

The Authority of Jesus in Mark

Mark 1:21-45 • Class Transcript

Opening Announcement

For those of you who don't know much about Christian works, Waterview has a strong connection to it. One of our former elders went on to serve with Israel Ward, and Gale Over wrote the chart used there. Gale was good at what he did, so I feel fairly confident he knew what he was doing when he put it together.

A quick announcement before we begin. Some of you have asked for copies of these lessons — and I don't know why you're crazy enough to want them, but you do. At one time I was recording video, but video is a labor-intensive process, especially without cameras set up properly. It's hard to do. The sound wasn't good, the lighting wasn't good, and the internet where I was recording was horrible. So all of that combined to make me quit. Since some of you still wanted to hear the lessons, I set up a QR code that takes you to a page on my website. On that page are three things: a transcription of the lesson, recorded every week; the audio of the lesson, also recorded every week; and the slides in PDF format, with speaker notes included. Depending on your level of pain tolerance, you can decide what works for you. Last week's lesson is already posted, and hopefully today's will be up by tomorrow.

Have You Ever Questioned an Authority?

Here's the class. Have you ever questioned something your doctor told you, even though he knows more about medicine than you do? What happens when it doesn't work?

I can tell you one case. When my granddaughter was born, she started walking on her tiptoes — something I can't do for very long without my calves killing me, but that's how she walked all the time. The doctor said she'd grow out of it. But my daughter is a mama bear who is fierce, and she also has a biology degree and had done medical research in a past life, so she traced the problem down. She found there's a possibility that a child can be born with a piece of tissue that's supposed to cut loose and slough away seven days after conception, allowing the spinal cord to develop properly. My granddaughter's hadn't done that, and at one particular spot it was controlling her nerve endings — including her walking. My daughter kept telling the doctor, "We need to do this," and the doctor kept saying she'd grow out of it. By the time she was five, she hadn't, so they did surgery on her back and removed that piece of material from her spinal cord. Now she walks fine. Afterward the doctor asked what had happened, and when my granddaughter told him, he said, "I've never heard of that before — I'm going to tell the other doctors." That concerns me. Just because you haven't heard of something doesn't mean it isn't true. That's why most of us want a second opinion: you may be capable, but you may not know everything.

Have you ever followed all the directions your GPS gave you? It says turn here — do you turn? You might run into a brick wall, or if it's not updated, it'll lead you right into the lake. We took a vacation once in Colorado, and I had just gotten a car with GPS in it, so I thought, this is great. We were headed toward Dumont, and if you've ever been to that part of Texas, God forgot something out there — on that day of creation He must have gone to bed early, because there's a whole lot of nothing. The GPS said turn left at the next intersection, so I did, and I soon found myself on a one-lane road in the middle of agricultural nowhere. No town in sight, no house in sight, not even a cow in sight — and I was starting to run out of gas. It kept saying keep going, keep going, keep going. I told Vickie, "The next intersection I find, I'm taking it, one way or another." I found a gas station selling gas at a terrible price, but I bought it, and I realized that had I just ignored the GPS, we'd have been in better shape. Just because something says it knows what it's doing doesn't mean it does. That's part of this issue.

Here's a second question: what's one rule you keep even when nobody's watching, and one you technically keep but privately resent? For me, I keep the speed limit, but I hate doing it. And I always stop at stoplights — which drives me nuts, because I'll pull up to a light on my way to the gym at six in the morning, there's nobody coming, and I'll sit there for five minutes thinking, what kind of idiots run this city, because nobody's moving in traffic. That's one of the things I keep, but I don't always want to. If I were really a rule-breaker I'd just run every light, so that may be something like your own answer.

Human Authority and Divine Authority

Today we're going to talk about authority — human authority and the authority of Jesus. The thread of the lesson is the authority of Jesus, and the problem is that it comes into conflict, or at least into contrast, with human authority.

Think about what we mean by authority. The dictionary defines it as the right to direct or give orders. I understand that, but that's our human conception, and the problem is that human authority and divine authority don't always work together. All human authority is granted by something else — no one simply has authority, they are given it. A policeman has authority only because of the law behind him. The Internal Revenue Service has authority only because of the United States Code. Doctors only have authority because someone gave them an education.

