

“Powerful Words in a Powerless World”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 3

Mark 1:21-28

Introduction: Take your Bibles and turn to Mark 1, Mark chapter 1.

In Mark chapter 1 we have seen the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We have studied the ministry of the forerunner, John the Baptist, and the baptism of Jesus, and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Last week we saw in the text how Jesus began his public ministry of the gospel of God as he went to Galilee and told the people that the time was fulfilled and the Kingdom of God was at hand. They were called by Christ to repent and believe in the Gospel. We then saw this call of response to the Gospel given specifically to four men – Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John. These men were called by Jesus to follow Him which meant much more than simply walking behind him along the way. It was a specific call to repent and believe in the Gospel. It was a call to have a new identity and a new life. It was a call to leave and come after Jesus, and this is exactly what these four men did. We were amazed last week at the powerful beckoning of the words of Jesus. How astonished we were that he could say, “follow me,” and they would leave everything and follow Him. In this we saw a glimpse of the power and authority of the Son of God.

And now in our text this week we see Jesus and his four disciples identified in the text as “they.” This is now a group that will move throughout the Gospel according to Mark all the way until the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. These men, and 8 others, will be called to be by Jesus’ side for the next 3 years, and they will hardly be apart as Jesus shapes and molds them to be His apostles – the foundation of His Church. And so, the text tells us that *they* went into Capernaum. Capernaum was a fishing village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. According to Matthew 4 Jesus had already made Capernaum his base of operations. It was a town that had anywhere from 1000 to 10,000 people living in it and just outside its borders ran the Via Maris, one of the main trading routes of the day. So the fish caught from the Sea of Galilee made their way all over the world. Capernaum was the hometown of Peter and Andrew, and of James and John. It was a mostly Jewish town, though it also had a Roman garrison and probably served as a central customs office for the region since it was positioned on the border between Philip and Herod’s regions of reign. Hence it had many tax collectors living in its vicinity, including Matthew who would become one of Jesus’ apostles. This mostly Jewish town with a heavy Gentile influence had a synagogue that served as the hub of social and religious life. It was a synagogue that was built for the people by the Roman Centurion, and Jairus was one of the rulers of this synagogue. So as the base of operations for Jesus’ Galilean ministry you can see how strategic and important it proved to be in his ministry. And in our text this morning we are confronted with the very first interactions of Jesus with the people of Capernaum. Let’s read Mark 1:21-28.

Jesus exclusively possesses astonishing authority. As the Incarnate Son of God, there is no other human who can lay claim to the astonishing authority that we see in this text. There is no one like Jesus. He alone possesses astonishing authority. And this authority is relayed to us by Mark in a sequence of two encounters in these verses. Both encounters take place in the synagogue of Capernaum within a matter of moments and both encounters give us unique insight into the astonishing authority of Jesus.

I. Jesus' Astonishing Authority Made Known – vs. 21-22

- a. So in verses 21-22 we see Jesus' astonishing authority is made known. Now we already knew that he possessed great authority. We were told in verse 1 that he was the Son of God. We were told that he was the essence and the content of the good news that was to come to all people. We were shown the necessity of the ministry of the forerunner because the way needed to be prepared for someone as great and mighty as Jesus. We saw the anointing of the Holy Spirit fall upon this Jesus at His baptism and the announcement that His Heavenly Father was well pleased with Him. We saw him in the worst of human conditions in the desert defeat the best of the enemy's temptations. We saw him powerfully proclaim the message of the Gospel and the necessary response that all men and women should have. We saw this power and authority brought into the lives of Simon and Andrew, James and John. And now we see this authority confront the lives of the everyday, common Jew of the quite normal town of Capernaum. And as they were confronted with the teaching of Jesus in their synagogue they were astonished.
- b. Ongoing Astonishment – vs. 22a
 - i. Christ's teaching in the synagogue is described in the text as astonishing the crowd of people. The verb used for "astonished" is in the imperfect tense which generally points to a continuing action in the past. In other words, Jesus kept on teaching, and they kept on being astonished. It wasn't just one part of Jesus teaching that astonished them because it had great power, rather they were continuing to be astonished as he continued to teach. So, it wasn't like Jesus had one great insight or one powerful comment that grabbed their attention. No, they had an ongoing astonishment at this one who taught them with authority.
- c. Inescapable Astonishment – vs. 22a
 - i. It was also an inescapable astonishment. It could not be avoided. When they were confronted with the authoritative preaching of Jesus they could not help but be astonished. A survey of the Greek word used here for astonished shows that it is used 12 times in the 4 Gospel accounts and all 12 times it is used in reference to Jesus. It is always used in describing the response of people to the ministry of Jesus. 10 of those 12 times it is in

