

The Commanding Authority of the King

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[0 : 00] said our reading tonight is from Mark chapter 1, which can be found on page 1002 of the church Bibles. So that's Mark chapter 1, beginning at verse 14.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news. As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.

Without delay, he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are, the Holy One of God. Be quiet, said Jesus sternly. Come out of him. The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked one another, what is this? A new teaching and with authority? He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him. News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Jamie, and let's pray again and ask God for his help. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

[2 : 10] Heavenly Father, we ask for your Holy Spirit's help this evening. We pray that through the Spirit you would draw us to your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and show us who he is. Show us his kingly authority, that we may submit to that afresh. We pray that your Holy Spirit would eliminate, therefore, eliminate these words for us this evening, and may it glorify the Lord Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen. Well, what would it take for you just to drop everything and follow Jesus? What would it take for you to do that? And what kind of person must Jesus be to have that kind of draw, that kind of magnetic pull on these barley fishermen, for them to simply down their tools and follow him like that?

Back in March 2001, Sir Alex Ferguson, who was then the manager of Manchester United, of course, and a successful football team, was facing a bit of a conundrum. He had a problem with his goalkeepers. His two first choice keepers both are injured and he didn't have a reliable keeper in reserve, and he needed a temporary solution. So he had this sort of mad brainwave and picked up his phone and he phoned up Andy Gorham.

Now, you may not know who Andy Gorham was, but back in the 1990s, he was the goalkeeper of Glasgow Rangers here and of Scotland and known simply as the goalie. So here Alex Ferguson thought that this could be his solution. He phoned him up and phoned up this 37-year-old to try and tempt him out of a semi-retirement that involved him playing in goals part-time for Motherwell whilst trying to run a pub in Glasgow. So Alex phoned him up and said, I want you to drop everything and come down and play for us.

All my keepers are injured. We've got Bayern Munich on Wednesday and Liverpool on Sunday. The trouble was that Andy Gorham didn't believe that it was Alex Ferguson on the other end of the line. He simply couldn't believe that this would be plausible. He thought it was his friend, Ali McCoy, who was on the wind-up thing, a prank on him on the other end of the phone.

[5 : 07] So here's Sir Alex Ferguson on the phone to Andy Gorham offering this amazing golden opportunity of a lifetime and Gorham's having none of it. Is that you, Christy? He says, and he

hangs up the phone on Sir Alex Ferguson. About a minute later, Sir Alex Ferguson phoned him up again and said, I'm giving you 10 seconds, son, yes or no. And so Andy Gorham very nearly missed out on an opportunity of a lifetime, all because of a mistaken identity. He didn't realize who he was speaking to. It seemed implausible, an opportunity like that at his age. He didn't recognize the person that was calling him for who he really was. Well, Mark here in this gospel doesn't want us to make the same mistake about Jesus. He wants us to see Jesus for who he really is, the king who has authority over all things, who offers us the chance of a lifetime in his kingdom, an eternity in his kingdom. What would it take to drop everything and heed his call? And if the Christian faith is new to you, if it's something that you're not completely decided about yet, then this question, of course, is going to have an especial pertinence for you this evening. But if you are already following Jesus, then this passage will serve to remind us, won't it, who it is we're following and why it is we are doing so.

So we've got these two scenes this evening, first on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and then in the synagogue in Capernaum. And in both these scenes, we're given a striking picture of Jesus' authority and the response to that authority which his authority excites. And we've got two headings this evening. First, it is a compelling authority that draws their disciples towards them.

A compelling authority that draws in disciples. Secondly, it is a repelling authority that drives out evil. A compelling authority and a repelling authority. First then, it's a compelling authority that draws in disciples. Last week, if you were here, we heard of the cosmic fireworks, the breathtaking image of the heavens being rendered, the heavens being torn open and the Holy Spirit descending from them like a dove onto Jesus and a voice from heaven affirming that Jesus is God's chosen king. Then there was the supernatural testing in the wilderness and now Jesus proclaims his good news message that the kingdom of God has come near and a need to respond with repentance and faith.

