

THE GERGESENE DEMONIACS AND COVETOUSNESS THE LAW, FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

**June 27, 2010
5th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision B**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 8:28-9:1
EPISTLE: Romans 10:1-10**

Today's Gospel lesson, either from Matthew 8, Mark 5 or Luke 8 is not used at all in the Western lectionaries. In the Eastern lectionary, this lesson is used twice: in October from Luke 8 and today from Matthew 8. From Luke 8 (or the 6th Sunday of Luke in October), the theme is taken from the text which relates mental illness in terms of demon possession. For today's Gospel lesson from Matthew 8, the theme follows John Chrysostom's lead in comparing demon possession to covetousness.

Today's Epistle lesson is used in part in the West. Verses 8-13 are sometimes used for the first Sunday in Lent while verses 4-18 are sometimes used for the 11th Sunday after Trinity.

GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 8:24-9:1 – Covetousness

The Gospel account took place in the winter of 28 AD and is also described in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39. (Jesus was crucified in the Spring of 30 AD). Jesus and His disciples had just finished rowing across the Sea of Galilee to the Eastern shore, probably in one of the fishing boats. On the way, a storm arose and Jesus calmed the storm. The Twelve were stunned, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the water obey him?" (Luke 8:25, Matthew 8:27, Mark 4:41). Following the calming of the storm, today's Gospel lesson took place. When they got back to Nazareth after this trip, Jesus sent the Twelve out two by two to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons all by themselves (Luke 9:1-6, Matthew 10:5-23, Mark 6:7-13). The Gospel lesson, then, is a hands-on-how-to-do-it in preparation for the sending forth of the Twelve. Jesus knew He was going to do this and picked a real bearcat as a demonstration.

As soon as they stepped out of the boat in the country of the Gergesenes (or Gadaranes in Matthew 8:28; Gadara and Gergesa were not too far apart), they were met by demon possessed men. Some details about these men:

- There were actually two of them (Matthew 8:28)
- They were naked and lived in the tombs (Luke 8:27)
- They had been like this for a long time (Luke 8:27)
- These men had been locked up, bound with chains and shackles, but they broke the chains (Luke 8:27)
- They were exceedingly fierce; no one could pass that way (Matthew 8:28)

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- Night and day these men would cry out and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5. Compare 1 Kings 18:28)

In today's terminology, they would be classified as a danger to themselves and others (that is, seriously mentally ill). Treatment programs today involve major tranquilizers to sedate them followed by more tranquilizers to stabilize them and control their erratic behavior.

When Jesus commanded the demons to come out of the men, the demons begged Jesus not to torment them before the time (Matthew 8:29). This is an interesting request! Night and day, the demons had caused the two men to cry out in pain and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5). But yet now the demons don't want Jesus to hurt them? Jesus then asked the men their name, and the demons replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many!" (Mark 5:9). A legion represented 2000 to 6000 foot soldiers and included some cavalry. The demons then begged Jesus that He allow them to enter a herd of swine (about 2000 according to Mark 5:13) that were feeding a good way off from them (Matthew 8:30). Jesus permitted them to do so and suddenly the whole herd ran violently down the steep embankment into the lake and drowned.

The reaction to all this by the herdsmen and the townsfolk is almost as strange as the demoniacs' behavior. When the herdsmen brought the townsfolk out and they saw the former demoniacs clothed, in their right mind, and sitting at Jesus' feet, they were afraid. When the herdsmen explained all that had happened, the townsfolk were seized with great fear and asked Jesus to leave. The demoniacs weren't the only ones in the area that had problems.

Two thousand head of swine represents a major industry for that area. While the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee was a largely Gentile population, meat from the swine was not lawful to be eaten by Jews (Leviticus 11:7). To eat it anyway was a sacrilege and punished by the person being cut off from Israel (Leviticus 7:20-21). If the townsfolk were intent on butchering the 2000 swine that just died in order to recoup some of their loss, they certainly wouldn't want some Jews around to watch. These swine would be doubly unclean, since they died of themselves (Deuteronomy 14:21). So who were the swine being raised for? From the reaction of the townsfolk (that the swine-raising industry supported) to a group of Jews (Jesus and the Twelve), the implication is that some of the meat was sold to Jews and that greed or covetousness was present. And it is from this aspect of the Gospel lesson that John Chrysostom had much to say.

A definition of covetousness here is needed. It is more than merely a desire to improve one's lot in life. Instead it involves discontent and unhappiness with one's current possessions and, with priorities completely out of line, a single minded path toward acquisition of material priorities. This is best illustrated with some examples.