response to his teaching, and two of those times it is used to capture the essence of a response to a miracle he performed. It is a word that is always used in the passive voice which means that the subjects of the verb did not initiate this astonishment in themselves, but rather this astonishment was placed there by some outside force. It was caused upon them by no choice of their own. Such is the case with the crowd in this synagogue at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. They were caused to be astonished because of the authority with which Jesus taught! This was an inescapable astonishment.

d. Incomparable Authority – vs. 22b

- i. And so this ongoing and inescapable astonishment was brought to them through the incomparable authority of Jesus. He taught in such a way that set him apart from all the others. In other words, at this church service, they were not just enduring the sermon, they were captivated and astonished by the authority of the one who spoke. No one could compare to His authority, not even the highly revered scribes.
- ii. This will make more sense if you understand a bit about the normal happening of the synagogue. The synagogue was the hub of Jewish life in the town, but its most important function was the Sabbath meeting in which a scribe at some point in the gathering would read a passage of Scripture and give his take on what it meant. His explanation of some idea or some truth was not an explanation that could be singularly based upon his own thoughts, but rather he had to quote other scribes who had written down their explanations and decisions. These men were experts in the Law of Moses and so when they were publicly teaching about how a certain Law should be followed in the life of the Jewish people they quoted the words of other scribes to build a case of consensus for their view so as to make known to their synagogue that this was how they were going to practice this law in their community. In other words, the scribe's authority as he taught was an authority of consensus in which he made a decision about a law of Moses. So, really if you think about it, they didn't have much authority at all.
- iii. Insert Jesus and his authoritative teaching. Notice that the text is explicitly clear here – it was Jesus' teaching that caused the people's astonishment because his teaching had authority. It was not his persona or his stage presence or even his presentation style – it was his teaching that authority. But Mark does not tell us anything about the content of his teaching. Most certainly we know in the least that what he said had something to do with the gospel of God. Most certainly he not only displayed authority in his teaching by explaining some portion of the Scriptures which he himself had written, but he also displayed authority

in calling his hearers to a response as he had done back in verse 15. Jesus didn't just have the power to decide what a text might mean, like the scribes did, but Jesus had the power to call for a decision from the listener based upon the truth he authoritatively presented.

- iv. And all of this is connected to Jesus Himself. That is Mark's point. He doesn't give us the ins and outs of what Jesus said on that Sabbath morning in the Synagogue because that is not what is most important in this text. Mark is intending to overwhelm us with the authority of Jesus. These words have authority because they came from His lips. This teaching calls for a response because the exclusively authoritative Jesus spoke these words. These listeners were not used to this kind of authority. They were caught off guard and they were rightly astonished by such a one as Jesus. This astonishment was ongoing and inescapable because they were confronted with Jesus' incomparable authority. And this encounter made known the astonishing authority of Jesus.

