

## **OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO THE OTHER SIDE**

**Luke 8:26–39**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Through the Gospel of Luke, we find a text that perfectly matches this occasion, a missionary text.

“They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. When Jesus stepped ashore, He was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!’ For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places. Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Legion,’ he replied, because many demons had gone into him. And they begged Him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss. A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and He gave them permission. When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left. The man from whom the demons had

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gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’ So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him” (Luke 8:26–39, NIV).

Someone has said that it is a pastor’s responsibility both to feed and to lead. And most of my messages on Sunday morning, as well as any other time, are directed toward the feeding of the flock of God. I’ve put a special emphasis today, however, upon my responsibility to lead. When we talk about missions, we recognize that missionary attitudes are developed. They are not inborn. When we become a Christian, we don’t suddenly become missionary-minded.

In this church, we have regular way of emphasizing missions, plus two special Sundays each year—one, the first Sunday of June and the other, the last Sunday of October, where we have summer and winter emphases on missions, because we recognize that missionary attitudes need to be developed.

We find this in the Book of Acts. The Early Church in Jerusalem grew mightily. There were many healings, thousands of people being converted. But the church did not of its own reach out to fulfill the commission the Lord gave it—to go to Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. When you come to the end of Acts 5, the early years of the church at Jerusalem, they had not set out to engage in missionary activity. It took the persecution—which scattered them—to begin giving them a taste of what it was like to carry the gospel to people who were different than themselves, people belonging to another culture.

Our humanitarian instincts today reach out when we hear of orphans in trouble, when we hear of famine and the need for famine relief, and we hear of disaster. We thank the Lord that we live in the kind of country and have the kind of people in this country that have humanitarian instincts.

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But as Christians, we add to our humanitarian instincts the spiritual instincts to see the gospel brought to people who don't have the Lord; recognizing that the fundamental need within anyone's life is the need for the love of Jesus.

The missionary awareness of this church has been growing over the years. When I became pastor of the church in 1971, our missionary commitments at that time reached a few missionaries and collectively, we as a church were giving \$257 a month to missions. It was shortly after I came as pastor that we really quit making missionary payments because we were behind on all of our bills. That went on for about six months. We got about six months behind in our missionary commitments. Those of you who have been through the new members' class know this story. Finally, the Lord spoke to us in the midst of a very difficult time, when we were losing people and not able to pay our bills. The Lord spoke to us through a deacons' meeting in which we felt the Holy Spirit directing us to begin making the back-commitments up to date on missions and not worry about the other needs that we had, but to put the Lord's interests first, at the top. We began to do this and, from that day on, the church has never been the same.

You see on the missionary insert today that we are currently supporting eighty missionaries or missionary organizations. That includes people in far away places and it includes home missions. It includes the ministry right here in our area. It includes helping pioneer churches in Southern California, ministering to ethnic groups here in Southern California, helping with drug rehabilitation through Teen Challenge centers. Helping the ministry to Mexico on our nearby borders through John Huntley's missionary extension outreach, and through the sending of video centers there for evangelism and training of Christian workers and national leaders. I am thrilled to report to you that in 1984, last year, this body gave over \$300,000 to missions, both at home

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and abroad. Home and foreign missions. It was given in a variety of ways. None of it through a large giver. All of it through the gifts of God's people all pulling together.

We praise the Lord for this because, when we went into the building program a number of years ago, we feared that the tendency would be to cut back on missions. We determined before the Lord that we would not do that, that we would ask God for faith to increase, and in the last four years, we have seen our missionary giving nearly triple and we thank the Lord for this. It's not the end, it's only the beginning.

When we think about missions, we're seeking to become world Christians. Individual Christians who have a sense of God's heartbeat and love for the whole world. We recognize that missionary churches are strong churches in their home base. Show me a church that is not missionary-minded and I'll show you a church that, most likely, is not doing much of the Lord's work in their own locale.

A pastor came to me recently for some advice on how to deal with a financial crisis in their church. They had more bills than they had resources. I simply shared with him the testimony of what the Lord had done in this church body, and I gave him some advice. I said, "Look around and find missionary enterprises that need some additional funding and increase your giving to missions." It's the only way I know of to really minister to the financial needs of your church. It sounds like crazy mathematics. Friends, it's Holy Ghost mathematics! It's taking the word of Jesus seriously and doing it.

Our text today fits a missionary theme. It fits it because it's the first account in the Gospel of Luke of Jesus' ministry in Gentile or non-Jewish territory. The Gospels give us three different

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names for the place he is going to: “Gadara,” “Gerasa” and “the region of the Gazarenes”; it could have been just as well on the other side of the world.