John Chrysostom (4th Century) makes an analogy between the demoniacs and various people of his day. "From history, we are able to know that the swinish sort of men are especially liable to the operations of the demons. As long as they remain men and suffer such things, they are often able yet to prevail; but if they are become altogether swine, they are not only possessed, but are also cast down the precipice."

Chrysostom continues, "And what of the covetous man (i.e. in the Church)? Is he not like this? For who will ever be able to bind him? Are there not fears and daily threats, and

admonitions and counsels, i.e. from the Liturgy, Matins, Gospel and Epistle readings, etc.? All these bonds he bursts asunder. And if anyone should come to set him free, he adjures him that he does not want to be freed, accounting it the greatest torture to be “freed.” What can be more wretched? The evil spirits, even though they despised men, yet they yielded to the command of Christ and quickly sprang out of the man’s body. But the covetous man yields not even to His commandment. He daily hears Him saying, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matthew 6:24), and threatening hell and endless torments but obeys not. Not that he is stronger than Christ, but because against our will Christ corrects us not” (Homily xxviii on Matthew 8). In regard to this, Jesus did not try to correct the townsfolk; he left the former demoniacs to do that.

While the demoniacs were so fierce that “no one could pass that way” (Matthew 8:28), Chrysostom continues, “yet is the covetous man much more fierce even than this, assailing all like hell, swallowing all up, going about as a common enemy to the race of men. He longs also to mar the substance of the earth and to see it all become gold; nay, not the earth only, but hills also, and woods and fountains and in word all things that appear.”

“Many at least with this view have even paid money to be childless, and having maimed their nature, not only by slaying their children after birth, but by not suffering them even to be born at all” (that is abortion).

“How then shall we deliver the covetous man from the demon? He often undergoes great losses in his attempts to gain money. Wishing to lend at high interest, he often doesn’t check those receiving the money – and loses everything. Others falling into danger, cling to their money and lose their life with their substance by delaying their escape.”

“Covetous men do not know how to sow but always practice reaping, and continually fail in their harvest (Galatians 6:7, 2 Corinthians 9:6, Proverbs 11:8). For no man can be always reaping; neither can he be always gaining. Therefore, being unwilling to spend, neither do they know how to gain. Should they take a wife, the same thing befalls them. For either they are deceived (by avarice) into taking a poor wife instead of a rich one; or when they have brought home one that is rich, they find her full of faults without number and incur more loss than gain. What profit is there of her wealth when she is expensive, debauched and scatters all abroad more vehemently than any wind? But they do not only marry, but also buy at great risk, from their great covetousness, laboring to find not good workers, but cheap ones” (Luke 10:7, 1 Timothy 5:18).

The writer of Hebrews had said, “Let your conduct be without the love of money; be content with such things as you have. For He himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5). This promise was made to the people of God as they began the very difficult task of the conquest of Canaan (Deuteronomy 31:6-8, Joshua 1:5).

On the other hand, our American culture bombards us with a constant urging of consumerism and keeping up with the Joneses. Advertising tells us that we need the latest model car or TV or computer or fashions. The Lord had warned, however, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for your life does not consist in the abundance of the things you possess” (Luke 12:15).

Paul addressed this at length in his first epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6-10):

- Godliness with contentment is great gain (v.6)
- We brought nothing in and carry nothing out of this world (v.7, Psalm 49:17, Ecc. 5:14, Job 1:21).
- Be content with food and clothing (v.8, Matthew 6:25-32)
- The covetous fall into a snare, into harmful lusts which cause men to sink into ruin and perdition (v.9, Proverbs 30:8-9)
- The love of money is a root of all evil (v.10)
- In pursuing this, some have wandered away from the Faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (v.10).

We tend to belittle covetousness since it is such a major part of our American consumer-oriented economy. Thus, it is a major challenge to follow Paul's admonition: "Let (covetousness) not even be named among you" (Ephesians 5:3). We tend to overlook places in the Scripture that list covetousness among the worst and most debauched characteristics among men (Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, Ephesians 4:19, 2 Peter 2:1-19) that those who hate God are given over to. Thus, covetousness can become a demonic-like possession for those who refuse to humble their hearts and be content with the Lord's provision. And we, like the townsfolk may end up sending the Son of God away for interrupting our business expansion plans. So John Chrysostom's teaching here is no small thing!

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EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 10:1-10 – Righteousness by Faith

A Zeal for God

The Epistle lesson begins with Paul's identification with and sympathy for the people of Israel. "I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God" (Romans 10:2). Paul, himself, had been there and done that. He was "a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6) and "had advanced in Judaism beyond his contemporaries by being more exceedingly zealous for the tradition of the fathers" (Galatians 1:14, Acts 22:3). In his zeal, he had "persecuted the Church beyond measure and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13, Acts 8:3, 9:1-3, 22:4-5, 26:10-11). But as Paul admits, his zeal "was not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2).