II. Jesus' Astonishing Authority Displayed – vs. 23-28

- a. But this encounter of the Jewish people with the incomparably authoritative teaching of Jesus was not the only encounter on this Sabbath day. Jesus' astonishing authority had been made known through his teaching, and now in verses 23-28 it was to be put on display through his interaction with a man who had an unclean spirit. As James Edwards has said in his commentary on this text, "In the synagogue in Capernaum, Mark demonstrates the authority of Jesus by showing what happens when a man with an unclean spirit meets the One anointed with God's Spirit."¹
- b. It is difficult to overstate how important this first miracle of Jesus is in the economy of Mark's account of Jesus' life. This was among the first miracles that Jesus performed in his ministry, but it was not the first. And yet, Mark puts it first in his account so as to draw attention to the power and authority of Jesus which is here put on display. It is also significant that this is not the only account of Jesus casting out a demon or an evil spirit in Mark's gospel. Now, John 21 makes it clear that we do not have all of the miraculous works of Jesus recorded in the Scriptures for not all of the libraries of the world could contain all that he did in his earthly life and ministry. And so we know that the writers of the Gospels, as they were moved along by the Spirit of God, record for us only certain miracle accounts. They had to be selective. Depending on how you count, Mark has 25 accounts of miracles, and in that count I included anything that was a general statement of Jesus' miraculous work, as well as His power being given to others who go and do his miraculous work, like when he sends out the disciples to preach and they cast out demons and heal people.

¹ James R. Edwards *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC, pg. 52.

- c. Of those 25 accounts in Mark, 8 of them are accounts of Jesus casting out demons and evil spirits. That is a whopping 32% of Mark's miracle accounts. Of those 8 throughout Mark's book, 4 of them are specific stories of Jesus casting out a demon or an evil spirit, and 4 of them are general statements of Jesus casting out demons. Also, as you consider the types of miracles that Jesus performs, exorcism is the most common miracle in Mark's Gospel. In other words, there are more demons cast out of people in Mark's Gospel than there are blind men healed or deaf men who receive their hearing again, etc.
- d. So, the point I am making to you is that by the nature of the case Mark must be selective in which miracle accounts he puts in his biography of Jesus, and in his selection he chooses to include 4 specific encounters that Jesus had with demon-possessed people. Not only that but the very first miraculous work of Jesus in Mark's gospel is this account of Jesus casting out a demon in the synagogue of Capernaum. And of all the miraculous works of Jesus that Mark records in his Gospel, exorcisms are the most common. In other words, Mark is making a point about Jesus' authority. There is no realm, whether human, physical, spiritual, or diabolical – there is no realm in which Jesus does not have authority.
- e. Rival authorities put on notice – vs. 23-24
 - i. And so in Mark 1 as this man with an evil spirit encounters Jesus we see these rival authorities being put on notice by the arrival of the authoritative Jesus. Up to this point in the incarnation of the Son of God he has not taken the fight to the enemy. He has patiently awaited the appointed time of the Father, and now the appointed time has come, and the enemies of God – these rival authorities – are put on notice that The Authority is on the Earth. The greatest rival authority to Jesus is His arch-enemy Satan. The authoritative anointing of Jesus at his baptism was met by this rival challenging that authoritative and lofty position as the Son of God with whom the Father was pleased by tempting him in the wilderness. And now, the authoritative teaching of Jesus is met by the evil work of Satan as one of his underlings possesses a man in the assembly and causes him to cry out – “what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”
 - ii. This is the demon speaking through the man and he speaks not on behalf of the assembly of Jews in the synagogue, but on behalf of his fellow evil spirits. This vile and wretched being whose existence has been marked by defiance and deceit and destruction and rebellion from the day of his departure from Heaven until this very day in Capernaum cannot stand to be in the presence of the unsullied holiness of Jesus. Jesus treads on his turf and the evil and unclean spirit cannot be silent. He could hardly stand the presence of the Holy One of God.

