

Spiritual Freedom
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And...there met [Jesus] out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains,...neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself. Mark 5:2-5

If you were to reflect on the question, "How did last week go for you?" What comes to mind? You could think about what you did or what events took place around you. Or you could reflect on where your heart and mind have been this last week. You could focus on some of the qualities of your inner life.

A common false idea that we all fall prey to is that we think and feel our outer life produces our inner life. It seems as though the events around us and the people involved directly produce the inner life that we experience. Consequently from this perspective a person might say things like, "I had a bad week because the photocopier at work broke several times during a key project." or "I was really depressed by a person's constant complaining." The implication of this way of thinking is that if the workplace could just get a decent copier, the person will be more likely to have a good week and if others stopped complaining the person wouldn't get depressed.

What events this week triggered negative emotional reactions in yourself? What happened that resulted in you feeling bitter, discouraged, angry, impatient or filled with self-pity.

The story of the man possessed by the legion of demons describes a reality of our inner experience. Although the appearance is different, our problems are almost exactly the same as his. He could not help himself till Jesus came to help him. He was a human machine being operated by spiritual forces. They were directing his actions as if he were a robot with a remote control.

But you might ask, aren't we free? Hasn't the Lord promised, even guaranteed that we are not in this position of helplessness? And the answer is yes, the Lord offers us freedom of choice and supports it in our lives, but this does not mean that we receive the benefits of this freedom. Any time that we think and feel that external events have caused a negative state of mind or a negative emotional reaction within us, we are saying that we are not free spiritually and unless you are quite different from most people you're likely doing it many times each day. Something happens, say a close friend makes a joke at your expense in front of a number of people. Your reaction may be that you retaliate with an angry and cutting remark. A person watching this interaction might make an observation about your anger and you could easily say, "Of course I'm angry, and my supposed friend started it!" In that state of mind we are possessed by evil spirits. We do not choose it. It just happened as an instant reaction to an external event. When have you been possessed recently in this sense of the word? What happened that caused a significant negative reaction in your mind and heart?

Sometimes we try to handle these negative reactions in the same way that the people in the New Testament story tried to handle the man possessed by the legion of demons. Just as they tried to bind him up with chains and shackles, we can recognize the mess that our destructive states of mind produce and promise ourselves that we will never do that again. We can set rules or limits for ourselves that we hope will prevent the problem, such as trying to remember to count to ten before

we respond in any way when we sense anger in ourselves. We can experience some success with controlling our behavior, but strong negative reactions will usually burst free sooner or later and express themselves. When a situation hurts deeply enough, we will not even think of counting to ten before we respond. A person who is paying attention to the results of his attempts to control these reactions can eventually come to recognize that he, by himself, lacks the power to control them. No matter what chains of personal resolution or shackles of self-imposed rules are put in place, something happens especially when we are caught off-guard, and our reaction breaks out with a vengeance.

A difficulty we face is that our reactions feel so right, and we can think of so many ideas to support what we are feeling, thinking and doing. This is inevitable in our early stages of regeneration. Our natural heredity and the patterns of life it fosters leads us to mis-perceive ourselves and the events happening in our lives. This is what is meant by the following passage from *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*.

None of us who by conviction and manner of life has chosen evil and the falsity which comes of it can know what good loves and true ideas are, because we believe that our own evil loves are good and thus that our own falsity is truth. However, if we by conviction and manner of life have chosen good loves and the true ideas which come from those loves, we will know what evil loves and false ideas are. The reason is that all good, and the truth which comes of it, is in its essence heavenly, and that which is not in its essence heavenly is still of heavenly origin. But all evil and the falsity which comes of it is in its essence hellish, and what is not in its essence hellish still comes from that origin. Everything heavenly is bathed in light and everything hellish is sunk in darkness. (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 19)

Our natural heredity leads us to think such things as, "He deserves it, he is wrong," or "This always happens to me, I am such a failure." But as one person put it, although we tend to think that we have a right to be angry or depressed or whatever negative feeling we're experiencing, in reality the Lord says we have a right not to be angry. We have right not to be depressed. But rather than experiencing these rights, like the man in the story, we find ourselves spiritually separated from others roaming alone among the mountains of self-importance or the tombs of morbid self-pity, bemoaning how wrong things are. And who gets hurt? Sometimes lots of people, but for certain, we do. We miss the joy, the peace, the usefulness that the Lord wants us to experience more than anything else.

We will never solve the problems of our natural reaction to the events of life by ourselves. We need to turn the Lord, ask for His presence within our life. We've heard this many times, but living it is a different matter. It takes a consistency of effort and greater attention to the dynamics of our mind, than most of us have the habit of giving. And without this regular effort and attention, we will be possessed over and over again, hurting ourselves and often others.

