

1. Christ Sets Us Free:
From Our Demons
Luke 8:26-39

In the creation story in Genesis we are told that human beings were the last thing God created. God said, "Let us create humans in our image." We were created to be like God. God had great things in mind for us. How great? In Jesus we see what God intended for us to be: Holy and righteous, in perfect communion and fellowship with God, filled with the Spirit of God, moved and guided by love for God and all God's creation and creatures.

None of us have become what God has intended for us to be, have we? As Paul said, "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We want to be like Christ. We even work at being like Christ. Some people work very hard at being like Christ. But we have a problem: We have restraints that are holding us back. Our Vacation Bible School this week had the theme of Galactic Blastoff. It was about blasting off into space in rockets. Well, we are like a rocket created to blast off into space. The countdown has been completed. The fuel has been lit. But we are not getting off the launch pad, because the landing clamps are still in place, holding us firmly on the ground.

We need to be freed to take off. And Christ has come to do that very thing. Christ came to free us from the restraints that are holding us back from greatness.

For the next three weeks we will be looking at the restraints from which Christ wants to free us, if we will just let him.

This morning we will see how Christ frees us from the restraint of low expectations.

We don't expect much of ourselves, do we? After all, we're only humans, and humans are sinful by nature. So, yes, naturally we sin. We can't help it. We are sinners, so we sin.

Let's think about that. What does it mean to say that as human beings we are sinful. Back when I was in seminary, we had to write a long paper, about thirty or forty pages, expressing our understanding of the gospel in a cohesive, systematic manner. It's called a Credo, which is Latin for "I Believe." As a part of that, we had to explain our understanding of sin and how it came into the world. We all know that human beings are sinful. Why is that? The answer is because we are children of Adam. Adam's sin, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because he wanted to be the equal of God, was the original sin. And his sin was passed on to all his descendants, to all human beings. Now, the question becomes, how did that sin get passed on to us? One of my friends explained it to me this way. He said that Adam's nature was changed, and that we inherit Adam's nature. He went on to explain that Jesus was sinless because Jesus didn't have an earthly father to inherit this sinful nature from. I said to him, "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that the gene for sin is located on the male chromosome and that our sinfulness is a genetic disease?" He kind of looked sheepish and said, "Yeah, I guess that is what I am saying."

I don't believe that. I believe that when Adam and Eve sinned, they passed on their demons to us by creating a dysfunctional family. I believe that original sin is not a genetic disease. It is a social disease. We live in a sick society, and we are all oppressed by the demons which have multiplied with each generation and passed on to us.

That means we are not sinful by nature. A baby is not a little sinner. Immature, yes. But not sinful.

We are sinners, not because we are sinful by nature, but because we live in a sinful world.

Many years ago I served a church in a small town that was especially sinful. These people were involved in feuds that went back generations. They were divided between the respectable people and the trashy people. The trashy people were the ones who hadn't been in the community more than two generations.

A family moved into this town and joined the church. The wife had deep roots in the community, so they were respectable. This family had been highly involved in the Emmaus program before they moved. They were members of a very healthy church and community. The man worked in a well-functioning office. They were a breath of fresh air, so full of joy and love. I thought that they would help transform the church and the community. The man worked for the same company he had worked with before. However he was moved into the department that was responsible for collections from deadbeats. There was no active Emmaus community in this area. Slowly, but surely, I watched this family change. The false pride and contentiousness of the church and the community began to wear them down. After a year, this joyful, loving family became as angry and sad as the rest of the community. We are affected by the sinfulness of the people around us.

In one of my churches, there was a retired high school football coach, Chuck Moser. He was the winningest high school coach in the state of Texas at the time he retired. I was sitting next to Chuck one time at a banquet. I was making conversation with him, so I asked him what the secret of his success was. He told me one of his secrets was changing the players with bad attitudes. He said that he discovered that if you pair a boy with a good attitude with a boy who had a bad attitude, the boy with the bad attitude would change. He would become more enthusiastic and committed to the team. I told him that was a great solution. But he went on to see there was a drawback to it. The attitude of the other boy wouldn't be nearly as good after spending a lot of time with the boy with the bad attitude.

We influence one another. We pull one another up, and we pull each other down.

One more example: Counselors for troubled children encounter a certain scenario over and over again. Parents bring a child to them who is angry and rebellious and destructive to himself and to the people around him. They say they have done everything they can to make him behave and nothing works. Can the counselor help them? Well, the counselor spends time talking with the child. Slowly, but surely, the child becomes more and more reasonable. The counselor is able to help the child see how much trouble he is causing for himself by his actions. But a strange thing happens. As the child gets better, the parents become more and more anxious. What the counselor discovers is that the parents are the real problem. One or both of them has some unresolved issues. Maybe their marriage is in trouble. The child has simply been acting out the problems of the parents and other family members. The parents have been avoiding dealing with their own problems by saying that the child is the one with the problems.

Knowing that helps us understand this story of the Mad Man of Gerasenes. Jesus encounters this crazy, angry, destructive man whom the villagers chain up in a cemetery, because he is so dangerous. The man tells Jesus that he is filled with a legion or a battalion of demons who are forcing him to do these things. Jesus casts the demons out, and they go into a herd of pigs, which stampede into the lake and drown. When the villagers come out, they find the man sitting quietly with Jesus, having a calm, sensible conversation.

I think this was the real healing in this situation. I've been present at a couple of exorcisms. Usually the exorcist orders the demons to leave the person who is "possessed." That never works, and the exorcist begins screaming at the demons. Then you begin wondering who is really possessed by demons.

You probably have heard the old story about the sun and the wind seeing a man who was obviously enjoying wearing a beautiful new coat. They argued about who could get that coat off of the man. The wind went first, and it blew as hard as it could, trying to rip the coat off the man by blowing as hard as it could. But the man simply wrapped the coat more tightly around himself. Then it was the sun's turn. The sun didn't try to take the coat from the man. The sun just gently shone down on the man, and the man took the coat off himself.

That's the way to deal with demons. I have had success in helping people free themselves from their demons by simply listening to them with a loving, caring spirit and talking with them in a calm reasonable manner. It's not a coincidence that when the villagers came out to see what had happened, they found the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

It's also not a surprise that the villagers reacted by being afraid and asking Jesus to leave. Where do you think all those demons came from? They came from the villagers. And guess where those demons were going. They would be returning to the villagers. All of the problems, the sinful and broken attitudes and relationships, which they had dumped on that poor man, calling him the problem, would come back to them. They could not longer use him as the scapegoat. They would have to look at themselves.

That was the bad news. The good news for them, even though they couldn't see it, was that now healing could begin. We can't be healed as long as we project our problems onto someone else. Only when we own our own sinfulness can healing begin.

But we can be healed. We are not sinners by nature. We live in a sinful world. When we sit at Jesus' feet, clothed in the Spirit of God and in our right minds, Jesus helps us to know who we really are and what we can be. He frees us from our hopelessness and our slavery to the sinfulness of the world in which we have lived all our lives. He frees us from our demons to become holy and righteous, good and loving, as we were meant to be.

Don't believe that you have to sin because you are a sinner by nature, because you are, after all, on human. Spend time with Jesus. See what it means to truly be human. Let Jesus free you so that you can become the person God meant for you to be.

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