

The Coming of the King: Ruling Authority

Mark 1:21-34

January 31, 2021

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When people are asked to describe Jesus the most frequently used word is “love.” And all things considered this is a pretty good description. Jesus was constantly helping people who couldn’t help themselves. And He was committed to non-violence. And His teachings elevated the equality of all people before God. And when you couple this with His laying down His life for the salvation of humanity He easily fits within a framework of love.

The problem with this is that our culture’s ideas about love have grown mushy. There is no longer any room in love for challenge or correction or even difference of opinion. And so painting Jesus with the love brush today requires that His edges be rubbed off. And of course that kind of Jesus is one we create in our own image. He is the Jesus we are comfortable with. But this kind of Jesus is powerless to save.

And so the real Jesus that Mark introduces us to is raw and edgy. Jesus was offensive and challenging to the world He walked into. He caught people off guard by saying and doing things they never expected. And as a result, if you asked Mark to describe Jesus with one word he wouldn’t choose the word love, he would choose the word authority.

And today we bump into that Jesus. Please grab your Bible so you can follow along. We are in Mark chapter 1 starting in verse 21 today. And as you turn there would you stand with me in respect for God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Mark 1:21-34]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

In today’s text the rightful King demonstrates that His authority reigns over all of life because He built this place. And as King He wants to lead His people on a new Exodus journey into His new kingdom.

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So last week we looked at the kingdom Jesus inaugurated, and saw that it was totally different from any kingdom His first listeners might have expected. But it is also different from anything we might naturally expect as well. So it wasn’t a conservative kingdom or a liberal kingdom, and it wasn’t in the middle. Instead, the kingdom Jesus was setting in motion was a restoration of something that had been missing in creation since Adam decided to try his own hand at being king back in the Garden.

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That didn’t go so good, but that was last week. This week Jesus steps from the general introduction of kingdom into Sabbath. So in verse 21 Jesus heads into a synagogue on the Sabbath and starts teaching.

Now it wasn't surprising for traveling rabbis to be given teaching opportunities – that was very much part of culture. But it isn't coincidental that the first thing Jesus does in His ministry is start teaching on Sabbath. Sabbath is central to Jesus' identity.

So the Sabbath in Jewish tradition is the 7th day of the week. It's Saturday. And it's a day of rest. And it was both a command and a special gift from God. So through Moses God told His people – and this is the fourth commandment:

You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day He rested. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy. (Exodus 20:9-11)

Now to understand Sabbath we need to make two connections. The first connection is between Sabbath and creation, and the second is between Sabbath and the Exodus.

So first, the Sabbath was designed to keep God's people coming back to creation. And this is explicit in the 10 Commandments. God explains that the reason His people are to rest on the 7th day is because God rested on the 7th day of creation.

So the Sabbath was to be a blessing for God's people. It was a gift. And part of the gift – the central part, was reminding us of the time when humanity was living with God, in His perfect kingdom, before we decided we wanted to be king. This was life the way God designed it to be. And this included rest.

Now don't miss the significance here. Rest isn't a frivolous, optional aspect of God's kingdom. The 10 Commandments weren't guidelines in a pirate's code. They were the requirements God set for being part of His kingdom. God says, "If you want Me as your King then you need to follow these rules."

And then Jesus shows up, and a ton of His ministry happens on Sabbath. And this causes all sorts of trouble because the Pharisees thought He was disobeying God. They thought He wasn't following God's rules.

But Jesus did follow the Sabbath – He loved it. But He loved it the way God designed it, not the way religious people had made it. Sabbath, for Jesus, was a day of rest dedicated to YHWH – that's what the 10 Commandments dictate – not a day dedicated to human tradition whatever that might be.

And so once, after He was attacked for healing someone on the Sabbath Jesus replied: "Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" (Mark 3:4)

Sabbath for Jesus was about doing what God does – it was about setting people free.

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Now following Jesus' example, Sabbath observance changed for Christians. The early Jesus followers emphasized that it isn't about the rules, it is about the intention. This means, for example, it doesn't matter what day you observe as long as you observe. And so Christians worship on Sunday because this was the day Jesus rose from the dead.

But hear this: In Jesus' kingdom, rest and Sabbath are still central. God built this place because He loves us and wants a relationship with us. And so, just because Sabbath isn't law doesn't mean we don't do it. In fact, people who understand how much God loves them love to Sabbath because we can.

