



Mark 1:21-28

The Astonishing Authority of Jesus

Summary: What was more amazing than Jesus' miracles? His teaching.

Next year marks the 70th anniversary of the Guinness Book of World Records, the recognized authority on all kinds of records for the world's fastest, longest, shortest, smallest, and on and on. But, do you know the background of the book? There's a hint of it in the name – the book was conceived by an executive at the Guinness brewing company, the people who make the beer. They produced it as a promotional item for pubs so that when people started debating topics like what's the fastest bird – that is, actually, the question that started it all - they could turn to one authoritative source for the answer. Remember, this was before the internet and Google. The idea was a hit and within a year or two of their first printing, the company began selling the books to the public instead of just giving them away to pubs that sold their beer.

Why were they so popular? Because, we like to have somewhere to go to find the final answer when we're stuck – whether it's in a debate with a friend or a problem you're facing in life. We want to be able to turn to an authority and settle the issue.

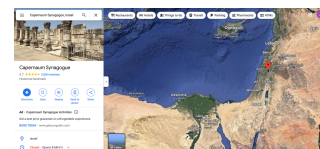
Well, this morning as we jump into Mark's gospel, we're going to see that people were stunned by Jesus' authority – He shocks people, generates a lot of interest, even casts out a demon with an authoritative command. Read with me:

Mark 1:21 Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. **22** And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. **23** Now there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, **24** saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" **25** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" **26** And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him. **27** Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." **28** And immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee.

The city of Capernaum, located on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, became something of a headquarters for Jesus' ministry. It was a thriving town, wealthy from the fishing industry, but also a headquarters for many Roman troops, so you'd find all sorts of pagan and perverted influences from across the empire. It's the ideal place for Jesus to challenge Jews and non-Jews alike with authoritative claims of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

The synagogue was kind of like a combination community center and church for Jewish people. All sacrifices and major worship events happened down south at the Temple in Jerusalem. But every Sabbath, which is Saturday, Jews would gather in local synagogues to pray, read Scripture and hear someone speak. A synagogue was typically overseen by a council of elders with one appointed as the ruler. It was his responsibility to oversee the services but he often wasn't a rabbi, so he might invite guest speakers to address the congregation. This is why you often find Jesus, and later Paul, invited to speak in the local synagogue when they travel.

You can actually visit the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum today. Google can help you get there.



It's less than 100 yards from the lakeshore and sits just past what some think are the remains of Simon Peter's house where they've built a whole museum with a glass floor so you can look down at the ruins. Over at the synagogue you can walk among the remains of a newer synagogue built on top of the one Jesus taught in.



It might have looked something like a large two-story home with an enclosed patio. But most scholars agree – this is the place where these things happened.



So, what did happen? Well, if I can say it this way, Jesus went to church, and He taught a sermon that stunned people. He also cast a demon out of someone who was there, which was amazing, but really just reinforced His status as someone with astonishing authority.

So, I'd like for us to spend the rest of our time together considering the astonishing authority of Jesus and what it means for us today. If you're taking notes, I've got four points.

1. The astonishing authority of Jesus was observed in His teaching.

According to the passage we read, when Jesus taught, people were blown away. They were buzzing with curiosity and excitement. They were astounded, bumfuzzled, flummoxed, and flabbergasted. Jesus caused a stir by His teaching. The word astonished occurs thirteen times in the New Testament, and it's always used to describe reaction to the things Jesus said. If you want to be stunned by Jesus this week, go back and read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7.

Mark doesn't give us much of the content that Jesus taught, we have to go to the other gospels for that, but he does tell us *how* He taught. There are two major types of teaching. One is to simply declare or announce, to say this is what it is. Think of teaching someone the alphabet – this is an A, this is a B, and on and on you go. You're labeling things or announcing facts.

The other style is to explain and expound – this is what this is, or this is what happened, and here’s why it matters or here’s what’s going on when...This is teaching for comprehension.

And this is how Jesus was teaching. He was announcing the Kingdom of God is here, and here’s what that means. Jesus was communicating to people what God was like, what He was up to, and what He expected of us. He was explaining not just what was happening, but how it all worked and what it all meant.