Human authority rests on three things: position, power, and status. If you're the CEO of a company, that's your position — you have authority because of it, even if you don't know much about the business itself; plenty of CEOs don't. Power is the ability to actually do what you need to do — a general, because of his authority, can order troops into battle. And status comes from being recognized differently because of where you stand; titles tend to do that. Those are the human authorities we come into contact with every day, some lesser, some greater.

When you get to Jesus, it's different. Two kinds of authority show up in Mark. The Jewish rabbis had authority based on their great learning and their ability to interpret Scripture — that's why they held the status and place they had in society; they were recognized because they supposedly knew more than everyone else, and I use "supposedly" for a good reason. The Romans, on the other hand, had power — they could march you off to war, take your land, tax you to death, or force you into servitude. But as Julius Caesar found out when the conspirators assassinated him, just because you have power doesn't mean you keep it. All human authority, misused, can make your life miserable. Jesus is different.

There are two moments in today's passage — Mark 1:21-45, a little more than twenty verses — that highlight the key idea of the lesson. First, Jesus is in the temple and he speaks, and the people are amazed because he has authority; they recognize it. Second, there's an evil spirit that he casts out, and again the people recognize his authority — his power over it. But they're working with a human conception of authority, and there's more to Jesus than that. He did not *have* authority. He *was* authority. True authority comes from who you are, not from your position. It's recognized, not appointed — and just because someone is appointed doesn't mean they're truly authoritative, even though we tend to think so.

The Question at the Heart of Mark's Gospel

Mark's gospel has one simple, central question, and we started on it last week. It comes in Mark 8:29, where Jesus asks the disciples:

"What about you? Who do you say that I am?"

Mark 8:29

Peter answers, "You're the Messiah." That's the point of Mark's gospel — everything Mark writes is pointing toward that question, a conclusion every reader has to draw for themselves. It's the essential question of Christianity, and it's the fulcrum around which everything else in Mark's book revolves. But the follow-up question is: what kind of authority makes him the Messiah? What gives him the right to claim that title, and gives us reason to believe it?

Sometimes we get lost in the trees and miss the forest. One of the dangers I face putting this class together is wanting to dig into the minutiae — what does this word mean, how does this verse fit — and in the process, missing the bigger picture. We need to broaden our view and ask what's going on in general, what the landscape looks like, before we zoom in on the details.

An illustration: I follow an Instagram account that shows paintings hanging in galleries, broken into several panels. The first panel asks, "What do you see in this painting?" You might say, "I see a woman sitting down." Then it says, look closer — does her face look sad? Look at how her hands are clenched. Look at the person next to her, with tears in their eyes. By the fifth panel, you realize it's a painting of a woman about to be beheaded. That changes how you see the whole picture. There's a painting called *The New Orleans Market*, about the mercantile markets there, and a Harvard art history professor takes students to see it, has them lock up their phones, and gives them two hours to simply look. At the end, he asks what they saw. It doesn't look like much at first — until you notice a black man in coat and tails doing trading in the background, unusual for New Orleans in that day, and wallpaper with strange ghostly figures of people already gone, watching over the scene. The more you look, the more you see. That's what we're going to try to do today.

Setting the Scene: A Week in Capernaum

This whole lesson takes place across a single week, Sabbath to Sabbath — twenty-three verses, moving fast. Mark writes like a journalist: he's busy telling you the story, not stopping to explain what it's about. He wants you to pick up the details as you go, and week to week he moves quickly. In this one week alone: a synagogue talk leaves everyone stunned; in the middle of it, a wrestling match breaks out with an unclean spirit; when they leave for a meal, they arrive at a Galilean home where the woman of the house is too sick to cook the Sabbath meal; when they step back outside, they're met by a crowd of people, all needing help, all carrying someone who's sick or demon-possessed, wanting Jesus to act right then. The sun sets, and the next morning looks like it's going to pick up the same way — except Jesus disappears at dawn, and nobody can find him. And finally, as the week moves on, a leper appears who's willing to ignore every Jewish regulation there is to get what he needs.

This is Jesus in motion — not Jesus teaching on a hillside. The motion tells us a great deal, and authority is the thread that holds it all together, though you have to watch where the thread goes.

An illustration: My grandmother liked to knit, and grandmothers who knit tend to knit things for you. In seventh grade she knitted me a vest for Christmas — it didn't fit, and no self-respecting seventh grader is going to wear a vest made by his grandmother, no matter how much that irritated my mother. She also managed a five-and-dime store, and always bought the cheapest leftover yarn, which meant the colors were garish. We've got a closet full of her afghans. But what amazed me was that she could take a single strand of yarn and, out of that one strand, create something. That's what Mark is doing. This single strand — authority — is the thread he's using to make something out of this whole account.

