

“Spiritual Authority” (Part 1 of 2)

Luke 4:31-36; Mark 11:27-33; Matthew 28:16-18

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

August 26, 2018

So who’s boss? Who’s in charge? Who’s got *authority*? Who’s got the *power*?

From an early age, we learn who’s in charge. Our parents. Our teachers. The police. The president. People in positions of authority. People who have the right to “call the shots.” People who, hopefully, hold those positions with honor and integrity, and who truly *deserve* the respect that those positions call for. There are, of course, some bad apples in every bunch. Irresponsible or cruel parents. Abusive teachers. Police who brutalize. Hopefully those are the exceptions and not the rule, but of course *those* are the ones we hear about in the news.

I’m curious – was anybody here ever summoned to the principal’s office? I have a vague memory of a time when me and a couple buddies got summoned to the *vice* principal’s office. I don’t remember what precipitated it, and I remember that the conversation was much more gentle than we feared it was going to be. A mild reprimand for a minor offense, given by somebody who had probably done some things like that himself when he was a kid.

When we were young, and in Sunday School, there were a different set of answers to the question, “who’s in charge?” Parents and teachers and police officers were still good answers, but in church there was generally a *better* answer, and we all knew what it was. God. Jesus. When in doubt, give one of those two as the answer to any significant question, and you’re probably on the right track.

Easy to learn, of course. Easy to say. But what does it *mean*?

When Jesus showed up on the scene, people realized he carried an *authority*, that was qualitatively *different* from anybody else. He goes to Capernaum, he teaches in the synagogue, people are *amazed*, because he is “teaching with authority.” A man possessed by a foul spirit stands up to challenge Jesus, Jesus issues a *command*, and the demon comes out of him. Poof. Just like that. Jesus goes to visit Simon Peter’s mother-in-law; she’s in bed with a fever; he “spoke sternly to the fever, and it left her.” Poof. Just like that. Gone. (How many of you have ever tried speaking sternly to a *fever*?)

Jesus goes out in a boat with his students on the big lake. They’re out there a while; Jesus falls asleep. A huge storm swells up; waves are sloshing over the sides of the boat; they wake Jesus up, frantic; Jesus gets up and gives orders to the storm, and it just ... goes away. Poof. Just like that.

Everyone marvels at Jesus. “What kind of person is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

That’s the question that was on everybody’s minds. Who *is* this guy? Where did he get such *authority*? One day in Jerusalem, Jesus is accosted by his rivals – the chief priests, the experts of the law, the elders. “What kind of authority do you have for doing these things?” they demand to know. “Who *gave* you this authority?” It’s not a question of, *does* Jesus have authority. It’s clear that he does. Everyone has seen what he can do – heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, cast out demons, calm the storm. Yes, he’s got *authority*. The question is, where did he get it? *Who gave it to him?*

In their minds, there are only two answers. Either God – or the devil. One of the two. Jesus heals a man who had been mute. The crowds say, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.” But the Pharisees say, “He throws out demons by the authority of the ruler of demons.” Meaning: “He doesn’t get this authority from God. He gets it from the dark lord of the pit.”

Of course, we know that’s not the case. Jesus is not the emissary of the devil; he’s the emissary of the Almighty. He doesn’t represent the forces of darkness; he represents the ultimate forces of good. Every Sunday School kid learns that basic truth.

Yet when he walked the earth, that truth wasn’t “basic.” He had authority, that was without question. But what was the *source* of his authority? Ultimately, it’s that question of authority that does Jesus in: he tells the high priest that he is, indeed, the Son of God, and he’s condemned as a blasphemer and sentenced to death. But death has no authority over him, and through his death and resurrection he gains authority over even death itself, so that when he returns to the earth, he can say to his disciples, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth.” Not just *some* authority, not just authority on *earth*. *All* authority, in heaven *and* on earth. Anybody who’s been paying even the slightest bit of attention to all the things he has done ought to sit up and take notice. He’s not kidding. He’s in charge. He’s got the power. *All* of it. It was *given* to him – not by the ruler of demons, as the Pharisees supposed, but by God the Father Almighty.

