

With Authority

4afterEpiphany

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Mark 1:21-28

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Fourth Commandment, we are commanded and encouraged to respect our earthly authorities. These authorities include our parents and guardians, our local police and city officials, and our national leaders, including President Trump, his staff, and all the members of each political branch of our nation.

These individuals may or may not be worthy of respect themselves, but due to their offices—which are provided by God as we learn in Romans chapter thirteen—we should respect and honor the authority which God has given to them.

There may be times when we don't agree with an authority figure, and we use the appropriate means to voice our opinions. We have that right in this country.

In our Gospel text, though, we learn that unclean spirits do not have that right. When Jesus entered a synagogue and began teaching, an unclean spirit possessing a man came near and began speaking out against Jesus. That did not last long. With only a word, Jesus forced the unclean spirit to leave the man. Jesus had authority to which the unclean spirit in the man—and indeed, all unclean spirits—must yield. While the spirit was able to speak against Him before the Lord opened His mouth, once Jesus spoke to the spirit, we find that the spirit was not permitted to utter another word.

Jesus exorcised this unclean spirit by using His authority. That's basically what our text says; but what about on a deeper level? How does Jesus exercise His authority? Why do we trust His authority? We'll consider these thoughts as we turn to our Gospel text.

Verse 1

“And (Jesus and the disciples He had just called) went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

Earlier in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had been baptized and there His Father spoke concerning Him: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” As one with whom God was well pleased, Jesus had the authority to go and speak God's Word; and He used that authority as soon as He entered Capernaum. Immediately He “entered the synagogue and was teaching.” Take note of the response of those at the synagogue! Yes, they would be “amazed” later—once the unclean spirit was cast out of the man—but even here, just Jesus' Word had them “astonished.” They were “astonished” because “he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

Today we also are certainly amazed when we consider that infants, children, and adults are all brought into God's kingdom through the waters of Baptism—though truly it is by water *with the Word*. But how often are you astonished by God's Word alone? Is that not the focus of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: *sola scriptura*? That is, Word alone? Granted, we hear it from the mouths of ones who have been called into the ministry to preach and are given the authority to preach in that way while Jesus taught and proclaimed by His own authority. Yet one thing has not changed: the message itself. Whether spoken by Jesus, God in human flesh Himself, or pastors under the authority of the call, it is the Word of God which is proclaimed and preached. So again, how often are you astonished by God's Word?

The Word of God still comes by and with God's authority. It does what God says it will do. It crushes and kills sinners with the Law, and it raises new creations to life by the power of the Gospel. And it also has power over evil spirits.

Verse 2

“(I)mmediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’”

By His authority, Jesus commands the unclean spirit to get out of the man. Everyone at the time did not question whether it was truly a spirit in him or a mental illness. Most certainly, there were no psychologists then as there are today. But the idea that the man was only mentally ill and not possessed by an actual spirit raises some important questions regarding Jesus' authority.

This is how commentator Lenski lays out the seriousness of questioning the man's condition as liberal theologians today do: “The tendency is strong among modern commentators, even of the better sort, to deny the reality of demoniacal possession as it is recorded in the Scriptures. The demoniacs are supposed to have been people who were afflicted with some mania, an unbalanced condition of mind...But what is gained by such an assumption?...These explanations...run foul of something that is far more serious. Either Jesus knew or did not know that these were not demoniacs. If he did not know their real condition, we have a Savior who was as ignorant as the people of his day. If he did know that these were not devil-possessed then he acted as if they were, and we have a Savior who could act a lie. To say that Jesus only ‘accommodated himself’ to the popular opinion leaves his case under a fatal moral stigma. The fact is that he never lowered himself to any falsehood, however widely and strongly it was held (*St. Mark's Gospel*, Lenski, p.76).”

Everything that Jesus had done up to this point, fighting the temptations of Satan, calling His first disciples, and proclaiming the Word of God were all done with authority. If Jesus' authority were to fall under accusation of being ignorant or, even worse, maintaining a falsehood, then His authority would not have the power that it needs to as the One who would later claim from the cross that “‘It is finished.’”

Today, we claim Jesus as our Savior from sin. If His authority is not true and valid, then we are not saved from our sins. Thanks be to God Jesus knew exactly what He was doing and what He was saying. He was the beloved Son of God who had the authority to preach and teach and expel actual unclean spirits in ways that the people had not witnessed in their current leadership.

Verse 3

“(T)hey were all amazed saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.”

The people gathered in the synagogue beheld Jesus' authority. Some of them would lose their amazement and their faith in Him. Yet some would continue to hold on to His Word to life and salvation.

Today some will hear the Word or see a mighty work that could only be the work of the hand of God. Some of these people will hear the Word or see the mighty works of God and believe for a while, but ultimately fall away. Others will hear and see and believe to life everlasting.

Those who believe and are saved are those who have the gift of faith. None of us believes of our own power. If we could save ourselves, Jesus Christ would not have had to come as God in the flesh and bearing God's authority. If we were able to save ourselves, Jesus would not have had to go to the cross. But because we cannot believe of ourselves—either us or those who heard and saw in our text—Jesus went to the cross of Calvary. There He died; paying the price for the sin which blinded us to God's mighty works and deafened us to His Word proclaimed with His authority.

Now you have been made new creations with eyes to see and ears to hear. May you continue to use them this season of Epiphany and to *your* life and salvation, in Jesus Christ our Lord. In Jesus' Name. Amen.