

Part 30: A Portrait of Power and Control

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The desire for control is a funny thing isn't it? We all want it, we've all seen people who abuse it, and we all know what it's like to lose it. There is often nothing more comforting and empowering than having total control over something. Each of us who used climate control in your homes this past week knows that full well.

But on the flip side, anyone who heard your air conditioner grind to a stop, or malfunction, knows how the smallest threat to our control can quickly turn our peace into panic, our contentment into chaos, and our feelings of superiority into a deep spiral.

The more we try to control in the world, the more we realize what we can't. Just a few weeks ago in the parable of the sower we talked about how there are three major threats to our lives according to scripture: the world, the flesh and the devil. Each of these threatens our peace, our identity and our hope on a daily basis. Nothing can stir feelings helpless like natural disasters beyond our control, spiritual distress despite our desire for peace, or the inevitable weakness and death of our bodies.

This fall we are going to have a short sermon series that helps us speak the gospel to ourselves when we are afflicted by some of these issues specifically—I hope you'll join us for that starting September 4th. But for now, as we continue in the gospel of Luke we aren't primary looking for how we might respond in the midst of these threats to our own control, but instead we are seeing who Jesus is and how he responds to things humans have no control over.

However it is in seeing how Jesus responds to these event we find hope in our own moments of distress. Because while we can't control so many things in this world, we can control how closely we walk next to Jesus—the one who controls all the things we can't.

This is so important to understand as a first priority and we are in the middle of Luke's attempt to show us the unlimited power of Jesus over things which naturally limit and distress us. Last week, Jesus exercised his control over the world causing waves to halt at his word. Today Jesus is going to demonstrate total dominance of the devil by dominating evil spirits, and next week (in what is the text I've most look forward to in the book of Luke) we see Jesus defeating the flesh by making a fool of death itself. It is in seeing the power of Jesus who is God in the flesh that we find hope for those of us who are not God.

Today we are going to read a dramatic story of power, terror and redemption and our big picture is this: **Jesus' authority is powerful, disruptive and restorative.**

The scene for this account is set in our opening verses where, for the first time in Luke's gospel, Jesus extends his ministry outside of Galilee into the land of the Gentiles. This movement towards non-Jews is drastically understated in Luke's gospel, but is something he builds on in the book of Acts. But already we already see Jesus' desire and hope for the nations. In fact it is perhaps for this very reason that Jesus crossed the sea despite the storm, for salvation knows no cultural borders.

And immediately as Jesus steps onto this new frontier, conflict ensues. Let's read this together **Luke 8:26-30**.

We have all heard stories of "rise and fall" narratives. Biblically we have portraits of men like Nebuchadnezzar who went from the most powerful man in the world, to grazing in the desert like a wild animal, on his hands and knees, afflicted by God himself. In politics we have men like Aaron Burr who though a bright young political mind, and vice-president of the United States, lost all his respect and future when he entered a hot tempered duel with Alexander Hamilton. In sports there's men like O.J. Simpson or Pete Rose who, once the brightest stars in their sport, are now forced to sign autographic cards for hours on end in order to stay ahead of fines and debts.

But what's remarkable about the man we meet today is not necessarily how high he started, but how far he had fallen. We aren't told this man was anyone important, only that he was "a man from the city." But Luke's description of him is devastating. As dark as the storm clouds were on Galilee, darker was the state of the man he met in the Gerasenes.

This man from the city, had fallen so far that even the most basic aspects of humanity were seemingly stripped from him. He had, through ways Luke doesn't share, become possessed by a multitude of evil spirits which stripped him of even the most common aspects of control. We can gather from this interaction that he doesn't even have the ability to speak for himself, the demons speak for him. At times they seized not only his voice, but his whole body.

For a long time, Luke tells us, he wore no clothes. Which may cause us even in our modern sensibilities to blush a little bit, but even more than today nakedness in this time was not only silly and immodest but entirely debasing. This man is so depraved that he is literally shameless.

More than that, he no longer lives in the city, he lives among the tombs. Sometimes if he got too close to the city, it would appear that he would be captured by the towns people and clothed in chains and shackles, but even then the demon would overpower him and give him a superhuman strength to break the chains and drive him further out into the desert.

