

## Preach Simple Truth

*From the Gospel of Mark*

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**Bible Text:** Mark 1:21-27

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I would like you to turn now—those of you that have your Bibles with you—to the first chapter of the book of Mark. The text I have selected is Mark chapter one verses 21 through 28.

They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” And Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s pray together.

*Father, we thank you again for your Word. We thank you that we have the privilege of studying your Word. We have the privilege of learning from it. And we have the privilege, Father, of meeting together and having you apply your Word to our hearts, to our growth and edification that we might better serve you the living God. And as we look this evening at this particular text concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, the holy one of God and his activity in teaching particularly, we pray that we might learn from him and we might, by your grace, preach simple truth that strikes hearts and changes lives just as he did in this ordinary ministry of the Word in which we see him engage in this particular text. So be pleased to bless us this evening as we take time to look into this, your Word, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:21-28.

Well, since I am speaking largely to a group of ministers and also elders who are charged to encourage the ministry of the Word, I have to start out by confessing that I assume all preachers think they have a handle on preaching. Is this correct? For the most part, preachers consider themselves experts in preaching. I know this is the case because after I graduated from seminary I knew I was an expert in preaching. And those who are experts in preaching often need critics. My mother was one of my critics. She deplored my sermons. It is very bad when your mother won't even listen to your sermons.

But then a little bit later, after I came into the Reformed Presbyterian Church and was in Sterling, Kansas, the seminary, RPTS, invited Haddon Robinson for a preaching seminar. I see a couple of you nodding. This was in 1991. I attended that preaching seminar and was glad to do so. I recognized that I needed a little encouragement and a little help. And one of the things that I took away from that preaching seminar was Haddon Robinson talking about connecting with the congregation. How important it is to connect the truth of God with the congregation!

And after my mother's critique, I recognized that part of my problem was I was a scribe. I loved to give the Word of God and to give some of the technical things in the Word of God. I realized that my authority was the authority of my office. My authority was simply the authority of the Word of God. But when I look at the Bible I realize that the scribes had the same authority. And I was more in their camp than I was in the camp of Jesus. This caused me to do not a little wrestling with regard to the Word of God.

You see, when you look at our text in Mark chapter one verses 21 through 28, you realize that Jesus Christ was not like the scribes. He preached simple truth that connected with the hearts of men and changed lives. And this is what you need to be about and this is what I need to be about. This is what our church needs to be about, preaching simple truth that captivates hearts and changes lives. And this is the point that I want you to get from this text. Those of you who are preachers and those of you who are elders who encourage your pastor and your preacher in your congregation, you need to preach simple truth that captivates minds and changes lives.

Now when we look at this particular text it is undoubtedly a text about Jesus Christ. And in the very center of this text, in verse 24, you find out some information about this Jesus. The demon cries out, "I know who You are—the Holy One of God!"<sup>2</sup> And so here is a text about the holy one of God, the one who is set aside for the purposes of God. He is not only holy in conduct and holy in character, but in a very particular and peculiar way he is set apart for the purposes of God. And one of those purposes we learn, as we read the gospels, is to preach the gospel. And in his preaching he encounters this demoniac who identifies him correctly. And you notice from the text, Jesus is not only "a" holy one of God, He is "the" holy one of God, the one who is the Son of God. This reminds us of the confession of Peter. "Who do you say that I am?"<sup>3</sup> Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:24.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:15.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:16.

In the gospel of Mark, this confession comes in the eighth chapter. The eighth chapter of Mark is rather a demarcation point in the gospel. Prior to Mark chapter eight all that is going on basically has to do with who Jesus is. Mark is presenting us the Christ who is the Son of God and the disciples need to learn who he is. And then in chapter eight we have this confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”<sup>5</sup> And then Jesus begins to articulate very clearly the mission for which he comes. He plainly tells the disciples that he came to be betrayed in Jerusalem and to be killed and to rise again and with some wonder and amazement they, at first, received this message. And so this confession of the devil fits right in with the theme of the beginning of the book of Mark.

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of being at the ARP synod. It was a very enjoyable time. The synod began with a message by Sinclair Ferguson and a communion service. And Dr. Ferguson gave a very pointed and poignant gospel appeal to the ARP synod. After that service, perhaps the next day, I heard one of the delegates say, “That was a bold move.” My response is, “Maybe that wasn’t such a bold move,” even in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian synod. And maybe it is not such a bold move in the Reformed Presbyterian Church synod.

