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(Mark 1:21–28)

Introduction

Recently, we sang the decades-old song by Jack Hayford: "Majesty." Its lyrics are simple but, well, majestic:

Majesty, worship his majesty:
Unto Jesus be all glory, honour and praise.
Majesty, kingdom, authority:
Flows from his throne, unto his own, his anthem raise.

In the passage before us we get a glimpse of the majestic authority – the kingdom authority – of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus had begun his public ministry of *proclamation* (vv. 14–15). In vv. 16–20, Jesus issued an authoritative command: "Follow me." Four men answered the call. They bowed the knee to the King, evidenced by leaving their livelihood, familial relationships, and comfort zone. He called them to a life and ministry of *separation* (vv. 16–20). They had little idea of where following the King would lead them or what it would cost them. What they *did* know is that the King had called, and they would follow. This is precisely what each of us is to do.

Now, in vv. 21–34, we have the record of his authoritative *demonstration*. He was demonstrating that the kingdom had come, and was providing assurance that it would *continue* to come. This assurance is precisely what each of us needs. The Lord's Prayer, in other words, is not merely a ritual; it is rather a reality to be embraced.

In the text before us, the issue of the authority of the King is again at centre stage. Here, we witness the demonstration of Jesus' authority over the devil and over disease; his authority over Satan and over sickness; his kingly rule over the spiritual and over the physical. We witness his rule and the realm in which he is King – namely, over everything.

This morning we will examine what the kingdom authority of Jesus looks like in the congregation of God's people.

Authority in the Congregation

First, Jesus displays his authority in the kingdom. The entire encounter of vv. 21–28, in fact, occurred in the synagogue, but vv. 21–22 introduce his authority in the congregation: "And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

If this were a movie, we might title this scene, "Showdown at the Synagogue." In these verses we have the record of a rather intense scene, full of drama, suspense, and action. Jesus enters the synagogue and provides instruction (doubtless from the Torah). His teaching leads to the revelation that someone has an evil spirit. A great disruption occurs as Jesus cast it out, and the people are left thunderstruck by all that has occurred. They recognise that Jesus has unique authority. In the words of Lane, "Jesus' word, presented with a sovereign authority, confronted the congregation with the absolute claim of God upon their whole person."

By the combination of authoritative instruction and authoritative confrontation, it is clear that—at least for us—the King has come to his congregation. And what a difference this makes. And though our churches are not synagogues, what occurred there and then has great relevance for what needs to occur here and now. Jesus was demonstrating that he had authority over God's covenantal congregation. This is a lesson that we continually need to review.

Fishing in the Aquarium

In the previous passages, Jesus began his public ministry of proclamation by heralding, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (vv. 14–15). Jesus then called his first disciples, commanding them to follow him and promising to make them fishers of men (vv. 16–20).

We saw previously that this entails the concept of judgement. The announcement that the King has come is good news to those who acknowledge their rebellion towards the King,

but it is very *bad* news to those who continue in their defiance of his rightful rule and rightful *rules* over them. And somewhat remarkably, at least at first blush, the first place they go fishing is in the congregation that ostensibly were already in the net. We might say that they were *fishing in the aquarium*. Strange—or is it? As Lane has pointed out, “In the presence of Jesus men are disturbed, and this disturbance is the precise act of fishing to which Jesus had called the four fishermen.... Jesus’ presence entails the danger of judgment for all present” (Lane). But, as Peter will later record, judgement must begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).

If God’s people are confused about who is King, there is little likelihood that those who do *not* belong will get it. So, Jesus starts with the synagogue. The apostles, being faithful disciples, will follow suit in their later ministry. The book of Acts makes this quite clear.

Let me bring to our attention the need for our own congregations to receive such visits from the King. There is plenty of fishing to be done week in and week out in our own churches. We too need to be reminded of the authority of Jesus Christ. May we see our need to be both *disturbed* and *comforted* by his presence.