Mark starts in Capernaum, the big city of Galilee — though Galilee doesn't have many big cities. It's a little like calling Merkel the big city of Jones County back in 1970; they had maybe a thousand people, a funeral home, and a railroad running through. Still, compared to a little town like Noodle, Merkel was a big city. Capernaum had a synagogue, originally built by the Romans, destroyed at some point, and rebuilt on the same site in the second century. What archaeologists have excavated there is probably the site where Mark 1:21 takes place.

Authority in the Synagogue (Mark 1:21-28)

On the Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. There's a difference between synagogue worship and temple worship: the temple is where sacrifices and priestly prayers happen — call it ten o'clock worship in the auditorium. The synagogue is a teaching organization — nine o'clock Bible class in the chapel. (There's no real parallel between me teaching and Jesus teaching, so don't take that comparison too far.) We don't know what Jesus taught that day; Mark doesn't say, because it isn't the point. As he's teaching, something happens.

The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

cf. Mark 1:22

The scribes and Pharisees taught in quotation marks — "this is what Rabbi so-and-so said," over and over. Every sermon had footnotes. When Jesus got up to speak, he didn't reference anybody. He said, "This is what God says," and he said it so plainly no one could miss it. The people were used to sitting through dry, predictable teaching they'd heard a hundred times, and here was a man speaking the words of God without leaning on anyone else. It was a breath of fresh air. What made the difference wasn't the method — it was who he was. He didn't speak for anybody else.

Here's a rule worth remembering: authority that has to announce itself doesn't have any. When people insist, "We have the authority to do this," they usually don't — because if they did, they wouldn't need to say so. True authority doesn't announce itself; it's simply there, and you know it when you're in its presence. Jesus had that kind of authority. He didn't have to prove it.

Then comes the interruption — an evil spirit cries out. I can't fully explain demons; Western Christianity has largely sanitized the idea into mental illness, and I don't know how accurate or inaccurate that is. I do know people are sometimes so overwhelmed by life that something breaks. For four years in a row I did a funeral the day before, the day of, or the day after Mother's Day for someone who had taken their own life. I began to hate May. How do you talk to a family whose son took his life on Mother's Day? I don't know — you try. But something's there, and I don't fully know what it is. When I was in Nicaragua, at a clinic at the end of a dirt road that simply stopped, I remember a man holding an eight-month-old with a red thread tied around the baby's wrist. I asked one of the Nicaraguan preachers why, and he told me the father wanted to keep evil spirits away from his child. I can't explain demons; I only know evil takes many forms.

So Jesus is teaching, and there's this interruption — the spirit cries out.

"What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!"

cf. Mark 1:24

The spirit had good information — it knew the truth; it had, in a sense, done its Bible study. Jesus tells it to be quiet, then orders it to come out. The man convulsed — and if you've ever seen a convulsion, it will scare you to death. My own daughters both had fever-induced convulsions on the same day, one of them while she was in the car with me, and I have never been so frightened in my life. Here was this man, thrown to the floor, foaming, convulsing — and the demon came out, and suddenly the man was fine. What prayer and rabbinic teaching could not do, Jesus did in a moment. The crowd's response was the wrong question: "What is this — a new teaching?" The right question was, "Who is this?" They said it themselves: there was authority behind it, enough that he could command even unclean spirits and they obeyed.

Healing at Peter's House (Mark 1:29-31)

From the synagogue they go to Peter's house, where his mother-in-law was supposed to be fixing the Sabbath meal. Jewish women would move heaven and earth to keep doing what needed to be done, so if she was in bed, she was genuinely sick — running a fever. Notice what Jesus does: he takes her by the hand. Think about how gentle that is. He goes down to her level, reaches down, and helps her up. Then the fever leaves her, and she gets up and serves. She didn't just get better — she got whole, because Jesus heals with compassionate touch, which is something we'll keep seeing.

Then comes a crush of need — a crowd presses in, and when people have needs, they tend to be insistent. Most of us, under that kind of pressure, would say, "I can only do one at a time." Jesus didn't. He healed many and drove out unclean spirits, without letting them say who he was. It's a summary statement of everything he was doing. But behind it is the human condition in a nutshell: disease, suffering, evil, and hopelessness and helplessness — and Jesus, in the middle of it, healed them of those things.

