

Jesus and Unclean Spirits

Mark 1:21-28

Intro *The Exorcist*

November 31st is Halloween. As Halloween approaches, more horror movies are airing on cable all month. Do you like watching horror movies? I don't like it as much as I have used to. After watching a horror movie, gruesome images and horrific screams lingered in my memory for days and I would often have bad dreams. So I don't like it any more. One horror movie that haunted me for a week was "the Exorcist." Have you seen this movie? It is a story of a priest and a girl who is possessed by an evil spirit. If you want to test your nerve, you can watch this movie alone in a dark room on a quiet night, but I would not recommend it.

People are scared by watching these kinds of horror movies because with horrific images and gruesome sound effects, these movies vividly *SHOW* scary demonic spirits... and make us *FEEL* that unseen evil spirits are *REAL*. But at the same time, people can enjoy horror movies because they know that it is only a movie. It's not real.

Real or Not Real?

We are living in the 21st century, the age of science and medicine. Most people do not really believe in evil spirits or demonic possessions. That is why people can enjoy Halloween. Originally, Halloween was not a day for fun. 2000 years ago, people tended to believe that the spirits of the dead were set free from the underworld, and roamed the earth on Halloween. To avoid harms from evil spirits, people dressed themselves up as scary animals or ghosts. Do you think that they enjoyed Halloween as a fun day for parties as we do today? Not really. However, even kids enjoy Halloween today because people do not believe evil spirits roamed the earth to find their preys. Somehow, modern people including most Christians do not believe that evil spirits and demonic possession is real.

Have you ever seen any persons who were possessed by evil spirits? I have not met any. I have heard from my father that he actually had some experience of casting out evil spirits. But I have never seen it firsthand. Because we do not really experience evil spirits on first hand... and because we are more familiar with psychology than Demonology, we are often puzzled when we read about Jesus exorcizing unclean spirits.

A Man with Unclean Spirit

Today's scripture is one that puzzled us. With his followers, Jesus entered Capernaum and taught at the synagogue on the Sabbath. "The people were amazed by his teaching, because Jesus taught with authority." And "suddenly, a person with an evil spirit screamed." What first caught my attention in this text is the location where this event took place. Where did it happen? It was at the synagogue. There was a demon-possessed person at the synagogue. Isn't that surprising? Since Jews strictly followed purity laws, demon-possessed people were not allowed in the synagogue, except for special occasions held for exorcisms. This means that this man who was possessed by an unclean spirit appeared so normal that nobody knew he was possessed until Jesus drove the evil-spirit from him. Even a religious person can be possessed by evil spirits. How do we interpret this perplexing text?

If we try to interpret this text only as an event of someone being possessed by supernatural evil spirits, we would find it difficult to understand and apply this text to our lives. To understand it, we need to extend the meaning of a demonic possession.

In Mark chapter 5, there is another story of a man with unclean spirits. He was possessed by Legion and he lost his freedom, human dignity, and relationships with people. Even though he wanted to be freed from them, things that possessed the man controlled his actions and his life. Under the influence of these destructive evil forces, this man's life was completely ruined. He lived among the tombs and graves. His violent and destructive actions threatened other people around him so people tried to restrain him with chains and ropes. But it was not successful. He became isolated from people and was left alone. He lost his human dignity and had to live among tombs like a dangerous

wild animal. He even slashed himself with sharp stones, committing self-destructive actions.

Isn't this man's story familiar to us? Many people in the United States are suffering from substance addictions. "Experts say the United States is in the agony of an opioid epidemic. More than two millions of Americans have become dependent on prescription drugs and street drugs." I read a tragic story of a ruined family life by opioid addiction. Patrick Griffin, a 34 year old man, overdosed 4 times in 6 hours in May 2017. When his father and sister first found Patrick on the floor around 1:30 p.m., he had already overdosed. Patrick's father then began arguing with his son over his heroin addiction. As Patrick felt morose[머'로스], he lashed out and, "sliced a love seat with a knife, smashed a glass bowl, kicked and broke a side table and threatened to kill himself. Shortly after 3:00 p.m., he darted into the bathroom, where he shot up and overdosed again. This time his family called 911 and Emergency medical workers revived him. His family tried to persuade him to go into treatment, but he slipped away around 4 p.m. and shot up a third time. He overdosed again, and emergency workers came back and revived him again. But around 7:30 p.m. he overdosed a fourth time. He somehow survived in this series of overdose events but "for him and his family, life can be a relentless[리- '렌트리스] cycle of worry, regret, pain and chaos." This is a tragic and horrible story of being possessed by the destructive force of opioids. I'm not saying that drug addiction itself is a demonic possession. But it could be as destructive as a demonic possession. We can easily notice that Patrick's life resembles the man with unclean spirits.

Human being can be possessed by evil spirits. But human spirits can be possessed by many other things too. Drugs, alcohol, power, money, sex, television, internet, food, shopping, political ideology, religions, racism, sexism homophobia, xenophobia, and this lists can go on and on. Many things can possess our minds and spirits. Furthermore, these destructive forces can also capture the spirit of our society and nations. And what possess our spirits eventually controls our actions and our lives.

