

Where Did He Get Such Authority?

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 & Mark 1:21-28

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
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Deuteronomy 18:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. ¹⁶ For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." ¹⁷ The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. ²⁰ But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him [or her] to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at His teaching, because He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an unclean spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey Him." ²⁸ News about Him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Where Did He Get Such Authority?

Today's lesson from Mark's Gospel is one that troubles many modern Christians. Jesus and His disciples are in Capernaum. Capernaum was a fishing town located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Linda and I have been there. It was a fairly large city of about ten thousand people and lay along a major trade route. When Jesus began His public ministry He made Capernaum His home.

Our story takes place on the Sabbath. Jesus has gone into the synagogue and begun to teach. The people are amazed at His teaching, because He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. But while Jesus was teaching a man in the synagogue who, Mark tells us, "was possessed by an unclean spirit," cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!"

What in the world is an "unclean spirit?" I use the word unclean as opposed to impure or evil because that is what the word used here in Greek translates to. Is this the ancient world's way of dealing with people with mental illness? Perhaps. This certainly sounds like a man who is emotionally troubled.

He doesn't really sound angry or evil. In other places in the Gospels where they believe a person is posed by an evil spirit it says just that.

This guy's not threatening to shoot everyone in the synagogue as a deranged person might do today. He was only asking Jesus what His motive was as he stood in the synagogue that day. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!" Notice that the man with the unclean spirit recognizes that Jesus is sent by God. As such, Jesus would indeed be a threat to anyone with an unclean spirit.

Certainly ancient people believed in unclean spirits and demons. In his commentary on the New Testament, William Barclay points out that in ancient cemeteries skulls have been found in which a hole had been drilled. The shocking thing is that it is clear from bone growth surrounding the hole that this boring took place while the patient was still alive. Sounds horrific, doesn't it — especially before anesthetic — having a hole drilled into your skull? The reason for drilling this hole was to allow demons to escape from the body.

This is but one of various forms of exorcism, the driving out of demons, some of which have continued even up to the present day, but not without some controversy. I read that the Lutheran church first restricted and then abolished exorcism by 1600. Not long after, Calvinists renounced the practice as applicable only for Jesus' day. The Roman Catholic Church still does an occasional exorcism and I do know of some United Methodist pastors who have done some exorcisms and believe myself that there are times when they are appropriate.

Most people don't put much stock in unclean spirits or demons today, though Hollywood has maintained a lively interest. But based on some of the extreme evil we have seen committed by some people today, and the fact that the Bible bears witness to them, I am not going to rule out the existence of evil spirits and demon possession.

We really do not always fully know what the New Testament means when it speaks of casting out unclean spirits. Is it at times referring to what we consider today to be mental and emotional illness? Would physical problems with unusual manifestations such as epilepsy have been considered demonic in a pre-scientific world? Many scholars are convinced that this is the nature of so-called demon possession in the Scriptures. But does this mean that we should forget these stories and consign such problems to modern medicine and psychiatry? Absolutely not! Jesus still casts out demons whether they are physical, emotional or spiritual.

We do not know, in the way people in that time would have, what to make of demon possession today, but Jesus took the man seriously. He saw a man in front of Him who, for whatever reason, needed help and, quite naturally, Jesus helped him. "Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Mark tells us, "The unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek."

Here's how the story ends: Mark tells us, "The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey Him.' News about Him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee."

And no wonder — a person with that kind of authority is going to attract attention. Where did that authority come from? Why did Jesus create such a dramatic reaction, both positively and negatively from everyone He met?

JESUS' AUTHORITY CAME, FIRST OF ALL, FROM HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER.

As someone has noted, the teachers of the law in Jesus' time didn't speak with their own authority. They usually prefaced their comments with something like "There is a saying that..." or "Rabbi Such-and-Such has said that..."

Even the prophets rightly attributed their pronouncements to "Thus says the Lord..." But Jesus said simply, "I say to you..." How could Jesus do that and have people take Him at His word? It was because of Jesus' relationship with the Father.

It's like the Sunday school teacher who was asking her first-grade class a question to which the correct answer was "Jesus." One little girl called out, "God!" The teacher gently suggested she try again. Another little girl piped up, "Jesus!"

When the teacher congratulated the second girl on the correct answer, the first little girl said in a huff, "Yeah. That's what I meant — but I call Him 'God' for short." This, of course, was the primary source of Jesus' authority. He and His Father were One.

Dr. Phil Majors says that when his second daughter, Megan, was born, he took her older sister, Jamie, to see her new sister. It so happened that twin boys were in the newborn nursery with Megan and they caught Jamie's eye. She stared at them trying to fathom the mystery of two babies born on the same day to the same parents and so much alike. On their way home that evening, Majors says, Jamie turned to him and asked, "Dad, are God and Jesus twins?"

Out of the mouth of babes. That was the primary source of Jesus' authority — His relationship with His Father. But there were other sources of Jesus' authority.

JESUS' AUTHORITY ALSO CAME FROM HIS GENUINE COMMITMENT TO SERVING PEOPLE.

It made no difference who they were or what their need was, Jesus was there to serve. Of course, onlookers were amazed at the change Jesus made in this man, but His willingness to engage with the man in the first place — a nobody, an obviously troubled spirit, an outcast — impressed them just as much. When Jesus made a difference in this man's life, it gave them the confidence that Jesus could make a difference in their lives too.

