

THE HEALING OF THE GADARENE DEMONIAK
Breaking Bad Habits
Luke 8:26-39

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In today's Gospel, we see how the Lord cast a legion of demons out of a man. We may not be "possessed" in the sense of this demoniac, but we all have habitual vices from which we need to be delivered and cleansed. So how do we break bad habits and cultivate good habits? It is never enough to tell people that they must give something up. The first part of ridding ourselves of bad habits, therefore, is that we must have a reason. Otherwise, even if we rid ourselves of a bad habit, there will always be a void, and something must fill that void. If our motivation is not based on love of God, then evil will fill that void, and our second state may even be worse than the first state from which we were delivered. In other words, unless the house is filled with goodness, evil will come to it. There must rather be an exchange of one thing for another. The exchange is based on our own volition — we must be willing to exchange one thing for another. Our decision must be swift and decisive, and not half-hearted, otherwise we will fail. So getting back to the first part of ridding ourselves of bad habits, our reason must be based on good beliefs and ideals. If our beliefs and ideals are wrong, then our actions will be wrong. Zaccheus was a dishonest tax collector, but once he found a new ideal through the visit of our Lord to his home, he repented and changed his habits. Mary Magdalene surrendered evil habits for virtue through the vision of divine purity.

It is extremely important for us to cultivate the highest ideals, that we may act upon those ideals. We may look at the Sermon on the Mount and think that these ideals are impossible for us, but our Lord would never ask anything of us unless it was possible. The Lord was accused of asking the impossible when the rich man turned away in dismay because he loved his riches more than God. But what did our Savior say? "With men these things are impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Mat 19:26). We must ask ourselves, do we love our evil habits more, or do we love God more? If the answer is that we love our evil habits more, then we have some work to do. Even if we have developed and recognize a new ideal, it is still necessary to have an outside power to help us, namely, the grace of God. But if our love of sin is greater than our love of God, then we hinder the grace which is necessary in order for us to be delivered and freed from the bondage of evil habits. If we love someone, and we enter a room with a hundred people, won't we bypass the 99 and go directly to our beloved? If we love God, won't we choose to go to Him and to be with Him by going to our icon corner and saying our prayers and by going to church? So the first part of liberation from an evil habit is recognizing a new ideal based on our love of God.

The second part of breaking bad habits is based on our will and our actions. Once we recognize a new ideal and realize that we need an outside power to help us, there must be a cooperation on our part by an act of the will. Our will must be resolute, determined and decisive, and we must make an effort and take action. Merely wishing for something is futile, even if we choose to believe in it. Remember the old adage, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." We don't need intentions. We need actions. If we allow ourselves to be in situations, in places, or with the people or environment that fosters the evil habit, then we have taken no actions and have done nothing, and our will has made no decisive choice to be freed from the vice that binds us. A bad atmosphere corrupts health, and evil companions corrupt morals. The purpose of the will is to desire the virtue and to eradicate the desire of evil, and then to take the necessary steps required to free ourselves.

Should the breaking of the evil habit be in stages and gradual or should it be immediate? Our Savior gives us the answer when He says that the breaking should be abrupt. "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Mt 5:29). Many people go to great lengths at making themselves beautiful or handsome. They can spend hours in salons, or

exercise vigorously, or keep strict diets. Yet how weak we are when it comes to spending time in the spiritual exercises necessary for the beautification of the soul, such as prayer and fasting! When we are baptized, we are given a grace of *potential*. It is then up to us to enact upon that potential, that flame which has been kindled within us, and to keep it burning and growing. One way is to read the Lives of the Saints on a daily basis. These are real people with weaknesses such as our own with whom we can easily identify. We can become inspired and filled with the fire of faith when we read about how these people were victorious in their spiritual struggles — how they eradicated their bad habits. And then as our love for our Lord grows stronger and the potential within our hearts grows from a flame into a bonfire — then the evil disappears. As Blessed Augustine said, “Love God and then do whatever you wish,” because if you love God, you will never do anything to hurt Love.