Customary Gathering

Jesus, as was his custom (Luke 4:16), gathered each Sabbath with the congregation of God’s covenanted people. Mark breathlessly brings this to the forefront when he writes, “And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath, he entered the synagogue.”

The word “synagogue” speaks of an assembly of persons or a gathering. The synagogue was established during the Babylonian exile. Having been separated from their beloved Jerusalem, and therefore cut off from access to the temple, Jewish people would gather for weekly singing of Psalms, prayers, and reading of the Torah followed by exposition of the text. This was vital in order to maintain their religious and cultural community. Eventually, special buildings were erected for this purpose, and hence the proper name “synagogue” referred to these (much like we often use the word “church” to describe our meeting place). For a synagogue to be properly constituted and to function, ten Jewish males were required. (This is still the case today. A sister church in another part of our country hires the side hall of a synagogue, which is defunct because there are insufficient Jewish men to formally constitute the synagogue.)

An Inglorious Gathering

These gatherings would take place on the Sabbath as well as various festival days. Eventually, Jews would gather at the synagogue on Mondays and Thursdays as well. Exiled Jews put a premium on gathering as a congregation. This was a good priority, yet it often

proved less than helpful and less than fruitful. In fact, in many, if not in most, cases, it proved detrimental.

Each synagogue would be administrated by a ruler, who would be responsible for these weekly meetings. He would not necessarily lead the meetings, and neither was he expected to be the teacher. But he *was* responsible to ensure that someone would give instruction from one of the inspired scrolls. Enter the scribes.

The scribes were a group of Jewish men who were supposed to be trained in the exegesis and exposition of the Scriptures. They were entrusted with synagogue instruction. They were later called “Rabbi” or “Master.”

Perhaps the most noble of the scribes was Ezra. We read of him: “This Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given.... The good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:6, 10).

Ezra was faithful to God and therefore to his Word; he was faithful to God’s Word and therefore he was faithful to God. Great blessing came upon the people of God as this faithful scribe taught God’s word. It is clear from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, that Ezra taught with *authority*; with *God’s* authority. The people were blessed under the ministry of this godly scribe. But, as we will soon see, and as the remainder of Mark will reveal, most scribes of Jesus’ day were a long way from the devoted and dedicated ministry of an Ezra.

Thunderstruck

On this particular Sabbath, Jesus fulfilled the role of scribe. The impression he made was remarkable. It can be assumed that the ruler of this particular synagogue had invited Jesus to speak to this gathering. At the least, he gave Jesus permission to do so.

Usually, a prearranged passage from the Hebrew scroll would be read and the instruction or teaching would follow. We don’t know what text Jesus taught, but we *do* know its effect. The text reads, “They were astonished at his teaching.”

The word “astonished” speaks of being struck with panic, wonder, amazement or awe. It could, in fact, be translated “thunderstruck.” The gathered congregation was wowed as Jesus taught, “for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

“Authority” speaks more of freedom to act than it does of raw power. Of course, a degree of power is implicit, yet the word speaks not merely of ability but rather of a right to act or to speak. The same word was used by Jesus in Matthew 28:18 to describe “all authority”

that had been “given to [him] in heaven and on earth.” That is, he had the right to do as he pleased; after all, he was King. Bear that in mind as we consider this scene in Capernaum.

Jesus taught in such a way that there was no question as to his right to speak, his right to exhort, his right to expound, his right to command. As someone has put it, Jesus spoke like thunder because his life was lightning. His authority was palpable. It was innate, not derived.

It has been said that there are three necessary elements for an effective preacher: *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*. Jesus had the fullness of all three. And therefore he spoke with authority.

Logos speaks to the content of the message. It speaks of the *message*; it speaks of the *word* and the *words*. It refers to what is *said*. Jesus, of course, was the Logos incarnate and so, we might say, when he spoke, every statement was in like a red letter edition of the Bible! Whatever Jesus spoke in this synagogue was faithful to God’s logos, God’s Word.