I think it’s important to note that this was the main thrust of Jesus’ ministry – that He was a teacher. Not a consultant or speaker, not an activist or revolutionary, but a teacher and He spoke on the core issues of the meaning, purpose, and direction of life.

What does that tell you about God’s perspective on human problems? Jesus didn’t come and give us a set of blueprints or technical specs for something to build. He didn’t come to give us hints about where to look for natural resources. He didn’t drop off a protocol for 5G networks to jump start technical development. He spoke about things that last forever and things that affect everything else – things that shape us from within.

Right now, there’s a lot of buzz going on about AI and specifically the abilities of ChatGPT, an astonishing technology that creates content for you instantly on seemingly any subject. It is going to be a radically disruptive innovation. But here is something to consider – AI and ChatGPT can put information in your hands quickly, but that’s different from having information in your head and your heart. There are benefits and advantages to each, but they’re not the same things. The person who can provide you with a five-page paper generated by ChatGPT is not the same person as the one who is capable of writing that paper personally. So, which person do you want – the one with information in their hand or the one with information in their head and heart?

And, as a side note, remember, AI reflects the value choices of those who program it. Or we should we say, their authority?

Jesus came to earth teaching. Imparting instruction. Offering to fill heads and hearts with information that led to transformation. He came to clarify and establish truth and His mission has had a profound impact on the church so that doctrine has always been an essential part of the faith and Christians have always valued learning. Look at the close relationship between the spread of the gospel and literacy rates, including those of women. If you follow the spread of the church around the world, you will also see the spread of schools. Christians value learning because Jesus taught, and He did it with astonishing authority that was unlike any other teacher.

2. The astonishing authority of Jesus was unlike any other teacher.

So, may I ask, what are the sources of authority in your life?

Who tells you what's what? Who tells you what to do? Who influences you – whether directly or indirectly? We're all being shaped by someone. We all obey or follow someone. There is someone you listen to when you have questions. Our problem in the age of the Internet is not with finding an authority, it's figuring out which one to listen to.

Today we hear too many conflicting voices, too many sources of 'authority' and they often offer competing perspectives. It's the downside of a pluralistic, globally connected life. Many people try to cope by relativizing everything – you probably do this yourself – with expressions like, "well, if it works for you..." Or, "you do you and I'll do me." Or, "live your own truth."

The problem is, there really is objective truth – truth that is true for us all. You're either right about Jesus – who He is, what He's done, and why it matters, or you're wrong. And there are consequences to it either way.

But there is also subjective truth – truth that is determined by what you think and feel. It's the answer to questions like: where do you go for the best pizza? Which make better pets, cats or dogs? What's the best color of hair and should it be long or short, curly, kinky, wavy, or straight? Public school, private school, or home school? All the things that we might feel deeply about, but which, at the end of the day are convictions, opinions, or preferences. You can believe one thing and I can believe another.

But we can't disagree about what happens to water at 32 degrees Fahrenheit. We can't disagree about the speed at which light travels. We can't disagree about what happens when you mix the colors yellow and green. Our feelings, preferences, and opinions have absolutely no bearing on the outcome.

So here's what I'm saying – yes, some truth is culturally conditioned or personally determined, but other things are empirical. I think we can all agree on that.

But now, here's the question which blows up everything: which category does the gospel belong in?

The answer is, it's empirical. Jesus stepped into time and space. He left footprints as He walked to the synagogue in Capernaum. He taught things that were universally true: there is a God, He cares about people, and He's reaching out to us. These things are true, and they matter. They will affect you regardless of what you think, feel, or believe about them.

The typical speaker in the synagogue was selected because they knew what someone else had said. They didn't lack certainty, they weren't wishy-washy, they could often be dogmatic and self-confident, but it was all because they knew what so-and-so had said about this.

Maybe you've known the guy or gal who's an expert on all the rules and regulations. They know what all the codes, instructions, and rules say and can quote sections to you from memory. The scribes were those people. The problem is, they might not be wrong, but they don't always tell

you what you want to hear – sometimes the rules and regulations are stupid or don't make allowance for your particular situation. Well, religious rules can be exactly the same, especially if they're made by human beings, which was true of all the rules and regulations the scribes taught.