It will not work to give effort and attention to an undefined sense that there are evil loves and false ideas that trouble our lives. The Lord has been quite explicit that this doesn't work. Specific evil inclinations and false ideas that warp our perspective need to be recognized in the very tangible daily experience that makes up each minute of our natural life. And we will never see them if we don't develop the ability to watch the thoughts and concerns that ebb and flow through our mind. Watching does not mean controlling or attempting to chain up bad stuff. Remember, it doesn't work. Watching means trying to see it for what it really is. It means quickly reflecting to oneself, "Notice that you're telling yourself that you are a failure because that person isn't happy with what you did. Why does

their unhappiness have to mean that you failed?" It means reflecting to oneself, "Notice that you are getting really angry at anything or anyone who interferes with what you want to be doing now." Until we have watched and observed the natural state of our mind, we will not be ready to turn to the Lord for help. We will not be ready to pray for help in any meaningful way. It is very hard for the Lord to help us if we are asking him to help us fight an undefined set of evils and falsities. It is when we know the slow death of self-pity and see quite clearly how it comes whenever we don't get what we think we deserve, that we can ask the Lord to cast it from our heart.

Without effort and attention to watch and see the natural responses of our lower mind, we will not be free in the key events of our spiritual lives. We will be run by evil spirits. They will control our responses, direct our concerns, and focus our thoughts. Freedom is not something we have no matter what we do. Yes, the Lord has guaranteed that we will always have the possibility of freedom, but this possibility will only become a reality when we make the effort and give the attention necessary for it.

So what are you going to notice in coming week? How much will your attention be absorbed by your outer life and how much will it be used to watch your inner life. The Lord promises us that watching our inner life is the only source of freedom. It is through our efforts here that we provide a place for Lord's presence, that we provide for growing love, growing wisdom, and growing freedom. **It** is through our efforts to cooperate with the Lord that we provide for the freedom to be happy when things aren't perfect, the freedom to be constructive when times are bad. As we do our part we can be sure that day by day we will be set free by the Lord to enjoy the blessings that He wants so much for each of us to have. Amen.

Lessons: *Mark 5:1-20, Psalm 37, Heaven and Hell 590, 597, 598 portions*

Mark 5:120

¹ Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. ² And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, ³ who had *his* dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, ⁴ because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. ⁵ And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. ⁷ And he cried out with a loud voice and said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me." ⁸ For He said to him, "Come out of the man, unclean spirit!" ⁹ Then He asked him, "What *is* your name?" And he answered, saying, "My name *is* Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ Also he begged Him earnestly that He would not send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now a large herd of swine was feeding there near the mountains. ¹² So all the demons begged Him, saying, "Send us to the swine, that we may enter them." ¹³ And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea. ¹⁴ So those who fed the swine fled, and they told *it* in the city and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one *who had been* demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ¹⁶ And those who saw it told them how it happened to him *who had been* demon-possessed, and about the swine. ¹⁷ Then they began to plead with Him to depart from their region. ¹⁸ And when He got into the boat, he who had been demon-possessed begged Him that he might be with Him. ¹⁹ However, Jesus did not permit him, but said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done

for you, and how He has had compassion on you." ²⁰ And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled.

Psalm 37:1-7

¹ Do not fret because of evildoers, Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. ² For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb. ³ Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. ⁴ Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart. ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring *it* to pass. ⁶ He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday. ⁷ Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.

Heaven and Hell 590, 597, 598:1-3

There is a perpetual equilibrium between heaven and hell. From hell there continually breathes forth and ascends an endeavor to do evil, and from heaven there continually breathes forth and descends an endeavor to do good.

This equilibrium or spiritual balance is essentially a freedom that it exists between what is good and what is evil and between what is true and what is false, and these are spiritual realities. So the ability to intend either good or evil and to think either truth or falsity, the ability to choose one instead of the other, is the freedom I am dealing with here.

The Lord grants this freedom to every individual, and it is never taken away. By virtue of its source it in fact belongs to the Lord and not to us because it comes from the Lord; yet still it is given us along with our life as though it were ours. This is so that we can be reformed and saved, for without freedom there can be no reformation or salvation.

Anyone who uses a little rational insight can see that we have a freedom to think well or badly, honestly or dishonestly, fairly or unfairly, and that we can talk and act well, honestly, and fairly but not badly, dishonestly, and unfairly because of the spiritual, moral, and civil laws that keep our outward nature in restraint.

The reason we cannot be reformed unless we have some freedom is that we are born into evils of all kinds, evils which need to be taken away if we are to be saved. They cannot be taken away unless we see them within ourselves, admit that they are there, then refuse them and ultimately turn away from them. Only then are they taken away. This cannot happen unless we are exposed to both good and evil, since it is from good that we can see evils, though we cannot see what is good from evil. We learn the good spiritual things we can think from infancy from the reading of the Word and from sermons. We learn the moral and civic values from our life in the world. This is the primary reason we need to be in freedom.

The second reason is that nothing becomes part of us except as a result of some affection of love. True, other things can enter us, but no deeper than into our thought, not into our will; and anything that does not enter our will is not ours. This is because thinking is derived from our memory, while volition is derived from our life itself. Nothing is ever free unless it comes from our will, or what amounts to the same thing, from a particular affection that stems from our love. Whatever we intend or love, we do freely. This is why our freedom and the affection of our love or intentions are one. So we also have freedom in order to be able to be moved by what is true and good, or to love them, so that they do become part of us. In a word, anything that does not enter us in freedom does not stay with us, because it does not belong to our love or intentions; and anything that does not belong to our love or intentions does not belong to our spirit. The actual reality of our spirit is love or will—using the phrase "love or will" because whatever we love, we intend. This is why we cannot be reformed except in a state of freedom.