

In some way, everyone's interested in the power of God. Some are interested out of wonder at the immensity and beauty of the universe. Others are interested out of doubt and skepticism. They want to know why doesn't he do something about the wickedness in the world, if he is so powerful? However, most are interested in the power of God because of some concern that has become overwhelming in their lives. A young couple sits in the hospital waiting room shaking with fear after getting news that their nine-year-old son has lymphoma. They're frightened and feel powerless. They are asking, "God do you really care? Can we count on you to help us in the ordeal that is ahead of us?" An inner city pastor sits at his desk thinking about what to say to his congregation this coming Sunday. As taxes are raised businesses along with those who are able move out to the suburbs. Jobs are drying up, his congregation is shrinking and they face a high rate of unemployment, which means that attendance is down and offerings are down. He cries out to God, "Do you really care about these people?" He says, "God, don't you see that their lack of power to make a difference is robbing them of all hope? Are you really with us and can you really help us?" Another person goes to work everyday and sees a boss, berate, intimidate, and abuse his power over others. He's totally unaware of the broken people left behind the wake of his abuse. In fact he's convinced he's doing God's will and prides himself that he tells it like is. Yet, if the worker challenges him, his days are numbered, and she has a family to support. Does she hold her tongue or does she say something and put her family at risk? Does God care? Where is the power of God here? There is something universally human in all these questions. When we come up against forces that are out of our control we have our own questions.

For the past few weeks we have turned to the Gospel of Mark to see if we are following the real Jesus. Have we reshaped Jesus in our own image, one that reinforces our own biases and prejudices? Are we believing in Jesus the way he essentially is and the way he is revealed to us in the Scriptures? In the first verse of his gospel, Mark tells us that to follow Jesus is to follow him *as king*. This is what the term *Christ* means. It means God's anointed king. To say that you believe in Jesus and yet, to remain your own king, is really not to follow Jesus at all. Mark underscores this theme again in verse 15, recounting the first words of Jesus' public ministry. "*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel.*" So, the threads of the gospel will always lead you to a kingdom. A kingdom always has a king and so it's not surprising that in the very first episode of His public ministry Jesus reveals his Messianic authority or power. So, at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus forces us to re-think what we understand the authority and power of God to be and the way in which God's power ought to be exercised. What is his authority like? How does he use His authority and power? The word translated *authority* in vv. 21 and 27 is the Greek word *exousia* and denotes *authority* or *power*. So, as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being, what does Jesus reveal that is distinctive about the power of God? How do we understand God's power and, how does it affect how we live and how we exercise authority and power? ¹ This morning I want us to consider three things about God's power from our text.

First, Jesus revealed a *new* and different kind of power and authority.

Second, Christ's authority is always an *embattled* or challenged authority.

Third, Christ's power is a *liberating* authority.

First, Jesus reveals a new kind of authority. 1:22

" ... Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach and they were amazed at His teaching; for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

¹ As our world is quickly becoming Muslim, it is critical to know that the idea of God's power and its use is one of the starkest contrasts between Christianity and Islam.

Now, we're tempted to read into this phrase, "one who taught with authority" whatever we find authoritative about the demeanor or style of a teacher. Some think to speak with authority is to speak really loudly. To scream, yell, or to pound the pulpit really hard—to some, communicates authority. But the one thing Mark explicitly gives us about this new authority is that Jesus taught, *not as the scribes*. And, there were scribes who were animated and spoke loudly. Some think speaking with authority means to be commanding or to speak with a lot of imperatives. In other words, some read this to mean that Jesus was *authoritative*. Yet, again, there were scribes who were authoritative in their teaching. Some think the difference is that the scribes were petty and legalistic. Well, some certainly were but not all. So, what does it mean that Jesus spoke with authority unlike the scribes? Two things are worth considering:

1. Jesus' Words Matched His Actions

First, unlike the scribes and unlike us, with Jesus, there is complete and absolute consistency between what He says and does. Jesus said about the scribes, "Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say {things} and do not do them" Mtt. 23:3. There is absolutely no variation in what He says and what He does. None of us can say, "Follow me twenty-four seven." But Jesus' authority is a new authority where His words and His actions never contradict. Every word He said and taught was perfectly consistent with what He did. Notice that Mark does not even tell us what Jesus preached on that day. He's more interested in what Jesus did. In fact, in v. 27, after releasing the man from the unclean spirit, the people called that exorcism a "new teaching with authority or power." Jesus' authority was revealed by what He did and He used His authority to actually help and to serve someone. His words of liberation were actually followed by acts of liberation. People weren't stepping-stones to greater pastoral authority and power. Jesus was never "moving on up" the ladder of success. His words matched His actions.