The trouble for us is, we don’t see that power *directly, firsthand*, the way all those people in Judea and Galilee did two thousand years ago. We don’t *see* this man healing the sick, curing the blind and the lame, casting out demons, commanding storms to just go away. Hurricane Lane was threatening Hawaii earlier this week; we didn’t see Jesus show up to tell the storm to just *go away*. Last week it was the floods in India; there were no reports of the Son of God showing up to *command* the waters to recede. There are terrible diseases, paralysis, blindness, mental illness, the list is endless – where’s Jesus? Why doesn’t he show up to just *fix* it all, make it all *go away*, the way he did to such great effect two thousand years ago? We don’t *see* Jesus exercising authority, the way he did for a few short years in a fairly localized part of the earth long ago. We’re *told* he has all this power, but we don’t *see* it. That can make it hard for some of us to really *believe* that he really *does* have all that power.

Back in the day, people *saw* him wield authority. He had it; it was evident; the question was, *where did it come from?* For us the question is usually different: not, where did he get this authority, but rather, *does he really have it?* You’ve heard the question, in a thousand different forms: “If there really is a good God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?”

In other words – if Jesus has all this *power*, power to command fevers and demons and wind and waves, power to beat down death itself, then *why don't we see evidence of it more often?*

Ah ... there's the rub. That's why a lot of people have doubt in their hearts about the goodness of God, or even the very *existence* of God. That's one reason why there are so many avowed atheists in the world, why it can be so incredibly hard to persuade non-Christians to become Christian. They hear about the "signs and wonders" that Jesus is said to have done, but they look around at this grieving world, with all its problems, and they don't *see* signs and wonders. They want to see *evidence*, good hard *proof*, that there's a good God who fixes all the things that are wrong with the world, and it's hard to see the proof. Their mother-in-law is dying from cancer, and they want to see Jesus come along and *fix* it, make the cancer just *go away* – the way he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law from her fever. He's got the *authority*, right? He's got the *power* to it, right? Isn't that what we Christians claim? What the Bible says? That he can *do* it? That "all authority in heaven and earth" has been *given* to him?

I don't think it's an understatement to call it a crisis for Christianity. *There are a lot of people who want to know that Jesus really is who he says he is. That he's worth believing in.* Sometimes even people who *are* Christians have trouble believing that Jesus really can and does *fix* things. C. S. Lewis once said, "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God." A lot of people have made their choice. They've chosen to believe that Jesus *can't* fix it all, that he really *doesn't* have authority, or doesn't want to wield it.

What would happen if people like that saw some hard evidence to the contrary? What if they saw some *proof*? Some *demonstration* of his spiritual authority?

"Sounds great," you may be thinking, "but *how?*" How do we get *Jesus* to *act* in this world, here and now, in ways that will make people bow down in *wonder*, the way so many did long ago?

What if that's the wrong question? What if it's not *getting Jesus to act*? What if it's *us*, acting in *Jesus' name*? What if he's given *us* access to some of his authority? Some of his *power*?

What if there was a day when Jesus gave Simon Peter some of his spiritual authority, to do the things that he was doing ... which the New Testament says, *there was*? What if there was a day when Jesus gave all twelve apostles some of his spiritual authority, to do the things that he was doing ... which the New Testament says, *there was*? What if there was a day when Jesus gave *seventy-two* of his disciples some of his spiritual authority, to do the things that he was doing ... which the New Testament says, *there was*? What if it's the case that there is a time when Jesus gives *us* some of his spiritual authority, to do the things that he does ... which the New Testament says, *there is*? What if we need to stop waiting around for *Jesus* to do things ... and start doing them *ourselves*? What if we have more real spiritual power and authority than we *think* we have?

I sure hope you're going to be here next week. We're going to talk about the spiritual power and authority that Jesus gives *you*.

© 2018 Rev. Bill Pinches