

Jesus' Authority for Life

Thomas Robinson, *Learning at Jesus' Side, 1*, May 20, 2012

Matthew 7:28 - 8:13

After the Sermon on the Mount, a Leper Approaches Jesus

7:²⁸ And when **Jesus finished** these sayings, the **crowds** were **astonished** at his **teaching**,²⁹ for he was **teaching** them as **one who had authority**, and not as their scribes.

8:¹ When he came down from the mountain, **great crowds followed him**.² And behold, a **leper** came to him and **knelt** before him, saying, "**Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.**"

³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and **touched him**, saying, "**I will; be clean.**" And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

⁴ And Jesus said to him, "*See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.*"

A Military Officer Asks Jesus for Help

⁵ When he had entered **Capernaum**, a **centurion** came forward to him, appealing to him,⁶ "**Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.**"

⁷ And he said to him, "**I will come and heal him.**"

⁸ But the centurion replied, "**Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.**"⁹ *For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.*"

¹⁰ When **Jesus** heard this, he **marveled** and said to **those who followed him**, "*Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.*"¹¹ *I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,*¹² *while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, "*Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.*" And the servant was **healed** at that very moment.

Matthew 6:33

³³ "*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*"

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**"¹⁹ *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*²⁰ *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

Leviticus 13:43-46 Regulations about defiling skin disease described as leprosy.

⁴³ **The priest** shall examine him; if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles a leprous disease in the skin of the body,⁴⁴ he is leprous, he is unclean. **The priest shall pronounce him unclean;** the disease is on his head.⁴⁵ The person who has the leprous disease shall wear **torn clothes** and let the **hair** of his head be **disheveled**; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "**Unclean, unclean.**"⁴⁶ He shall **remain unclean as long as he has the disease**; he is unclean. He shall **live alone**; his dwelling shall be **outside the camp**.

Authority in Word, Work and Call

We have been exploring Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) – complex, challenging, fascinating.

Matthew is leading us to grasp Jesus' announcement of the inbreaking of God's kingdom with its distinct vision of God's will/righteousness. Jesus is the uniquely authoritative proclaimer not only because of insight/wisdom but also by his life, death, and resurrection.

As Jesus finishes the Sermon, the people recognize the difference in how Jesus teaches. But he has no official position, no wealth, no long tradition for his views. Why should anyone listen?

In Mt 8-9 the Gospel leads us through an amazing series of vignettes of Jesus' ministry that allow us to see the authority of Jesus' words embodied in his life. Two interwoven themes:

(1) Jesus' power to command the physical world (disease, storm, even death), and it obeys.

(2) Jesus' call to people to follow him as disciples, and their ability to accept or reject him.

The miracles are signs of the authority that is within the teaching and call to discipleship, and they embody examples of the struggles of faith and of following Jesus in the world.

Authority was a central idea in the Roman world. Emperor Augustus built his power on the idea of authority as "first citizen"—hiding absolute power. Authority is a difficult idea today as we idealize rebelling against authority. Jesus called disciples to a new kind of authority (Mt 20:25-28).

The Flow of Life-Giving Power in God's Kingdom

The crowds following Jesus parted as a "leper" approached Jesus. He was ritually unclean, excluded from society and his touch made others unclean (Lev 13). He embodies the alienation among the people. Kneeling in worship, he states his perception of Jesus: "Lord, if you will..."

Jesus surprised everyone by reaching out to touch the man. The first time he has been intentionally touched since getting the disease. Jesus is reversing the flow of destruction and death. Impurity does not pass to Jesus, rather purity is given to the man: "I will, be clean."

Jesus is not destroying the law but filling it up. That purity involves healing and restoration to family and society. Jesus urges the man to go to the priests who have the official authority to declare him clean. We see Jesus' real authority as Lord to touch the untouchable, to purify and heal the deep cause of alienation set beside the priests' official authority to pronounce about the result.

The Surprising Faith of a Foreigner

In the second vignette, a non-Jewish centurion (captain) working in Herod Antipas's army approaches Jesus. He describes briefly his servant's plight; Jesus responds willingly, though elsewhere he limits his ministry to the Jewish people. Suffering crosses all ethnic divisions.

Amazingly, the centurion refuses Jesus' gracious offer to come to his home. He is not a Gentile condescending toward a Jew, but rather sees himself as unworthy and the trip unnecessary.

He has recognized something in Jesus from his own experience of authority to command soldiers.

But he knows Jesus' authority is different. He can command soldiers and they obey, but he can't command a disease. Even his superiors, even the emperor can't command this paralysis.

But the authority structure around Jesus encompasses everything. He speaks as Lord/creator to his creation. A request that would be foolish to the emperor is sober when made to Jesus:

"Only say the word..." It is that same authority that allows Jesus to say that his words are the rock on which to build a life. It is that innate authority that calls us to follow him.

Jesus is amazed. This is faith. With his disciples all around him (!), Jesus says no one in Israel has shown such faith. It is not that the centurion has become Jesus' disciple or follows all his teachings. But he has perceived what is happening in Jesus – the inbreaking of a new authority (the kingdom of God), and he sees that it is beyond any authority structure he knows. As a commander he yields to Jesus. Jesus' authority is real; his word alone can command, and does.