

**“Astonished at His Teaching”**

*And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes (Mark 1:22).*

For God’s people, Moses was the ultimate authority. Through Moses, God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, and as the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, Moses was God’s mouthpiece, guiding their journey and giving the Law. Through Moses, God had provided everything His people needed for forty years, and now as the Israelites stood poised to enter the promised land, Moses was at the end of His life. In today’s Old Testament reading, we hear some of the last words Moses delivered to Israel, and in this final speech, Moses shares a promise from God that He will send another “prophet” who will deliver His people and demonstrate the same kind of divine authority God had given to Moses. And this promise was a big deal! In fact, God’s promise to raise up a prophet *like Moses* was so important to the Jewish people that every subsequent generation anticipated its fulfillment. For instance, when John the Baptist arrived on the scene and began preparing the way for the coming Christ, one of the first questions he heard was, “Are you the Prophet?” They didn’t ask him if he was *a* prophet, or *some kind of* prophet; they wanted to know if he was *the Prophet* – the one that God had promised way back in Deuteronomy 18?”

This ancient promise was pivotal to God’s people and, as Jesus begins His ministry in today’s text from Mark, His audience is deeply grounded in a theology that clearly pointed to the coming of this special Prophet. And it’s in this culture of anticipation that Jesus entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. This act alone shows us that Jesus already held a certain degree of authority because no synagogue ruler would simply relinquish his responsibilities to someone who had walked in from the street. So, whether by reputation or simply by the power of His presence, Jesus is allowed to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and yet what happens next, no one could have expected.

Mark tells us that, as Jesus began to speak, “they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Mark’s description leads us to ask all kinds of questions, but one of the most important questions raised in this account is the issue of authority. What does Mark mean here by “authority?” Does he simply mean that Jesus spoke with confidence and charisma? Or was this some kind of visible designation of authority like we saw at His Baptism when the Spirit descended on Jesus and the Father’s voice validated His Son’s ministry? From what we are told in the text, neither explanation works. You see, the authority that amazed the people as Jesus taught in the synagogue was not supernatural, instead, it was an authority that came from the teaching itself.

You see, the scribes Mark mentions in verse 22, didn’t teach God’s Word. They used their synagogue pulpit not to proclaim the promises of God; instead, they used their positions of power to dissect the Law and debate interpretations of how the people should live their lives. The truth is that these scribes were much more concerned with the traditions of men than the Word of God. So, when Jesus began to speak, His teaching was immediately recognized as the Divine Word that it was and the people were amazed *...and the demon was incensed!*

This is a fascinating element in today’s text. You see, the demon-possessed man didn’t come running in from the street; Mark tells us that he was already *in* the synagogue. As far as we know, he was a member of the assembly, yet, the demonic presence in this man was unknown. Every Sabbath day this man had come to the synagogue and listened to the scribes debate their traditions

and with this kind of meaningless discussion the demon had no problem. The scribes were interested only in sorting out the endless demands of the Law and so they extracted rules and regulations for almost any situation and, with the attention of the people on the legalistic teaching of men, the demon was happy to keep silent.

But when Jesus spoke, everything changed because he taught a different word. Jesus spoke not of human regulations and church tradition...He spoke the promises of God! Paul tells us that, "Faith comes from hearing the message...of Christ" and, as Jesus preached the Good News of the Kingdom, the demon immediately recognized the threat that Jesus' message posed. Mark tells us that the man possessed by the evil spirit 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!"

The demon had been pleased to indulge the man-centered teaching of the scribes because they were doing his accusing work for him. But now God's Word of grace was being taught from the mouth of *the Prophet* and the people were being turned from looking to themselves for salvation to God's message of deliverance in the promised Messiah. *This* was the authority that amazed the people! And, as this Gospel message stuck its mark, the demon scrambled to persuade the people through the mouth of this possessed man: "Have you come to destroy us...you are the Holy One of God!"

You see, this is always the response of a sinner to a holy, righteous, and all-powerful God. It was the response of the demon-possessed man and, this fear-driven response to the Word of God was the same sentiment that led the people of Israel to cry out to Moses at the foot of a shaking, smoking Mount Sinai, "Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die" (Deuteronomy 18:16). And in response to this fear-filled request of the people God said to Moses, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:17-18). In these words to Moses, God acknowledged that the sin of the people had separated them from His presence and, that for this relationship to be restored, God would have to provide One like Moses who knew God "face to face," who would stand between a Holy God and sinful man and satisfy the demands of righteousness in his place. That is exactly the message that Christ preached on that day in the synagogue, and it is exactly the message we hear from Christ today!

The new teaching that amazed the people in Capernaum and comes to our ears today is that God has come to us humbly and meekly and in our own flesh to bear our burdens, to carry our transgressions, and to destroy the sin that holds us captive. In 1 Timothy 2:5 Paul writes, "For there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." And this is the message that the demons cannot tolerate! This is the message that crushes the serpent's head! This is the message that removes the sin that stands between God and humanity. This is the message that forgives us and brings us salvation and eternal life!

The Word of Jesus in synagogue wasn't a new teaching; it was a retelling of a timeless promise from the mouth of God Himself. It is the teaching that man is not capable of keeping God's Law. It is the teaching that Christianity is not about the works of the Christian, but about the work of Christ. My friends, today we have this very same Word of God...*and this teaching is astonishing!* It is a teaching that releases captives from the prison of sin! It is a teaching that makes demons flee and opens the door of heaven! It is a teaching that gives life! And today, you are saved by this astonishing teaching! Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people: "Amen."

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