You need to hear the gospel. You to hear that Jesus Christ is the very Son of God and that he came to die on Calvary’s cross to pay the penalty for the likes of you and me for our sins. The devils believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you trust Jesus Christ? Are you one who confesses with his mouth Jesus as Lord, but lives differently? I say this to you because in my own presbytery one of our own pastors recently left the Reformed Presbyterian Church for Eastern Orthodoxy. He left our fellowship to follow doctrines that smack of justification by works. Yes, it is quite possible for us to sit here in this synod and not have a proper relationship with Christ. And so as Jesus preaches in the synagogue and you hear this confession of the demon—“I know who You are—the Holy One of God!”<sup>6</sup>—I ask you, is this your confession and is this what you are bound before God to preach?

Now as you look at Jesus here, one of the astounding things is that the holy one of God begins to participate in the *ordinary means of grace*. Look at verse 21. “They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue.”<sup>7</sup>

Here is the holy one of God who on the sabbath immediately enters the synagogue. And, of course, we understand that the sabbath is a creation ordinance. And we understand the sabbath is also an ordinance coming to us through Moses in the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”<sup>8</sup> And so the sabbath is a very ancient institution of which Jesus partakes.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:24.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 1:21.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 20:8.

And he also goes to the synagogue which is a very ancient institution. Yes, I know the modern scholars tell us that the synagogue was first organized or came into existence during the exile. But you ought to realize that the more traditional position that was held by the ancient rabbis and held by the Christian Church prior to the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century is that the synagogue goes back to Moses. It goes back to Leviticus 23. There Moses speaks to the people and calls holy convocations for the seventh day of the week, for the sabbath day. And so the traditional position is that the synagogue goes back to Leviticus 23. Talk with our Professor Williams about this and his encounters with the Orthodox Jewish rabbis with whom he has been studying. Well, Jesus comes into the synagogue on the sabbath to participate in these very *ordinary means of grace*.

And the ritual in the synagogue was very simple. There were certain prayers. There were certain blessings. There were readings from the law. Then there were readings from the prophets. Then there was an exhortation. It was a very simple service. We do something similar, do we not? We have prayers and we sing psalms. If psalms were sung in the synagogue they mirrored that which took place in the temple. And then we have an Old Testament reading and a New Testament reading. The procedure in the synagogue was for the exhortation to look at Moses through the eyes of the prophet. And what we do today, generally, is look at the Old Testament through the eyes of the New Testament. And so we basically, you basically, follow the same procedure which is a very ancient procedure we might add. We therefore stand in a very good tradition in a very good sense. Again, what we are talking about are the *ordinary means of grace*. I emphasize this.

But now you also notice, verse 21, “They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus not only went in to the synagogue to participate in the ordinary means of grace, he participated in the ordinary means of grace in this matter of teaching. And I think you need to realize this and I need to realize this.

You see, Jesus followed exactly the same procedure that was always followed in the synagogue. We have witness of this in Luke chapter four. Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He turned to the appropriate place and read the prophet. Jesus, no doubt, had earlier read from the law. Luke doesn’t tell us this, but it is very probably that Jesus did read from the law. This was the procedure in the synagogue. Then he reads from the prophet. Then Jesus gives an exhortation. He preaches in the synagogue.

And this is the whole idea of teaching, you see. Part of our problem today is—and I really think this is part of our problem today—that we when we think of teaching, the teaching that Jesus does here in Mark chapter one and the teaching that the apostle Paul speaks about, we think of teaching in the modern sense. We think of the regurgitating information. We think of giving out information. We fall into the modern education heresy. Modern education espouses this theory: Give people the right information and they’ll make proper decisions. And so teaching involves dispensing information.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 1:21.

But I submit to you that this is not what the word “teaching” means in our text. It refers to a sermon, to an exhortation. You see, the scribes were charged, and those who taught in the synagogue were charged, to take the Word of God and pointedly apply the Word of God to the people in the synagogue. And so the teaching was actually preaching.

