

(mis)Understanding Jesus [Part 6]

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[0 : 0 0] In our morning services at the moment we are doing a series that has got two titles. The main title is understanding Jesus and as we've been saying each week the reason we have this title is because we are looking at some key moments in the life of Jesus in order to better understand who he is and why he came. But the kind of other title that goes alongside that is misunderstanding Jesus and the reason we have that title is because we want to identify ways in which Jesus has been misunderstood both by people who saw him and met him but also by people today.

This morning we're going to turn back to Mark chapter 5. We're looking at the whole section from verse 1 to 20 which we read but let me read again from verse 1 and 2. They came to the other side of the sea to the country of the garrisons and when Jesus had stepped out of the boat immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. Like all the passages that we've been looking at over the past few weeks this one's easy to misunderstand and that's perhaps especially the case here because this event can seem so far removed from our lives today. If we compare what happens in Mark 5 1 to 20 with what you were doing last week then I'm pretty certain that they probably seem a million miles apart. We've got a madman in a graveyard. We've got a legion of unclean spirits possessing him. We've got a herd of pigs charging into the sea. The only place that any of us will have seen anything like that in the past week I think will have been on Netflix. So a passage like this can seem strange, obscure, maybe even a bit intimidating but if we conclude that this strange passage has got nothing to teach us today then we are jumping to the wrong conclusions because the truth is and what I hope that we'll see today is that this passage is one of the most relevant passages for today in the whole of the New Testament. Far from creating confusion this passage is actually vital for correcting some massive misunderstandings and we're going to look at three of these misunderstandings today. Number one this passage shows us that we can easily misunderstand sin. The narrative here in the passage we read is very vivid. We can put verses 1 to 7 up on the screen. These describe how Jesus crossed the sea of Galilee along with his disciples. They come ashore and they're confronted by this man who has an unclean spirit who's possessed by a demon or by demons. We're given a bit of background information about him. We're told that he lived in the tombs.

He was violent both towards others and towards himself. His behaviour was clearly well known to the community and they tried several times to subdue him but the aggression arising from the condition that he was in meant that he had extraordinary strength which no doubt left people even more afraid of him. When Jesus arrives this man sees him, runs down to meet him and a confrontation begins. So what's it all about? Well this is one of many occasions in the gospels where Jesus is confronted by people who are possessed by demons. After he began his public ministry he quickly came face to face with satanic opposition. Now immediately all of that can make us think okay well this seems a little bit weird. It can all seem a wee bit like a fairy tale to us today because in our culture we don't tend to think or talk much in terms of demon possession and many people will look at passages like this and say well yeah that that made sense then because that was just the ancient world's way of explaining illnesses that we now understand a lot better and I'm sure that that probably is true of some conditions that in the Greco-Roman world they would describe things to a spiritual realm that later scientific discoveries have helped to clarify but we need to be very careful about just dismissing all of this as a fairy tale or saying well yeah that was how they understood things then but it's not like that now and I think there's two things that we have to recognize. One is that our view of this kind of thing is very western secular and sanitized in many ways and that's very different to many other parts of the world today and so there's there's many places in the world many cultures that have no hesitation in recognizing demonic activity even with all the advances that take place in psychiatric medicine and a friend of mine who many of you know Suraj from Nepal I studied along with him in Edinburgh and he was talking about this one day to us and he was saying so you know you guys do you think recognize demon possession today and I was kind of like well I don't I don't really know and he just looked at me he was like you're crazy like we see this all the time in Nepal and so our view is kind of a local view in terms of the world today and it takes an enormous amount of confidence for us to say you know we know better than the west and I personally can't claim any expertise in this question as to how much this kind of things happens today and so I'm hesitant to offer any definitive conclusions but my own view just if you're interested is that I would be a little bit hesitant to say that that things today are exactly the same as they was in Mark chapter 5 and the reason I would say that is because I think that the arrival of Jesus prompted a particularly strong level of opposition from satanic forces and the death and resurrection of Jesus binds those forces and restricts their activity in a way that that makes things a little different today as they were then but I also think and again this is just me sharing my own view that I think that we are far too quick to dismiss this reality today and I think we actually have to recognize the ongoing reality of spiritual warfare a bit more than we do so that's the first thing to say our view you know of this or the view that people on the street might have is very different to many other parts of the world still

