

Recognizing Jesus' Authority – January 29, 2012—Mark 1:21-28

That day that Jesus taught in the Temple, no one even mentioned WHAT he taught, even though they recognized it as something new. What amazed them was his confidence and the authority with which he taught. Unlike the rabbis, he wasn't quoting scripture or experts in the law. He wasn't going into the finer points of scriptural interpretation. Rather he was teaching something new in a way that surprised and amazed those who were listening.

The people weren't the only ones who recognized that he had authority. An evil presence also recognized it as a threat and knew Jesus had power over evil. When Jesus commanded the presence of evil to leave, it caused quite a commotion, but it had to go. This confirmed for the people what they had heard. They saw the new teaching Jesus taught backed up with a visible outpouring of his authority over evil.

Today, in our culture, we are more likely to respect people like the Rabbis who have detailed knowledge of scripture. We are suspicious of those who preach with authority. In our culture, people are also less likely to recognize the presence of demons, except as fictional characters in books and films. The context of our cultural world view is very different from Jesus' day. When

scientific knowledge appears to challenge what we believe the Bible teaches, we scramble to find some scientist who thinks he can prove scientifically that the Bible IS true. In such circumstances, our faith is not based in Jesus' authority, but in our rational ability to prove our beliefs. Another way our culture is different is that we rely on reason, science, or psychology rather than spiritual influences to explain human behavior. We are tempted to question any spiritual experience, be it positive or negative, that we can't explain through reason, science, or psychology.

So, I think it would be very difficult for us to recognize Jesus' authority by using the same criteria that his listeners used. We'd be skeptical of someone who didn't root teaching in our known scriptures or someone who claimed to be able to recognize and cast out evil spirits.

Given our cultural biases, I wondered, "What does this scripture have to do with US, other than being a base of our belief that indeed Jesus is one with God and has God's authority based on the testimony of those in the story who came to that conclusion.?" I wondered "How would Jesus present himself in our culture?" and "How would WE recognize his authority in such a way that it would amaze us?"

In the absence of Jesus' physical presence, except as experienced through other believers, how does Jesus' authority become REAL to us, rather than just being a belief that we hold?

I think that for us to recognize Jesus' authority, we first need to be more open-minded. We may need to be willing to change some of our beliefs. The Rabbis had all their beliefs figured out, down to dotting the i's and crossing the t's. If WE have all of our beliefs wrapped up and tied in a bow, it will be hard for us to hear anything different or new, because we will be more intent on defending our beliefs than on learning something new, something we had not considered before. It's good to dialog with people we disagree with and try to understand their point of view. Sometimes Jesus DOES speak through the people around us. As distressing as it might be, all of us could probably use a tune-up in our beliefs now and then.

Second, in order to recognize Jesus' authority, we may need to change how we view ourselves. For example, If we refuse to see ourselves as capable of error or if we feel the need to defend ourselves, it could be difficult to focus on anything new that Jesus might want to teach us ABOUT OURSELVES. One defensive way that we sometimes use to feel OK about ourselves is to be overly

concerned about the sins and errors of others. Sometimes this defense is disguised as a commitment to holiness in the church. But when we are overly focused on those sins we find especially objectionable, we often miss seeing the other sins that also have free reign among us. Sometimes as we look at others, we are projecting our own sins on them. For example, I've seen in counseling that a husband or wife who suspects their spouse of straying is often doing that themselves. I've seen in myself temptations to do the very things that I dislike in others. These are forms of self-righteousness, and they can blind us to any word of conviction or new insight that Jesus in his authority may want to bring.

Another view of ourselves that may need to change for us to recognize Jesus' authority is having too low a view of ourselves. If we think that we are too sinful, too unimportant, too ignorant, too common, or too ashamed because of things we've done, or because of how others have treated us, or if we have been taught too much about the need to be humble; or if there has been too much emphasis on being submissive to personal or institutional authority figures, we may have to look for healing so that we can find more confidence in ourselves and in our own relationship with God.

When I was a teenager, I attended a church that sought to empower everyone to hear God's call and direction and to follow it. And I responded with my heart and actions. Then I spent the next 20 years in a church that was more hierarchical with women and children at the bottom of the hierarchy. As women, we were expected to submit to male authority and teachings and interpretations of scripture from a male perspective. While I fought to hold on to my beliefs and my confidence in my relationship with God, 20 years of this teaching wore me down, and caused me at times to doubt my own spiritual walk. When I doubted, I did things out of submission to male authority and hierarchical teaching in the church that I have often regretted. At other times, I had more of a feeling of wanting to speak out, or to escape and follow the path I felt God wanted for me.

I sometimes think that these two almost opposite ways of viewing ourselves—one way of holding on to our own ways of thinking, feeling self-righteous and overly confident in our beliefs, and the other way of lacking confidence in thinking that God could speak to and through us could be due to a similar problem: fear; for some it could be a fear of God's judgment, for others fear of the response of other people to us, or even fears that we developed from other's abuse or harmful and unchallenged teaching.

