

“Authority over Unclean Sprits and Much More”
A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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“The authorities are looking in it.” Who are “the authorities?” What has authority? Who holds authority over my life today?

The Gospel reading today is from the first chapter of Mark, in other words the beginning of Mark’s story of Jesus. So far we heard the announcement from John the Baptizer introducing Jesus, the Baptism of Jesus, and the call of some disciples. Today is the first act of the ministry of Jesus, and the point being made is that Jesus has unique authority, unlike any other. Projecting ahead a bit, Mark tells in subsequent incidents from the ministry of Jesus how that authority extends to physical conditions and illnesses, authority over evil (Beelzebul), over nature (calming the storm), the hunger of 5000 people, over the Law, over personal behavior, and ultimately over sin.

Today is the first step by Mark in his many illustrations of the authority of Jesus. This time it’s a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath possessed by an unclean spirit, sometimes call an evil spirit, or the devil. Jesus goes to the synagogue. Where else would the Son of God go on the Sabbath except where the people of God gathered? A person deemed to be possessed by an unclean spirit was not supposed to be in the synagogue, for his presence would threaten to make everyone unclean. That’s like the separation of people afflicted with leprosy. The Hebrew law prohibited an unclean person from associating with those who were clean.

Jesus enters, teaches the Word of the Lord, and experiences how this possessed man disrupts the gathered worshipers. The response of Jesus is to cast out the unclean spirit. Others back then tried various ways to dispel the unclean spirit – incantations, expulsion, rituals, and even surgery. In the ancient mid-east, archeologists have found ancient cemeteries yielding skulls sometimes with holes in the middle of the forehead. The condition of the skulls shows that these people did not die from this surgery. Evidence teaches that these trepanned skulls demonstrate one method of dealing with possessed people – at least what they thought were possessed people. The hole was surgically made to let the evil spirits out, to heal the person. Can you imagine the agony imposed on such people, some of whom – the graves reveal – then wore the circular piece of skull around their necks to ward off evil spirits. We have no way of knowing the effectiveness of this procedure, only that such a procedure was done.

Jesus had a much more effective and compassionate method. He invoked the Word of the Lord and drove the unclean or evil spirit from the man and made him whole. Those who watched exclaimed, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority!” They did not then know, but Jesus had authority not only to exorcize an unclean spirit, but to also

conquer sin and remove the power of sin for us today. This small section from Mark 1 foreshadows the main human problem and its solution: sin and forgiveness. The problem for us is not just an unclean spirit; it's much bigger than that. Sin is our problem. The response is the gift of God's Son for our reconciliation and redemption. Two dominant themes in Christianity: sin and forgiveness.

We commonly divide life into segments that are not necessarily related – family, work, leisure. Upon opening the msn home page on our home computer and you the same if msn is your home page, the user – you or me – can click on any number of choices from the top for further information or investigation. The list includes Air Tickets and Travel, Autos, Careers, Dating, Food and Entertainment, Games, Green Living, Health & Fitness, Horoscopes, Investing, Lifestyle, Maps & Directions, Money, Movies, Music, News, Real Estate, Sports, Tech & Gadgets, TV, Weather, White Pages, and Yellow Pages. That's a handy tool for finding what you may be looking for. Interesting, that there is no choice that says "Religion" or "Faith" but one of the choices reflects a religion: Horoscopes. The leftover of this ancient Persian religion remains a choice on our computers, yet the faith we embrace requires further pursuit.

The msn list suggests that we partition life into so many facets that we find it difficult to embrace one cohesive relationship that brings congruence to all facets and phases. We're divided. What may have authority in one segment may have no authority in another. There is "Sports" for instance where competition rules to "Lifestyle" where comfort and pleasure rule to "Investing" where accumulation rules. We are so used to these divisions that all seems normal and OK to us. Christ Jesus comes today to be the one authority to bring cohesiveness to all of life. However we perceive life, the Lord Jesus is to be the One authority over all experiences of our lives. At the conclusion of his earthly ministry, Jesus declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). He not only had authority over the unclean spirit that possessed the man in the Galilee synagogue, he has authority over me today. You, too.

If we assent to this faith that Christ Jesus is the sole authority in our lives, and if all of us decided that we put Christ Jesus in total control of our lives, would our lives look any different tomorrow than they did yesterday? If you thought in your mind that your answer was "Yes," how would we be different? What would happen to the goals of competition, comfort, and accumulation? What greater place would "justice, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23) have in our lives?

God's forgiveness would be no greater. That's already been accomplished. What I'm asking is an evaluation of our response to that forgiveness, that grace. How would my life change – or would it – if I submitted entirely to the authority of Christ Jesus? And yours? Amen.