

Jesus' Amazing Authority

Mark 1:21-28

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One time Babe Ruth was called out on strikes by an umpire, Babe Pinelli. There was a stunned silence in the stands. Ruth turned to Pinelli and said, "There are 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball." Pinelli replied, "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts" (<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/february/cominggripsauthority.html>).

Whose opinion really matters? Who really speaks with authority? Twice in this passage the authority of Jesus is mentioned. Each time Jesus' authority is displayed, the people are amazed or astonished. What kind of authority did Jesus have and what was so amazing about it? Can we still be amazed by Jesus? Or do we find him a bit too tame, too familiar, even boring? Let's see what this episode tells us about our astounding Lord and his amazing authority.

Jesus shows his authority in what he says and what he does. First, we see that people were amazed because Jesus *taught* with authority. One preacher I heard imagined Peter and Andrew sitting in the synagogue listening to Jesus. Andrew nudges Peter and says, "You know, this guy makes sense!" When's the last time you heard a preacher who made sense? (Dennis Kinlaw said this in a sermon I heard on a tape sometime.)

But what amazed the people in the Capernaum synagogue was more than that Jesus made sense. There was something about the way he taught that impressed his listeners. Mark doesn't even tell us what Jesus taught that day. It was probably something like his announcement that the kingdom of God is near and possibly illustrations of God's powerful presence and rule like we find in Jesus' parables later in the Gospel—along with the call to repent and believe.

Jesus taught in a way that was different from the religion scholars of the day. Those scholars are called scribes or teachers of the law. They quoted lots of other authorities and placed their opinions alongside several other opinions. They'd say things like, "Rabbi so-and-so interpreted this

passage this way, but Rabbi such-and-such interpreted it another way.” Jesus spoke as if he were giving *the* right interpretation. He told what God’s intention was in what the Scriptures said. He spoke as though directly from heaven. Jesus didn’t depend on the authority of “the tradition of the elders” or opinions of various teachers. He spoke with his own authority.

Part of the purpose of this episode and others like it is to help us see who Jesus is. He really is the Son of God. He really is specially anointed by God. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism is key to understanding all that Jesus says and does. The authority Jesus speaks with here flows from his identity as God’s beloved Son and from the Holy Spirit who anoints him. God’s powerful presence is coming through who Jesus is, what he does, and the way he does it.

Jesus is still our authoritative Teacher. He’s more than just a teacher, but he is our teacher. When he speaks, we listen. Jesus is able to tell us what life is about and the best way to live. He tells what the kingdom of God is like and how we enter it and live in it. Dallas Willard reminds us that Jesus is brilliant, the smartest person around (*The Divine Conspiracy* 94).

Also, as our teacher, Jesus is our example. Mark frequently calls Jesus *Rabbi* or *teacher*, but Jesus speaks less in Mark’s Gospel than in the others. “Jesus is revealed as a teacher who trains his disciples by providing a living model of a faithful son more than a proclaimer of words” (David Fenton, *MARK. Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

Jesus lived what he taught and he shows us how to live out his teachings. Even more, he gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us to follow his example. The same Spirit who anointed Jesus, giving him power and authority, lives within each person who by faith opens up to Jesus and is committed to following him. The living Lord is present in the church through his Word and Spirit. He wants to instruct us, to guide us, to show us how to live as his people. And he equips and empowers us to learn and obey and follow and live his way.

While Jesus was teaching in the synagogue and the people were amazed by the authoritative way he taught, there came a challenge to his authority. A man was there who was possessed by an impure or unclean

spirit. Jesus, anointed by the *Holy Spirit* now confronts an *unclean* spirit. Jesus' first public encounter with demons happened in church!

God's will and purpose in Jesus confront the will and purpose of evil in a cosmic battle. And it happens in the midst of people like us. The issues of life and death, of good and evil are fought out in the Capernaum synagogue. In the same way, they're fought out among us where we worship and study the faith (Ann Hoch, *Preaching Resources*, January 30, 2000, p. 20).

This man, actually the demon inside him, cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

The inbreaking, invading kingdom of God causes this outcry. The demon recognizes Jesus and his purpose and it cries out in fear and fury.