2. Jesus Honored The Dishonored

A second way in which His authority was new and different from the scribes is that He used His authority and power *to honor the dishonored* instead of seeking honor to gain power. I think this is revealed by the fact that He began His public ministry in Capernaum. If you were going to begin a start-up ministry to change the paradigm of Israel's religion, to influence as many as possible, and spread your message to the movers and shakers of the culture, Capernaum would have been the last place to launch a ministry. It was just about the least strategic place in all of Israel to begin a religious movement. Capernaum was a dinky little fishing village on the Northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. It was kind of like Molalla, Oregon or Hagerman, New Mexico. If not for Jesus, you would have never even heard of Capernaum. People there had to walk several miles just to get to a major road. So, Jesus bypassed the economic, political, and religious center of Israel to begin His ministry. This is counter-intuitive to much of our thinking. But again, Jesus' authority is different than ours. Jerusalem was the hub of Israel's religious, economic and social life. If you wanted your message to reach the most people you would go where the people are.

So, what's the matter with Jesus? Why doesn't He know these things? Does He need a better business plan? Does He need a business expert to tell Him that He is obscuring His message by making His headquarters in Capernaum? Why would Jesus go to some off-road, obscure, unheard of, insignificant, sparsely populated sleepy place like Capernaum to begin His ministry? *He does so because His authority and power is a different kind of authority and power.* He does so to honor the dishonored. In Mtt.23:6 Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues." By beginning in Capernaum in Galilee, Jesus reveals that He doesn't use His power and authority to seek fame and honor, but rather to serve and honor those who have been dishonored. He doesn't use the proven success principles of social science to advance His cause. "Location, location, location" may be a proven best practice in business, however, Jesus ignored it. Have you ever wondered why Jesus was always saying to those He healed, "Don't go tell anyone." The reason was that He didn't want His fame to spread quickly. He wasn't interested in having a fast growing movement among the honored. He was interested in exercising His power first among those who have little power. He did not want others hearing that the Messiah has come doing miracles— too quickly—because *He doesn't want their personal and nationalistic expectation of the Messiah to define His*

ministry. He wants His life, teaching, preaching, healing and serving the dishonored to define what the Messiah does, what the kingdom is, and not the personal and nationalistic hopes that Israel attached to the Messiah.² He used His authority to honor, serve, and love the dishonored. This was a new authority because the scribes used their authority to create honor and advantage for themselves. Their power was political, social, and commercial. Jesus' authority was driven by loving and honoring, helping, and serving. So, His authority was new and different. And, beloved, a faithful witness to Christ today happens where authority and power are used differently than the way the world advances its causes.

Second, His authority was an embattled or challenged authority. 1:23

“Immediately 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.’”

As soon as Jesus' authority was made evident, it got challenged—right there in the synagogue. A man who had come under the control of some unclean spirit recognized the threat Jesus' authority was presenting. I interpret the unclean spirit's questions as defiant assertions. “*What have you to do with us?*” means, “*You mean nothing to us.*” or “*You have no business here with us.*” The second statement is also an assertion, “*Do you think you can come in here and destroy or exercise over power us?*” Finally, naming Jesus was a way of controlling him, “*I know your name and I know exactly who you are and that makes no difference to me that you are the holy one of God. Your identity doesn't phase me.*” The unclean spirit challenges the authority of Jesus over this man's life and wanted to author his life as well. However, as created being we *have been authored* by God. Being “authored” means that we have been made for authority. It's bound up in our DNA. You can't escape authority. That means that you are *always* serving someone or some thing. When Jesus comes into your life, He comes as a king to conquer anything and everything that would come between you and His authority over your life. And that makes faith an *embattled* faith. A war is taking place over who gets to have control of your life. Now, Jesus' authority is good; it's not one that intimidates, abuses, and humiliates. He uses His authority to serve, honor, and liberate. But, it is still the authority of the Son of God and as such it always comes to us with the intent of conquering any other authority that would compete for your allegiance. The reason He does this is because no other authority is a worthy author and will end up controlling us and not liberating us.

By *unclean spirit*, Mark is referring to something alien or foreign to the righteousness of God. Here we are not told the kind of unclean spirit that possessed the man. Perhaps it was some ambition, deception, passion, or some cause. Perhaps he was a leading elder in the synagogue whose ambition was running the show. Whatever it was, the spirit magnified it, amplified it, and exaggerated it to the point that the man no longer had a voice. Notice that uncleanliness *is now speaking for him*. The man is now defined by the obsession of the uncleanliness. Unclean spirits need a host; they latch on to what ever is already there and often distorted in a person. They magnify fears, insecurities, selfishness, pride, passion, and ambition, in the human heart. They will even take a good and beautiful thing and twist it until it gets ugly and distorted.

