

# **The Incomparable Authority of Christ**

A Sermon on Mark 1:21-28

Preached by Paul Liberati, February 21, 2021

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*And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes – Mark 1:22*

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One of the ways in which the Bible emphasizes the greatness of Jesus Christ is by the comparisons that it makes. For example, in Matthew 12:41-42 we find two back to back statements where Jesus compares himself to certain prominent Old Testament figures.

In verse 41 he says that if the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, then those who were listening to his voice should also repent, *for indeed*, says Jesus, *a greater than Jonah is here*. Likewise, in verse 42, he says that if the Queen of Sheba travelled from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, then (again) those who were listening to his voice should desire his wisdom. Then he says, *for indeed a greater than Solomon is here*. You see, no matter who or what it is that's ever being compared to Jesus Christ, the outcome is always the same. Whether it's the power of the prophets or the glory of the kings, Jesus the Son of God is greater than all!

Today, we're continuing in our study of Mark's Gospel, and in verses 21-28 there's something very similar that's taking place in our text. Just like we know that Jesus is incomparable in power and wisdom, so here we also learn that Jesus is *incomparable in his authority*. In fact, if you just look at the structure of this text, you can see that the whole passage breaks up, very naturally, into two main parts, and each part is marked out by a declaration of the authority of Jesus Christ *in comparison to something else*.

In the first part (vv 21-22) that comparison is between Jesus and the Scribes. In the second part (vv 23-28) the comparison is between Jesus and the unclean spirits of this

world. So, if we had to summarize what we find in our text, it would be: The Kingdom–Authority of Jesus Christ *manifested in word and in deed*. It's manifested in *word* by his teaching and in *deed* by his healing of a demon–possessed man. Now with that summary in mind, let's zoom in a little bit more and look at some of the details of the text.

Mark provides us with some background information that gives a context for what we're about to see. In verse 21, he says that Jesus did two things: *first*, he came into Capernaum, and *second*—being the Sabbath Day—he entered into the synagogue and taught.

The connection here, between Jesus and Capernaum, is something that we see all throughout the Gospels. The reason for that is simple; this is where Jesus set up his missionary headquarters and out of which he conducted a large part of his Galilean ministry. Of course he did that because Capernaum was the city in which he lived. Remember, Mark already told us that when John was put in prison, Jesus *came into Galilee*, but in Matthew 4:13, we learn that when he did so, *he came and dwelt in Capernaum*. So Capernaum was where he lived and because of that it should be no surprise to see Jesus going in and out of that city several times as we read through Mark's account.

But there's something else that Mark says, and this too should be no surprise. That is, on the Sabbath day *Jesus entered into the synagogue to teach*. You see the truth is, before Jesus moved to Capernaum, he was already teaching in many of the synagogues of other towns. In fact, at the very beginning of his ministry, the Bible says that after he was baptized, Jesus first went back to Nazareth where he was raised, and in Luke 4:16 it says that in those days, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read—*as was his custom*. By this time, Jesus had already been engaged in a long season of synagogue-teaching. But now in our text, Mark picks up the story a little bit farther down the line. Jesus has already moved to Capernaum, he's already called his first four disciples on the sea of Galilee, and now, it's the Sabbath day when he does what he normally does: he enters into the synagogue to teach.

Now in verse 22, Mark says that the people had a very strong, but favorable reaction to the Lord's teaching on this occasion. By contrast, remember that the sermon he preached in Nazareth didn't go so well. Luke tells us that when they heard the things which Jesus said, *all the people in the synagogue were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city.* On that occasion, Jesus said that a prophet has no honour in his own town.

But here, the people in Capernaum give a different response. Rather than being filled with wrath, Mark says that they were *astonished at his teaching.* And this word that's translated "astonished" is a word that describes a combination of *wonder* and *fear*. The people here were so affected by the teaching of Jesus Christ that Mark says they were "struck with amazement" and taken by "total surprise." In fact, one rendering of this term could be that they were "dis-possessed of themselves." And Mark tells us why they reacted this way; he says, *for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

Now, in order for us to appreciate what that means, we have to know something about the Scribes, and so we ask the question: Who were the Scribes? and What was their status in Jewish society?

