

Mark 1:21-28  
January 14, 2024

Does anyone here have a problem with authority? Growing up, did you ever purposely watch that TV show, run in the street, push your sibling- simply because your parents told you not to? Do you grumble under your breath when your boss tells you to do something and you have to because that's your boss? Do you find yourself saying things like "don't tell me what to do," "who put you in charge?" If you have a problem with authority, you aren't alone- you are a product of your culture- Americans cannot stand authority. One source shows that in 1960- about 75% of people trusted the government to do what's right, today that's down to about 15%. There may be plenty of reasons why our culture is like this, but one thing we can say for sure is this: We don't like authority.

Today, Mark displays something that we may not like, but need to hear-. **Jesus is authoritative.** 1. He has authority over truth. 2. He has authority over demons.

1. Jesus has authority over truth. If you remember last month's sermons, you remember that about 600 years before Jesus, the Babylonian empire came in and destroyed Israel, the city Jerusalem, and the temple. When the Israelites got back from Babylonian captivity after 70 years, they didn't have a temple, and they had to find different ways to worship God . The synagogue was a community of believers that would meet together in a building on the Sabbath, pray together, hear the scriptures, sing hymns, and an appointed teacher, rabbi, or Pharisee would teach them based on a part of Scripture. This was their worship- and our modern church services evolved from this. Jesus and some of his disciples come to Capernaum in Galilee and on the Sabbath they go to Synagogue- where Jesus is invited to teach. While he's teaching, his listeners are dumbstruck, speechless, jaws to the floor while they are listening to him because, according to Mark, Jesus teaches as one with authority, not like the Pharisees and rabbis. What exactly does that mean?

The Pharisees and rabbis were known for memorizing entire chunks of the Old Testament- they knew it like the back of their hand. A typical sermon from a Rabbi at that time would be concerned with questions like "How long should the tassels (little strings attached to Jewish clothing) be? How many steps can you take on the Sabbath day before it's considered "work" and therefore sinning? How much water should you use when you ceremonially wash your bowls, pots, and cups? Even if their sermons weren't so hifalutin- they would often quote other well-known Rabbis and Pharisees to whatever teachings they were getting across. And what we can also say about their teaching was this: it was legalistic- it wasn't about what God has done for you, it was all about the little things you can do to be extra religious, extra righteous, extra pious in order to earn God's favor. By misusing Scripture, preaching in such a way as not to actually build up the people's faith but to instead look smart, and prioritizing the authority of other Rabbis over the authority of God's Word, and by preaching- "this is what you must do to earn God's favor," they were robbing God's Word of its authority, robbing God of his glory, and robbing God's people of the comfort that he wanted them to have.

But Jesus was different. Instead of getting caught up in tassel lengths and Sabbath steppings, he preached the Bible. He said "repent, for the Kingdom of God is near. All people are sinful, all people deserve

punishment from God, but he is gracious and compassionate and forgives and loves sinners. Believe in him, and believe in me!” Jesus didn’t say, “be like me and you’ll be saved!” He said, “I have come to save you.” And here’s something fascinating- in the synagogue, when a Rabbi made a good point or said something that was true and good, the listeners would say a Hebrew word that meant “That’s true.” The word is, “Amen.” They would say, “amen, that’s true” when they heard something they knew was true (which is a tradition still in some churches). Do you remember what Jesus begins important statements with? “Very truly,” “Verily Verily,” literally in the Greek, “Amen Amen” So Jesus is saying, “I don’t need your ‘amen.’” I “amen” myself because I define what is true and what is not true.” No wonder people were speechless.

2. Yet, not only did Jesus display his authority over truth, but also over demons. While Jesus is teaching, a demon, a fallen, evil angel possessing one of the listeners shouts 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!” Demonic possession, from what the Gospels tell us, was decently common during this time- Jesus was constantly casting out demons. Exorcisms often involved incantations, magic words repeated over and over, and different kinds of remedies and methods to get rid of the demon, often invoking the name of powerful people and more powerful demons to cast demons out. The ancient historian from around this time, Josephus, writes about a Jewish professional exorcist and his rituals. He would grind up a bad-smelling root and make a strong-odored paste and stick that up the possessed person’s nose so that the demon would be so repulsed by the stink that he would leave. This process also included repeated special words and invoking the name of King Solomon.

Jesus doesn’t have to do any of that. He says, “Be quiet. Get out.” And the demon flees in terror. Jesus is not only unafraid of demons,, the demon is afraid of Jesus. Of all the things that keep me up at night in terror, demons are at the top of that list. And yet Jesus is the one who fills them with fear.? Look at what the demon said! Jesus of Nazareth, a full human being, is also the Holy one of God- the one who is sent from God, has fellowship with God, and yet is Holy like God because he is God! And he is going to destroy Satan and all his demons for their rebellion and evil on Judgement day when he casts them into the burning lake of fire, hell itself, and they will suffer for eternity. The demons that terrify us are nothing compared to Jesus and his wrath, and because he is their creator, they have no choice but to obey him. Jesus is not simply an authoritative teacher- his words are not just true, he himself is the definer and creator of truth because he is God himself. That is exactly what that demon knew, and that is why it fled in terror.

That is what Mark is getting across here. That is why he puts this account in the first chapter of his Gospel. He wants you and I to know that there is no higher power, no higher authority, no higher terror than Jesus. And yet, something’s missing from this account. Mark tells us that the people were “amazed,” but it’s a different word than used before. This word is more like intimidated, stunned with fear, because they haven’t just seen a ghost, but they are in the presence of the one who is the creator and judge of all spirits. Jesus shows his divine authority as God and people marvel, they wonder, they listen, they spread the word, but do you notice what it doesn’t say? It doesn’t say they believe. The demons, maybe you noticed, are the only ones who seem to know about Jesus and who he is and what he’s come to do. But they hate him. The people knew Jesus was powerful and authoritative, but we don’t get the impression that they had faith in him as their savior. How can this be? How can demons and people reject Jesus even though he’s obviously powerful?

Paul later writes in 1 Corinthians, “Jews,” like the ones who saw Jesus, “look for signs, power, strength, but we preach Christ crucified.” We are not saved by Jesus’s power and authority. We couldn’t be. That’s not what breaks down the human heart and causes us to love and trust Jesus. It’s the fact that Jesus, the one who has all authority willingly gave it up so he could have you and me. Jesus, the one who by his Word alone caused demons to flee was silent as he was mocked, beaten, abused, and shamed. Jesus, the one who defines and preaches truth, stood before the Jewish religious authorities, the ones who didn’t preach with authority, and let himself be condemned by their lies. That’s the kind of King Jesus is. He doesn’t gain followers and establish his kingdom by flexing his authority, but by giving it up and dying a criminal’s death so that sinners could be forgiven. That is why we, unlike the demons, unlike the people of Capernaum, can look to Jesus as our ultimate authority, trust what he says, obey what he says, embrace what he says- because he our kind- an altogether different kind of king who values his people more than his power.

One application point I’d like to make is this: demons are real, and Christians need to acknowledge that. Maybe there are some who hear this account and think, “really? Come on. They didn’t know about mental illnesses and modern medicine back then, we know that demon possession isn’t real.” Here’s my response: boy, I wish you were right. Firstly, the belief in Satan and demons is absolutely logical. If you believe in a supernatural force of good, like God, then it therefore makes sense that there is a supernatural force, or forces, of evil. That’s logical. Secondly, look at the evidence. Look around the world at the wars, the atrocities, the natural disasters, the human cruelty and tragedy, and tell me that there aren’t intelligent, supernatural forces of evil at work. Thirdly, and most importantly, Jesus clearly says so. And if Jesus is who he says he is, and he has the authority that he claims to have, then his word is truth and Satan and his demons are real, and if you convince yourself that Satan and his demons don’t really exist, you’ve fallen right into their trap. What Satan and his minions do is they either attempt to seem more powerful than they actually are, which we see a lot in the Gospels, or they convince you they don’t exist. This account from Mark proves something that’s quite disturbing, but we need to know. Here we see someone who worships the true God, and is at the same time deeply oppressed by a demon. Is it possible for a Christian to be possessed by a demon? Scripture doesn’t answer that, so I won’t attempt to, but what I will say is this: It is not only possible, but true that Satan and his demons are constantly at work against us, constantly tempting us to fall into sin, constantly trying to pull us away from Christ, and they will use anything they can- money, pride, lust, laziness, fear, resentment, anything they can do to make you hurt others and forsake Jesus, and we need to be constantly vigilant. We need to pray to God for strength and protection. We need to constantly be in the Word to arm ourselves against Satan and his lies. We need to be with each other and encourage and strengthen each other for our battles. We need to be vigilant, but not afraid. Never afraid. Because although Satan and his demons are real, and powerful, and terrifying, the King that has bought us with his own blood strikes them with fear at the sound of his voice. He has the authority, he has the power, he has the terror of justice in his hand, and he also has us in his arms. And while we certainly submit to his authority, we do it with joy because he isn’t just powerful. He’s good. And he’s ours. Amen.