

## “The Word of Authority”

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*“He taught them as one who had authority, not as the scribes.” “A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey Him.”* There is obviously something very different about Jesus. He communicates authority.

There are two kinds of authority...that which can be bestowed and that which is achieved, or earned.

Bestowed authority is the kind given to a judge, an elected official, a police officer, a teacher, a pastor. It is authority that comes with a position or a profession. Earned authority is very different. It is achieved by experience, by the development of character. Earned authority communicates certain qualities which cannot be taken away from a person. Earned authority does not require a title. There are persons, as we all know who commands respect by the way they conduct themselves. They have an aura of authority which is hard to define, but is impossible to overlook.

The sad commentary of our times is that so many of our public authority figures do not possess much of this earned authority. Many have been given positions of power and prestige but have not earned the respect that would equip them to be effective in office, nor do they possess the innate qualities of integrity, wisdom and humility which might encourage people to respect their authority.

We're not going to solve that problem here today. But this text helps us to focus this issue on our own spiritual journey and the place of authority in the mission of the church. Jesus is presented as one who teaches with authority, unlike the scribes. The scribes were teachers of the Law, a position of responsibility and authority. But Jesus clearly communicates qualities which place him at a different level. He has not received the blessing of the religious establishment, yet the people perceive that He is the real authority figure, the one who demands their attention and respect.

By way of illustration, Mark recounts how Jesus sternly rebukes and casts out a demon which had possessed a man. The intent, obviously, is to leave no question in the mind of the hearer that Jesus is exactly who he claims to be, the Messiah, the Son of God that he possesses an authority, a power that no one can deny or ignore.

We hear all this and say, “Indeed! You get no argument from me. Jesus is the ultimate authority.” But how do we really connect with this text? Are we simply amazed on-lookers? What is it that convinces you of the authority of Jesus? The fact that he healed some poor demon-possessed person in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? Do we give Jesus respect and honor

simply because this is what we have been taught to do? Or have we experienced his power? Does he communicate his authority to us by casting out our demons?

We modern folk always have difficulty with these “unclean spirit” texts, don’t we? What do we make of these demons that reportedly lived within people? Do we take the easy way out and write this off as simply the only way primitive people had to describe epilepsy or mental illness? Are these simply the raging inner voices of a schizophrenic?

Can we accept the possibility that “demon possession” is really a universal malady which is experienced in varying degrees? Don’t you suspect that while you may be perfectly sane, there are moments in your life when you are possessed? Our language even gives us away. What do we mean when we say things like “*I don’t know what came over me?*” or “*What ever possessed him to do a thing like that or say a thing like that?*” or “*What has gotten into you?*”

I submit to you that we will never truly appreciate or experience the ultimate authority of God until we acknowledge the demons within us and give thanks to God, who by the authority of His Word, the Word made flesh, has overcome and cast out our demons. You understand, I trust, that I am not talking about some brush with the occult, but the harsh realities of sin, death and devil, which are so much a part of our daily journey.

I recall reading a little piece about the life of Marilyn Monroe, the sex symbol of the 60’s. This poor woman has become a kind of icon, a symbol of the emptiness, the drug abuse, the malaise of our moment in history. This was told by the great playwright Arthur Miller, in his autobiography as he spoke about his marriage to her. He spoke of watching her descend into the depths of depression and despair, with growing paranoia and dependence on barbiturates. One evening after still another doctor had been persuaded to give her a tranquilizing shot, she was sleeping. Miller stood by watching, sadly reflecting to himself. He writes, “*I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she was awake and I were able to say, “God loves you, darling” and she were able to believe it. How I wished I still had my religion and she has hers.*”

Is this not a sad commentary on the power of personal demons and the emptiness of life without the compassionate authority and forgiving love of Christ? What a privilege it is for to gather here and listen to the rumbling, authoritative voice that has echoed through the centuries, “*Come unto me, all who are weak and burdened, and I will give you rest!*”

God does not leave us alone with our demons. He does not abandon us to struggle through the valleys and shadows of our lives with vague philosophical solutions and a stack of self-help books. When we are wrestling with evil, overwhelmed with our burdens and helpless in the face of our failures, He reaches out to us with authority, and with compassionate love, and declares that the head of the serpent, the prince of demons, is crushed. The kingdom is ours.

Let me encourage you to think of this passage as more than another astounding illustration of Jesus' power. Think of it as an absolution. Like the word of forgiveness that is spoken to you every time you repent and confess that you carry the disease of sin... that you are demon-possessed and demon-driven. It's like an exorcism...helpless, we cry out, "*Son of God, have mercy on us.*" And the authority of Christ speaks to you, "*Rise up, go forth and live! You are forgiven. You are free to live as a new people!*"

I recall the story of a missionary friend who told of his experiences in New Guinea. On trips through the bush to the various little settlements, he had a constant companion, his native interpreter and assistant whose smile was always radiant and quick. The native never tired of telling the story of what Jesus meant to him. He would say, "*These jungles are very dark and very dangerous. For most of my life I would walk in fear of demons. From early childhood I was taught that demons lived in the rocks and trees of this dense jungle and lay in wait for those who pass by.*" Then tears would fill his eyes and he would say, "*If I could tell you what it means to be a Christian, I could do it with one word...LIGHT! I no longer walk these dark paths in fear. There may be demons or there may not be demons. It does not matter. I walk in the light. I belong to Christ and that is enough!*"

Indeed, the Light has shined in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We belong to Christ, and that is enough. This is the word of authority, authority earned by the blood of the cross.

If I could extrapolate on this text for just a moment, let me point you toward another dimension to concept of authority. Namely, the authority that has been given to us. The Lord has authorized his followers to reach out in His Name and declare his power and reflect his love to the world. Understand well, this is not earned authority. There are far too many contradictions and inadequacies in our lives for anyone to respect our message for our own sake. When people complain hypocrites in the church, well, they are often right. But we have been given an office. God has *made us a kingdom of priests and a holy people to declare the wonders of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.*

Arthur Miller felt he had not right to talk about God's love, even though he sensed that this was the one thing that might conquer the demons that were destroying the one he loved. He had abandoned his God, determining to make his life's journey entirely alone. You and I, I trust, have not. We open ourselves to the power of the Spirit of God. And this Spirit has called us in Baptism, showered us with his gifts, assured us that we will never have to battle our demons alone. We have been commissioned and given authority to speak to every hurting neighbor around us. "*Yes, God does love you. You are not alone and without resources. God is your refuge and strength, very present help in trouble.*"

This is why this church and every church must always be an inviting church... a church that communicates with word and deed that it does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of

the many around us who still wrestle with demons. We are people with a mission. We exist to praise the God who has delivered us from the demons and to speak with His authority to a world where the demons are still in control.

It is when we are true to our mission that we become credible. It is when we are true to our mission that we are able to speak with authority. May God strengthen us for the task.  
Amen.