Well, the word itself goes all the way back to the period of the Davidic Kingdom. Originally, it was used to describe the officers who served as secretaries for the business of the king's court. You can read about that in 1 Kings 4 and 2 Samuel 8, where they're called, *recorders.* But then, by the time we get to the post-exilic period, the term took on a different meaning, and it came to describe those who were experts in the word of God; men who studied the Torah and had the ability to teach and train the people in the laws of God. In this sense, the Bible says that the first man who served in this capacity was Ezra. In Ezra 7, we learn that he *came up from Babylon and was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses.* In verses 9-10, there's an explanation of what that means; it says, *for Ezra had prepared to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.*

There you can see that a Scribe was, first and foremost, a master of the word of God. And because of that, he was uniquely qualified to teach and instruct the people in the things of God. Very naturally, as time went along, the status of a Scribe in Jewish society

grew and became extremely high. One commentator says that by the time we get to the first Century, the reputation of the Scribes had taken on “legendary proportions.” In fact, there’s an interesting story that was told later in the Babylonian Talmud that bears this out.

In Yoma 71B, it says that it was customary for the people, on the Day of Atonement, to escort the High Priest from the temple back down to his house. And, one day, as the crowds were walking with the High Priest, they looked up and saw two Scribes and heads of the Sanhedrin, also walking along. So, when the people saw those men, what did they do? The Talmud says, they left off with the High Priest, ran over, and walked with the Scribes!

With that kind of a background, you can see why the comparison that the people are making in our text is nothing short of amazing. Jesus comes into their synagogue and in their minds, he’s just a young itinerant preacher. But then, as he opens up the word of God and begins to teach, the people realize that his teaching is unlike anything they’ve ever heard.

I find it interesting that Mark doesn’t tell us anything that Jesus said, and so here, we don’t know the contents of the Lord’s teaching. Yet at the same time, because the contrast is between the *authority* of Jesus and that of the Scribes, I would argue that the difference is less about the content and more about the source of the truth that he taught. It’s a pretty well-known fact that when any Scribe would instruct the people he would always substantiate his doctrine by appealing to the ancient Rabbis. But we know that when Jesus taught, he did the very opposite of the Scribes.

In Matthew 5, in that great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching on the Law of God, and in verses 21 and 22, that’s exactly what he did. He said, *You have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever kills shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment.* Here, you can see that Jesus taught the people in a totally different way than the Scribes. Rather than appeal to the authority of the Rabbis, Jesus appealed to his own.

Congregation, this is important for us to see because there's a great difference between the authority of an ordinary man who studies the word of God—and the authority of Jesus Christ who is the word of God himself. When Jesus speaks, he can never be wrong. Anytime he gives us a command, that command is altogether righteous and full of the wisdom of God. When Jesus comes to us, and gives us the promise of his word, we know that we can trust that promise because the word of Jesus Christ can never fall to the ground. In Matthew 24:35 he says, "*heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away.*"

Next time you're gathered together with your family for the reading of God's word, there's two things that you need to keep in mind. First, every promise you find on the lips of Jesus is a promise that can never fail. Second, every command you find is a command that you absolutely must obey. The authority of Jesus Christ means that when we hear what Jesus says, our job is to believe it, embrace it, and put it into practice in our lives. This is why Jesus says, at the very end of his Sermon on the Mount, *Therefore whosoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house upon a rock. But every one who hears these sayings of mine, and does not do them, he shall be likened to a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand.*

Now, moving along, we come to verses 23-28, and here we go from the authority of Jesus Christ in his *word*, to the authority of Jesus Christ in his *deeds*.

As Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, Mark says that *there was a man with an unclean spirit*, that is, he was possessed by a demon, and apparently, the spirit was troubled at the presence of the Lord. Mark shows that he was so troubled he couldn't contain himself. In verse 24 we learn that he cried out, 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!*

There's no question that this particular spirit had a good reason to fear. If you think about the overall ministry of Jesus, you'll remember that in every city, Jesus would always do three things. He would preach the Gospel, heal the sick, and deliver those who were subject to demonic possession. And, it's interesting, because on more than one occasion,

the demons that Jesus confronted indicate that they know very well that one day they will be destroyed at the hands of Christ himself. So many times, the only thing they wanted to know was whether or not that time had arrived.