Those who minister God’s Word are to do just that. The content of the teaching must be the unadulterated word of God. Sadly, the majority of the scribes of Jesus’ day were not faithful to the logos of God. Therefore they had no authority in their ministry. Rather than knowing and declaring God’s logos, they proclaimed the mere logos of mere *men*. They quoted as authorities those who contradicted God’s Word (Mark 7:3–13). They were useless shepherds, with the result that the sheep were scattered (Matthew 9:36–38; see Acts 20:28–32). And so it is in many congregations today. Far too many do not take God’s Word seriously. They replace God’s authoritative Word with human reasoning.

I was recently in conversation with a pastor of another church who is seeking to reform his church. One area of reformation concerns the way they open their services. Until now, they have typically shown a brief, secular YouTube video that, in some ways, ties into the worship theme for that week. He wants to get away from that practice, but some of the leaders in the church remain convinced that it is necessary to show these YouTube videos in order to “get people interested in the Word of God.” How incongruous! How sad!

When God’s Word is properly handled, it is as though Jesus is in the pulpit. Pray for this!

Ethos speaks of the character of the one who preaches. As mentioned, the life of Jesus was lighting in that it was holy and without blemish. His life in no way contradicted his lips. He was the Holy One, the Son of God, and he lived like it. Robert Murray McCheyne famously said, “A *holy minister* is an awful weapon in the hand of God.” No one exemplified this more than Jesus Christ.

It is clear that the scribes of Jesus' day lacked ethos. The majority of them were corrupt, and therefore they held no moral authority over the people. This Scribe was profoundly different.

Congregations need such men to teach them the Word of God. As Ryle once said, "My people watch me six days a week to know whether or not to listen to me on the seventh." Pray for those who teach you God's Word. Pray for what older preachers called "unction"; that is, the sense of God in his own life, and in the congregation as the Word is preached.

When you consider the seriousness of the call to fish for men, we should understand the need for a life that handles God's Word seriously.

Pathos speaks of the passion of the one teaching – not necessarily the decibel level, but rather the *devotional* level. How devoted to God is the person who is teaching? Jesus clearly was devoted to his Father. He was devoted to the promotion of his glory. This is doubtless why he began his public ministry among the congregation of those who professed to belong to God. Jesus was passionate for the repentance and reformation of God's people. The scribes, however, as will become increasingly evident, were more concerned about their own comfort and for their own glory.

As the people in the synagogue listened to Jesus of Nazareth teach, they detected an authenticity about him, a deeply-devoted commitment to God. The result was that they were thunderstruck – "astonished at his teaching." His teaching had an authoritative impact upon them. You see, when Jesus taught, the people sensed that they were in the very presence of God. *Their synagogue had become a temple.*

This is a vitally important matter. It was not so much *what* Jesus said (though that was very important). Rather, it was in the manner in which he taught. And his manner was the result of *character*; it arose from his *person*. The congregation probably did not realise it at the time, but they were in the presence of God. This is what made the difference. Oh that our congregations would more regularly experience this!

I once heard Leonard Ravenhill preach to a group of three hundred pastors. He preached with such pathos that, when he was done, you could hear a pin drop. Everyone simply filed out without speaking. Ravenhill's pathos was so evident that it impacted his hearers. I've never experienced that again.

Do we look for Jesus when we gather? Do we listen to and for Jesus when we gather? Do we pray for this? What do we expect? Are we gathered to glory and to grow? Are we gathered *by* and *to* and *for* God? Or do we merely *gather*?

The latter was the problem with the synagogues of Jesus' day. Interestingly, when God did appear at their gatherings – in Jesus Christ – they were offended! Why? They were offended because the presence of Jesus can be rather disruptive; it can be disturbing.

