

Mark 1:21-27

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[0 : 00] The key word in this account that we've read of Jesus in the temple at Capernaum is authority.

The word is repeated, and not only because of its repetition, but because of the central place it occupies in the account, we can identify and describe in this way as being key to all that we read in this passage, authority, the king's authority. Remember, as we've been beginning to go through this gospel, remember how Jesus inaugurated his public ministry. He was baptized in the Jordan, and we read that as he came up out of the water, heaven was torn open, and the Holy Spirit came down upon him, anointing and empowering him as the messianic king. Now, what do kings do?

Well, kings exercise authority. That surely is at the heart of their job description. Kings exercise authority. But what about King Jesus? How does he exercise authority? Well, he does so with words.

It is with words that Jesus demonstrates and exercises his authority. The word of God exercises his kingly authority with words. And in this passage, I think we can identify two kinds of words, or two occasions in the short account where words are exercised with authority. And we're describing them as words of challenge and words of deliverance. And that's what we want to think about this evening.

These two ways in which King Jesus exercises his authority with words of challenge and words of deliverance. We want to notice the manner in which he does so, but also consider the response that his words provoke. Because there is very clearly in what we've read a response to his words. And we want to think a little bit about that response also. Now, as we do this, what I want you to be mindful of and to remember is that Jesus is accompanied here in Capernaum, here in the temple or in the synagogue, rather, he is accompanied by his new disciples. There in verse 21, they went to Capernaum. Who are they? Well, we noted it even as we read. Jesus and those men he has just called to be his disciples, that he would make them become as fishers of men. And as he ministers, as he exercises his authority here in Capernaum, there is a sense in which their training begins. Their training as fishers of men. The disciples are not just to observe what Jesus does. Perhaps that is how it will begin. But in due course, they are to imitate what Jesus does.

[3 : 44] We might say, but will the disciples ever have the authority of Jesus? Well, in a sense, yes. Jesus will grant to them, he will afford to them this authority that they would be sent to do what Jesus does.

We've read what he did on this occasion in Capernaum. And notice we only need to move on a couple of pages, a couple of chapters to chapter 6 and verse 7 and see how in a relatively short period of time, the disciples are not only to be accompanying, but they're to be doing.

Mark chapter 6 in verse 7, we read, The very same message that Jesus preached.

So, the disciples aren't just observing what Jesus does. They're learning. And in due course, they themselves will go out and do what he is doing. Well, that's the disciples. But what about us?

What about you and me today here? Well, we too enjoy that delegated authority as disciples of Jesus. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. And that commission extends to us. At Pentecost, the disciples were anointed and empowered by the same Holy Spirit who anointed and empowered Jesus. And each of us, as believers, are also baptized by the same Holy Spirit for the fulfilling of that same commission.

[5 : 52] So, it's important to have that in mind so that when we're looking at what Jesus did, it's not something that we simply look and admire and say, well, isn't it amazing what Jesus did? But understand that this is something that we are also to be involved in as we, under and with his authority, also reach out to a lost world.

Let's think then of these words that I've described as words of challenge and words of deliverance. Verses 21 and 22. Let's think about that first part of this section and the way, as I say, I'm describing it as words of challenge. They 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 most striking aspect of Jesus' teaching that is highlighted here is that it had authority. Now, this would have been true even if it had not been recognized by his hearers. But on this occasion, it's very clear that that authority is acknowledged and recognized by his hearers.

They may have been very unclear as to where that authority came from or how it was that this man had such authority, but they recognized that he had that authority. The ordinary citizens of Capernaum, gathering there in the synagogue as they had done so many times, acknowledge that this man taught with authority, not like those they were accustomed to hearing. What authority is being acknowledged, recognized, is being talked about here. I think we can identify two aspects to this authority that Jesus exercises as he teaches. We can say that it is authority from God. Jesus himself, as the God-sent Messiah King, enjoyed God-given authority to exercise his kingly rule. But also, the message that he brought was a message imbued with divine authority. It was God's message.

It was, as it's described by Mark himself just a few verses before, the good news of God. Jesus himself enjoys this divine authority, but the message he brings is also a message characterized by and grounded in this divine authority. What did he actually say? Well, we're not told. We're not told the content of this message here in the synagogue in Capernaum. We, I think, could reasonably conclude or imagine that it was the message that we've already been told. It was at the heart of his proclamation. We thought of that already in verse 15. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God is near.

[9 : 13] Repent and believe the good news. No doubt that was at the heart of the message that he brought, a message delivered with authority from God, but also authority over the people. The words that he brought were words of challenge. And maybe this is what most struck the audience, those who heard him.

It's not just that Jesus was a better teacher than the teachers of the law. It wasn't just that he was more eloquent. It wasn't just that he was more passionate. It wasn't just that he was more theologically astute in explaining what it was that he was explaining. But it was that Jesus' words were words of challenge. They were words that demanded a response. And the people are struck by this authority with which he spoke. Words of challenge. We, as disciples of Jesus, also are called to speak words of challenge. We are to bring to the attention of this world words of challenge, to announce the good news of God, to call sinners, to repent and believe. And we have been given the authority to do so.