They said, 'the Bible says we are supposed to honor the Sabbath. And the Sabbath starts at sundown. Rabbi so-and-so said that if you want to know what time sundown is, you need to hang a piece of white string and a piece of green string outside your door and when the sun sets to the point that you can no longer tell the difference between the two colors, then it's sundown. But, rabbi so-and-so says it should actually be a piece of blue string and piece of white string, so that's what we do now.'

That's a real example of rabbinic teaching. And notice, it's often like that, a lot of energy spent explaining *what* to do, and nothing said about *why* keeping the Sabbath was important. It was all about *how* to obey the rule – do this, this way.

So, contrast that with Jesus who showed up and taught without footnotes or quotation marks. He was confident and authoritative because, He's the one who drafted the plan for everything that's happening. He knows what's going and why and what happens next. Speaking of which...

3. The astonishing authority of Jesus was authenticated by miracles.

It's important to note that people were impressed by Jesus before He cast out this demon and even afterward, they kept talking among themselves about what Jesus said – 'oh yeah, and did you see what He did?!?' Jesus' miracles, and there are many of them, were always meant to authenticate the claims of His teaching.

It's interesting to note here then that the point of conflict between the unclean spirit and Jesus was over who was talking. The spirit tries to interrupt Jesus' teaching and Jesus responds by with a sharp, decisive command. Martin Luther translated it into German as the equivalent of Shut up! The word in Greek literally means to close the mouth with a muzzle. Jesus says, in effect, 'I'm the one talking here, teaching is My role.'

I want you to know, God speaks like that. He speaks with authority. He's not always soft and mild. Though, we must also say, you can be authoritative and soft-spoken. You can be calm and compelling, there's no need to lose your composure. Jesus was known for being gentle and lowly, not boisterous and loud.

Also note, He cast out a demon with a simple command, not a complicated process or ritual, and it wasn't a struggle for Him. Demons, or unclean spirits, appear throughout the Gospels and Acts. They're always disembodied spirits, meaning they have no body of their own. Whenever we meet them in Scripture, they're in some person, or a herd of pigs. They are frequently associated with causing injury or illness, either physically or mentally. But it's important to note: the two are not always linked.

In other words, not all mental illness is associated with demon possession. But some is. Not all physically illness or injury is caused by demons. But some is. And there may be demonic possession or influence without any signs of mental or physical illness or injury at all – the person may appear completely normal. Remember when Satan himself was using Judas Iscariot, it wasn't obvious to anyone else. At the Last Supper Jesus told them, one of you will betray Me, and they all had to ask, 'who's He talking about?'

So, there are three major errors we could make regarding demons or unclean spirits. The first is to think they don't exist in our highly modern world, that modern medicine and the DSM can explain everything now, which we know isn't true because respected authorities still debate over all kinds of things that no one fully understands. The second is to think that they're directly behind all illness or addiction or destructive behavior which Jesus Himself said is not true - sometimes injury and even death is just the result of living on a broken planet. The third is to think that you can obviously tell who they're influencing or possessing, but remember Judas.

The thing I hope you'll take away is the knowledge that though Jesus primarily came to teach, preach, and announce the gospel of the Kingdom of God, He never backs down from a conflict, He's not afraid of a power encounter. He didn't come to this synagogue looking for a fight. He was busy trying to teach the people who were present when this spirit tried to interrupt and get Him off course. And yet, He dealt with the distraction as if it was nothing more than a flicker of the lights – 'what was that? OK, never mind, back to what I was saying.'

Friends, Jesus never loses. His power over Satan and darkness is total and absolute. It is never in doubt or questioned. Satan always operates on a limited tether. And that means Jesus can set you free – He sees you and He can reach you. If Jesus can drive out a demon with a simple, direct command, that means there is hope for the worst of us.

