

## **“The Authority of The King”**

Introduction: Like it or not, in some manner we all live under authority. We live under the authority of parents, or bosses, or supervisors, or professors. And, as of last Friday, we all live under the authority of a new President! What is your response to the authorities in your life? Is it positive, negative, or mixed? Certainly it depends on how that authority is exercised. People can use their authority to coerce us, or use us, or even abuse us, or they can use their authority to free us, make us secure, or help us flourish.

While we’re on the subject, how do you feel about God’s authority in your life? Do you welcome it, embrace it, give thanks for it, or do you resist it, ignore it, or try to run from it? Again, it probably depends on how you understand God to exercise his authority. What might Jesus have to teach us in this regard?

Last week we considered the opening statement of his public ministry: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” And then his immediate call to become part of his community: “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” We said that Jesus had come to fulfill the OT longings for Israel’s God to come and rule over—to exercise his authority over—heaven and earth, and that with the coming of Jesus, the King and God’s kingdom, have come. While there is a future fullness to God’s kingdom, there is also a present reality that Jesus begins to unfold for us in and through his life. In the meantime, if in Jesus we see God, it gives us the opportunity to ask: What kind of King is he? How will this one who has come, called us to follow him, and declared he is going to make something of us, exercise his authority?

It’s the question that the people in Capernaum raised when they first heard his teaching in their synagogue: “What is this?” they wondered. “A new teaching—and with authority!” What we will see in the opening scenes of his ministry, and then really throughout his life, is that Jesus embodies a humble, servant authority. It’s an authority that is not self-serving, but has the interests of others in mind.

### I. At a Synagogue

A. It is fascinating to consider where Jesus began his ministry. It was in Capernaum, a town in the northern region of Palestine known as Galilee. Significantly, it is in the region in which the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had settled centuries earlier. In 722 B.C., these tribe were the first two to feel the brunt of the invasion of the Assyrians. They were removed from the Promised Land and taken into exile. They were, therefore, the first people to begin to wonder, “What has happened to the promise of God, to restore his creation and rule over heaven and earth?” Even when they had returned from Exile a few centuries later, that question still lingered, due to constant foreign occupation. But they were also the people who Isaiah foretold would first experience the coming of God in their midst:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past [God] humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned... [Isa. 9:1-2]

Into that promise steps Jesus as the great light that has dawned, the child that is to be born, the one who will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness...forever (Isa. 9:6-7).

B. How, then, does Jesus begin to establish and exercise his authority? He begins to teach in the local synagogue, in a way that is unlike any other teacher the people have ever heard. He quoted no one, no "Moses wrote..." or "As Rabbi so and so said..." Jesus simply spoke with words that somehow carried their own, jaw-dropping authority. The word authority comes from the same root word as "author," so we could say that Jesus spoke with an original, not a derived, authority, in a way that explained the story of his listeners' lives as their very author.

C. Though his listeners were puzzled, there was one in the audience who was not. It was an impure spirit who recognized full well who this Jesus was. Right from the get go Jesus was engaged in a battle with the unseen, spiritual force of evil that was at the root of all the darkness and did not want to give an inch. But right from the get go as well we see that evil is no match for this King. By a mere word the evil spirit is dispatched, albeit unwillingly! How does Jesus exercise his authority? Not simply to affirm the truth of who he is and what he has been teaching, though his actions do that. He uses his authority to free, to rescue a man who has been living in darkness and enslaved by the power of evil, bringing healing and joy to this man's spirit. It's a battle Jesus would continue to wage throughout his life, all the way to the cross where he emerges victorious over evil once and for all.

## II. In a Home

A. Jesus and his followers then move from the synagogue to a home. Sabbath services were over, they had been eventful, even exhausting, and it was time for a good lunch! But when they all arrived at Simon's home, they found that his mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. When they told Jesus about it, he went to her, took her hand, and used his authority to heal her. In his account, Luke tells us that Jesus "rebuked" the fever, in the same way he rebuked and drove out the evil spirits (Lk. 4:35, 38, 41), and later the wind and waves (4:39), leading us to understand that sickness is not a condition that God finds good! Further, it reveals that the authority of Jesus includes not only the spiritual realm, but the physical as well. And again, we see him exercise his authority to free and to heal, an authority he compassionately extends to the neighborhood when they come banging on Simon's door after the Sabbath day has ended.

B. Not to be missed in all of this excitement is the response of Simon's mother-in-law after she had been healed earlier in the day: she began to prepare lunch. As such, she is a model of discipleship, responding to grace with humble, self-giving service, a model Jesus will repeatedly call his followers to and then supremely embody in the giving of his own life. Such service was something with which the men, in particular, seemed to struggle! When we later hear the followers of Jesus arguing about who will get to sit at his right hand in glory, Jesus responds with a teaching about how authority is to be properly used in the kingdom of God:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." [Mk. 10:42-44]

Godly authority is humble, self-giving, servant authority. Over what, we might ask, do we have authority? Each of us has, somewhere, in some fashion, even if it's only over our cat! As he uses his authority to serve us, so Jesus calls us to use ours to serve others.

### III. On a Mountain

A. The final place we see Jesus during this very eventful, first 24-hour period in his ministry is very early the next morning, while it is still dark. Mark tells us that Jesus went out and found a solitary place. We're not sure exactly where that was but I like to think of it as on a mountain, or at least on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee since that's a place we see him praying when he's hanging in the Galilee region (e.g., 6:46), and I'm sure Jesus appreciated a good sunrise with his prayer and coffee, if only to make sure his good and beautiful creation was still functioning properly! In any event, his followers aren't pleased not to find him in his bed and so go searching for him. You get the sense that they were hooked on a bit of an adrenaline rush. Perhaps they hadn't slept at all and couldn't wait for another day filled with watching amazing miracles.

B. But for Jesus this time alone with his Father was a highly important part of the exercise of his authority. We know that his time of being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, a time when Jesus had been tempted to skip the cross—to avoid the humble, self-giving, servant nature of his authority—and go straight to the glory, had come to a successful end, but Satan continued to hang around (cf. 8:33). How tempting it must have been for Jesus to be tempted to travel the road of wonderful miracle-worker, amazing people every day and building his reputation along the way? But it's not why he came. Further, Jesus knew that those who built their faith upon miracles, and not the self-giving power of the cross, would really have no faith at all. And so, in that solitary place, and others like it, Jesus rested in prayerful dependence on his heavenly Father, seeking his daily guidance and direction in the exercise of his authority. We, each and every day, would be wise to do so as well.

So, what is the authority of the King like? It is an authority that is humble, that is self-giving, that is servant-like in nature, that seeks to heal and restore and make whole. It seeks not to glorify self, but to meet the needs of others. That is an authority I would readily welcome, receive, embrace, and obey. And it is an authority I am challenged to exercise. In that regard, whether we are newly arrived in Washington D.C., or have lived on Boston's North Shore for years, this prayer by the Apostle Paul for the members of the church in Philippi would be a good one to take with us this week:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... [Phil. 2:3-7]