back to his community. In spreading the good news of his physical and mental healing, he likely experienced some relational healing with others. You and I need to call out for God's rescue and then follow His lead to wholeness. A journey that will take time. But, you might have some objections about this.

Objection 1 - You might be thinking **"I am not an addict and therefore this series has nothing to do with me."** You may know someone who struggles with this. You will learn ways to help or gain some understanding that may preserve your relationship with them. On top of that, there are a lot of parallels between addictive and sinful behavior. In fact, the human heart is reckless by nature. We all have desires or look for activities that rapidly provide some sort of feel good bodily experience. So we dare not excuse ourselves from needing to hear what Scripture has to say to us. We can all grow in self-control, which Scripture has much to say about. So there might be more here for you than you think.

Objection 2 - **"You're not a recovering addict Tom so you just don't get it."** You're right that I am not a recovering addict. I don't know what you are going through. So I hope I come across humbly with what I present. But I do know that I'm a sinner. Sinful behavior is

not so far removed from addictive behavior. In fact, some have said that the only difference between those struggling with addictions and those who don't is that they struggle in less obvious areas. Maybe not to the point of addiction but certainly with sin. So, I will not pretend I'm a recovering addict. But, I will try to be honest and humble in sharing what I've learned.

Objection 3- “You’re not an addictions counselor Tom, so you just don’t get it.” You're right. But I can read and I come at this from an area that I do know a little about – the Bible. I am advocating for a more serious look at what the Bible has to say about the heart issues behind addictive and sinful behavior.

Objection 4 - “Are you saying ‘Just pray and it will go away Tom? Quit your AA group and rehab and just trust Jesus?’ If so, you really don’t get it.” No. I am not saying that. If you have addiction struggles and have found some support and progress through an AA group and/or rehab program, great! But I am saying that we also need to look and check what we're hearing and learning with Scripture. There may be some deep-seated beliefs about ourselves, or our addictions, that go contrary to Scripture. There may be some wrong belief we hold that actually keeps us in slavery and rejects the freedom

Christ offers. If that's true, wouldn't you want to know about this? Let God's Word speak to and transform your thinking.

If you have never received Christ, this is the crucial first step to dealing with the stuff in your life. Jesus has the authority to release you from any captive hold anything has over you. When you receive Jesus, you receive the Holy Spirit. You will have God in you who is infinitely more powerful than any unclean spirit or addictive behavior.

Jesus has the authority to release us from whatever holds us captive. So we must call out for His rescue and follow His lead to wholeness. Let's do that now as we come to the Lord's Table.