- iii. And in his statement we gain great insight into the character of Jesus Christ. The unclean spirit declares the humanity of the Son of God by calling him Jesus of Nazareth. In other words this unclean spirit recognized the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God. Most certainly he did not comprehend the eternally great depth of the incarnation, but he knew that this was bad news for him that the Son of God had become a man in Jesus of Nazareth. But he also recognizes in his statement that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Holy One of God. Obviously this unclean spirit had eyes to see beyond just the physical. Since he was a being that was primarily spirit he saw into the spirit world – a world known to us humans only through a dark glass – and when this spirit gazed upon Jesus of Nazareth with the eyes of a spirit he saw the Holy One of God. He recognized in Jesus something far greater than just a normal human being. Jesus was not just a man, He was the Holy One of God. And it was this God that this unclean spirit had rebelled against so long ago, and now here he stands face to face. And this unclean spirit cannot contain himself in the presence of the Holy Jesus.
- iv. He cries out with a loud voice and asks two questions – what have you to do with us? And, have you come to destroy us? Essentially he is asking the same question two different ways and he is speaking not for the man and the other people in the synagogue, but for he and his evil cohorts. You see, notice had been served to the unclean spirit world by the Lord's authoritative teaching. They now knew that the one and only boss of all was in town, he was in their sphere and he had the authority to demand their every move.
- v. They also knew that there was a day in which this very Holy One of God would come with all power and majesty and authority and would pour down his righteous wrath and his holy judgment upon all wicked beings in his creation. Whether or not this question of "have you come to destroy us?" is meant to point to that day or not, certainly it shows us that they knew he had the authority to bring their doom. In other words, by these two questions, this unclean spirit understands that one more powerful than he is in the room, and as evil and holiness clash this unclean spirit knows that he is going to lose this battle.
- vi. This same type of submissive encounter is described again in Mark 3 where in verse 11 Mark records -
1. ¹¹ And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." (Mar 3:11 ESV)
- vii. What astonishing authority this Jesus of Nazareth possesses. This Holy One of God beckoned the very submission of the unclean spirits by his very presence! They couldn't help but to fall down before him and declare

His authority. These instances in the Gospels are simply rolls of thunder before the rain. They are pre-cursors to the great and terrible day when the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will come again to Earth and all will bow the knee and declare Him to be Lord to the glory of God the Father. Every time one of these unclean spirits bent the knee of the man or woman they were possessing they were simply getting their trial run in for that great and terrible day when they cannot help but bow the knee to Jesus the Eternal King. What astonishing authority this man Jesus possesses!

- f. Rival Authorities forced to obey – vs. 25-26
 - i. These rival authorities were not just put on notice that the Son of God had made his public debut, they were also forced to obey. So, they knew that Jesus had the position of authority over them, and now we will see in verses 25 and 26 that His authority demanded their obedience. These are powerful words of Jesus. He rebuked the unclean spirit saying, be quiet, and come out of him! In this rebuke Jesus is making known his ultimate authority over all things – even the powerful spirits of evil. This man’s body had been overrun by this demon. This man was powerless to change his situation. Everyone else in the synagogue and in the city of Capernaum and in the region of Galilee and in the whole world – everyone else was powerless to do anything about this unclean spirit overrunning the life of this man. He needed the intervention of one more powerful than the spirit. Notice that Jesus does not rebuke the man, but the spirit. Throughout Mark’s Gospel we will see that those who are afflicted with evil spirits will be treated like those who need to be healed. Jesus does not rebuke the man for having the evil spirit, he simply casts the evil spirit out.
 - ii. And he does so by rebuking the spirit with these words – Be silent, and come out of him! This is a formula of words that occurs often in the Gospels as Jesus rebukes something and uses this colloquial phrase for sternly telling someone or something to hush up. Most famously these are the same words that are used in Mark 4 as Jesus is awoken from his nap in the stern of the ship by fearful disciples because of the storm that raged on the Sea of Galilee. He arose and rebuked the wind and said to the sea – “be silent!” And every time we come to this phrase in the Gospels we see the immediate response of the one addressed and the subsequent amazement of those who are watching. So in Mark 4 the words of Jesus to the wind and the Sea are met by the immediate obedience by wind and wave and this produces in the disciples astonishment as they wonder what kind of man can command the wind and the waves.