The locale of most of Jesus’ ministry was situated on the northwestern side of the Lake of Galilee. That was Jewish land. Gadara was on the southeastern side of the lake, and it was largely populated by Gentiles in that day. People from the northwest, because they didn’t drive cars, for there were no motorized vehicles of any kind, would not get over to that region. Going to Gadara would be the same for them as if I asked how many of this crowd have been to China. It was the other side of the world. It was Nepal. It was Katmandu, the capital city of Nepal. It could have been India. It could have been anywhere far away. That was Gadara. There are some things we learn from this gospel text that match our involvement in missions. Four things in particular I want to single out from the story:

#### **I. Jesus went to the other side of the Lake while His work in Galilee was still incomplete.**

The ministry was not done on the northwestern shore of the Lake of Galilee. There were people who were still sick and hadn’t been healed. There were crowds that had still not been taught. There were villages that Jesus had not yet been to. There were disciples that had not yet been trained. But for a moment, He leaves all that and goes across to the other side.

What is the principle that I’m trying to illustrate? It is simply this: Some may object to an emphasis on missions on the grounds that we shouldn’t try to do anything anywhere else until we’ve done everything we need to do at home. We should totally build up the work at home and then, when we’ve got it all built, we should look across. But, until we do that, we ought to focus right here. I simply would point out that that’s not the way Jesus did it. Before things were done in Galilee, He was already teaching His disciples to go across to the other side.

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There are fundamentally two views of the growth of the church. One, I would call the “seed planters” and the other, I would call the “tree toppers.”

The seed planters are those who recognize that the gospel is a potent seed. If you sow it here, and it's growing in Costa Mesa soil, it has a vitality of its own and it will grow. But if there's an area where the seed has not gotten to, we need to take some of the seed we have here and put it over there. And not wait until the seed is fully-grown here until we take the seed there.

The tree toppers are those who say, “Let's not take anything anywhere else until we see the seed grow up and it becomes a great tree and it has great branches and it's growing fruit; then all we have to do is top the tree.” When we get to the point where all we have to do is top the tree, then we'll go somewhere else. Tree toppers never get the work of the Lord done somewhere else. We don't wait until we're perfect here in this locale to reach out and minister halfway across the world.

You know, if you're involved in this church, that this is not a perfect church. This is not a perfect pastor. If you're a visitor, you didn't hear what I said at all. This is a perfect church. But there are a lot of needs here. Some people come in and look around and say, “All these people! You probably don't need anyone to work here. We'll go to a smaller church that has need for workers.” Friends, we have needs! You wouldn't believe the amount of needs present in this body for ministry. We have a place for you.

We're not a perfect church. But we're a church that has a concern. While we're reaching into this home area and we're not neglecting our ministry here, we have a concern to be a world church and world Christians.

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I love the verse in Proverbs that says, “Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty.” That simply means that if you’ve got a cow in the barn, you’ve got a mess. If you’ve got something living, you’ve got messes on your hands. If you want something perfectly orderly and programmed and clean and everything working right, then clean everything living out of it. There’s nothing more organized, someone has said, than a cemetery. So the church of Jesus Christ is where there are living people and, as a result, there is an ox in the stall. And there are messes. Thank God, this place isn’t as messy as other places can be. This is a great church. But sure, we’ve got things to do here. And missions isn’t about neglecting things we have to do here, but it is to say, “While we’re doing the Lord’s work here, we’re concerned that it’s being done somewhere else as well.”

### **II. Another great thing about this passage is that Jesus found the most serious level of personal deterioration waiting for Him on the other side.**

That’s why He went to the other side; because the man of Gadara was calling. This man, who could break out of chains and ropes and lived naked and screaming among the tombs on the slopes of Gadara, was desperately calling out for the help that only Jesus could give. When we look seriously at the kind of help we really need, only Jesus can meet the deeper level of needs in our life.

Several weeks ago, at a prayer luncheon for ministers, Bill Wilson spoke. Bill is a pioneer of a church called Metro Assembly of God. It perhaps is one of the most unusual churches of the world. It mostly has people in it under fourteen years of age. Six thousand kids. Bill has ministered, for about the last five years, at the Bedford area of New York City—a high-rise, high-density, slum area. Bill is going to be with us in October for our winter mission Sunday and