today but the other thing I want to say is that regardless of what happens in particular places or in particular periods this passage is challenging all of us to think about how we understand the world and in particular to think about how we understand good and evil and ultimately we have all got to make a choice in terms of how we understand this either we are born into our realm where good and evil already exist and we have to reckon with that reality now when I say we I mean the whole of humanity so either we're born into our realm where good and evil already exists and we have to reckon with that reality or we are born into our realm where good and evil are created by us and we are responsible for that reality in other words human humanity is either susceptible to all that's evil or humanity is the source of all that is evil and the latter of these views the view that humanity is the source of all evil that's the that's the the view that would say you know there's no such thing as demons no such things as a spiritual realm no such thing as spiritual warfare humanity and the physical universe is all that there is that view does not make humanity clever that view makes humanity grotesque because it's saying that every single example of hideous behavior among humans is entirely our own doing and what I want you to recognize is that the bible never degrades humanity to that level instead the bible tells us that humanity is born into a realm where the good holy righteous god is opposed by satan and the kingdom of evil and this points us to the fact that according to a biblical worldview the whole of history and reality is in the context of a conflict narrative god is good his purposes are good he is holy righteous and utterly pure but he's opposed by satan the deceiver the accuser the father of lies and the enemy of all that is good and a good way to ask yourself you know whether whether that's true a good way to ask yourself whether that's true or not is to think to yourself when you think of death what do you think of do you think of just something that just has to happen that you just have to accept or do you think of an enemy and if your gut instinct tells you that death is an enemy then that's telling you that the biblical worldview is the accurate one this conflict between god and satan points us to the reality of spiritual warfare a cosmic conflict between the kingdom of god and the kingdom of evil and humanity has been dragged into that conflict and we read you can read about that in genesis chapter three when satan deceives humanity we sin against god we turn against him in rebellion and we're dragged into this battle god's response to that is not to walk away god's response is to engage in battle and a conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent between god's kingdom and the kingdom of evil shapes the rest of history for centuries satan was in the ascendancy as god's people waited for the savior to come but now

in mark matthew luke john jesus arrives the kingdom of god comes and a massive confrontation begins between satan and jesus mark five is one of the many battles that took place in that monumental war now all of this is pointing us to one of the most common and catastrophic misunderstandings that any of us can fall into that is the misunderstanding of thinking that sin isn't a big deal that is a massively important lesson that mark five is teaching us because it is so easy to think that sin is not that big a deal and the reason we tend to fall into this trap is because the culture around us thinks that way tends to think that sin isn't that big a deal two massive things two major things have happened in the past a hundred years one is that many things that were once considered sinful are no longer seen as sins or stuff that once was bad no longer is bad you can think of many examples for yourself the other though is that stuff that we still regard as bad has now become legitimate entertainment for us so yes we still regard certain things as wrong but yet the newspapers we buy the books we read the tv we like the films we watch often the most attractive and popular forms of entertainment are full of behavior that's horrific now i'm not saying that to sound all kind of pious and all like you know you shouldn't buy a newspaper you shouldn't read watch tv and i'm not saying that at all i believe in liberty of conscience but what i am saying is that all of that can combine to make us think that sin isn't that big a deal let's just think oh yeah it's kind of it's bad it's wrong but it's not that big a deal that is a terrifying misunderstanding we've got to recognize how serious dangerous and horrible sin is and this passage helps us to do that because it shows what sin is really like when you observe the behavior of this man one thing is abundantly clear sin is utterly destructive so when you think of the word sin you know often we can think you know what do you think of when you think of sin you think when you think of something you think bad wrong or something like that and and that's accurate sin is bad sin is wrong but when you think of sin i also want you to think of the word destruction because that's what sin wants to do to you and to everyone around us sin wants to destroy you and you see it so clearly in this man he was aggressive uncontrollable violent and constantly self-harming he lived among the tombs he was attracted to death he was a total mess and then when the demons come out of him and enter the pigs what do they do they immediately go on a rampage of self-destruction that's what sin wants to do to you and to me that's the devil's objective that's how horrible sin is it's totally destructive and even though you and i've probably never met a man like like this man the evidence of the destructive power of sin is all around us so humanity's greed is destroying our environment we're seeing that so clearly in all the all the