- iii. And so here in our text. The mighty rebuke of Jesus with words of command are met by the immediate obedience of the unclean spirit and this produces amazement in those who are looking on. And they should be amazed. No one else in the room, let alone anyone else in the world could speak with words like these and demand the obedience of an unclean spirit. But this obedience was not the obedience of a well-pleasing son, but rather the obedience of a defiant criminal to a judge. The unclean spirit does not go out of the man nicely, but rather convulses the man and causes him to cry out with a loud voice and then comes out. So the spirit still obeyed the words of Jesus by coming out of the man and by not speaking anymore about who Jesus was, but he certainly did not obey with a submissive spirit. He was defiant even in his obedience.
- g. Unrivaled Astonishment – vs. 27-28
 - i. And yet all of this produced in the onlookers an unrivaled astonishment. His teaching with authority was coupled with this grand display of authority as he commanded the actions of the domain of darkness, and the people were astounded all the more. The word for astonished or amazed is a different Greek word than the one used in verse 22. It is a word that Mark uses here and then in chapter 10 and he always uses it in a context where he has already used the other Greek word for astonish. And so, what I think Mark is doing is drawing attention to the fact that the people had a new level of astonishment. They were astonished before as they listened to Jesus teach with authority, but now, they were all the more astonished. It was an unrivaled astonishment produced by all that they had seen and heard from the Son of God. Not only was this a new level of amazement but it was a pervasive amazement. They were all amazed. There was no one in the synagogue who was leaning back in their chair with a “yeah, I could do that too” smirk on their face. They were all on the edge of their seats astonished and amazed by the One before them who displayed such great authority. And they should have been. This was the God man in whom was vested all authority over all things. Nothing was outside the scope of his commanding rule.
 - ii. And so, his fame spread throughout all the region of Galilee. The match was lit and the fire of his fame spread high and low, near and far. Through these two encounters in the synagogue the life and ministry of Jesus would forever change. And yet, this is what he came to do. He came to make known the might power of God, not just to domineer the evil in the world, but to save and cleanse men from sin. The sin and rebellion associated with this unclean spirit were dealt with in this moment by the powerful word of Jesus. But they were not fully and finally dealt with. There will be other exorcisms that we will encounter throughout Mark,

and there will be other types of healings that have to take place because evil still exists in the world in Mark 1. Jesus does not here complete vanquish his foe, but he does here begin to take the fight to the enemy. And these tremors point us to the glorious end. Jesus came to Earth to reveal God to man to redeem mankind from sin. In Mark 1:21-28 we mostly see the glorious power of God revealed to us through these two encounters in the synagogue. But we also see tremors of the glorious redemption of mankind from sin. Jesus has authority to free and liberate men from the bondage of evil. But an eternal solution to the bondage of evil would take more than the authoritative words of Jesus – it would require an unbelievable act of self-sacrifice. Jesus could not simply appear on Earth and declare men to be redeemed from sin through His powerful words. He could command around the forces of evil and He did – but in order to break the bondage of sin over the souls of men, he would have to take that sin upon himself and pay its penalty on the Cross of Calvary. The hope that we see in this text as Jesus frees this man from bondage points us forward to the eternal hope that is coming in chapter 15 as he once and for all defeats sin and death and hell by dying in our place and resurrecting himself from the grave! Oh the astonishing authority of Jesus Christ!

Application:

- Jesus
 - He alone has all authority.
 - Be astonished at this astonishing authority.
 - Realize that our ministry of the Gospel has been entrusted to us and it is not our teaching to make up or to make novel. It is His teaching and this teaching has all the authority it needs without us.
- The possessed man
 - Realize that all cleansing starts with Jesus.
 - No matter how big the pain, how wicked the sin, how vast the consequence, how vile the offense – these things have not put you beyond the reach of God's grace. In fact, that is just why Jesus came – to heal the sick and unclean through the work of His powerful and authoritative grace. Your powerless situation needs the powerful and authoritative words of Jesus.
- The Crowd
 - You would think that the many who saw this astounding start to Jesus' ministry, and were witnesses to much more in his ministry would respond with repentance and belief. You would think that this much evidence would produce many disciples. And yet, you would be wrong.
 - ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been

done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." (Mat 11:23-24)

- Don't be like those in Capernaum. You have seen the astounding authority of Jesus of Nazareth – so repent and believe in the gospel.

Benediction:

Jude 24-25