One idea that has promoted fear is that some people think that fear IS the proper response to God's authority and power. Doesn't the Bible tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? When the Bible teaches us to fear the Lord, however, it rarely means that we should be afraid of God. It's a concept that is easily misunderstood because of differences between our culture and Old Testament culture. Fearing the Lord means to put our trust and hope in God, to depend on God, to seek God, to be in awe of God, to hate evil, and to have a loving desire to obey God's command, not obedience out of fear. When we fear God, it means that God is at the center of our reality. When our relationship with God is the primary thing in life, and when we can rest in and respond to God's awesome love, we will LEARN to recognize Jesus' authority with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As we get to know God better and trust in God's love for us and for all people, our beliefs about God will change over time, as will our views of ourselves. We will be less inclined to try to fit our beliefs about God around the kind of life we are living. We will be more inclined to fit our lives under Jesus' authority and the kind of life He wants us to live.

To recognize Jesus authority, we need to be open-minded about our beliefs, have a changing our view of ourselves, understand and put into practice what it means to fear the Lord. We may also need to expand our understanding of what it means for Jesus to have authority over evil. I think there are two ways Jesus exercises authority over evil, and they need to be kept in balance. First, we look for God at work, for the positive things that God does and, secondly, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we look within ourselves for those things that don't honor God, and allow God to shape our conscience.

Philippians 4 gives us a short list of positive things that help us to be more aware of God's work—whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy. These are the things that should occupy our minds. The expression of these qualities are areas where we see God at work, where his authority is visible. Focusing on these things will help us to become more aware of God's presence, provision, and authority in our daily lives and will enhance our feelings of peace and well-being. Recognizing Jesus' authority benefits us. So, then, the first way Jesus shows his authority over evil is by promoting the good.

Second, Jesus shows authority by sensitizing us to any evil that we are personally participating in, perhaps without even realizing it from the beginning. We can ask God to convict us of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in our lives that should be changed. This will give God more opportunity to show us God's authority over evil, especially any evil that is influencing us in our own lives. However, if we just coast along doing things the way we've always done them, having decided in the past on the right ways to do things, Jesus' active authority in our lives will be more limited because he doesn't push his authority on us as we walk with him.

Jesus doesn't really need us to give him authority or recognize his authority. He already has all the authority he needs. Recognizing his authority is for our benefit. He doesn't need to grab power; he already has all there is. He is totally free to love. So, even if we resist his authority, he continues to love us and may nudge us now and then, but we'll learn more and grow more if we accept his authority, if we question our own status quo and listen for the Holy Spirit to speak into our lives.

Acknowledging Jesus as our authority in life and recognizing the ways in which he exercises it builds our character and refines our spirit. It helps us to see

those areas in our lives that are inconsistent with who He is, and those areas where we are hypocritical, not even living up to what we know to be true.

As we give more and more to Jesus, he SHARES his authority with us. He promised that we would be able to do the things that He did while physically on earth.

The authority of Jesus that he shares with us, I believe, is not based on the strength of our personality or our intelligence, or the number of degrees we have, or on our Biblical knowledge, or on a position we hold in the church or in the family. It is not dependent on the trust others invest in us. I believe that when Jesus shares his authority, using us as vessels to accomplish something he would like to see happen, he depends on our willingness to be used in that way. He depends on our awareness of the Holy Spirit; he depends on our trustworthiness to live in such a way that seeks to honor Him, in a way that yields fruit; he trusts us to be loving vessels of his authority and he depends on us not to overreact emotionally, because acting on strong emotions can block our ability to hear God.

To share in Jesus' authority over evil requires great discernment. Some things are blatantly evil—like trying to do harm; trying to cause injury, ruin, or suffering; viciousness; intentionally deceiving in order to cause harm or gain

power; moral depravity; being in opposition to God; and leading others to do evil. These kinds of evil are pretty obvious. Some beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are more subtle kinds of evil. Some behaviors might be linked to genetics or upbringing in ways that make it difficult to determine what the cause or causes of the conduct are, whether or not evil is the source. Sometimes an act may appear to be evil just because it seems hurtful or because it is commonly thought of as being wrong or because it's different from what we're used to, but the intention of the behavior may NOT be toward evil. I'm going to repeat that. Sometimes an act may appear to be evil just because it seems hurtful, or because it is commonly thought of as being wrong, or because it's different from what we're used to; but the intention of the behavior may NOT be toward evil. Or, on the other hand, a person's conduct may look appropriate and acceptable, but the intention of the behavior MAY be evil. This is why being rooted in Jesus' love for all people and having spiritual discernment are more important than beliefs about right or wrong when Jesus wants to SHARE his authority with us to speak or take action in these kinds of situations.

It's important to remember that Jesus is our redeemer. While he has all authority over evil, sometimes he allows evil and good to grow side by side rather than destroying evil or sending it away. Then, when we become aware of our

participation in evil, he brings his redemptive power into the person or situation, redeeming both and thus creating good out of what was evil or what was meant for evil. Either way, Jesus' authority wins.

Jesus is more than a friend who loves and comforts us, who redeems, heals, and empowers us. He's more than a brother that we can look up to and follow. He is holy, and being in his presence sometimes causes us to tremble or get goosebumps, or cry, or fall on our knees. We are in awe of his authority and his power.

Jesus' power is rooted in love, and his love is rooted in power. There is no greater force than love; there is no greater name than the name of Jesus.