[15 : 20] emphasis just now on climate change addiction is destroying the lives of people all over scotland sexual immorality is destroying relationships and people's self-esteem unforgiveness is destroying families gossip is destroying friendships i am 38 years old according to the office of national statistics the thing that is statistically most likely to kill me is myself is myself sin is utterly horrible if we think that sin isn't a big deal we're not just misunderstanding jesus we are misunderstanding everything that's going on around us so that's the first misunderstanding that's set before us the second misunderstanding though i want us to highlight is that this passage shows us that we can easily misunderstand mess we can easily misunderstand mess the man in these verses is in a horrific state he's clearly been in that condition for a while and while and there's been attempts to subdue him these have failed and i can't help wonder imagine that you were standing on the shore that you were just a local maybe you've gone for a walk on the the shore so the sea of Galilee that day you see jesus's boat arriving you see him get out and then you think oh man here comes the crazy guy from the tombs and you hear him and you see him running down and you see him standing in front of jesus and you think oh my goodness this is not going to end well and when we are confronted by the havoc that sin can cause in people's lives we can easily come to the same kind of conclusion we see the destructive power of sin we see the wreckage that it leaves in people's lives and we think to ourselves there's no hope and i found myself thinking that many times you you come across circumstances that are just in a horrendous mess and you just think there's no chance this passage is showing me and you that that conclusion is wrong if we look at someone's life and think that's too much of a mess then we're misunderstanding jesus and that's shown so powerfully in the restoration that takes place in these verses the man's healed by jesus and in verse 15 you've got this beautiful description of him clothed sitting and in his right mind but that healing takes place it arises because of a crucial distinction that jesus makes in verse eight let me bring up verse eight because in this verse jesus makes a crucial distinction um he says i forgot my glasses today so i can't read that it's too far away from me come out of the man you unclean spirit is what jesus said and what i want you to notice is the fact that jesus makes a distinction between the man and the mess come out of the man you unclean spirit in other words jesus recognizes that underneath all the destructive havoc that sin has caused in this man's life underneath that is a precious person who needs to be healed and who can be healed you think of all the horrible mess in this man's life there was violence isolation distress misery self harm it's so easy to look at this man and to think he's horrible you look at this man and you think how horrible he is that's not how jesus thinks jesus looks at this man and he thinks how horrible is life for this precious man it's astonishing in verse seven