The negative comparison to the scribes is a foretaste of more negativity to come. That is, the scribes, along with the elders and priests of the people, will increasingly be presented by Mark as hostile to Jesus Christ the King. It was precisely because of his authority that the religious leaders opposed him. As Hughes notes, "It is very possible to recognize Jesus for who he is and hate him all the more." This would be the case with the so-called shepherds of Israel.

Ears to Hear

The lesson for us is that, when the King speaks, we must listen with awe. Mark will use a similar word later (v. 27). Throughout his book he will use the word "afraid" or "fear" (twelve times). In fact, Mark's probable last word in this book is "afraid."

Concerning the debate over the longer ending of Mark (i.e. whether the last half of Mark 16 is original), many are of the opinion that 16:8 could not be the last word in this Gospel precisely because of the concept of fear. After all, isn't fear the opposite of faith? That may be true in some cases, but not in all. In fact, fear can be a legitimate motivation towards faith. If I fear fire, I will overcome my fear of heights and will grab the top of the ladder and climb down from the top of the building.

Mark wants us to see that Jesus is King and therefore *fear* in his presence is not only understandable but is in fact highly advised and therefore commendable.

We cannot be nonchalant about the person of Jesus Christ. When we sense him, we should – properly – shiver before him (Luke 5:8). As Isaiah found out centuries earlier, fearful woe is the precursor to saving grace (Isaiah 6:1–7).

It is just this kind of authority that our Christian congregations need. If we lose our awe – if we stop being astonished or amazed at the person of Jesus Christ the King – we will merely be a gathering. Like the church of Sardis, we may have a reputation of being alive, but in fact we might be dead (Revelation 3:1).

May God hear our prayer for more reverence, for more astonishment in our gatherings.

Satan in the Synagogue

Verses 23–27 are the first of several instances in Mark where Jesus confronts an individual or individuals who have been demonised. In each case, with powerful authority, and merely

by his word, he cast the demon out. We call this exorcism. The Greek term is *ekballo*, which means simply to cast out.

And 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.” But 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! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

(Mark 1:22-27)

In New Testament times, some claimed to be exorcists, but there is no extant evidence that they were successful. The descriptions are replete with incantations and all kinds of hocus pocus, but without success. The same, sadly, continues today. Recently, in Zimbabwe, a self-styled prophet was baptising a young lady. He said that she took on the appearance of a vampire and concluded that she was demon possessed – so he drowned her. He has, rightfully, been charged with murder. (By the way, there was a case where Jesus confronted demons and drowning took place, but that is another story! See Mark 5.)

Nevertheless, when Jesus confronted demons, they obeyed him – immediately. Jesus did not touch the person or use a magical formula. Instead, he simply told them – in most cases – to keep quiet and to leave the person. And they always did – as in this instance.

Possessed among the Professed?

When I moved to South Africa, a book was all the rage among the general population of Christians. It was titled *Turmoil in the Toybox*. The thesis was that some of the most popular toys were demonised. *Cabbage Patch Kid* dolls was one of the biggies. After all, Xavier Roberts was purported to be a New Ager. Parents were all in a fluster about exorcising their children’s toys. I think the book made such a stir because a toybox seems so innocent and therefore the last place one would expect to find demons. (By the way, you have no good reason to!)

But if that seems so incongruous, how much more to find a demon-possessed individual in the midst of a congregation of those who profess to be God’s people! But then again, perhaps not.

A Place for Deliverance

There are a couple of things that I want to note in this narrative.

First, though Cole is correct that “it is a strange commentary on the spiritual situation in Capernaum that a demoniac could worship in the synagogue with no sense of incongruity,” yet I can think of no better place for someone to congregate who is in such dire need of spiritual help.

At one level, the presence of someone with an unclean spirit should not strike us as strange at all. After all, in the congregation of the gathered church, there is probably not a better place for such an individual to gather. It was here where a profound spiritual deliverance takes place.

We need to be welcoming. We need to trust Jesus to change those who gather who clearly do not belong. May BBC be a place where people find deliverance from the guilt of their sin, from the habits of their sin – deliverance from the wrath of God.