Dr. Edward Rosenow, formerly with the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, told of the experience that caused him to become associated with the field of medicine. When he was a small boy living in Minnesota, his brother became acutely ill. The family sweated it out until the doctor arrived. As the physician examined his sick brother, Edward Rosenow kept his eyes riveted on the anxious and anguished faces of his parents. Finally, the doctor turned to his parents with a smile and said, “You can relax, folks, your boy is going to be alright.”

Young Edward Rosenow was profoundly impressed with the change that announcement brought over his parents. In relating the incident in later years he said, “I resolved then and there that I was going to be a doctor so I could put light in people’s faces.”

Jesus put light in people’s faces. He healed them and gave them hope. Jesus still gives hope to people today.

Dr. Diane Komp is a pediatric oncologist; she specializes in treating children who are suffering from cancer. Through her work with suffering children, she has moved from being an agnostic to being a follower of Jesus. One of her favorite quotes comes from a former patient: “For the Christian, the Big C is not cancer; the Big C is Christ.” Jesus is the big C. That’s authority. Jesus genuinely cares about people who are in distress.

JESUS’ AUTHORITY ALSO COMES FROM HIS WILLINGNESS TO DO WHATEVER IS NECESSARY TO ACCOMPLISH THAT WHICH HE WAS SENT TO ACCOMPLISH.

Any leader who is willing to give his or her all is going to gain the respect of his or her followers, and certainly that was true of Christ. That is what the cross is all about.

Out of World War II comes the story of a platoon of American soldiers stranded on one side of a mine field they had to cross. The commander came up with a plan: one man would walk across the mine field, leaving clear footprints for others to follow. If this first man hit a mine, then another man would walk across the field in his footsteps, until finally someone had cleared a path for all the other soldiers.

With their hearts in their throats, the young soldiers agreed to the plan. Which one would be chosen to walk the field first? To their surprise, the commander began walking across the field. As their leader, he insisted on risking his life for the sake of his men. The commander crossed the field safely. Following closely in his footsteps, all the soldiers made it across the field.

If you were a soldier in that commander’s company, wouldn’t his willingness to give his all cause you to respect him, listen to him, follow him? Remember that if you are ever in a position of leadership — whether it is in your work, your community, or just in your family. Why should people follow you if they know you are not really committed to them and the task at hand?

Of course Jesus above all persons was willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish what His Father had sent Him to do. His authority came from His relationship with the Father. Jesus authority came from His genuine commitment to serving people. And Jesus authority came from His willingness to do whatever it took — even sacrificing His own life — to accomplish that for which He was sent.

But there is one more reason for Christ's authority that is important to us today.

IT IS THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE JESUS HAS IN OUR WORLD TWO THOUSAND YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION.

No one who has ever lived has had the influence on human society that Jesus Christ has had. The early church felt His influence, of course.

Rodney Stark, a sociologist at the University of Washington, points out that when a major plague hit the ancient Roman Empire, Christians had surprisingly high survival rates. Why? It is because most Roman citizens would banish any plague-stricken person from their household. But because Christians had no fear of death, they nursed their sick instead of throwing them out on the streets. Therefore, many Christians survived the plague.

Why did Christians not fear death? Because their Master taught them that He is the resurrection and the life and therefore death had no hold over them. He also taught them to love one another. That is how people were to know they were Jesus' followers, by their love. And so, many Christians survived the plague. One of the sources of Christ's authority through the ages has been His influence on those who follow Him.

Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," painted over 500 years ago, is considered one of the classic masterpieces in the history of art. According to author Michael J. Gelb, this painting was done in a circular motif. Everything on the table is round, such as the bread and the plates. Also, the disciples are arranged in a half-circle on either side of Jesus. There is a distinct purpose behind da Vinci's use of the circular theme. As Mr. Gelb writes, "Like a stone tossed into the still pond of eternity, Leonardo conveys Christ's influence rippling out to change human destiny forever."

That's authority — when your words and your actions send out ripples of influence that outlast your life.

An anonymous author made this striking observation: "Socrates taught for forty years, Plato for fifty, Aristotle for forty, and Jesus for only three. Yet the influence of Christ's three-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men who were among the greatest philosophers of all antiquity.

"Jesus painted no pictures; yet some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him. Jesus wrote no poetry; but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him. Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven,

Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies, and oratorios they composed in His praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by the humble Carpenter of Nazareth.

“[Jesus’] unique contribution to the race of humans is the salvation of the soul! Philosophy could not accomplish that. Nor art. Nor literature. Nor music. Only Jesus Christ can break the enslaving chains of sin and Satan. He alone can speak peace to the human heart, strengthen the weak, and give life to those who are spiritually dead. Jesus is a marvelous example and proven leader for Christians to emulate and serve.”

That’s authority. No one who has ever lived had the authority Jesus had. It came from Jesus’ relationship with His Father, it came from Jesus’ genuine commitment to serving people, it came from Jesus’ willingness to do whatever it took including giving His own life, and it comes from Jesus’ continuing influence to this day. And that is why I have the authority to say to you this day, Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord. If you have not already done so, I invite you to accept Him as your Savior and Lord today. And when you do, come talk with me so I can help you with your walk of faith. God bless and amen.

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