Some people have developed this tough exterior because it's like a shield. It's how they cope. If that's you, you may be afraid to let Jesus in because you're going to have to find a new identity, a new persona, a new way to act in the world. That's difficult. But it's what needs to happen. You don't have to be the tough guy, or gal. The survivor. Let Jesus transform you. Let Him bury the past. Let Him teach you how to spend more time looking at the future than dwelling on the past. Trust Him. Because,

4. The astonishing authority of Jesus can be rejected or received.

It is possible to observe and recognize authority but reject it. It is possible to resist it, to conceive in your mind that it does not apply to you. It is a very American thing to see authority and say, yeah, no thanks. Every summer we actually celebrate that attitude with a national holiday on July 4th. We told a king, a monarch, yes, we see your authority and we feel you've overstepped it, so, we're out.

Two thousand years ago men in the Middle East did something similar with Jesus. They saw His authority, observed His power, heard His teaching, witnessed His miracles, and said, “No thanks.” As one commentator (Hughes) noted, “It is possible to recognize Jesus for who He is and hate Him all the more.”

So, here’s my two-part question for you: have you recognized Jesus’ authority, and if so, how do you respond? Do you resist and reject it or do you receive it and come under it?

Sometimes we recognize authority and yet reject it because it doesn’t line up with my opinion, beliefs, or preferences. “Yeah, I know that’s what the experts say, but they don’t know MY situation.” Or, authority may be rejected if it’s seen as being influenced by other factors. The most rigorous scientific credentials can be quickly undermined in the eyes of half the population if the scientist seems to be influenced by a political party or agenda in their presentation or application of the data. In these cases, “authority” is questioned, debated, and quickly becomes divisive.

But the great thing about Jesus is, He has no hidden motives. He’s working for our good. Remember, Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, we bring nothing to it, but gain everything from it.

So, are you under God’s authority, or not? After His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus said:

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

And then He went on to give the Great Commission, to go to the ends of the earth making disciples. But here’s the very challenging question: Christian, do you believe this? Really, truly, believe this, and trust it? If so, how does what you believe affect the way you think about yourself and your situation and the world?

It’s been my personal experience that I can pass the theology test, I know the right answer to put on the paper, but I struggle with the practical application. I know Jesus has all authority, but I still worry about how I need to protect or advance the issues in my own life. Maybe I’m alone, but I don’t think so.

Church, Jesus has all authority, even in the darkness. And He told us in the Sermon on the Mount, all the time and energy you spend worrying about things does nothing for them. How many of us can say we actually worried something into happening or not happening? Worrying is either wasted energy or fuel for prayer. Bring those things you’re worried about to God, and say, I’m worried about this, but You have all authority. Help me trust.

One of the things that should help you do that is to receive communion. To hold in your hands physical reminders of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. That He came to earth, spoke with authority, and then triumphed over every other form of authority when He died on the cross

and rose from the grave. He triumphed over the plots and plans and Satan. He triumphed over the betrayal of Judas. He triumphed over the plotting and scheming of the Jewish leaders and over the political power of Rome that sentenced Him to death and carried it out. He triumphed, even over the combined authority and power of all those who opposed Him.

And yet, He's kind, and gentle, and compassionate to you. You see His authority. You recognize it. Will you resist it, or receive it?

Let's Pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 1:21-28

The Astonishing Authority of Jesus

Summary: What was more amazing than Jesus' miracles? His teaching.

- If you could set a Guinness Record, what would it be for?
- How have you (do you) appealed to authorities to solve issues, find answers, or settle arguments?
- What are some reasons why you resist or reject someone who should be seen as an "authority?"
 - o Do you think people are generally for or against authority? Does the answer depend on circumstances or situation?
 - o How do your answers apply to accepting or resisting God's authority?
- Mark says people were astonished by Jesus' teaching. Has anything about God or anything you've read in Scripture astonished you? What? Why?
 - o When was the last time you read the Sermon on Mount (Matthew 5-7)? It's a good start for those who want to be astonished.
- What's the difference between objective and subjective truth? Why does it matter which category Jesus is placed in?
 - o There are many sources of information about the factual, evidence-based proof that Jesus lived, taught, worked miracles, and was crucified on a Roman cross. One is Evidence That Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell, reach out to the church office for more or if you have specific questions.
- What's the difference between having information in your hand and having it in your head and heart?
- Why do people recognize the authority of Jesus but then resist or reject it? What led you to receive it?