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tell the story of his church, a modern-day miracle right out of the pages of Acts. Bill, before he got up and began to speak to the ministers, as he went to the microphone, was already weeping. He's a young man, about 31 years of age. I wondered, "Why is he weeping?" I realized, the minute he began to talk, why he was weeping. He was weeping over the story he was getting ready to tell. The story of just a few weeks ago, being on the sixth floor of a high-rise tenement house which had been basically abandoned by the city and was supposed to be temporary housing. It had become permanent housing. The elevators don't work. The lights don't work. The garbage isn't picked up, it's left in the hallways, and people live on a level of the rodents. Bill was rounding the darkened hall on the sixth floor and heard a baby's cry. He turned and looked and there, sitting in the middle of the trash, was a baby, naked and crying, abandoned. Bill said, "I've seen many sights in New York, but I've never seen one that quite got to me like that one." He reached over, took the baby in his arms and began to hold it and weep. Then he went, door to door, down that hallway trying to find who the baby belonged to. After some searching, he finally found its mother, a fourteen-year-old girl who took the baby back and, without ever saying a word of thanks, received the baby back. He said to us, "That's why God has called me to go into that area and to bring Jesus to those people. I know I can start with the children." And he has six thousand of them. But he identified with the area of society which was most broken down, most completely deteriorated, most traumatized.

The great news is that if Jesus can help the most traumatized person, He can help everybody at every level. There's probably no one more traumatized in the entire gospel than this man whose name was Legion. It didn't mean that he had six thousand demons. It meant that, when describing what it felt like, it felt like a six thousand battalion of Roman force within him.

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Someone suggested that maybe he witnessed an atrocity by Roman soldiers and that atrocity was always ringing in his ears and it brutalized him, and the demon's presence in him had further deteriorated him until all he could think of was the horror of the trauma of the legion.

Jesus has good news for the person who has the legion and everybody on up who is less personally deteriorated than this man.

Jesus is going over to the other side to help us and everyone. We enter into the Spirit of Jesus when we become sensitive to the people—in our life or on the other side of the lake—who are in need of Him.

The third great thing about Jesus is, not only did He go to the other side while the work in Galilee was incomplete and find a complete level of deterioration on the other side but...

### **III. The activity of Jesus reveals his priorities and values.**

That's what this story does. It reveals our priorities and our values. There is a tremendous event that happens at the close of the story, where the people come and beg Jesus to leave. They see the man who had had the legion sitting there clothed and in his right mind, and they do a very stunning thing. They ask Jesus to leave. They don't want someone like Him in their presence.

The reason they ask Him to leave is that their pigs had been destroyed.

Jesus didn't destroy them directly. He simply gave the demons permission to enter the pigs. But I think since Jesus knows what is in people, He fore-read the response and the values of those village people. Some have suggested, I think wrongly, that what Jesus was doing was clearing out the pigs at Gadara and striking a blow to the kosher diet celebrated in many homes in Jerusalem. But I don't think that was His intent. He was in Gentile territory. But Jesus knew that in the region of Gadara, if they'd had an election and there were two things on the ballot, one

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line marked “pigs” and the other line marked “people” (you could vote for one but not two), that almost all those people would have checked “pigs”. They would have said, “We’d rather have a few crazies running around among us and keep our property than see those crazies in their right mind and risk some personal loss.”

The Lord is always sorting out our values and helping us to realize whether or not our priority is with things or with people. Whether our priority is with our house or with our home. Whether it’s with people matching our expectations or whether we really have a concern of love for them as individuals.

There’s a great story in the newspaper this last week about a father in Philadelphia whose thirteen-year-old son was a member of the colony that recently has been so much in the news with the great fire that wiped out that sector of Philly. These were back-to-nature people who didn’t wash and literally became extremely unkempt and were against everything a normal society stood for. This man’s boy had been taken by his mother when he was just an infant and the father had not been able to see the boy for about the last ten years. He had sought custody, but it was too dangerous to get into the headquarters to get the boy. When he heard that the fire had broken out, he raced to the perimeter of where this event was happening, hoping that somehow his boy would get out. The boy’s mother perished in the fire, as did a number of the members, but the boy somehow made it out. The father found out he had been taken to a hospital. He went to the hospital to visit him. He embraced him and then made sure the boy had a bath and was combed and his hair was cut. He realized that this boy at thirteen-years was totally illiterate. After spending a little bit of time with the boy, the father realized that his son was going to have to have massive personal care if he was going to become a useful citizen. So the

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father went back and had a talk with his wife, and they agreed that he would take off the next two years from his work, a very middle class kind of a job. He's not independently wealthy. His wife agreed to go to work. And he would spend the next two years being a full-time father and trying to bring his thirteen-year-old boy up to date with where he should be.

I took my hat off! Here's a man who has his priorities in the right place. It's not making a living, it's making a life. It's helping a life. That's where Jesus is in this story. He is concerned for people.

