

Teaching with Authority

Matthew 7:21-29

What does it mean to teach with authority, “as one having authority,” which are the words we find in verse 29. For some people, that means to speak loudly, for some preachers today it means to shout and yell, even berate your listeners. But that can hardly be what is being observed of Jesus. Yet some preachers and teachers abandon any sense of authority at all, speaking with a dull presentation hardly even effective for a college lecture let alone a biblical sermon? So what does it mean to teach with authority?

When I was first ordained, still in my middle 20s, that was a question that occupied my mind, for in you youth and inexperience, I was preaching to people most of whom were a good bit older than me, those I acknowledged as wiser than me. But I was the preaching, the pastor. And after several years of preaching, I remember gaining some sense of the importance and authority of what I was doing. Thankfully, I learned early, as a young man, what it meant to teach “as one having authority.” It wasn’t that I was ordained as a minister, though that was the outward evidence. It wasn’t that I was particularly eloquent, because I have never been eloquent. It wasn’t that I was educated or well-studied, though those were very helpful aspects of my preparation and training. But here is what it came to mean in my own mind, as a relatively young preaching. When I enter the pulpit, I come to proclaim the word of God. Not that I am ever infallible or inspired in the sense of the apostles were, but I recognize that my job is nothing less than to proclaim and declare what God himself has spoken.

With reference to myself, that keeps me humble, for there is nothing that I have of myself that bears any great importance in

your life. But if am to go about expounding what God has said, well, that has everything to do with your life. And I take that seriously, so I don’t wish to present simply a well-reasoned lecture or academic discourse. I certainly don’t wish merely to share with you some thoughts that I have formulated this week. Rather, my words, and my presentation of those words, is intended to communicate this most important of all points, that as I preach, as I proclaim God’s word, God is speaking to you through that word.

That is the way in which Jesus spoke as well, “as one having authority”. We ought not to think of Jesus yelling and shouting at the crowds. We shouldn’t think of him with any desperate attempt to make the people listen. Nonetheless, they listened. Because the people clearly observed that he spoke with authority, namely the authority of God.

I. AUTHORITY OBSERVED.

They were astonished, we read in verse 28, with the obvious observation that “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” For the people who were assembled, used to sitting under the teaching of the Jewish scribes, this was,

A. A striking contrast.

It was very, very different. But what made it different? What was so striking about Jesus’ teaching? What was lacking in the teaching of the Scribes? Perhaps the difference could be described as power. Jesus taught with power. In other words, his message was delivered with power, it exhibited power. His message was a matter of life and death, and his teaching bore the imprint of truth and reality. It was important. It was meaningful.

Some years ago I listened to a guest preacher myself, and I

cringed when I observed the very opposite sort of presentation, the casual nature of his communication from the pulpit. It was as if he were at a college football game, texting all his buddies about all his experiences. His presentation was shallow, empty. Frivolous, vain. Drivel. Banal. Commonplace, dumb. It wasn't simply that he chose to tell jokes, because humor can be very, very powerful; but that he chose to present himself with no exercise of authority whatsoever. Nothing in his presentation gave you any thought that anything he had to say was actually worthy your time or attention, no sense of the gravity of the situation that God himself was speaking.

Perhaps the people were used to that kind of teaching from their scribes. Maybe the teaching they had been used to hearing was similar to the sort of talk you might hear on a movie entitled, *Dumb and Dumber*. Jesus' teaching was different.

So this contrast must be evident today, for those who preach today must seek to teach as Jesus did, with authority. It is God who speaks to his people, and he uses the preaching of the word to do so. Al Mohler describes that contrast with what he described as "a subtle shift." "The shift from expository preaching to more topical and human-centered approaches has grown into a debate over the place of Scripture in preaching, and the nature of preaching itself. Two famous statements about preaching illustrate this growing divide. Reflecting poetically on the urgency and centrality of preaching, the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter once remarked, 'I preach as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.' With vivid expression and a sense of gospel gravity, Baxter understood that preaching is literally a life or death affair. Eternity hangs in the balance as the preacher proclaims the Word. Contrast that statement to the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, perhaps the most famous (or infamous) preacher of this century's early decades. Fosdick, pastor of the

Riverside Church in New York City, provides an instructive contrast to the venerable Baxter. 'Preaching,' he explained, 'is personal counseling on a group basis.' [Mohler continues.] These two statements about preaching reveal the contours of the contemporary debate. For Baxter, the promise of heaven and the horrors of hell frame the preacher's consuming burden. For Fosdick, the preacher is a kindly counselor offering helpful advice and encouragement."

It is fair to say that many people today really prefer preaching that does not bear the weight of authority. They prefer preaching that makes them comfortable, that leaves them settled and peaceful, preaching that does not grip their soul nor leave them trembling in the very presence of God. Such a striking contrast there is today, and sadly how often is this sort of teaching rejected by the common lot of God's people. Beloved, the teaching of God's word should never leave you unchanged. It should never fail to strike your heart, nor to address the matters of your innermost soul. And it should never be divorced from the reality of God's word, which comes to us with those most authoritative of all words, "Thus says the Lord..."

An your response should be the same as what we observe in the people to whom Jesus spoke here in Matthew 7. Theirs was,

B. An appropriate response.

They were astonished, according to v.28. The Greek word has the idea of being struck with panic. To be shocked or astonished. Amazed. Perhaps somewhat literally, to be struck or hit with a blow, to lose possession. Perhaps in the Greek language of baseball terminology, this word would be the word used for a strikeout. Three strikes and you're out. That's the sense of the people listening to Jesus. It struck them deeply.