So ask yourself: What does the way I Sabbath demonstrate about my understanding of God's love? What am I in the practice of doing that refocuses my mind on my Creator? And is it working? Is it helping me live in the relationship with God I was created for? Or are there areas of my Sabbath rest that have really just become about me?

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Sabbath is about getting back to the God of the Garden.

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But that's not the only thing Sabbath is about. Sabbath is also about redemption, and as such it is connected to the Exodus.

So God gave Israel the Sabbath just after He brought them out of Egypt. And the Sabbath was one of the central ways that differentiated life under King YHWH from life under Pharaoh.

So in Egypt there was no such thing as a day of rest – slaves don't have that luxury. But God's design for humanity wasn't slavery, it was freedom. But ironically, when we chose to be our own kings we sold ourselves into slavery. And so God had to win His people back – redemption.

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Now there are two groups of enslaved people that Jesus interacts with in Mark. One group is enslaved by sin, and the other group is enslaved by legalism. And these two groups look totally different to the people around them, but Jesus sees them as very similar. They are people trapped outside God's kingdom.

So notice that Jesus is in the synagogue when He is confronted by a demon possessed man.

Now the synagogue was the official turf of the Pharisees who were all concerned with holiness. This was their turf. But as Jesus is teaching in the middle of this space run by people all concerned with purity and holiness, verse 23 says a man possessed by an impure spirit starts causing trouble.

And the word “impure” here means “ceremonially defiled.” In other words, not allowed in the temple – and yet, there he is. The Pharisees’ stomping ground is full of impurity.

And this means these men who were outwardly doing everything God commanded were inwardly far from God. They were enslaved, and as a result they weren’t able to free the people they were leading from slavery.

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And so, as Jesus begins to teach in their synagogue, people recognize right away there is something different about Jesus – He’s got real authority.

Now “authority” is the big word Mark uses to sum Jesus up – we get it in verse 22 and then again in verse 27. And really everything Jesus does exudes authority: when He teaches, when He heals, when He exercises demons it is all with authority.

Now there are two different kinds of authority. So first, we talk about people being an authority on a subject. So a university professor is an authority because she has spent years studying it her topic.

I had a professor named Craig Evans who was an authority on 1st century Israel. And his lectures consisted of him telling stories about life in the first century. And he knew it so well it was like he had lived there. It was awesome.

But there is a second kind of authority that isn’t attached to what you know, but to the position you hold. And this is the authority to rule that kings and governments yield. And the Greek word in this text refers to this second kind of authority. Jesus taught, not just like He knew what He was talking about, but like He was in charge.

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Now imagine you bumped into someone at university or in church who was teaching like they were in charge. Can you imagine what that would be like? What would they sound like? Would you be drawn to them or repulsed by them? What kinds of words would you use to describe someone like that?

How about arrogant or cocky or overconfident? We hate people like this when we meet them, and we try to oppose them.

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So right now in culture there are all sorts of movements aimed at defunding the police and expunging political leaders from history and defaming Christian influence in society. And the tool being used to accomplish this is the exposure of corruption. The message is clear: when people have this kind of authority they abuse it and hurt those around them.

But amazingly people didn’t react like this when Jesus taught like He was in charge. And that was because there was something else about Jesus that counterbalanced this authority. And that was that He used His authority to set people free.

You see the reason we hate it when people act like they are in charge is because they are always building themselves up. But King Jesus wasn't looking to bolster His position, He used His authority to bolster the position of others. And we see this with the demon possessed man.

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Now we live in the 21st century and we have a pretty hard time with demons. The age of science hates the idea that there could be anything more to life than can be studied in a lab. And that's because if we can study it then we can control it. And we want to be the kings of our own lives. This is very much the modern, western consensus.

But what is interesting is that while we tout science as our ultimate authority there is a huge amount of passion being spent on tearing down injustice.

So the #metoo movement has pointed out it's not okay that women have been abused and their abusers have gone unpunished. That's wickedness.

And it's not okay that from the 1870's to 1996 the Canadian government teamed up with the church to take Indigenous children away from their parents and educate them in the ways of the west and abuse them in the process. That's not okay. That's wickedness.

But very interestingly one thing that nobody is saying is that these actions were to be expected because they are examples of the survival of the fittest. Nobody would dare espouse that idea, and yet its the natural progression of the scientific worldview.

In this worldview everything that exists is merely the product of atoms bumping into each other. There is no meaning. There is no right or wrong. It's just chance and natural selection. So if men abuse women it's not wrong, its just the stronger sex taking what they want from the weaker. And if the government and church oppress a people group it's because we were the winners and that's what winners do to losers.