Words of challenge. But how, or what is the response to these words of challenge? I think we can find in the passage a two-fold response. There's the response of the people, and there is the response of the evil spirit who had taken possession of the man that we are introduced to here in the passage.

First of all, the people. How do the people respond? Well, what are we told? We're told there in verse 22 that the people were amazed at his teaching. Now, the word that Mark uses here that we have translated amazed. Carries, can carry, and I think here very clearly carries, the sense of profound dread in the face of what they're hearing. This is not the amazement that we might experience observing a skilled magician performing some act of magic, and we're amazed. How did he do that? And we're amazed. Or maybe as we see some precocious child prodigy on the X factor doing something remarkable, we're amazed.

That's not the kind of amazement that Mark is describing. It's an amazement that grips the people with a sense of dread in the face of who they see and what they hear. The people were gripped by a sense of awe in the presence of Jesus and by the words of Jesus. They are amazed or in awe of both the teaching and the teacher. They are, at this point, it would seem dumbfounded. They have nothing to say. They simply stand back in silent awe at what they see. They'll have words to say in due course, but at this point, this seems to be the manner of their response. But that's not the only response that is provoked by Jesus' words of challenge. There's also the evil spirit, and his response is a hostile response.

[12 : 45] We read there in verse 23, 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. And from the words that the Spirit addresses to Jesus through this poor man, I think we can notice how this hostility of the evil spirit is threefold, or there's three elements to it. It's grounded in a recognition of who Jesus is. I know who you are, the Holy One of God.

That the evil spirit has an insight into the identity of Jesus that surpasses that of the disciples, certainly at this stage. But he voices his recognition in a tone of challenge and hostility.

I know who you are. He knows, and he is afraid. His hostility then grounded in recognizing, at least in a measure, who Jesus is, but also recognizing that Jesus is his enemy.

The first words that he addresses to Jesus, what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? This is not a polite inquiry that he's making of Jesus. The evil spirit is declaring that he and Jesus have nothing to do with each other. They belong to different kingdoms. They relate to each other only as enemies. But his hostility also is grounded in a recognition that he will be defeated. He posed it in terms of a question, have you come to destroy us? The evil spirit knows the answer to his question, but maybe he harbors some vain hope that Jesus will not succeed in his mission of destruction, of evil, and of all the hosts of evil.

Notice how the evil spirit seems to be speaking in representation, not only of himself, but of others. On two occasions, he speaks of us. Notice there in verse 24, what do you want with us?

[15 : 09] He doesn't say, what do you want with me? What do you want with us? And then, have you come to destroy us? He speaks on his own behalf, but not only on his own behalf. It would seem that in some sense, he is the spokesman for all the demonic hosts, and he voices their hostility to the person of Jesus.

We wonder. We're not told, and so it's probably not profitable to speculate in any great measure, but I wonder how the evil spirits gained the insight that they did concerning the identity of Jesus.

We could maybe think of different ways in which that came about. But I wonder if one source might have been the outcome of the encounter between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness that was recorded for us in Mark, that it had only just happened. And that victory of Jesus has become known among the demonic host.

They've heard of this man who did not fall when tempted. They'd never come across a man like this. And so they begin to come to conclusions concerning who he is and the power that he holds and his capacity to destroy them.

But what about today? As we, disciples of Jesus, proclaim his words of authority and challenge, what is the response that we can expect?

[16 : 52] But we should pray that the very Spirit of God would provoke a sense of amazement, and yes, even dread as God's Word and God's truth is declared.

Not only on an occasion such as this, from a pulpit, behind a lectern, but as we, all of us, as God's people, speak the truth, speak the truth, share the good news that there would be in those who hear us a sense of amazement at the teaching and at the truth that we bring.

But also, we should expect the hostility of Satan and his hosts. The demonic opposition may not be, indeed, probably will not be, in the form that it took in the temple, or rather in the synagogue in Capernaum.

It does seem that there is a sense in which, with the coming of Jesus, all hell broke loose. It's a term that we use, but it applies almost literally to these days that are recorded for us as Jesus exercised his ministry.

Well, the opposition may not take the same form today and with us, but opposition there will be. In fact, the more the people are amazed, the greater the opposition that will follow.

[18 : 19] They go together. So, words of a challenge. But also, we find in this passage how Jesus exercises his authority by delivering words of deliverance.

And here I'm thinking of the words that we read in verse 25. Jesus is responding to the evil spirit who has challenged him and expressed his hostility towards him.

And what do we read there in verse 25? Be quiet, said Jesus sternly. Come out of him. The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

It's sometimes said that the ministry of Jesus was a ministry of word and deed. I think that's a fair description. On this occasion, when we look at our passage, we might categorize his teaching as word and the expulsion of the evil spirit as deed.