The aim of Paul's and Israel's zeal was righteousness; the question is how does one obtain such. Zeal alone does not produce righteousness; righteousness begins with faith (or belief) in God. For example, "Abraham believed in the Lord and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). This statement from Genesis 15:6 is pivotal and is quoted four times in the New Testament: three times by Paul, once by James. The context of these four quotes is summarized as follows:

Romans 4:1-5 Abraham was not justified by works of the law before God but by believing in God. If he were justified by works of the law, debt, not grace, would be involved.

Romans 4:20-24 Abraham did not waver in his belief but was fully convinced and strengthened in faith that God would deliver on His promise. This was not written down for Abraham's sake alone, but also for us.

Galatians 3:5-9 The work of the Spirit among the Galatians was by faith and not by works of the Law. Only those who are of faith are truly sons of Abraham and part of the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

James 2:20-26 Abraham's faith was working together with his works; by this, the faith was made perfect. Thus deeds disclose one's faith. (Compare also John 14:15, Matthew 7:21, Matthew 25:31-46).

The leaders of Israel in Paul's day were ignorant of God's righteousness and sought to establish their own righteousness (Romans 10:3). They certainly knew the above statement regarding Abraham, but they did not submit to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:3). This word "submit" is a dirty word in our culture because it implies humility not arrogance. However, no one achieves the righteousness of God with an arrogant, know-it-all heart.

The Law as Our Tutor or Pedagogue

“For Christ is the end (or goal) of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (v.4). “Therefore the law was our tutor until Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:24-25). In ancient Israel, the “tutor” (Greek: *pedagogos*) was a trustworthy slave who acted as a guide and a guardian for the heirs of the family until they reached their maturity. Once the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within us (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), the Law became written on our heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 2:15) and the Spirit teaches us better than the Law ever could (John 14:26) in a way that transcends spoken languages (Romans 8:26).

As John Chrysostom stated, “The Law is not the adversary but the fellow worker of Grace. But if when Grace is come, the Law continues to hold us down, it becomes an adversary. For if it confines those who ought to go forward to Grace, then it is the destruction of our salvation. If a candle which gave light by night kept us, when it became day, from the sun, it would not only cease to benefit us, but would injure us. And so does the Law if it stands between the greater benefits of Grace and us. Just so a tutor or *pedagogue* makes a youth ridiculous, by retaining him with himself, when time calls for his departure” (Comm. on Galatians, Chap 3).

Going back to the giving of the Law, the original commandment was, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). This has been called the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:28, Matthew 22:36-40). On one occasion, one of the scribes questioning Jesus admitted that this Greatest Commandment is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33). Jesus replied that he was not far from the Kingdom of God (Mark 12:34). All he needed to do was to follow through and do as he had just said and as Abraham did and as James wrote about. The Greatest Commandment as a concept is fine, but “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:8-13). Deeds are necessary! They prove what we believe. For more discussion on The Greatest Commandment, see the Gospel lesson for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost.

Thus, Paul wrote that, “He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law” (Romans 13:8-10). Jesus said the same thing. When questioned about the Greatest Commandment by a lawyer, the lawyer asked Him, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus proceeded with the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate faith and works, the concept and the doing. The Law as our tutor gives us some guidelines and specifics as to how we can love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Law as a Rigid Rule Book

Some people try to keep the Law without loving the Lawgiver. From our Epistle lesson, “Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the Law shall live by that righteousness” (v.5). Here Paul is quoting loosely from Leviticus 18:5 which reads, “And you shall keep My statutes and My judgments which a man shall do them and he shall live by them.” These words of Moses are also quoted by Nehemiah and Ezekiel in a negative context where the people hadn’t kept the Lord’s statutes and judgments and were suffering or were about to suffer the consequences (Nehemiah 9:29, Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 21).

Paul follows by quoting Moses loosely again to say that the righteousness of faith does not involve heroic efforts to bring Christ down from heaven or up from the abyss. It is not difficult, and is really very simple; it is near you in your mouth and in your heart (vv.6-8). The full text of this as written by Moses reads, “For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it that we may observe it?’ But the Word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Moses went on to say that the Lord’s people had a choice. If they loved the Lord and walked in His ways, they would have life and prosperity; if they were drawn away to worship other gods, they would have death and adversity (Deuteronomy 30:15-17).

Paul continued to clarify Moses’ words: Moses said, “The Word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Deuteronomy 30:14, Romans 10:8). Regarding this, Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9-10). We note that Paul said, “With the heart man believes,” and not just with the head man believes.