The man from the city is certainly no longer in the city and he appears to be even less of a man--no community, no home, no clothes. We have a homelessness issue in Missoula and I want you to think of the anxiety you might have if standing at a crosswalk a disheveled man in tattered clothes were to come and stand next to you even just to cross with you. We know the emotions we would feel, whether they are appropriate or not. But here a fully naked man, who Mark alludes in his account may have had open wounds on his body, ran, screaming in a loud voice straight at Jesus.

We often cross the street to avoid encounters with individuals. This city had banished this man. Therefore we the readers are left with a question: "What would Jesus do?" Would he send him away as well?

But Jesus is going to do something better. Over this man who himself had no control over the demons, and a city who had no control over the man, Jesus is not going to send the man away, but send the demons away—freeing the man.

This is our first portrait of Jesus' authority: **Jesus' authority is inevitably powerful**. I say inevitably powerful because Jesus' interaction with these demons reveals some important truths about Jesus and his plan and help us understand the problem of evil in our own day. Read with me: **Luke 8:28-33**.

Now before you ask, yes, this is an odd scene. It's not only odd that the demons would desire to be sent into pigs, or why the pigs then would run off a ledge and die. It's odd that it appears we see Jesus negotiating with demons.

We aren't quite sure the significance of the pigs. Perhaps it was to show the kind of fate the man would have suffered at the hands of the demons had not Jesus intervened. But what we do know is that Jesus didn't send the demons into the pigs, Jesus gave the demons permission and they freely went into the pigs on their own accord and they caused the pigs to rush off the cliff.

Which brings us back to the primary question: What is Jesus doing here? Most of us are aware of the government line "We don't negotiate with terrorists," but is that what Jesus is doing that with demons?

If we read this text closely we see this is no negotiation. These are not two equal parties dictating terms of surrender to the one who has the strategic upper hand. Notice again their tone. Three times, once in verse 28, once in verse 31, and once in verse 32, Luke tells us the demons are begging Jesus. They know they are defeated. More than that look at what their first request was: **Luke 8:31**.

They begged that Jesus wouldn't command them into the abyss. We don't see Jesus coming and doing some spiritual jujitsu to conquer the demons. He just showed up and the demons knew they lost. They knew that what men couldn't do by chains and shackles Jesus was able to do with his word. If Jesus gave the command, the demons stood no chance. Just as the winds and waves obeyed Jesus on the sea, here even the demons stood under Jesus' powerful command on the shores.

They knew that this Jesus had the power in that moment to send them into the abyss. This was a term used to describe the place of the dead, a place of suffering for evil spirits and the lost. It's a word used in Revelation 20:1 to describe the bottomless pit that one day Jesus would commit the Devil and all his servants to forever.

When we say walking with Jesus in the midst of hardship is the safest place to be we don't say that because it's a cute silver lining, we don't say that because it's a crutch for the weak. We say it because God is the only source of true power in this world and in the person of Jesus Christ, the Triune Godhead has set all of that power to save and restore his people now, and to one day remove sin and suffering forever.

This sort of theological understanding is understood even by the demons. They recognize what even the Pharisees couldn't. Jesus was the Son of God. They also recognize that Jesus' victory over them was inevitable. In fact Matthew's account makes this more clear when they say this: **Matthew 8:29**.

The time would come when Jesus would crack the seal of the abyss and put evil in its place. But what we see in this text, and in Jesus' treatment of these demons is that this day, is not yet.

Where Jesus walked on the earth we see what the Kingdom of God is like, demons are evicted forever. But Jesus has ascended and this world is not the Kingdom of God. But that day is coming. So why does

Jesus delay? Why not now? Why do we see his power displayed, but why is that inevitable day still to come?

Because Jesus wants to save more people. Because there are eternal things, better things, yet to come though evil still exists. Paul says this in **Romans 9:22-23**. Vessels of wrath exist now, so that vessels of mercy may enjoy eternity. Peter says this in **2 Peter 3:9**. Jesus himself says this in **Matthew 24:14**.

Why does evil exist now? So that salvation, glory, and restoration might be experienced by more and more people later. But what we also see in this text is that though suffering exists, Jesus does not leave his saints without his help in the midst of it. Jesus brings relief in the middle of the world's woes as we await that final day. Jesus is, as Psalm 57 says, the place where we hide ourselves till the storms of destruction pass us by.