When the spirit of Germany was once possessed by antisemitism and xenophobia in the middle of 20th century, they justified the killing of some six million European Jews. Around two-thirds of the entire Jewish population of Europe was killed in gas chambers.

When the spirit of our country is possessed by the demonic force of sexism, millions of women become preys to sexual abuse, and male predators do not even notice their wrong doing. When the spirit of this nation is possessed by the destructive forces of endless greed for money, major drug companies hid the highly addictive nature of synthetic opioid pain relievers and sold them to people. Now millions people are living in hell on earth and their lives are completely broken. When the spirit of our society is possessed by the demonic force of racism, millions of people of colors have to live in fear of hate crime and suffer from the structural and institutional discrimination. As the spirits of people and of nations are possessed by destructive forces of evil, it can be dangerous both for themselves and people around them.

Although we are Christians, we are not completely immune from these powerful forces that attempt to possess our spirits. As the man with an unclean spirit could stay at the synagogue without being noticed, Christians can be at church while we are possessed by something other than the Spirit of God. David Platt, the author of book, “radical,” said, “most American Christians have morphed the Jesus of the Bible into a "middle class Jesus" who doesn't mind at all our materialism and consumerism.” What do you think of his critique? I think Platt is quite right. We want to become Jesus’ disciple but we also don’t want to sacrifice our American life style. Right? We need to think of what really holds our spirits and the spirit of our nation. And we must be liberated from the destructive forces of evil.

Jesus the Exorcist

Though we cannot free ourselves from things that possess us, we also know who can set us free and cast out these unclean spirits within us and our society. Who can set us free? Who can cast out unclean-spirit from our society? Jesus Christ!

When the man with the evil-spirit heard the powerful teachings of Jesus Christ, it cried out of fear, and revealed itself, saying “Have you come to destroy us?” Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” Then, “The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” As Jesus casted out evil-spirits from the man at the synagogue, Jesus Christ can also help us be liberated from the destructive forces of the unclean spirits in this world.

Jesus set us free from unclean spirits!

Of course, the power of unclean spirits of the world is so powerful and REAL that it even makes us confused as if the power of God is UNREAL. The chain of drug addiction or alcohol addiction seems to be unbreakable. It seems that faith doesn't have much power over the problem of opioid epidemics. The church doesn't seem to have any power to stop the cycle of violence and heal the broken world.

But don't be charmed by those illusions. It is not the world... it is not the evil spirit but Jesus Christ has the final authority and power. Our God has the power to free us from all captives to unclean spirits. This does not mean that God will instantly set us free from all addiction issues or divisive social problems such as racism or sexism. Rather, God constantly invites people to turn toward the better path, all the while sitting next to us on our life journey. God inspires faithful people of God to be His agents of casting out unclean spirits of the world.

Do you know Alcoholics Anonymous or gambling anonymous? The Twelve Steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program is developed based on Christian principles and it continues to help millions of people seeking recovery from their addictions. Churches and Christians have been faithful companions and friends along their journey of recovery.

As I told you before, Korea has been a strong patriarchal society and male chauvinism and sexism still is pervasive there. Back then, women did not even have their own names as they were usually called as someone's daughter, wife or mother. As the gospel of Jesus Christ first came into the Korean peninsula about 100 years ago, Korean

women not only began to find their names for their own sake, but also claim their proper rights within the church and the society.

Do you know when the United Methodist Church first allowed full clergy rights for women? It was 1956. Then, can you guess when the Korean Methodist Church allowed for the ordination of women? It was 1931. The Korean Methodist Church approved full clergy rights for women even 25 years before the UMC approved it. God's way of transforming people's spirits and the society is amazing. It is often beyond our imagination. I know that still there is a long road ahead for a gender equality in Korea as well as the United States, but I believe that God is with us in the way of casting out unclean spirits of sexism. These are examples how God still powerfully works among us and casts out unclean spirits in the world.

Jesus has the power to set us free from unclean spirits. When the man at the synagogue suffered from an unclean spirit, Jesus casted out those demonic spirits and set him free. As Mary Magdalen was inflicted by seven demons, Jesus casted them out, set her free and made her as his faithful disciple. As our society was possessed by demonic force of racism, God raised prophets like Martin Luther King J.r. and many nameless Christians to cast out those evil spirits, and set us free from racial prejudice and hatred toward other people. Jesus has the authority to set us free. He has the authority to set us free. In fact, he already has set us free on the cross and because of him, now, we can fight with those unclean spirit in our society. We are called to cast out those evil spirits.

Now, our church is struggling for dwindling membership and it seems that our survival has become our primary goal. But my friends, survival shouldn't be our goal. God's plan for us is much bigger than that. God wants us to cast out evil spirit of addiction, violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, hatred, greed, injustice, and vanity. God wants us to change the world. Can we do it? Can we cast out evil spirit in the world? Yes we can! Yes! We Can do it because Jesus Christ, our Lord, is with us! Trust our Lord and cast out evil spirits in our society! Amen.