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Now I hope that sounds terrible because it is. Christians believe that right and wrong isn't about who is strongest or who wins, it is about who God is. And so the church should be at the front fighting for justice.

But interestingly, right now it is largely secular society that is fighting for this. And there are some inconsistencies here. In science, right and wrong, and hate and love, are all just chemicals in your brain that you use to pass on your genes. And so of course when the world attempts to fix injustice it comes up short. But friends, there is a call here for the church to stand up and be the presence of Christ in society. This is our job. We are the light of the world.

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And so, in the worldview of the real Jesus of Mark's Gospel, the physical world is tied together with the spiritual. And Jesus is the authority on this world because He made this place. And it is with this authority that He calls out this demon.

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Now in this exchange between Jesus and this demon – or demons – we see some really interesting things. So the demons starts talking first. And they’ve got some questions for Jesus “What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us?” They are scared. But even more interesting is that they call Him the Holy One of God.

Now this is a quote from Isaiah. The demons address Jesus by quoting God speaking about Himself. Here’s Isaiah 43:

This is what the LORD says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...
 I am the LORD, your Holy One,
 Israel’s Creator and King.
 I am the LORD, who opened a way through the waters,
 making a dry path through the sea. (Isaiah 43:14-15)

In Isaiah, YHWH is the Creator King and Redeemer who makes a path through the waters to deliver His people. Creation and Exodus together. And this is who the demons think Jesus is. And they are right. But Jesus tells them to be quiet.

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Actually, throughout Mark Jesus is constantly telling people and demons to not make Him known. So for example just a few verses down Jesus heals a man with leprosy and then sends him away with the strong warning:

“Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you.”
 (Mark 1:44)

Now this is a bit of a mind bender. I mean wouldn’t it help publicity for people to know what Jesus had done? Wouldn’t it help if the demons He was casting out were allowed to complain that YHWH in the flesh was giving them a whooping?

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This is what I would do, but Jesus isn’t worried that His publicity is suffering. This is all part of His plan. It’s going to take time for us to realize He’s the Messiah, but He knows how the story ends and so He doesn’t need the help of lying demons or people who have wrong ideas about Him to tell His story. Jesus is going to tell His own story.

And so Jesus heals this man possessed by an impure spirit thus making him clean. Jesus uses His authority to elevate the position of this man. He goes from not being allowed in the synagogue, to being welcome in the presence of God.

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Our text ends today with another elevation as Jesus heads to Simon’s house where his mother in law is sick. And in verse 31 we read:

So He went to her bedside, took her by the hand, and helped her sit up. Then the fever left her, and she prepared a meal for them. (Mark 1:31)

Now notice Jesus helped her sit up, literally, “He raised her up.” Mark uses this word throughout His Gospel when Jesus heals. So Jesus “raises up” the paralytic. Then He raises up Jairus’ daughter. Then He raises up the boy with the unclean spirit. And ultimately Jesus is raised up after His crucifixion. It’s not an accident.

This is the reason people loved Jesus even though He taught with authority. Jesus' authority didn't crush or oppress. It raised people up. It resurrected people to the life they were designed to enjoy in the beginning.

And we see this with Simon's mother-in-law. So when she gets healed it's interesting that she doesn't get on with doing all the stuff she wanted to do but couldn't get to because she was sick. No, instead she starts to serve Jesus. And she does this because she can. The moment she is no longer impaired by illness she enters life in Jesus' kingdom.

And this is what Jesus' freedom leads to. Freedom for Jesus isn't about being able to do whatever you want. Doing what you want doesn't result in freedom, it results in slavery. But freedom in Jesus' kingdom is about your desires changing so that you want to live your life in a way that bring God glory.

And here is where the Lord of the Sabbath, our Creator and Redeemer King, brings this all together. When we want what God wants for us that is where we find ultimate happiness. And this is what Jesus' kingdom is about. Jesus is about redeeming people who are trapped in slavery to sin and trapped in slavery to legalism and leading us out of this old life and into the abundant life He designed us to enjoy in the beginning.

And the question Mark wants to ask us is will you kneel before your Creator and Redeemer? Will you submit your life to Jesus' will? If you will then He will open a way through the waters and lead you out of your Egypt. He will deliver you from what is oppressing you. He will raise you up to freedom and bring you into the restful relationship with God He created you for in the beginning.

So will you submit to Jesus' ruling authority?