But before we see that relief we see another paradox of Jesus' control. This is our second point today: **Jesus' authority is uncomfortably disruptive.**

Read with me **Luke 8:34-37**.

This is another humorous, but tragic story. It's humorous because you can imagine the confusion of the herdsmen. They are sitting up on the hillside above the shore with their flock looking down at the lake. They see a small boat cross, and a group of people get out only to have the naked possessed man from the hills sprint up to them. The possessed man stops dead in his tracks and begins to talk to one of the men from the boat. Then all of a sudden their whole herd of pigs gets up and runs off a cliff into the lake!

But what's humorous to us, wasn't to them. Luke tells us they fled. That word communicates a flight for safety, they thought they were in danger and they ran and told everyone else. While fearful confusion grasped their experience they knew enough to tell townspeople who appeared to be at the center of it—for when they all went to see what happened they all came to Jesus.

And in seeing Jesus, they see the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind and they were afraid. In fact, Luke again tells us in verse 37 seized with fear, so much so they asked Jesus to leave.

Now what caused this fear? It's because they realized the disruptive force of Jesus' authority.

They saw the man was healed. They knew that Jesus was powerful. They connected some dots in their heads with this man, the demons and their pigs. This authority-speaking Jesus brought a challenge to their previous existing façade of control and comfort.

They encountered the man who had control over the man over whom they had no control. Remember the man is from the town. The town had frequently tried to chain him, shackle him, and guard him. But the demons would give him superhuman strength to break the bonds and terrorize the town untouched.

I was talking to one of our members this week who grew up in Africa and she mentioned how her town in Kenya had a crazed man in it. He would wake, wail and cause the whole town to be fearful whenever he was around. But this man was even stronger and therefore more terrorizing.

And these townspeople come to two conclusions which would lead them to send Jesus away.

First, the sheer power of Jesus was overwhelming. Imagine if you were out in the woods camping and you saw a bear beginning to sniff around your campsite. Few things would cause us fear like that. But what if the bear was all of a sudden snatched by something much larger from the woods and you hear it destroyed in the shadows. Yes, to a degree you would be grateful the bear is gone but a much larger question remains. What is this new power and is it good? You see Paul tells us in Romans 1 that the power of God is displayed all over our world. The challenge therefore of our experience is not to realize Jesus' power, but instead to realize his goodness. Is the one able to shape the mountains, sustain the sun and remove the bear good, holy, or kind? If we cannot understand the character and nature of the one who commands the seas he will always appear to be a fearful threat to our existence.

But secondly, the work of Jesus was disruptive. It disrupted their prosperity and their peace. Their pigs were not their pets. Agriculture was their income, and all of it just drown in the lake. But also the town had gotten used to managing the demon possessed man. As long as he was on the outside of the town, they felt a sense of peace but now it appeared this man was set to rejoin society and they were a bit skeptical and fearful of that.

The town was safe before Jesus' salvation. Their comfort was protected before Jesus' salvation. Their flocks yielded prosperity before Jesus' salvation.

For us as readers we realize the foolishness of their fear. Didn't they just see what Jesus did? Haven't they read the gospels? Didn't they watch the Passion? Why would they send Jesus away?

But how many of us find ourselves increasingly uncomfortable with Jesus' own power in our own lives? How many places in our own affections, our own relationships, our own bank accounts and past times do we ask Jesus to take his disruptive force and get back into the boat?

You see the Legion of Demons were cast out of the man, but the darkness remained. We might look at Jesus and think, he's great for those who have a legion of demons, but I've got a nice house, a safe relationship and a good thing going.

But while demon possession is a real thing, the Bible speaks much more broadly about our need for relief from spiritual forces. Who is it that needs this Jesus? Who is under the influence of the demonic?

Consider **James 3:14-16**. Anyone who has jealousy and selfish ambition—those who look at the world and boast that they can get what they want on their own. Based on what grounds? Because they think have the authority they need to get what they want. Let's not forget that these people thought they were safe and free but they still had the man on the outside. They were free, but only when trapped on the inside. They thought they solved the problem by their own ambition, but by the end we see they are the ones enslaved.

When the gospel comes knocking it comes with destructive force. Jesus turns our world upside down. He will threaten your wisdom and your boasting according to the world. This is why Augustine resisted conversion for the longest time. He loved the idea of salvation but he loved his sexual exploits, his nice clothes and his academic position.