"Have you come to destroy *us*?" the demon cried. Not just this one evil spirit is threatened, but all evil spirits, the whole world of Satan's influence. One spirit speaks for all of them. By casting out one, Jesus says, "I can get rid of all of you." Jesus the true King launches kingly war against all of the realm of evil (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. The Biblical Journey* DVD, week 2).

The answer to the question, "Have you come to destroy us?" is yes. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). By announcing and bringing near the kingdom of God, Jesus was attacking the devil's kingdom. The activity of the devil and demons seems almost frantic during the life and ministry of Jesus. Their defeat was at hand. Jesus cast out demons, who recognized who he was. And he gave his disciples the same power to cast them out (Mk 3:15). In Matthew, Jesus answers the Pharisees' charge that he was casting out demons by the devil's power this way: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." We see a close connection between the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God. The Spirit defeats the demons and establishes God's kingdom (Larry Hart, *Truth Aflame* 178).

Now the demon tries a trick. It announces that it knows who Jesus is and correctly identifies him as God's Holy One. If Jesus receives acclamation from demons, then people will believe that he's really on their side. You

occasionally see this ploy in stories. The bad guy will act like the hero's friend and so throw doubt on the hero and his or her motives.

Another thought is that the demon tries to gain control over Jesus by identifying him. There was a belief in the ancient world that knowing someone's name or identity gave you power over them. The demon may think that by saying who Jesus is, it can exercise power over him.

Jesus will have none of this. He doesn't argue or negotiate with the evil spirit. He simply speaks an authoritative word of command: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" And the evil spirit had to obey. With a final display of contempt and a loud shriek it came out of the man.

Again the people are amazed. And here the word is more like astounded, even apprehensive. There's some fear in their amazement at Jesus. They ask each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He simply commands evil spirits and they obey him." People in that day were used to talking about unclean spirits and seeing evidence of their presence. They were even used to certain people driving out demons. Exorcists in that day usually used various magic arts and rituals and remedies to try to drive out evil spirits. They might speak the name of a more powerful spirit to get rid of a lesser one. They might put a smelly root up the nose of the possessed person hoping the demon couldn't stand it (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*). The Jewish historian Josephus describes a demonstration by an exorcist who put a ring of secret herbs under the nose of the possessed person. The herbs would force a sneeze that supposedly was the demon being expelled. The exorcist would command the demon, in the name of Solomon, never to return (Michael Card, *Mark: The Gospel of Passion 36-37*).

The people in Capernaum were amazed that Jesus didn't use all that rigamarole. He was effective by simply ordering the demons to leave. He didn't have to use incantations and herbs, he didn't speak in the name of someone like Solomon. He spoke with his own authority and gave the command. And the evil spirits left at his command.

What do we make of this display of Jesus' authority? We can handle him being a teacher, but someone who drives demons out of people? The

“modern mind” has a hard time accepting any spiritual reality, much less evil spirits that attack and possess people.

Billy Abraham tells about how as a young person he resisted God. He didn't want God telling him what to do. He had some bouts of faith, but in his teens he decided he was an atheist. He didn't think he could believe in a God that he couldn't see. But he still kept studying Christian faith, thinking he should understand it if he was going to reject it.

What got through to Billy was how Christianity refused to blunt the reality of evil by denying it, taming it, pushing it to the margins, or covering it up. Instead Christian faith took the reality of evil so seriously that it showed up all over the place. But what really caused the breakthrough for Billy “was the ability to conceive of the demonic.” As he pondered the depth and extent of evil in the world, he had no difficulty conceiving the possibility of the influence of a completely evil being at work. That led him to give up the idea that only what's visible can be real. Then he could deal with the possibility of God's reality (“Faraway Fields Are Green,” in *God and the Philosophers* 166).

Another of my teachers, Bob Tuttle, tells about preaching in a seminary chapel and this passage from Mark was the text for the day. He told those students who were training for ministry, “My job is not to convince you of the reality of the demonic. Your first church will take care of that!” Instead, he said, “I want to remind you of the power that's available for overcoming principalities and powers” (He's told this several times. I've probably heard it in person as well as on tape). “Principalities and powers” is what the New Testament sometimes calls these evil spirits.