That seems to be Tolkien's point in the *Lord of the Rings*. Smeagle was right to see the beauty in the ring, but his obsession with it turns him into Gollum: a pathetic emaciated skeleton of the hobbit he once was. Boramir, was once a noble warrior, yet his obsession with patriotism became a lust for power and revenge. His obsession for power turns him into a shell of the nobleman he once was. Even Frodo, in his willingness to serve and to accommodate the needs of others, was magnetized by the ring, which made him utterly and indulgently self-pitying, so that by the end of the story he refuses any assistance from his best friend Sam. The power of the

²Read John six for his confrontation with the crowds that followed Him because of the spread of the word of His miraculous powers. At the end of that lesson His teaching drove them off to follow Him no more. They followed Him only because of the miracles and for their own agenda. They got the wrong idea and so when He tells them the way things are they leave to never follow Him again.

ring exploits their obsessions. And their obsessions become ruling authorities that eventually author each one's life. Any other authority, cause, ambition and pursuit that competes with the authority of the Lord Jesus in your life will turn you into a shell of who God has called you to be. In the pursuit, you will get lost; in time, you may not even know who you are. You will no longer have a real voice; the ambition speaks for you. I discovered this in graduate school. My first semester I led a balanced life, but then I made some A's and thought, "If I dedicate every waking moment to the books, I can graduate with honors." However, in time, that ambition was scripting my life and I became irritable, surly, and argumentative. I reached my academic goal. However, the ambition was in control of my life and not me nor the Lord.

The quest for beauty and power can lead to eating disorders. The quest for comfort and ease, can lead to addiction, prescription drugs and alcohol and selfishness. The quest for success when it controls you, can lead to debilitating workaholicism that fractures all relationships. When we allow any other authority into our lives, an unclean or alien authority, we become spiritless, and lose our own voice; the obsession (the alien authority) speaks for us.

People ask me if a Christian can be possessed by unclean spirits. My best judgment is that we can be influenced but not possessed. But, I know that I can let the influence of an obsession with something other than Christ—speak for me. So the question for us is: Who is authoring your life? Is it some cause, ambition, passion, goal, or some emotional need, or is it Jesus Christ? The authority of Christ in your life will be an embattled authority. Jesus Christ comes into your life to do battle with whatever it is that is competing for your allegiance, and to prevail - and that leads to my final point.

Finally, Jesus' authority is a liberating authority. Jesus is the only ultimate authority that will liberate you. No one or no other thing can. Everything else will use you for its end. And by His grace Jesus reveals that His authority is greater than that of the alien spirit. Jesus rebuked him saying,

"Be silent and come out of him." and the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him and they were all amazed so that they questioned among themselves saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority.'"

How does Jesus use His authority and power? He uses it to set us free. Here's the point. There is no uncleanness or unclean spirit that has the power and authority to successfully challenge Jesus. It's like when you are digging in the yard and you turn over a big rock buried in the dirt. When you pick it up and expose the darkness underneath to the light, the creepy things that like the dark run for cover. When the light of Jesus' power and authority was revealed, the unclean spirit bolted away. We don't know the final outcome in this man's life. But we do know how that liberating authority worked out in Peter's mother in law. In v. 31, Jesus raised her up from her sickness and then she *served* them. Jesus used His authority to serve her and then she used her authority to serve others. She didn't have the gift of exorcism nor healing. But she did know how to serve and so that is what she did.

When Juan Carlos Ortiz, an Assemblies of God pastor in Columbia, began his ministry years ago he always wanted to raise the dead. So after every funeral service he would go back in the parlor, lay his hands on the casket, and ask God to raise the person from the dead. After years of doing this with no success and after another failed attempt, he said that heard God speak to him (not audibly) but quietly in his spirit. The conversation went like this.

God: "Juan Carlos, how many times have you asked me this?"

Juan: "Many!"

God: "How many times have I answered?"

Juan: "None."

God: "Juan, do you think perhaps I haven't given you the gift of raising the dead? Juan, you don't have that gift. But, let me ask you... What do you have?"

Juan: “I have \$20 in my wallet.”

God: “That couple that just lost their child who you have been praying for needs \$20 for the funeral. Why don’t you give them what you have?”

So he did. God doesn’t ask you to give from what you don’t have. However, he does ask us to give from what we have. As we have been served and loved, so we are now called to serve and love.

I recently read that the protestant population in Cuba is 5% with only a fraction of these being evangelicals. Yet, after Cuba suffered a devastating earthquake a few years ago, the evangelicals decided that they would repair the roofs of their non-Christian neighbors before they repaired their own. Because of that service, many people have now started coming to church and seeking out the God that these people worship. The neighbors were amazed that someone would love them and take care of their needs before they took care of their own. And, isn’t this how Jesus loved us?

Beloved, Jesus’ authority is a new and different authority. It’s an authority where His words will always match His actions. He uses His authority to honor and serve the dishonored. He uses His authority to do battle with whatever it is that wants to control you and have authority over you other than Jesus Christ. He is the only One or Cause or Thing that is worthy of your heart. And nothing can stand against His authority and prevail. We must believe this. Jesus doesn’t use His authority to crush, destroy, intimidate and to subjugate. Instead, He uses it to liberate and resurrect. His authority will liberate you not to serve a selfish cause but to love and serve others as He has loved and served you.

“My chains fell off, my hearts was free, I rose went forth and followed Thee.”