Verse 15, the time has come, he said. Then we have this sort of extraordinary jump cut from the from the cosmic to the ordinary, from the sublime to the everyday as we're transported to the lakeside of Galilee. And here, Jesus' universal gospel message is individualized and personalized in the calling of the two pairs of fishermen. And so, down by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is walking along the water's edge and he sees the brothers, Simon and Andrew, and they're just doing what fishermen do, fishing for fish, casting out their nets like that. And he calls out to them, come follow me.

And you'll notice that he doesn't really give them an awful lot of information about what this is going to involve, does he? Come follow me, he says. And I'll send you out to fish for people.

[9 : 14] So that's it. That's the 30-second elevator pitch. Not even that. Not even 30 seconds. But do you notice the brothers' response? It's both immediate and wholehearted. At once, they left their nets and followed him. And it's just the same, a little bit further along the shoreline, with James and John out in the fishing boat, just doing their thing, out fishing on the lake with their dad, Zebedee. Great name, by the way. And Jesus calls out to them. And again, there's an immediacy here, without delay, it says. And again, the two brothers leave behind what they were doing and followed Jesus. And then we're left with this kind of quite surreal image, aren't we? It'd be amazing to see Zebedee's reaction in the cinematic version. I suppose you'd have the camera tracking

James and John as they wade through the water towards Jesus. And then there'd be this pan back, this cut back to Zebedee, looking close up to his puzzlement and wonder with the hired hand, saying, what's going on here? And he doesn't know. Well, we don't get that description, unfortunately, in Mark. But there's probably a lot of things here that we're not given information about that we might like to know. For instance, if there's a pre-existing relationship between Jesus and his disciples, then Mark's not interested in telling us about it. We'd have to go elsewhere in the Bible to find out about that. And that's because Mark wants us to focus on Jesus' authority in calling the four men and their obedience in heeding that call. So let's consider Jesus' authority. We've already been given glimpses, haven't we, last week, of Jesus' divine and kingly authority announced at Jesus' baptism, attended by supernatural signs accompanied by the Holy Spirit vested upon him. And we've seen it in his prevailing over Satan in the wilderness. We've seen the same authority in the way now that he's come into Galilee, proclaiming his good news message. And it's Jesus' authority that's on view in the calling of the disciples. Notice, firstly, that it's his initiative. It's Jesus who calls the disciples and not the other way around. That might not seem unusual to us, but to Mark's readers, normally it would have been the other way around. People

would approach the rabbi, the teacher of the law, and ask to follow them.

Well, not here. Mark is showing us here and later on in our passage that Jesus' authority is markedly different from your ordinary rabbi. The initiative is with him. And that's always the way. And the Lord called Abraham in the Old Testament. He said, leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. The initiative belongs to the Lord. And it's the same pattern here.

It's Jesus who calls his disciples to him. We can't have a relationship with Jesus unless he first calls us.

Secondly, Jesus' call is not so much an invitation to be accepted as it is a summons to be obeyed. An invitation would sound more like this, wouldn't it? Would you like to come and follow me? That is, if you've got nothing better to do with your time. But what we have here is a summons. Come, says Jesus, follow me. And this compelling authority is evident in the way that both pairs of brothers are magnetically almost drawn towards Jesus as they heed his call immediately and wholeheartedly. There's no negotiating the terms. There's none of them. Can you just give us a little bit more detail here, please, Jesus? Or don't you know this is an ideal time? I'm just casting my nets out here. You know, maybe if you came back a little bit later, we'll see what we could do. There's none of that. Immediately, they followed him wholeheartedly. They did so. And so let's look at what they left behind, verses 18 and 20. Simon and Andrew at once left their nets and followed Jesus. James and John, if I tell you, they left their father and followed Jesus. So essentially, they left behind their security.

[14 : 23] They left behind their families and their livelihood, their families and their career to follow Jesus. And now maybe in our individualistic society, that doesn't sound such a big deal for us to leave behind our father. Our society shows more concern, doesn't it, when an adult has to move back in with their parents for whatever circumstances. But for Jesus to demand priority over our careers, and that's something. For Jesus to say, I want you to prioritize me over a romantic relationship that you might be involved in or thinking of pursuing, then that's a radical call to follow Jesus.