We live in such a casual age. Communication is so flippant, lacking of respect and decorum. That's what is wrong with substituting text messages for substantive communication; it just teaches you to treat all communication with that same level of casual unimportance. Other words might be used as synonyms. Impertinent. Thoughtless. Glib. Insouciant. So laid-back as to be devoid of any serious minded care.

So how do you respond to teaching that bears authority? Do you prefer teaching that is common, ordinary, perhaps kindly and helpful in offering advice but placing no demand upon your soul to respond? Or do you prefer teaching that comes to you with all the authority of God speaking to you in the pages of Holy Scripture? There is an intensity there that makes many people uncomfortable, it astonishes them. There is a duty to take it seriously. That's what teaching with authority accomplishes. It compels you to hear, to listen, and to respond. It compels you to take it seriously. So will almost never use the language of sharing something with you when I preach. Rather, I am here to proclaim, to announce, to declare and expound nothing less than the Word of God. This is important. This is serious. This is a matter of life and death. This afternoon, I am as a dying man preaching to dying men.

Let's move backward into the text tonight to see what it was that Jesus declared with such authority.

II. AUTHORITY DECLARED.

It was a warning,

A. A necessary warning.

A dangerous warning. A provocative warning. A threatening warning. And a timely one, needed today as much or even more than it was needed when Jesus spoke it himself. Look at what he

says.

v.21

I don't need to tell you just how diametrically opposed that is to the spirit of our age. We live in an age of easy-believism. Just say the right words. Pray the right prayer. Maybe even join the right church. Get baptized. Profess your faith. That's it.

We in the reformed community can fall into that same danger. Just do those outward things that we all think are so necessary, outwardly good things. Say the words you know that everyone wants you to say. But that's not enough. The words are not enough. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven."

What makes the difference? Simply put, the effect that the reality of those words have upon your life.

v.21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Isn't that the same warning as we find in the book of James, James 1:22 "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

The warning is against hypocrites, against hypocrisy. The warning is against those who deceive themselves. And it is usually harder to deceive others. "Not everyone who says to me,

‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” And many, of course will object.

v.22-23

Beloved, this is a serious warning. And a necessary one. It is a grave and sober announcement, but absolutely necessary. Then and now. You cannot presume upon God. You cannot presume upon God’s grace and mercy when you live your life according to the authority of your own judgments. If your life can still be described as full of unrighteousness, if you can still be characterized as those who “practice lawlessness,” you cannot claim to be a Christian.

Doesn’t John say the same thing?

1 John 1:5 “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”

1 John 3:4 “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. 10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.”

I read these other verse to emphasize just how consistent the Scripture is, and how pervasively this warning is presented to us. Surely, this is a matter of life and death, eternal life and eternal death. And Jesus continues by giving us an illustration or parable which is very useful for,

B. Exposing foolishness.

Here is his illustration to expose the hypocrites, those who are his disciples in name only. Nominal followers. Interest that we use that word to define people today, and so-called nominal Christians are generally considered Christians, just not very mature. But Jesus has other ideas, other definitions. As the word “nominal” means “in name only.” Those who would claim to be his disciples in name only are not really his disciples at all! And they will be exposed.

v.26-27

Luke’s gospel records these words with perhaps even greater force.

Luke 6:46 “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say? 47 Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: 48 He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. 49 But he who heard and did nothing is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great.”

Beloved that warning needs to be proclaimed today. And the challenge of that warning needs to be felt by many who think that they can continue to live their lives however they want. ““Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”

Let me go back to James,

James 1:26 “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

James would continue,

James 2:18 “But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? 23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. 24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

That’s the warning. That’s the foolishness of hypocrisy being fully exposed. And before the judgment seat of God, no one will fool God. No one. Ever.

We read this similar warning in,

Heb. 12:12 “Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 looking carefully lest anyone

fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.”

Obviously, there is nothing trivial or frivolous in those words, and I proclaim them to you as a dying man to dying men. And with that warning comes the encouragement to those who acknowledge and honor the authority of God.

III. AUTHORITY ACKNOWLEDGED.

The positive side of this warning, you might say.
v.24-25

So the point is not to undermine the sincere faith of genuine believers, but rather to reinforce with them,

A. The wisdom of obedience.

The wisdom of being obedient. The wisdom of being doers of the word. The wisdom of being the man who builds his house upon the solid foundation of rock. That rock is Christ, representing a lively and vital relationship with Jesus that transforms the whole of your life. That rock is your living faith in Christ, your living in Christ, united to Christ. It is the evidence of Christ in your life.

And beloved, when Jesus is your rock, the rains may fall and the floods may come, the winds may blow, but the house will not fall. And that becomes your song of praise, doesn’t it? The very content of your worship.

Psalm 18:1 “I will love You, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my

strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.”

Again, James, the blessing.

James 1:25 “But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

B. The blessings of obedience.

In Jesus’ words,
v.24-25

What is that foundation? True discipleship. A truly and lively faith that is shown forth and made known by its fruit, namely the good works of your obedience. The foundation in this parable is nothing less than that which James describes as being “doers of the word.” The foundation is the discipleship by which you honor Jesus as Lord, not only with your lips but with your lives. That foundation is to be yours, and if it isn’t, then you need to hear this warning. But if it is yours, the blessing is also yours.

And such a blessing it is. So let me end with a Psalm, a Psalm I read for your great encouragement. A warning to the hypocrite, but a blessing to the godly. And I read this psalm to you as a matter of life and death, I read it as a dying man to dying men.

Ps. 1:1 “Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper. 4 The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff

which the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the ungodly shall perish.”