Now, is anybody else uncomfortable? I confess that I still struggle some with the idea of demons and possession and deliverance. I have no trouble believing that Jesus encountered actual evil spirits and showed his power and authority over them. But that's beyond my experience. I don't think I've known anyone who was possessed. Although interest in the demonic helped me open up more to God at one point. I was probably eleven when the movie *The Exorcist* came out. I've never seen the movie, but the hype surrounding it made me curious and I read the book. I stayed up late one night, either too interested or too scared to go to bed.

I remember seeing a book at the Missouri State Fair one time. It included a missionary's account of dealing with demon possession in other cultures. And one Sunday morning on Oral Roberts' TV show, he offered a book titled *The 12 Greatest Miracles of My Ministry*. Oral was a good marketer and he knew people were interested in the supernatural and demons because of *The Exorcist*. So he mentioned that two of the chapters had to do with deliverance of possessed people. I wrote in for the book and sent a few dollars and so became a partner in Oral's ministry. Correspondence from him helped me grow in faith and openness to God and prepared me for going to ORU as a student. Going to school there had a major impact on my life.

Still, reading about other people's experiences isn't the same as having the experience yourself. As a young Christian, I used to think that I'd like to confront demons and cast them out of people and just be some kind of gospel hero. At some point, I changed my mind about that. The more I've heard about that kind of ministry, the more I realize it's not to be taken lightly. It takes a lot of prayer and effort and usually a team of people to deal with possession. Still, Christ has authority and power. One thing I remember from *The Exorcist* is that the demon seemed to be more powerful than Jesus. That's just not the case. The authority and power of Jesus are always greater than any evil.

So there are literal evil or unclean spirits. They're agents of evil that attack and try to destroy people. And not just through possession. Often the forces of evil work in subtle ways. Go read C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* to get some insight into that. We need to be aware of them and prepared to face them with the Lord's power and equipment. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians how he was dealing with a situation with one of their members, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Cor 2:11).

Let's also broaden our understanding of evil and the demonic. The NT not only mentions evil/unclean spirits, but also uses the words "demons" and "principalities and powers." These are usually taken to refer to sinful or evil structures in society. They're forces that drive sinful practices on a large scale as well as in individual lives. Paul reminds us that God has equipped

us with all we need to combat evil in all the forms it takes (Ephesians 6:10-20).

Richard Foster, writing about authoritative prayer, gives a helpful perspective on the various forms these evil powers take:

Behind absentee landlords of ghetto apartments are the spiritual forces of greed and avarice.

In back of unreasoned and excessive resistance to the Gospel message are demonic forces of disobedience and distraction.

Underneath the organized structures of injustice and oppression are principalities of privilege and status.

Aiding and abetting the sexual violence and the race hate and the child molestation that are such a part of modern society are diabolical powers of destruction and brutality. (*Prayer* 239-40)

The term “demons” is also used figuratively in popular speech. People talk about their “demons” or refer to a troubled person’s “demons.” Usually they mean something like that person has strong, almost uncontrollable urges or temptations or struggles—such as with addiction or a violent temper or such.

Sometimes we also talk about demonizing an opponent. That’s when we see someone we disagree with as totally evil. If we see someone as all evil, we dehumanize them and so we feel like we don’t have to treat them as real people with real ideas and feelings.

Now hear this: Christ’s authority and power are greater than any of these forms of evil. Whether we’re talking about literal evil spirits or strongholds of evil in culture and society or the powerful pull of sin in our lives or the torment that many people feel, Jesus is powerful to overcome. In an email conversation about this section of Mark, a friend of mine said, “The greatness of the ministry of Jesus is that his authoritative voice can transform the person who is viewed as a hopeless cause in people’s eyes” (Dwight Moore, email, 1/28/2000).

The people in Capernaum responded to Jesus' authority with amazement. That's something short of real faith in Jesus. It's a kind of excitement or wonder, but not yet commitment to him or trust in him.

But if we do believe in Jesus we can't forget that he is wonderful, amazing, and surprising. Lloyd Ogilvie sums this up:

[W]e are forced to ask the question Mark hoped we would ask, "How would I have responded if I had been in the synagogue? Have I been astonished and amazed at Jesus' message and power today? In what areas of my life am I possessed and unable to live with freedom and love?" ...

The Messiah who moved immediately into human need whenever he found it and released the immediacy of divine power is with us now as the resurrected, living Lord. This passage in Mark is to quicken our faith so that we can dare to believe that what he did then he is more than able to do now. (*Life Without Limits* 44)