the demons are begging Jesus that they won't be tormented and yet they've got no hesitation in tormenting this man night and day they're cruel merciless destructive and totally selfish Jesus looks at that mess and he does two brilliant things he looks at the demonic forces and he opposes them with relentless determination and he looks at the man and he heals him with abundant compassion and this is where we see that the passage is giving us two vital warnings as we've been saying it's warning us against a casual view of sin God forbid that we ever think that sin is a play thing that we can muck about with but at the same time this passage is warning us against a hopeless view of brokenness we are surrounded by brokenness in Scotland today in our cities our towns our communities there's people in the grip of addiction people trapped in poverty people who are crushed by pressure people who are scarred by betrayal people who've been heartbroken by others people who are being tormented by themselves maybe even as people who are just mindlessly distracted by entertainment you look at all that it's so easy to feel helpless it's so easy to think that it's hopeless but this passage reminds us that if you ever see a mess and think that it's hopeless then you're misunderstanding Jesus the passage makes it absolutely clear that there's hope in the midst of chaos it's showing us that no one and nothing is too messy for Jesus we've got to always make the distinction that Jesus made we've got to distinguish between the man or the woman and the mess and that hope for people in a mess is powerfully demonstrated by what happened to the pigs now the pigs is kind of a sort of the the strangest part of all this passage and it's maybe the hardest one to understand so when I say that the pigs are a demonstration of hope you might be thinking you know what do you mean Thomas what are you going what do you say well let me try and explain first of all let me ask you a question is what happened to the pigs a miracle what do you think in your mind do you think of all the miracles of Jesus you know you think about how he healed people who were blind how he helped those who were paralysed and he even raised those who were dead he fed the 5000 he came the storm so is what happened to the pigs a miracle you can answer in your own mind so you don't need to shout out well these questions always depend on our definitions but I think there is a sense in which this is a miracle because if a miracle is something that's extraordinary something that's that can't be explained just by natural causes if it's something that that is beyond what naturally and normally happens then this is a miracle and if it's a miracle then it's a sign and if it's a sign it's telling us something and I think there's three key things that this sign is telling us three key things that we learn from what happens to the pigs the first we've mentioned already it shows us how destructive sin is when the demons go into the pigs they destroy them and that's showing us what sin wants to do to us it's showing us how destructive sin is but the second thing is the fact that because the demons went into the pigs it showed the man that they had come out of him

you think about being that man you think about the torment he's been under night and day for such a long time Jesus says to him come out you unclean spirit how's he going to know that that's happened after all this time and he can look at that heard of pigs and realize they're no longer in me so there's a huge reassurance to the man through what happens here so it shows us how destructive sin is it shows the man that they've come out of him but the third thing is that I think Jesus also wants to present before us a very powerful irony in the events that happened I want you to imagine that you are a reporter for the Decapolis Gazette I'm not sure if such a newspaper exists certainly back in the year 29 AD or whenever we are at the moment here you didn't have newspapers but imagine that you were just using an agronomic illustration for a moment so headline the next day supposing this is a Thursday I don't know what day it would have been but supposing it was a Thursday what's what's the headline going to be 2000 pigs massacred by Rabbi or whatever it might be I don't know it would be huge headlines I think that these pigs had come charging down the hill and you can see everybody came out to see what had happened because there's just pigs pigs everywhere imagine that the man had charged into the sea imagine that he'd been the one who had died that Jesus hadn't come across the sea and that it had just been you know the guy in the tombs finally just gone a bit crazy and he was found the next day in the sea would that be the headline I doubt it

I doubt many people would have noticed and those who did would have probably been actually sleep quite relieved so what I'm trying to say here is that the death of the pigs was a far bigger public outcry public sort of drama than the fact that this man's life was a mess and what Jesus is showing us here is that the general mindset of people is that a herd of 2000 pigs is more important than a madman Jesus says not to me Jesus is showing that this man is worth far more than 2000 pigs no matter how much of a mess he's in we can so easily misunderstand mess and think that people are too broken that is never ever true and the reason it's not true is in our third point so we've said that we can misunderstand sin we can misunderstand mess this passage thirdly shows us that we can easily misunderstand Jesus's mission as we've been saying this passage reminds us that the whole of history in fact is in the context of a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil mark finalist we've been saying is a glimpse into that conflict one of the things that makes abundantly clear is that demonic forces are powerful let me bring up verses three and four and verse 13 you can see how that power is demonstrated through the strength of the man he could break chains you see the demonic power destroying the pigs and this is one just one example of the fearsome strength of the kingdom of evil satan is capable of causing havoc but the key thing that mac wants you to know as you read this passage is that in the face of all of that demonic power Jesus is far far stronger and in every encounter between Jesus and the kingdom of evil in the gospels there's only ever one outcome Jesus is stronger and it's reminding us of the fact that at the heart of Jesus's mission is a determination to confront fight and totally defeat the kingdom and forces of evil this goes back to what we've been saying about the conflict narrative that all of history's in this battle between good and evil that heavenly battle has raged and in the days of the new testament that heavenly battle has intruded into time hell throws everything it can at Jesus and every single time it does it Jesus shows that he's stronger even in this passage you see it you've got this man who can break shackles and change so I don't know if you ever used to watch world's strongest man when I was young used to love watching you see people with phenomenal strength this man's like that incredibly strong people are not able to subdue him Jesus meets him and he subdues him and what does he do he just speaks so the guy who could break chains is bound just by the words that came out of Jesus's mouth and all of this is pointing us to a fact to an aspect of the personal work of Jesus that we can easily forget if you read through the gospels often our attention is drawn to Jesus's compassion his wisdom his humility his gentleness his obedience and these are massively important things which I love to highlight and which the bible rightly highlights but if we think that Jesus's ministry is just about teaching and kindness and wisdom and humility if we think that that's just what Jesus is about then we're in danger of misunderstanding him because alongside all of that Jesus has come