Withdrawal to Pray (Mark 1:35-39)

Very early the next morning, while it was still dark — before anyone else could get up, because when the sun comes up, the needs come up with it — Jesus got up, left the house, and went to a solitary place to pray. When they found him, they said, "Everyone's looking for you." He knew that. He needed that time anyway, because his authority was derived from his relationship with God, not from anything else, and he had to protect that connection. So he said, in effect, "We have other work to do — let's go somewhere else."

Popularity and calling are not the same thing. Just because people want a piece of you doesn't mean you should hand it over, because only one of those things can be allowed to become your compass. There's a book I read every year, *Ordering Your Private World* by Gordon MacDonald — I've been reading it since sometime in the 1990s, as a yearly reminder of this idea. MacDonald was an up-and-coming evangelical preacher in the 1980s, in high demand, pastoring a church of seven thousand people, and he liked being in the spotlight — until one Saturday morning he couldn't get up. He sat at the breakfast table and wept inconsolably. His wife knew he'd done too much. He kept saying, "But people need me," and she told him, "No, they don't — you need God." She cleared his calendar for a week, and he spent it trying to rebuild his life. The book is essentially his journal of what he figured out, and I read it every year around this time to keep myself in the ballpark.

Cleansing the Leper (Mark 1:40-45)

Finally, there's the man with leprosy. Leviticus 13 gives only two verses to what leprosy actually is and what to do about it, but over time the Talmud added layer upon layer of rules — how far you could go, what you had to wear, what you had to say, over and over again. Jesus meets this leper and does what he isn't supposed to do: touching a leper made a person ceremonially unclean, so Jesus is risking his own standing. But part of the weight of being a leper is that you stop being identified as merely unclean in body — you start seeing yourself as unclean as a person. There's a sense of being nobody. Sin tells two lies: one is denial — "there's really nothing wrong with me, I've made a few mistakes, it's not a big deal." The other is despair — "I'm beyond help." Some people carry both.

So the man says, "If you are willing..." — and that's not a statement of unbelief. It's a statement that says, I understand what I'm asking of you, but if you're willing to overcome the barrier here, would you heal me? Jesus was willing when everyone else was resistant.

Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him.

cf. Mark 1:41

Jesus could heal from a distance — the centurion later tells him, "Just speak the word," and Jesus does exactly that. He doesn't have to touch this man. Nobody touches a leper. But he treats the man not as a leper, but as a

man. If you were a leper in that day, you had no human contact at all — nobody touched you, and you touched no one. Whatever human touch you had left came from animals. Then Jesus touches him, showing him that human touch still exists — something the man may not have felt in as long as he'd been alive.

That's true in other places too. When a spouse dies, the person who always touched them in life is gone, and something is lost in that. Jesus touches this man to restore his humanity, because all of us need someone to touch us — a hand on the shoulder, a handshake, a hug. We need that physical connection. Jesus never uses his authority merely to prove he has it — that's what a magician does. He uses it to teach, to defeat evil, to heal, and to pursue his mission of restoring the excluded. He uses the authority he has because of who he is, not because someone gave it to him.

Three Lessons for Walking with Jesus

If you walk with Jesus, there are three things to learn.

First, authority that serves is the only authority worth having. If the authority you have exists only so that you can have authority, you don't really have it. The only real use of authority is to give it away to others, so that they get better because of it. That's what Jesus does.

Second, either prayer will set your priorities, or people will — they always do. The worst thing you can say to a lot of people is simply "yes." I used to get calls at night: "I need to see you tonight for counseling." There was a time I'd say okay. Eventually I started asking questions instead — "What exactly is your problem?" "My marriage is falling apart." "How long has this been happening?" "About four years." "So it'll wait until tomorrow?" People will set your priorities if you let them. Prayer has to be what sets them instead.

Third, your faith is measured by what you're willing to touch. If there are people in your life who are untouchable to you, that's a barrier to your faith you haven't gotten beyond. Everyone needs to feel their own humanness recognized, and that's what Jesus gave this man.

Next week we'll move on, hopefully at a slower pace — I had a lot to say today and didn't get through all of it. If you'd like this lesson online, use the QR code shown earlier, or write me and I'll get it to you. Thank you very much.