Some of you will remember that when we came to synod a few years ago we received name tags that had TE and RE on them before our names. The reference was to Teaching Elder and Ruling Elder. I didn't like those name tags very much. I think they perhaps betrayed the whole idea that teaching is just giving out information. And my question was: Where is the preaching? Where is preaching taking place? And so the teaching that we see in the synagogue here is of the character of an exhortation. The book of Hebrews is a long sermon which is probably like a synagogue exhortation.

But now as you look at the text. Jesus is preaching. There is an eruption in the synagogue. Look at verses 23 and following. “Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth?’”<sup>10</sup> This would be like preaching here tonight and someone jumps up and shouts, “What business do we have with you? Who are you?” And he challenges the preaching. This is exactly what was taking place in the synagogue service. There was this challenge. “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us?”<sup>11</sup>

You see, the demons understood who Jesus was. They were in fear and trembling. “Have you come to destroy the likes of us? We know that you have the power to send us into the pits of hell. You are able, fully able to do that immediately.” And, of course, Jesus Christ has the authority to take any one of us out of this life in an instant. And without faith in Jesus Christ, whoever of us is taken out of this life is consigned to eternal punishment.

And so this miracle occurs. Verse 25 says: “And Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be quiet, and come out of him!’ Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him.”<sup>12</sup> Throwing him on the ground and convulsing, the unclean spirit came out. The *Geneva Study Bible of 1599* gives us a little comment on this incident. One of the notes indicates Jesus preached a doctrine the devils could not withstand. Yes, Jesus preached a doctrine the devils could not withstand. This is the *ordinary* ministry of the word. This is the work you have and I have. And then the note goes on to indicate that Jesus performed this miracle to confirm the doctrine. That is, this miracle came along to display the truth of the doctrine, to validate the doctrine.

Hear this friends. Think about the preaching of the Word of God that you do. Think about the expectations you may have for God to act miraculously in the congregation. Now I am not suggesting that you are going to see demoniacs delivered. But I would suggest to you that the greatest miracle is the miracle of the new birth, the miracle of God

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 1:23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 1:24.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 1:25-26.

changing hearts. Think about Paul at Philippi preaching by the riverside. The text in Acts tells us that the Lord opened the heart of Lydia to respond to the things spoken by Paul. She was born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, anticipated. And the miracle confirmed the preaching of the apostle Paul.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, the apostle begins his recitation of spiritual *things*. This is what he says in the very first verse. He wants to talk about spiritual *things*. He does not indicate he is interested in speaking about spiritual *gifts*, as the English versions put it. He speaks of spiritual *things*. And the first spiritual thing that Jesus desires to speak about is the confession that comes by way of the power of the Holy Spirit. And he says, “No one can confess Jesus is Lord,” and I would add, and really mean it, and really know that this is the case, “accept by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Here is the miraculous work that accompanies the ordinary preaching of the Word.

And then as you look at the text again in verse 22 it says, “They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”<sup>14</sup> Yes, “He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”<sup>15</sup> I suggest to you that the authority that Mark mentions here is not the authority of office. The scribes had the teaching office. This was an office that was designated for them. And the authority spoken of here is not simply the authority of Scripture. The scribes maintained their authority was the authority of their office and of the Scriptures. The problem, as we know, is *how* they handled Scripture.

This is where it comes home to you and me, *how* we handle Scripture, *how* you handle Scriptures. The scribe, you see, also liked to rest his case on the authority of the Church doctors and to quote the rabbis. Does this ring any bells? How often you and how often I like to go back to Calvin, to go back to Turretin, to go back Berkhof, to go back to E. J. Young, to go back to any number of the commentators and to gain authority from the commentators. This is what the scribes did.

And it is not only that the Scribes would rest their case on the commentators, they also loved to engage in circuitous arguments. And they loved the complex and they loved to throw out the big words and the theological terms. Haddon Robinson has a very interesting little statement in his *Biblical Preaching*. He says something like this, “It takes a man three years to go through seminary, but it takes seven or eight years to get over seminary.” It is the technical language of the theologian that he is talking about, you see. And so I am calling you—as I am calling myself—to look. Is our ministry—is your ministry, is my ministry—more like the scribes? Or is it more like the ministry of Jesus who preached with authority?