to confront the kingdom of evil and as he does so he shows us that he is the mightiest bravest and strongest warrior that the world has ever seen Jesus has come to do battle he's come to destroy the kingdom of evil he's come to achieve total victory and of course that's what God has been saying all along in Genesis 3 when God responds to humanity's fault he says I'll put enmity between you and the woman between your offspring and her offspring he shall bruise your head you shall bruise his heel the seed of the serpent is strong it can bruise the heel but the seed of the woman is stronger he will crush the serpent's head and ultimately that victory is achieved on the cross Hebrews tells us that beautifully in chapter 2 since therefore the children share in flesh and blood he likewise himself partook of the same things that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death that is the devil and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery when Jesus died and rose again he crushed the kingdom of evil and the restoration of the universe and of humanity began we can so easily misunderstand sin and think that it's a play thing it's not it's a hideously destructive force we can misunderstand mess and think that all hope is gone but if we do we're misunderstanding Jesus he was on a mission to crush satan and the kingdom of evil to undo all the damage that sin has caused we can so easily misunderstand this but what I want you to notice is that Jesus doesn't misunderstand any of it Jesus knows how awful sin is he knew what he was up against he knew that the satanic opposition would be relentless and brutal he knew how big the enemy was Jesus knows the mess that sin has placed us in he knows how much damage it's done he knows how broken the world is he knows how broken we are that even though we're not the ultimate source of evil we've still done a huge amount to make things worse Jesus sees and knows the hideous power of the enemy he sees and knows the brokenness of humanity and he could so easily have concluded that we're just not worth the fight but he doesn't

[32 : 13] Jesus looks at this man Jesus looks at humanity Jesus looks at you and he says I'll fight to the death for them we said at the start that this strange passage is one actually one of the most relevant passages that we could be looking at there's two reasons for that it's relevant because it's getting us to think about the biggest questions of life the reality of good and evil the reality of heaven and hell the reality of the kingdom of god and the kingdom of evil and the fact that there is ultimately no middle ground it's getting us to think about the big questions of life but it's also relevant because it's telling us all what we need to do this week if you're not a Christian yet then this week you've got to think about it you've got to think about all that this passage is pointing towards you've got to think about all the mess that the world around us is in you've got to think about all that Jesus has claimed and demonstrated you've got to think about it but if you are a Christian this week we have got to talk about it you see that so brilliantly in the closing verses of this passage verses 19 and 20 oh sorry I was going to put the one in the screen oh they are excellent and the man wanted to go with Jesus and Jesus says no go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you that's my job and your job for this week and it's a great reminder that at the heart of witnessing the Lord is just telling people how much Jesus has done for you who's helped you loved you guided you protected you he's given you answers he's given you peace so for all of us we're going to think about it we've got to talk about it

Amen let's pray Father we thank you that in a world that is full of so much that's good and full of so much that's evil we thank you that Jesus has come as king and as saviour help us all to see the relevance of this passage help us never to misunderstand sin help us never to misunderstand mess and help us to never misunderstand your mission please teach us more about all of these things as we go into this week we pray that we'd all be thinking about it and that we'd all be talking about it to your glory amen