You know, I've often said that when you look at what the demons say in Scripture, you realize that they have a better understanding of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ than many people do today. That's unfortunate, but it's really true. How many people do you know, who deny that Jesus Christ is the *Holy One of God*? How many people do you know who refuse to believe that Jesus is the *Son of God*, and that all authority in heaven and on earth, is in his hands alone? Well, the demons are not so confused. Based upon what we find in the word of God, we know that they understood exactly who Jesus was, and they knew exactly what he came to do. In other words, they knew what the apostle John said, in 1 John 3:8—namely, that the *purpose* of the Son of God coming into this world was “*that he might destroy the works of the devil.*” So clearly, they had a good reason to be troubled.

And, Congregation, let us make no mistake about it, that's what Jesus *did* for the three and half years of his ministry. That's what Jesus did when he died on the cross and spoiled principalities and powers. And the truth is that, one day, that's what Jesus will do—*fully and finally*—when he takes the whole host of fallen angels, including Satan himself, and casts them all into the lake of fire. On that day, the works of the Devil will be completely and permanently destroyed. You can read about that in Revelation 20.

But here, Jesus is just beginning that work, and you can tell that the people are not prepared for what they're about to see. Up to this point, all they've heard is Jesus *teaching* with authority, now, they're about to see Jesus *acting* on that authority as well.

Notice that in verse 24 the demon puts two specific questions to the Lord. First, he says, *What have we to do with you?* And then he says, *Have you come to destroy us?* And yet, Jesus feels no obligation to respond. Instead, he moves right past the questions, and he issues a two-fold command. He says, *Be quiet*, and then he says, *come out of him.* And in verse 26, Mark shows that the demon, with all of the power he had in comparison to the

man himself, had absolutely no power in comparison to Jesus Christ. Mark says, *And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he came out of him.*

Last week, I made a pretty big deal about the fact that when Jesus said, back in verse 15, that the Kingdom of God was at hand, what he meant was not that the kingdom was almost here but that the kingdom of God had already arrived. If you remember, I made that point by mentioning the grammar and the force of the verb in the perfect tense. Well here, there's another way that we can make the very same point, and that's this.

In Matthew chapter 12, the Bible records another instance of Jesus casting out a demon, and on that occasion the Pharisees and Sadducees accused the Lord of working hand-in-hand with the Devil himself, just to deceive the people. They said, *this fellow is casting out demons by the Prince of the demons.* When Jesus heard that, he responded in a very logical and powerful way. He reminded them that any kingdom *divided against itself* can only fall. Therefore, it would do no good for Satan to help Jesus cast out demons from those that he sought to control. Then, in verse 28, he says, *But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then surely the kingdom of God has come upon you!* In other words, the very fact that Jesus was plundering the kingdom of darkness; the very fact that he was delivering those who were subject to the devil's control; proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that in the Person of Jesus Christ the Kingdom had finally come. This demonstration of his authority in the Synagogue in Capernaum then, was a declaration that Jesus was the savior of his people *and God's anointed King.* Thus, his authority was Kingdom-authority.

As you think about it, that's the whole reason that the synagogue worshippers responded in the way that they did. Verse 27 says that they were so amazed, they began to question among themselves saying, *What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.* And then Mark adds, *And immediately His fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee.*

Congregation, as we conclude our message for today, I want us to go away with a summary of two thoughts. As we look back at the structure of this passage, we see again that Jesus demonstrates a two-fold authority. And for us, each aspect of that authority is

relevant for our lives. In his *word*, Jesus speaks with authority, and therefore we must obey. In his *works*, Jesus acts with authority, and therefore we must learn to trust him with every aspect of our lives. In the days when things are looking dark and dim, in the days when we are overwhelmed by the cares and worries of this life, our job is to seek the face of Jesus Christ, for the wisdom, comfort, and protection that only he can provide.

Because remember, all the wisdom and all the power that we can find in this world, is nothing when it's *compared* to what we have in our Savior— Jesus Christ the King. **Amen.**