So we've noted in the calling of the disciples, that the initiative belongs to Jesus, and that it's a summons that demands our response. And before we move on to our next main heading, I want us to notice thirdly that Jesus' call is radically transformative of our lives. This is the kind of life-changing, transformative power that Jesus' authority exerts over those who follow him. When they're called to follow Jesus, these fishermen don't really have all that much to go on, according to Mark's gospel. Follow me, Jesus said, verse 17, and I will send you out to fish for people.

So Moses and David had been shepherds of sheep before they were transformed into shepherds of God's people. And these guys had been fishers of fish before Jesus would profoundly change the course of their lives by transforming them into fishers of men. They don't really know where it is they're going or what it would involve. They only knew who it is they were to follow. And I guess practically the whole world was reminded of that last week in the sermon during the Queen's funeral. And there was a line in the homily that went something like this, Jesus doesn't so much tell his disciples how to follow, but who to follow. And you know, when it comes down to it, that's actually what matters the most. The disciples needed to entrust themselves to the one who had called them to follow him. There's something about this man, Jesus, that told them that he is the one who knew the way, that he is the way himself.

Well, as a family on Monday, we listened to the funeral in the car on the radio on our way to climb a mountain. And when I'd proposed the idea of this adventure earlier on, on a bit of a whim to our young kids, they were keen. Immediately, they stopped what they were doing. And with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, they got dressed. They wholeheartedly got ready, getting to the numerous layers of outer garments that were deemed necessary for such an undertaking. And they got ready. And off we went.

[17 : 51] And too young to read a map, little did they know what they were in for. They couldn't have predicted how long and arduous a journey it would be, how many obstacles they would have to overcome, what danger they might face. But they did know one thing that really mattered. They knew that they had someone with them, that they knew they could trust, someone who knew the way. And we got back relatively unscathed, at least the kids did.

Well, our second heading then, a repelling authority that drives out evil. As Jesus calls his disciples, it's his compelling authority that was shown in the way he draws them to himself, to follow him. And it's Jesus' authority again that comes to the fore in the very next scene.

But here it is an authority that repels evil. It is a repelling authority that drives out the spiritual forces of darkness. And so as Jesus and the disciples arrive at the town of Capernaum on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, we're going to be shown a different aspect of Jesus' authority. But I want us to see that the basic pattern is the same. Jesus speaks and there's a reaction.

By the way, it's just worth noting that this is how God operates. This is how God has operated all along. God acts primarily through speech. He brings about creation by speaking it into existence. In the beginning, there was nothing. Then God spoke and there was everything. So Jesus goes into the synagogue and speaks and he begins to teach and there's a reaction.

People are amazed at his teaching. Why were they amazed? Because they'd never heard anything like it. Jesus is teaching them, verse 22, as one who has authority, an authority that they are unaccustomed to and an authority that is qualitatively different from the teachers of the law that's in stark contrast to their teaching. And in one of the classes that we were, I guess, forced to take in architecture up at the art school many years ago was on the seemingly endless building regulations and contracts law. Fire escape distances, insulation thicknesses, that kind of thing. It really was drudgery.

[20 : 37] And the construction law side was even worse, even more depressing. Architects being sued by clients, architects being sued by contractors, architects being sued by other architects. You know, most of us couldn't wait to get out of the door and back to the design studio after that. But then one day they brought in Mr. Construction Law himself, a renowned expert in the field. He'd written half the textbooks.

He knew his subject inside out and could feel just about any question. He had this sort of wonderful, unkempt appearance, a corduroy blazer and bow tie, wild hair with sort of heather sprouting out of his ears. And he just brought the thing to life. He was passionate about us, about the subject, and showed us why it's why it mattered. Well, in the synagogue, little do they know it, but here is one teaching them whom the textbook is about, whom the scriptures are about, who knows the scriptures inside out and is able to bring it alive like no other and to show them through the scriptures that the time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. But just as soon as Jesus begins his preaching ministry, there is immediately opposition from the principalities of darkness. Verse 23.

Just then a man appeared in the synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit, that is, possessed by a demon. And he cried out, what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. And it's ironic, isn't it, that an unclean spirit, a demon, is the first to recognize and identify Jesus as the Holy One of God and to perceive that it was Jesus' mission to destroy the power which Satan held over the people. But this incident raises a number of questions for us, doesn't it? Like, what is meant here by describing someone as being demon-possessed and what's an unclean spirit doing in the Holy Land anyway, let alone the synagogue of all places?