Second, at the same time, there is something that strikes me as disconcerting. Notice the response of the evil spirit when Jesus commanded it to leave: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” William Lane raises what I believe is a legitimate consideration: Did the spirit mean the congregation in the synagogue when it used the pronoun “us”? Perhaps.

It has been noted that “synagogues will appear another half-dozen times in Mark as places where demons are present (1:39), and where there is antagonism from religious leaders (3:1; 12:39), hardness of heart (6:20, and persecution (13:9)” (Edwards). In fact, “the demon seems to be suggesting that by his teaching there, Jesus had invaded the territory of this spirit” (Witherington). It was time for a showdown.

Clearly, though these people were gathered in the name of Yahweh, they were a long way from him. One evidence of this is that a demoniac could have seemingly attended this gathering so regularly without being disturbed – until now.

It needs to be acknowledged, with gravity, that this congregation lacked true spiritual authority. As Ferguson questions, “Was that congregation so spiritually dead that it had been possible for a demon-possessed man to attend without being disturbed by what was sung or prayed or taught?” The authority of Christ has a way of disturbing those in a spiritual stupor.

Jesus would one day address two churches that were facing severe persecution by Jewish people: the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. He would assure them of his swift

judgement upon those who claimed to be Jews but were, in fact, “the synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). These were Christ-rejecting Jews who, though gathering to sing God’s Word, pray God’s Word, hear God’s Word, and be instructed about God’s Word, were nevertheless of their father the devil (John 8:41, 44).

We need to understand that the professed gathered community of faith on the Lord’s Day, or on any other day for that matter, may not *really* be a community of faith. What a frightful thing! The question confronting us all today is, do *we* bow to King Jesus? Are *we* astonished to repentance by the knowledge of his presence and of his person? At the end of our life will *we* – will *you* – hear, “Enter,” or “Depart from me, I never knew you!”?

Doubtless in our own nation there are churches of Satan who display a cross and have a pulpit and a Communion Table. Be aware. Further, let us do what we can to reduce their number by multiplying churches where the Word of Christ is central because Christ is central. As a church, there are several avenues that we are pursuing in terms of church planting: training potential church planters, partnering with other churches in church planting initiatives, etc. One of our members is actually investigating a ministry opportunity that will focus on training and publication of materials to assist pastors and church planters. These are all opportunities to plant and strengthen churches, a need that is desperately required in our day.

Comforting the Disturbed

Jesus confronted the demon and commanded it to leave. It did so *loudly*, as the *person* convulsed under the influence of the shrieking and departing demon.

I emphasise *person* because it needs to be *emphasised*. This *person* was in deep bondage under the sway of sin and Satan. But as this man was confronted by Jesus, a great disturbance occurred, followed by a great deliverance. He (and those in the congregation) went from being disturbed to being comforted. This is the work of the Christ-besotted gospel work of the church: disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed.

It seems clear that the person, like the individual in Mark 5, was noticeably different, noticeably transformed by this deliverance. This is evident in that the people were amazed.

Are you disturbed today? Then be delivered from your guilt and your alienation today.

Christian, are you walking “in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him; bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10)? Then may you today remember that you were delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we continue to have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13–14).

Questions, Questions, Questions

Many questions arise with narratives such as this, questions that have some importance but may divert us from the main point. Yet, let me address some of these.

First, what is demon possession? Literally, the word means to be demonised. It is to be under the controlling influence of a demon (fallen angel). The demon, as here, is addressed separately from the person. The two are not inseparable. The individual suffers, is in bondage, but it would seem that they are responsible. Just as the demon is held responsible.

Second, does demon possession occur today? There is no good biblical reason to deny this. Yet, with the victory secured by Jesus on the cross, Satan and his minions have been rendered defeated (Matthew 12:22–32; Revelation 20:1–3). It seems also that the primary place where demons are busy is in the congregation (1 Timothy 4:1–5).