But look at what he said after his conversion: **"They are more strongly taken up with other things which have more power to make them miserable, than that which they so faintly remember to make them happy."**

What does he mean by that? He means that you can put your time and effort into building big walls and large herds, but when the sheep fall off a cliff, the man strolls back into town, and the storm comes—the things which once seemed to bring us peace and comfort now cause us to only desire more and more of what was quickly lost. We realize how fragile it is to live by worldly comfort. But here is the one who stands above it all and this is our last point: **Jesus' authority is amazingly restorative**. Here we see the character of the man who has the authority to command demons and interrupt our lives.

Look with me at **Luke 8:37-39**.

There is great irony in this passage where even as a town was freed from a man who was spiritually enslaved, it was the town who remained in bondage and the formerly possess man who saw the peace and comfort of Jesus.

What everyone else feared, this man wanted. The truth is, you can be like the demons and you can be like the townspeople. You can confess Jesus' authority, you can witness his power, but unless you are saved by it, unless you see him as your savior, you will always fear it.

But this Jesus has come to save those who are in fear.

I love how this man is found—at the feet of Jesus, fully clothed, and in his right mind.

What sin distorted, Jesus restored. You see the demons wondered what Jesus wanted to do with them, the townspeople feared what might happen if Jesus stayed. But in this man we see all that Jesus would do in full. All of his power, all of his authority, all of his strength would save. It would heal, and it would restore.

We watch movies all the time where superheroes defeat the villains but leave the city smoldering in their wake. We've heard of surgeons who tried to remove the cancer but had it complicated and caused harm because it was too interwoven around a vital organ.

We might look at the power of Jesus in salvation and think that the cost is too high, the power too transformative. But here we see the power of Jesus and the character of his salvation. It is disruptive, it is powerful enough to condemn, it is reorienting, and destructive to sin—but the result of it is not a man left shriveled and lifeless or a town picking up the pieces—its total redemption and renewal.

The person of power we fear in our sin is the person of power we learn to love in our salvation.

What's crazy about this account is that the demons begged Jesus, and he obliged. The townspeople begged Jesus, and he listened. But here the man he healed begged him but Jesus didn't grant him the answer. Look at **Luke 8:28-29**.

Do not mistake God's "no's" in prayer to be a sign of his apathy or lack of love towards you. The demons got their requests answered and fell off a cliff. The townspeople were obliged and they lost the Kingdom of God. But this man was turned down but in the midst of it was entirely restored.

This is the beauty of this whole story. Because it doesn't take a Biblical scholar to see that of the three people who voiced requests, it's the one that didn't get answered who is also the happiest, the healthiest and the safest. But that's because it shows the fullness of Jesus' scope of redemption.

Remember how the story began? There was a man from the city who had demons. And what happened? He was driven from his home, he was naked, and he was enslaved. What did Jesus do?

He set him at his feet. He clothed him. He restored to him his right mind and sent the forces of darkness packing. And where does the man end up? In the city.

You see one day Jesus will remove all the people he saves from conflict entirely. But for right now he sends fully redeemed people back into a broken world but with a story of salvation and a clear purpose.

To those who stand on the hills wondering if the nature of this power is for you or against you—look to the cross and realize that for all who come to him, he is for you. As certain and inevitable the power to judge is for those who stay away, so too is the promise to heal all who come.

And when we come—we are restored and repurposed for what we are made for. Here's the great hope for our evangelism. What does evangelism look like? Jesus tells us here—go home. Matthew says Jesus' said, "go to your friends." Evangelism might terminate in the nations but it begins in the neighborhood.

And what do we share? Jesus gives us the wonderful starting point: "With what God has done for you?" This man shows the soundness of his theology and his own gospel centrality where the only way to answer what God had done was to share what Jesus had done. Did you see that?

Where does the power of God do good to us? In Jesus.

This is your hope, and the hope for those still trying to understand. Christianity is not the belief or the confession that God exists. Christianity is the belief that God exists and that in Jesus Christ he has set forward to do something good for you—to restore to you what was broken even though the world cannot see it.

And this powerful Jesus sends us back, for a time, into the same world of tribulation but he gives us an experience with him that makes us bold ambassadors who proclaim with great joy, all that Jesus has done for us.