

## UNDER WHOSE AUTHORITY?

### Mark 1: 21-28

When you stop and think about it, there are all kinds of authorities in our lives:

- the police
- your parents
- the stop sign on the corner
- the IRS
- the judge in the courtroom
- the pastor in the church
- family traditions at Thanksgiving and Christmas
- the Bible
- Jesus Christ
- your boss
- the culture and mores of your company
- your morals or ethics
- the U S Congress
- City Council
- County Commissioners
- drivers on school busses
- your physician
- the physician's assistant
- close friends
- neighbors
- the homeowner's association
- referees in ball games

I guess we could go on and on with various authorities in our lives. Some that are more pronounced and clearly seen as authorities as well as those practices we follow in our daily lives without even thinking about them. Authorities abound in our lives. Authorities in life are found in two different ways:

1. The person in command. "When she speaks, it is the final decision." I am clearly aware of that in the courtroom. When the judge makes a ruling and bangs

the gavel, it is a done deal. One person who issues a command and it becomes the new reality.

2. The power to influence thought, opinion, or behavior. A person would do this or else it could be a set of standards and codes of conduct assumed by a community or a club or a group of people. Families are good at this kind of authority and no one even has to say a word.

Today we look at authority in the passage from Mark. Over the past several weeks, we have seen the beginning of Jesus' ministry. His baptism, the realization of Jesus being the Son of God, by Philip and Nathanael, and the calling of the disciples. All of which sets the stage for today's passage. By what authority does Jesus make these claims and who elected him to be the Son of God? It's a natural question which people observing these developments would ask. For you have to remember there were lots of people in that day claiming they were of God...the false prophets and those who were trying to convince people they were the Holy One. So our story is set on the Sabbath. It is also set in Capernaum where Jesus set up his base of operation. Jesus goes to the Synagogue on the Sabbath as any good upstanding Jews would do.

In fact, he was asked to teach which was customary, but that is where the fight began.

Verse 22: "They were astonished at Jesus teaching for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes."

The lines are already drawn. This verse sets up the issue of authority. That is who was right and to whom shall we listen? These battle lines between Jesus and the religious authorities start here and run throughout his ministry.

We are told Jesus taught with authority. He did not teach as the scribes taught.

The scribes were the religious leaders whose job was to uphold the Jewish religious tradition. Their job was to ensure that the Torah was interpreted correctly. They were to make sure every jot and tittle were perfect and kept in good order. They were the start of legalistic Presbyterians. They would argue over every word and every mark of punctuation. They spent hours arguing for the purity and properness of the Torah. They were probably originalists as recent Supreme Court nominees claimed to be.

And on the other hand, there was Jesus. He probably spoke a language that was blasphemous to their ears. While we do not know the content of his teaching on that day, we do know what Jesus said in his ministry:

“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

“when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases.”

“you have heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ I say do not resist an evildoer.”

“if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

“if you want to be first, be last and a servant of all.”

“Do not store up treasures on earth but store up for yourself in heaven.”

All of which would fly in the face of keeping the tradition. Living life in order to uphold the tradition rather than giving new life to people. Jesus spoke with authority.

For me, this part of the story speaks to me and my allegiance to the past. How comfortable it is to rest on what has gone before and keep on doing things like we always have done. We in the church are notoriously a bunch of scribes. Keeping our traditions going like they have been going for years. Doing the same creed in worship every week. Following the same activities at Christmas and Easter. I’m told that Consecration Sunday here at South Plains is always done the same way. Doing our church dinners where certain people always sit together and some

people always bring the same dish every time or else go to Harris Teeter on the way to the church.

I personally like traditions and they help me to stay grounded. So I am not against them. However, when traditions become our church...when practices are more important than our faith...when our position in the church is all I care about -- then, we are a bunch of scribes. We are people who do not live an active, alive, and alert faith. Keeping the institution, the church, running like it always has done will eventually kill it.

The pandemic has been a horrible experience for the whole world. And we have all been touched in significant ways. But one of the things God is doing through the pandemic is forcing his people -- church people -- you and me -- to ask the question, “What is the church all about?” “What is my faith all about? Why do I care?”

We have an opportunity now and in the post-pandemic era to chart a new course. To try a new direction. To live for a new day. The course is not clear, and we are feeling our way along. But it is happening, and God is at work. If not, why is attendance higher in many churches being online than it was in person? God is doing a new thing.