Well, we should note that this is not the first, but the second such incident involving supernatural evil in Mark's gospel. And we saw last week that Jesus had prevailed where Adam and Eve had failed and being tested by Satan in the wilderness. Right, from the outset then, Mark sets his gospel account against this cosmic backdrop of a battleground between good and evil, the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of Satan. According to scripture, Satan is not alone as an agent of evil, but has an army of demons at his disposal. This episode shouldn't necessarily come as a surprise to Christians.

But you may well be asking, if this account is true, then why don't we encounter more often people who are demon-possessed? Isn't this just a case of misdiagnosis from a more primitive time that we'd more accurately attribute to some form of psychosis? Well, I don't want to spend too much time on this, but given the relevance of the spiritual battleground to this gospel as a whole, consider the following.

[24 : 23] Number one, Matthew's gospel, so not Mark's gospel, Matthew's gospel, includes an instance where people are brought to Jesus with a list of ailments that includes those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having epileptic seizures, and paralytics. In other words, it clearly differentiates between psychological, physical, and spiritual

ailments. People back then in Jesus' time knew that there was a difference. Number two, on the other hand, it is we in the West, in the material, empirical, rational West, that may be naive ourselves to the spiritual reality behind the physical world. Number three, demon possession has symptoms in common with mental illnesses. The presenting symptoms may appear similar, but the cause, the cause is profoundly different.

And fourthly, demon possession is not uniformly distributed throughout the Bible. It's not even uniformly distributed throughout Mark's gospel. With one exception, it all happens in and around Galilee.

The Christian writer J.I. Packer puts it like this, the level and intensity of demon possession during Christ's ministry was unique, having no parallel in Old Testament times or since. It was doubtless part of Satan's desperate battle for his kingdom against Christ's attack on it. In Mark's gospel, the proclamation of the gospel and victory over supernatural evil go hand in hand. And here it is the demon who picks a fight with Jesus, but Jesus takes control. Exerting his authority, he rebukes the unclean spirit and dismisses it in just a few simple words.

Reading on from verse 25, Be quiet, Be quiet, come out of him, said Jesus sternly. And the impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

Jesus speaks and there's a reaction. He silences and commands this unclean spirit to come out of the possessed man.

[27 : 16] And the demon obeys. Satan's stranglehold is on the wane. The unclean spirit is no match for the Holy Spirit-endowed authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Though the spiritual forces of darkness may act in opposition to God, they're really ultimately powerless when confronted by Jesus' authority. Jesus speaks and there's a reaction.

Let us notice finally that it's not just the reaction of the demon, but the response of the people in the synagogue that Mark's recorded for us. And the ripple effect of that reverberating throughout the whole region.

The people were all so amazed, verse 27, that they asked each other, What is this? A new teaching? And with authority. He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.

And so news about Jesus spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. Jesus speaks and there's a reaction. And yet it's curious, isn't it?

[28 : 26] It's curious that in response to this powerful exorcism, this dramatic exorcism, that the people's reaction centers on the authority of his words.

People are further amazed at his teaching. You see, Jesus casting out the demon with authority was a sign that demonstrated very visually, very tangibly his teaching, his authoritative teaching that the kingdom of God was about to appear.

This passage invites us, like the people in the synagogue, to be amazed at the extraordinary authority of our King, the Lord Jesus.

An authority that draws in those whom he calls to his kingdom and an authority that drives out the demons and evil from his kingdom's midst. So if we are already following Jesus, then let us continue the course he has set forth with renewed confidence in his authoritative lordship over our lives.

But if that's not you, if you're not yet following Jesus, if you haven't yet decided to answer his call to follow him, then let me encourage you to not go on resisting, but consider what would it take for you to drop everything and follow Jesus.

[29 : 53] Amen. Well, let's join together in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in the Lord Jesus we have a King who is the way, who shows us the way, who beckons us to him.

A King we can trust. A King who has already defeated the powers of darkness. And a King who will lead us to his eternal kingdom.

Lord God, I pray that you would help us by his spirit to follow him faithfully as we go out from here this evening and throughout the week. And that we would place our trust in him.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen.