

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 2, AD 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ *They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.* ²² *The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*

²³ *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,* ²⁴ *"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!"*

²⁵ *"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"* ²⁶ *The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*

²⁷ *The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."* ²⁸ *News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (NIV)*

What's Amazing about This Authority?

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Jesus,

Everywhere you go, there's somebody in charge, somebody with authority. Turn on the TV and you'll see people who have authority in our government—the president, congressmen, the governor. For that matter, you can drive down the street and see people who have authority—police officers, who have the authority to enforce the laws of our government. In school there are authorities, too—the principal and teachers. At home there are parents and grandparents who are in charge. Even in church there are people with the authority to preach and teach publicly. Everywhere you go, there's somebody with authority.

The same was true for the people who lived in Bible times and places. In the time Jesus walked the earth, there were authorities. Some of the most obvious (and, people would say, obnoxious) were the Romans. Governors, soldiers, tax collectors—they were in charge in Israel. There was the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. They had authority over religious matters, as did the local rabbis and synagogue rulers in each town. And of course there were parents back then, too.

There have always been, and always will be people in authority, people in charge. That won't change. What will change is how these people in authority *use* their authority. Will they use it to help or to harm? Will they use it with other people's interests in mind or only their own? If they intend to exercise their authority in a beneficial way, will they actually be able to do it?

Today in the Gospel of Mark we see Jesus exercising his authority. And we hear people's evaluation—they were amazed. Jesus exercised his authority in a way that was amazingly different from other authorities of his time. What was so amazing about the authority Jesus displayed? Let's find out. As we think about this section of Scripture, listen for two ways that the authority Jesus exercised was different and therefore amazing.

Jesus uses it to give, not to get

It says, They [that is, Jesus and his first disciples; we heard last week about how he called these fisherman to follow him] went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went

into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

The service in the synagogue went something like this. There was the reading from the writings of the prophets. These writings are still around; they form much of our Old Testament Scriptures. Then there was the singing of a psalm. The book of psalms was kind of the hymnal of the Old Testament people. Then there was another Scripture reading, this time from the Law, one of the first five books of the Bible, which were penned by Moses. After that, a qualified and authorized rabbi, or teacher, would expound on the meaning of one of the Scriptures that was read. Does any of this sound familiar? This is the pattern for our worship service today! Reading, psalm, reading (we add another reading from the life of Jesus, of course), then the sermon, which explains one of the readings.

On this day in Capernaum, Jesus was authorized by the rulers of the local synagogue to teach. More importantly, Jesus was authorized by his Father in heaven to teach. This he did, speaking and explaining the words of God to people. No wonder the people were amazed!

But did you notice what Mark wrote? The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. The teachers of the law were the religious professionals of Jesus' time. If you remember the older King James Version of the Bible, these are the men called "scribes". They were able to write and to read, probably more than most people could. More importantly, they were often charged with the duty of explaining God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, to people.

Much of what they taught people was the Law of Moses. Ever since the time of Moses (about 1400 BC), God had given the Israelites many different laws to keep. Some of them included the kosher food laws and the special religious holiday laws that governed days like Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and the Passover. Keeping these laws would set the Israelites apart as a people devoted to the Lord. There were many regulations to follow. And for good measure, the religious teachers over the centuries had added even more! This is what the teachers of the law in Jesus' era spent much of their time explaining to people. Very authoritatively, they told them what to do and what not to do.

Then Jesus came. What did Jesus teach the people? Well, he did explain to his disciples what God wanted from them. We know that from his famous Sermon on the Mount. But there was more. We got a summary of it last week. Mark writes, After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14,15) Jesus told the people more than just what they were to do for God. He told them what God was doing for them! God was at work, right there among them, reigning in the hearts of people. Jesus told people to turn away from their sins and to believe the good news that God loved them, forgave them everything, and was bringing his peace to their lives.

That's what was different about Jesus. The teachers of the law used their authority to get obedience out of people. Now, don't misunderstand—they were using the Bible. But in doing so, in making sure people knew every last bit of what God expected them to do, they overlooked something bigger—what God was doing for them. Jesus highlighted that message of God's gracious action.

There's an interesting incident in the Gospel of John that highlights this. Jesus noted that the teachers of the law and other religious leaders were meticulous students of the Bible. They studied it in detail. But they missed the main point of the Bible. Jesus said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39,40). They thought that by studying the Bible they could get eternal life with God. They were half right. They could get eternal life through the Bible, but not through all the parts that told people

what to do for God. No, they could have eternal life through the Bible because the Bible pointed them to Jesus. The Bible told them that, ultimately, God wanted not to get something from them, but to give something to them—eternal life.

When people get power and authority, their sinful instinct is to use their authority to get things for themselves. Rulers who have power often use it to exploit those they rule. They use their authority to get things from them, whether it's taxes or slavish obedience, or darker things. That's how Jesus is different. He uses his authority to bring people good news. He uses his position to proclaim to us that our sins against God are forgiven, that we have eternal life in him. Instead of using his authority to get things out of us, he uses his authority as the Word of God made flesh to give us priceless gifts—forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

Jesus matches deeds to words

Government officials often speak with authority. Just last week our president spoke his State of the Union address. Whenever a government official speaks, we wonder if they'll be able to do what they promise. This is no slam on the President or anybody else in our government, but, knowing the weaknesses of human nature and the limitations of any form of government, we wonder if those in authority will be able to match deeds to words.

The people who heard Jesus teaching must have wondered the same thing. Jesus was announcing that the ruling power of God himself was breaking into the world: "The kingdom of God is here!" "Really?" people must have thought. "Things look the same. They feel the same. This man speaks impressively, but can he put his money where his mouth is? Can he give evidence that God is living and reigning here among us?"

Then something happened. An opportunity arose for Jesus to match some deeds to his words.

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit 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!" Was the power of God at work in the world? The power of Satan surely was. An evil spirit, one of Satan's fallen angels—a powerful, spirit being—had invaded the body of one of the people there in the Capernaum synagogue. This evil spirit knew who Jesus was and why Jesus had come. He knew Jesus was the Holy One of God—the one God had promised to send to destroy the devil's work.

This was evil, staring Jesus in the face, speaking to him derisively. Jesus would have none of it. "Be quiet!" Jesus commands. And the demon does! "Come out of him!" Jesus commands. And the demon does! The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

How's that for authority! Jesus did nothing but speak. He gave two simple commands. And this mighty, evil spirit being had to submit. When Jesus speaks, things happen.

How different this was from the teachers of the law! Many rabbis of Jesus' day preached and commanded and cajoled, harping on the Law of Moses and even adding new rules to it, all to produce a people pleasing to God. All to impress God so much that he would not be able to resist coming down to congratulate them. But the teachers of the law could not make it happen. They could tell people to get right with God, but they could not bring it about. They could not match deeds to words.

But Jesus did. He came into the world, proclaiming the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. And he did what he said. He himself was God in the flesh, come into the world to destroy the devil's work. He not only talked a good game, but he also backed up what he said with action.

Jesus showed that by driving out the demon from the man in the synagogue. And he showed it in an even more dramatic way at a later time. When he was nailed to his cross, the powers of hell had their fingers crossed. Had they been able to destroy the human race by leading it into sin, by bringing onto it all the stinging wrath of God? And had they now been

able to destroy God's Son as well? On the cross it looked as if they had. But in reality the opposite was happening. God was in charge. Jesus was ruling. He was saving the human race by suffering the torment of hell in its place. When he died for the sins of the world, he was destroying the devil's power, not the other way around. And when Jesus was raised back to life, when he descended to hell to announce his victory over Satan and all his followers, when he rose triumphant from the grave—then there was no doubt that the kingdom of God had come, just as Jesus had preached. Jesus matched deeds to words, and the result is life eternal for us.

Today we heard Jesus speak with authority. He still speaks, you see, through his people. Pastor Janke forgave us all our sins, and they are forgiven, for Jesus authorized him to say that. But can Jesus really forgive us? Can he match deeds to words? Come to his Supper and see. Take his body; he gave it into death to pay for all your sins. Take his blood; he shed it for you, to release you from Satan's grip. Jesus said he'd save you from your sins, and he did, at the cost of his own life. Jesus' authority matches deeds to words.

"Question authority," said the slogan of the 1960s. In moderation, that's not a bad idea. It's good to evaluate people who have great power and authority. Are they using their authority to help people or just to promote a selfish agenda and to take advantage of people? Are they actually doing something beneficial with the authority they have?

We can ask both those questions of Jesus. And he gives us answers. He uses his authority to give, not to get. He matches deeds to words. He powerfully gives us the free gifts of pardon, peace with God, victory over evil and real life forever. He uses his authority to show his love.

In a world that has through its history been full of corrupt authorities, that's nothing short of amazing. Amen.