Under the Old Covenant people did this also. Contained within the details of the sacrificial statutes and festivals was Jesus as the Lamb of God who would be raised on the third day. This is why Moses added, “That you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:12, 13, 14). Paul omitted “observing it,” since the sacrifice of the Lamb of God had by then been made once for all. In Moses’ day, the Law continually pointed forward to the Lamb of God. Thus Paul and Moses both taught righteousness by faith, but from different viewpoints in time. “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the law and the Prophets” (Romans 3:21).

The purpose of the giving of the Law was to lead the people of God to Christ (Romans 10:4). As such, the Law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24). Adam knew major aspects of the Law. Tertullian expressed this as follows, “For in this law given to Adam, we recognize in embryo all the precepts which afterward sprouted forth when given through Moses. That is, you shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart and out of your whole soul; you shall love your neighbor as yourself, etc.” (Answer to Jews, I, iii, 2). John Cassian added that how else could Abel have known to offer to God a sacrifice of the firstlings of his flock using the fat thereof (Genesis 4:4), unless he had been taught by the Law (Exodus 13:12, Leviticus 3:7-10)? How could Noah have distinguished what animals were clean and what were unclean (Genesis 7:2), when the commandment of the Law (Deuteronomy 14) had not yet made a distinction? (Conferences I, viii, 23).

John Chrysostom put it this way, “For what was the object of the Law? To make man righteous. But it had not the power, for no one fulfilled it. This then was the end of the Law and to this it looked throughout; and for this all its parts were made: its feasts and commandments, and sacrifices, and all besides, that man might be justified. But this end Christ gave a fuller accomplishment through faith. Do not be afraid then, he says, as if transgressing the Law in having come over to the Faith. For then do you transgress it, when for it you do not believe

Christ. If you believe in Him, then you have fulfilled it also, and much more than it commanded. For you have received a much greater righteousness.”

Chrysostom went on to refute the notion that Grace is easy and cheap while there is a virtue manifested in works. Included in faith is a requirement for a wakeful soul that does not yield to listlessness. “Thus when one is required to believe, there are reasonings which confuses and make havoc of the minds of most men, and it wants a soul of some vigor to shake them thoroughly off. This is a soul that takes in things beyond expectation, and does not stumble at appearances.” The Jews opposing Paul not only ridiculed Grace as too easy, but even stressed that it was not possible to be justified by faith (Homily xvii on Romans 10).

Like them, some people have tried to keep the Law without honoring the Lawgiver. The result is usually the Law being perceived as a rigid rule-book unrelated to the Lawgiver. For example, the Jewish leaders were seeking the death penalty for Jesus because He healed people on the Sabbath (John 5:9-10). Doing good had been the intent of the Sabbath as a time for rest and concentration on the things of God (Luke 6:6-11, Exodus 20:10-11, 31:15, Numbers 10:10, Leviticus 24:5-9, Ezekiel 20:12, 20). One who loves and honors the Lawgiver can see this. The Jewish leaders, however, could only see the letter of the Law that demanded the death penalty for anyone “breaking” the Sabbath rest laws (Exodus 31:13-17). And the zeal of the Jewish leaders for the letter of the Law was very strong. After all, it was given by God!!

By not seeking the righteousness of faith that Moses (and Paul) taught, they were seeking to establish their own righteousness (Romans 10:3). But what did their own righteousness produce? They ignored the details of the Law when it conflicted with their personal agenda (John 7:45-52, 12:9-19; 11:43-53; Matthew 26:3-5). The ultimate example of this is the crucifixion of the Lawgiver.

Isaiah wrote, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isaiah 64:6). This was the reason the Law contained detailed requirements for blood sacrifices and this is why Moses wrote “that you may observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:12, 13, 14). One of the purposes of the Law was to identify what is sin in order that repentance and faith might be forthcoming (Romans 7:7ff).

When the Light of God (John 1:4-5) exposes sin in peoples’ lives (John 1:9-11) and they reject the light because they love darkness rather than light (John 3:19-21), they open themselves up for demonic activity such as in the Gospel lesson. Sometimes, as in the Gospel lesson and as in the case of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, being given over to the demonic activity produced a gratitude for the things of God. King Nebuchadnezzar was given over to demons for seven years and lived like an animal, eating grass like a cow. Following that seven years, he repented and his kingdom was restored to him (Daniel 4:28-37). Similarly, Paul delivered one of the men of Corinth over to Satan in order that his spirit might be saved (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). The man repented and was restored to the Church (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). In other cases, however, the demonic activity only produced blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:24, 31-32, Matthew 12:14, 1 Corinthians 2:8) and a continued zeal to establish one’s own righteousness apart from God (Romans 10:3).