And yet, even the deed involves words. At its heart, it is words that Jesus employs to deliver this man, to cast out this evil spirit.

[19 : 36] Jesus speaks words of deliverance. And notice that the words are simultaneously words of defeat for the evil spirit and deliverance for the man possessed.

We focus on the impact of the words on the evil spirit. And rightly so, because that is the focus of the text. But we mustn't forget that the words of Jesus also secure deliverance for the possessed man.

He is delivered from this awful possession that he was the victim of at the hands of this evil spirit. And though we're not told, we can be sure that Jesus, when he saw this man, He had compassion for him and delighted in the fact that in one fell swoop, He both defeats the evil spirit and delivers the man.

And it's striking, the simple authority of unadorned words when spoken by Jesus. Jesus doesn't need to resort to any ritual or incantations or formulas to achieve his objective.

Unadorned words of authority suffice. Be quiet. Come out of him. It's enough. Because of the authority that they possess.

[21 : 09] We're reminded of how Peter, on a subsequent and very critical occasion, recognized the delivering and life-giving power in the words of Jesus.

You'll remember the occasion when many of those who described themselves or would have been described as disciples of Jesus were turning their back on Jesus as his teaching became too difficult for them.

And Jesus challenges his immediate circle of disciples. You do not want to leave too, do you? Jesus asked the twelve. And Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life. Words of deliverance. Words of life. Words imbued with life-giving power.

These are the words that Jesus spoke. And we see the impact of them in defeating the evil spirit and in delivering this poor man. But again, we think of ourselves today and our calling as disciples of Jesus.

[22 : 18] We too have words of eternal life. We have been given these words to speak these words. We need to speak these words to a world without God and without hope and do so in the conviction that as God accompanies us, so they might carry the same authority that we see the words of Jesus carried on this occasion.

What are the response to these words of deliverance? Well, again, there's a two-fold response. There's, first of all, the evil spirit. How does he respond? Well, the evil spirit obeys.

The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. A striking feature of evil spirits as accounts of encounters between Jesus and evil spirits are recorded in the Gospels is that they are invariably much more obedient than sinners.

Sinners, slow to obey, but the evil spirit obeys immediately. Of course, it is a forced obedience. He takes no delight in his obedience, and yet obedience it is.

The demon shrieks as he obeys, a shriek of frustration and defeat and humiliation. He can do no other than obey. What is striking there and solemn there is to remember that there is a day coming when that will be true of all sinners.

[23 : 51] Today, sinners may disobey. God grants them the prerogative, if you wish, of foolishly disobeying, but there's a day coming when that will no longer be an option.

When every knee shall bow, every tongue confess. The evil spirit obeys. But then the people, they too respond to what Jesus does in defeating the evil spirit and delivering this man from the possession that he was subject to.

How do they respond? Well, the very same thing is said, as has been noted before. The people were amazed. Verse 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. Is there anything more to add to what we've already said concerning this response of amazement?

I think we can say that their amazement now is even greater than it had been before. They themselves, in voicing their amazement, identify the casting out of the spirit as something that has impacted them in even greater measure than they had already been impacted.

[25 : 14] So there's a sense in which the measure of their amazement becomes even greater. Their dread in the face of the one who is ministering and speaking in this fashion.

But I think we can also say another thing about this. Not only that it's greater, but that it is a considered amazement. And what do I mean by that? What I mean by that simply is that it takes the form of a question that they pose.

And the question that they pose is a question that must be answered. The question they pose there in verse 27, what is this? What is this?

At this point, they don't know the answer. But it is a question that they can't simply pose and then forget about. Having posed the question that there's placed upon them a great urgency to find the answer.

You can't pose a question like this and then just forget about it. You need to know the answer. What is this? It's a question, of course, that reminds us of a very similar question that was posed by the disciples sometime later in Mark.

[26 : 33] In the same gospel in chapter 4 and verse 41, we read this question posed by the disciples. Who is this?

Even the wind and the waves obey Him. Again, a question that once posed must secure an answer. And even now, I would ask you, what is your answer to this question?

What is this? Who is this man who can speak with such authority? Who is this man that the citizens of Capernaum stood in amazement and dread of?

Who is this man who defeats the evil spirit, who delivers the man? Who is he? What is this? And, of course, these are the kind of questions that we look to provoke in others as we speak with words of challenge, words of deliverance, words of eternal life.

We need to speak, and we need to pray that God would provoke in our hearers these kind of questions, and that they would not rest until they discover the answer to these questions.

[27 : 50] Well, may God help us and grant that that would be our experience. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son, Jesus. We thank you for His authority.

We thank you for His words of challenge to men gathered there in the synagogue in Capernaum. We pray that as we speak the words, as we share the good news of God, that we would know something of that response.

Men and women amazed, not at ourselves, but at the content of what we have to say. We pray that we would be those who are quick to speak words of deliverance, words of eternal life, that they are, that they would be words that would provoke in many big questions.

What is this? Who is this? And that our hearers would not rest until they discover the answer. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.