Third, are Christians called to perform exorcisms? Does God expect us to cast out demons? If so, we do so only as Jesus did so: by his Word.

Don't Miss the Main Thing

The above questions are not unimportant, but they are not the main point of this story. Mark, I will remind you, is intent on his readers coming to see that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who is King. He wants us to bow the knee to him as our rightful King. He wants for us to repent and to believe the good news that God rules, and that he does so through his Son. Jesus has all authority!

The people noticed that the demon had obeyed this “new teaching” of Jesus. That is, they recognised that his word carried authority. The text tells us that “they questioned among themselves, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’”

They were, as yet, unaware of the identity of the King of kings, who stood in their midst, even though the evidence of glorious authority was undeniable. Reckoning on this—and then repenting because of this—makes all the difference in our life, and it will make a difference in the world.

Some reading this may be like that. My prayer is that today you will no longer question but will rather see who he is and bow the knee of your will to him as you repent and believe on him.

Some of us have bowed the knee but we have lost sight of the authority of our King and so we are making decisions to our detriment, to the detriment of our families, and to the

detriment of this church. Would it not be a glorious experience if a great repentance took place?

Some of us have succumbed to the lie that the devil and the world and the flesh are too powerful to be overcome by King Jesus, and so we have raised the white flag of surrender. We need to recognise the authority of Jesus Christ and, falling under his authority, go forth into the battle confident that he can cast out our sinful habits.

Related to this, we as congregations of Christ need to submit to his authority. He is here. He is Lord. He is King. He is the head of his church. We therefore need to honour him. One way to do so is by the exercise of church discipline. We need to be willing to disturb the comfortable—for Jesus' sake. And with his authority we also seek the outcome of comforting the disturbed. We dare not tamper with *his* rule of *his* church. Let us honour his authority by obeying his rules (see Matthew 18:15–20).

Faith, Not Fame

The passage concludes with what seems to be an encouraging scene: “And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee” (v. 28). For now, at least, Jesus was a local celebrity (France). But Mark, no doubt, was sure that most of his readers were familiar with the rest of the story. He assumes that we know that this is temporary fame, which, for the majority, will *not* translate into lasting faith. How sad.

In our day, we can liken this to the health, wealth and prosperity preachers and the plethora of “deliverance ministries.” What usually happens is that most of the congregation misses the real point of why Jesus came. And though some may go away with temporary relief, faith in Jesus Christ to deliver from our guilt and from God's wrath is sadly not the result. When the thrill is gone, so is the commitment to him.

In a future study, we will explore this further, but I want to conclude by noting what I believe to be significant.

The Lord silenced the departing unclean spirit (vv. 24–25). Why? There are several answers, but the main one is that Jesus did not come to ultimately reveal his kingship through exorcisms and healings. Rather, he would reveal himself as King by the cross. It was there that he would finish what he came to do (John 19:30). As Edwards comments, “Until the consummation of Jesus' work on the cross all speculations about him are premature. Only on the cross can Jesus rightly be known for who he is.”

The cross of the Lord Jesus was to be the means of the revelation of God as King. It was by his work on the cross that all of the enemies of God and of his people would be fully and finally defeated (Colossians 2:13–15; etc.).

Jesus came to die, not merely to deliver. Yes, the two are inseparable, but the latter requires the former. No cross, no ultimate cure. In fact, all of these people who were healed in Capernaum would, and did, eventually die. But because Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, because he then died on the cross for sinners who could not live a perfect life, and because he rose from the dead, those who believe in him ultimately will *never die* (John 11:23–27).

That is the gospel of God. That is what you and I need. May you and I believe that, today.

Church, Christian, be encouraged by the authority of Jesus Christ. It is because of this that we can experience a fuller net as we fish for men. After all, “Jesus is with us! His authority rests with his Church! Let us possess and use it with humility and energy” (Hughes).

AMEN