This past Wednesday, we had a memorial service for a beautiful young fifteen-year-old boy. He had been coming to this church for the last few months. A lovely, handsome young man, suddenly killed by touching a live wire. The death was a process of a week, but in terms of expectancy of death, it all hit everyone as sudden. In this sanctuary, there were scores of young people from Costa Mesa High School and perhaps other places; of grieving and weeping kids, many of them not dressed up to go to church. There was a time in my life in which I might've looked at a fifteen or fourteen-year-old boy that had an earring in his ear and I would have had inward feelings of revulsion and wonder why kids didn't look more normal. And girls that seemingly don't know how to put makeup on or put a dress on frontwards or backwards. I would never publicly say anything, but within me, I could feel that edge of criticism. As I saw all these kids here as they came forward to the front, I just reached out to as many of them as I could, put my arm around them and said in some way, "I love you and this church loves you and God loves you."

When people come to Jesus, He'll help them get clothed and in their right mind. I'm not worried about that.

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I was with my good friend, Austin Wilkerson, who pastors Evangelistic Temple in Houston, Texas, a number of years ago, when they had had a great move of the Holy Spirit and hundreds and hundreds of young people came to know Christ. The attendance of young people at the church services became so packed that kids were sitting all over the floor. They were sitting in the aisles. They were sitting on the stairs. They were sitting on the platform. They were sitting in the choir loft. They were everywhere. The church was struggling with the way some of these kids came in before they became believers. Austin said one night, “As I was sitting down in the front row and looking up in the choir loft, marveling at all the hundreds of young people there, most of whom had never been in a church and didn’t come from Christian homes, I looked up, and in the choir loft there was a little thirteen or fourteen-year-old girl sitting up in the choir loft and her little puppy was in her hands.” He said, “I just started to weep. My heart went out to love this little girl. Here was a little girl whose mom and dad had never been to church, so when she had the chance to go to church, she brought the thing that was most precious to her, her little dog.” That church had a marvelous baptism of love. Its people reached out to love kids.

If I have any desire in my heart it is that, somehow, God will use this church to reach the young people in our area and that we’ll reach out in the name of Jesus and say, “God loves you. We care about you.” We want to see the same thing happen here. We want to see this place so filled with young people—and old people too—that people have to sit in the aisles and in the choir loft to get a seat. It’s only Jesus who can change our lives.

This demoniac needed to be freed from evil spirits and there are young people and old people, and maybe people in this audience today, that need to be freed from something just as binding as an evil spirit. Drugs and child abuse and alcohol and homosexuality and immorality and

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disorientation of every kind. Jesus has come as a Liberator and a Savior. He causes us to no longer be restless. That was the case of this man. He was restless. But when he came to Jesus, he was clothed and sitting there.

If you're here today, and there's a restlessness within you, and that restlessness is driving you to drink, driving you to anger, driving you to drugs, there is a Lord who is able to help you settle down and be in your right mind—Jesus the Christ.

The result of the activity of Jesus, fourthly, was...

#### **IV. To leave a new disciple on the other side to minister to his own people.**

Jesus can't stay in Gadara. They don't want Him. And Jesus never stays where He's not wanted. He only comes by invitation. This man, we understand why, he wants to come to be with Jesus. He wants to get into the boat with Jesus. To everybody else, Jesus had said, "Come follow Me." Now Jesus says a strange thing, and I think maybe a hard thing. He doesn't say to this man, "Follow Me." He says, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

So the man went out and began to proclaim, in the whole region of the Decapolis—the ten Greek cities—how much the Lord had done for him, and all men marveled. What's interesting about this story is that, if you read all the Gospels, you'll find that Matthew's Gospel tells us the account of two demoniacs. There were actually two that Jesus healed that day. But Mark and Luke only tell us the story of one. The reason is, they give the sequel that the man went and told. Evidently, one of the two that was healed did nothing. In other words, he didn't tell anybody. But one of the two went out and told other people what happened. That's why Mark and Luke, therefore, single-lens on his story, because he went out and shared the good news.

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What are we trying to do with foreign missions and the backing of missions? We're trying to get the gospel to people who will tell their own people.

Wayne and Doris are able to be here today because there are workers now trained that are ministering in these two evangelistic centers in Mexico City. Our whole idea in missions is to raise up a church that is the people's church in their own country. If it's in Bolivia, it would be Bolivian pastors. If it's going to have Bolivian pastors, it needs people first, to come and to spread the seed of the gospel in that land, so that the training can take place for the church to emerge. What we're doing in missions is giving and praying and sending, so that on the other side of the lake, the church of Jesus Christ might grow, as told in the language of those who know the language on the other side of the lake, by the people who live there.

I ask you, on behalf of the Lord, to be involved in His heart for the world. I ask you to become a part of this church's missionary outreach.