Do we follow the scribes -- live as we always have done things and work hard to keep our traditions OR are we open to hearing one teach us with authority about a new way of life?

Which leads me to the other part of the story, or page 2, as Paul Harvey would say. There is another authority issue and challenge here in the story. The first was between Jesus and the scribes, the Jewish faith.

The second authority issue is about Jesus and the unclean spirit in the man. “In the synagogue a man (appeared) with an unclear spirit.” Such stories give us a clammy feeling when we read them in scripture. However, there is a powerful story here. As Jesus confronts the unclean spirits and shows he has authority over them.

A couple of pointers about the encounter in verse 24. The unclean spirit recognized Jesus. It inquired if Jesus had come to destroy them (the unclean spirits). In other words, the unclean spirit said, "leave us alone and we will leave you alone." And also, the unclean spirit named Jesus twice: as Jesus of Nazareth as well as the Holy One of God.

It is crystal clear that the unclean spirit knew Jesus firsthand: as a human and as divine. He named him. This confrontation, this second fight, in the story is a clear fight between good and evil. Jesus – good; unclean spirit – evil.

Interpreters indicate it was a "man in an unclean spirit" meant the man was completely immersed in this unclean spirit. He was possessed.

Who knows what the unclean spirit was? Yet the man was consumed. He was possessed. What possessed him was immaterial. However, he was in complete contradiction to what and who Jesus is. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out and it did, and the man was exorcized.

The great battle: Jesus and the evil of this world. The story is not that far off or removed from our own lives. We use different words, but we have unclean spirits. We live in opposition to who and what Jesus is. We find ourselves out of sorts and not sure what to do.

We have made investments that are risky and not sure how to get out of them. But they looked so good...

We find ourselves a little too eager to eat too much or to drink a bit too much. Oh, it won't hurt, and we will be okay.

We have begun to associate with people that are encouraging us to delve into some questionable activities and unclear how to move away from them. We are hooked.

We just do not have the spark in our marriage we once had, and the future is cloudy, unclear, and scary.

We are sick and tired of politics as they are and want to get involved in some groups that are a bit extreme to take a stand.

We have not always kept the books just right at the office. It was only a few dollars to start, but it has since blossomed, and I don't know how to stop it. Not sure how to keep covering it up.

My boss has been rather difficult lately and been haughty to fellow employees and abused them verbally.

I'm not sure about my attraction to illicit activities and things on the internet. It is not hurting anyone, I decide.

I still carry a grudge against my parents, even my deceased parents, for how they treated me as a child and certain automatic sayings are in my head.

Friends, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we all have unclean spirits of some kind in our lives. We may not be paranoid or schizophrenic, but they are there. A book I am using in class this spring talks about "Facing Your Shadow" whether that is from childhood or from today.

And until we face our shadow, whatever that is, the unclean spirit dwells within us. The spirit controls me. That spirit becomes my life.

In our story, Jesus became the authority to cleanse the unclean spirit. He exorcized it and the man was made well. Notice he did not have a laying on of hands or a Pentecostal type of prayer. No, Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and directed it to come out of the man.

You see that is how Jesus operates. He is the Word, and that Word takes care of everything. Jesus as the Word of God can and does take care of our unclean spirits. It is not magical and probably not quick. Yet if we believe Jesus has the authority over our lives, all things are possible through his Word.

Remember last week Jesus declared the Kingdom of God had drawn near. He declared that the Kingdom of God was in opposition to the Kingdom of Rome. Jesus was teaching about an entirely different whole world than people were used to. Here, now, is where Jesus is practicing what he is preaching! Here is where he was not just talking the talk but was walking the walk. Here is the word made flesh and dwelling among us.

If Jesus has authority in our lives, he confronts the powers of our faith and our traditions and practices.

If Jesus has authority in our lives, he also confronts the powers of evil in the world in the form of unclean spirits. And, he does so with authority.

Does Jesus have authority in your life or is he just a good teacher? Will you submit to Christ's will or the ways of this world?

It's the same old story:

Jesus' way

OR

My way

What shall it be? Under Whose Authority do you live?

**JANUARY 31, 2021 SCRIPTURES**  
**PSALM 111**

- 1** Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- 2** Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.
- 3** Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.
- 4** He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.
- 5** He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.
- 6** He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- 7** The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8** They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- 9** He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.
- 10** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

**MARK 1: 21-28**

- 21** They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.
- 22** They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.
- 23** Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,
- 24** 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."
- 25** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"
- 26** And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.
- 27** They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."
- 28** At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.