And as you observe the preaching and the teaching of Jesus, one of the things that you see preeminently is it’s simplicity. He presents simple truth. He presents truth with simplicity. You know as well as I do, that when you study the Scriptures to preach, you

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<sup>13</sup> See 1 Corinthians 12:3.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 1:22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

have a text. When you derive the truth out of that text that truth begins to burn in your soul, as it should. And I can't help but think that when Jesus participated in the *ordinary* ministry of the teaching of the Word, he knew the truth of the Scriptures he read. That truth would burn in his heart. And we know that the Lord Jesus had a zeal for the house of God. He had a zeal for the truth of God.

And this zeal, born of the truth, was in turn fired by an anointing from the Holy Spirit. As we mentioned earlier Jesus went in to the synagogue and we have that story of his reading from Isaiah chapter 61, "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME."<sup>16</sup> And for what purpose? "TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR."<sup>17</sup> Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes on this text, "Even Jesus Christ as a man, as a preacher, needed this anointing of the Holy Spirit." This put him in his office, not only as a priest, but as a teacher of the Word of God.

And with simple truth Jesus went for the hearts of the people in the synagogue. The reaction was simple. "They were all amazed."<sup>18</sup> The word "amazed" means they were "struck out of themselves." When the Word of God came to them in the preaching, the truth went out and touched their hearts, they were startled by the truth. It is like you are startled when someone comes up from the rear and unexpectedly speaks or reaches out and touches you and you start. They were amazed at his teaching.

And their minds were pricked and their consciences were pricked so that action had to be taken on their part. And in some cases it was like a javelin thrown and piercing their heart. They got the point of Scripture. They got the point of the teaching. It is very interesting, isn't it, that Paul uses the analogy of the Word of God as the Sword of the Spirit. A sword has one point. Ok, maybe I am pushing the analogy a little bit, but listen, men. The sword has one point. It is not a pitch fork that has five or six tines on it. It is not a gig, a frog gig, that has three or four or five tines on it. Christ preached simple truth that penetrated the heart. And they got it. And that is why they were amazed, why they staggered at that truth when they got it.

So what is our reaction? When the truth is preached under the power of the Spirit, the reaction is often palpable. Dr. Lloyd-Jones was asked the question, "How do you know that the Holy Spirit is working in the congregation?" He said something like this, "I look out over the congregation and I become afraid. I know that I am not in control. God is in control." God uses his truth to penetrate hearts and to change lives. He is a miraculously working to confirm his Word.

Years ago I had the privilege of being at a installation service for a young man as a home missionary in Hutchison, Kansas. And the ruling elder who was there gave the charge to the minister. And he said to the young minister, "Just remember, you are a shepherd, not a cowboy." And this fellow knew what using a cattle prod to get cattle out of a truck was like, pushing and shoving the cattle. And he was reminding the young minister, "You are

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 4:18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 1:27.

not a cowboy. You are a shepherd.” How often I have been a cowboy in the congregation rather than a shepherd. The shepherd says to the sheep, “Come on, come on, come on. Hear the simple truth. Here the simple truth of God that penetrates your heart and changes your life. Come on. Hear the truth and walk in this truth as you hear it.”

The old scribes were more like cowboys. They were interested in taking the two by four and smacking it up the side of the head of some of the people. “Do I have your attention yet?” No. Jesus is the good shepherd and you pastors and you elders are the under-shepherds of Jesus. Your job and my job is to present the simple truth that penetrates hearts and changes lives. That is how Jesus ministered.

And I challenge you, and I challenge myself in this regard, as you go through this week of synod and as you go back to your congregations, think about the ministry of Jesus. Think about the scribes. Think about the difference between the scribe and the ministry of Christ. He presented the simple truth with a zeal and with an anointing of the Spirit to strike hearts and to change lives. This too is your ministry. And so this is the whole point. Preach simple truth to strike hearts and change lives. Preach simple truth to strike hearts and change lives.

Let’s pray.

*Father, thank you for your Word. You are far better able to apply it to our hearts than certainly I am or any other human being is. Work your Word into our hearts and cause each one of us to examine our own ministries and not to be complacent with where we are. And grant, Father, that by your grace your pastors, your elders, will present the truth simply to congregations so that hearts are struck and that lives are changed. Be pleased to do this work in our small corner of the ecclesiastical world we pray. We ask these things in the good name of Jesus Christ who is the Lord. Amen.*