

January 28, 2024

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Our Problem with Authority”

Mark 1:21-28

Everyone has a problem with authority. It’s true. Some may submit to authorities more readily and willingly than others, but we all resent authority at some time or another. We start young. We know God establishes the authorities and the foundational authority in creation is that of parents over their children. But what is one of the first words every child learns? “No!” Half of childhood is resisting authority...and that’s before the kid becomes a teenager!

We never give this up. Hopefully, as we grow older and wiser we learn the consequences of defying authority...without having to go to prison first. We learn the authority is the authority for a reason—the authority indeed has power over us, and we learn to submit. But let’s be honest, a lot of the time we don’t do so happily and willingly. Especially when you’ve been raised in a more or less free country, you really see yourself as an authority unto yourself, having inalienable rights that hold the authorities at bay.

Of course this means we have a problem with God; the ultimate authority over all authorities. It started with Adam in the garden. The temptation of the serpent was, *“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* You will be like God, as in not God’s creature under His authority, but a god unto yourself—your own authority. Our sinful nature still wants that.

What you are probably expecting me to say now is that every time you sin, break God’s command to love your neighbor as yourself outlined in the Commandments, you are rebelling against His authority in favor of your own. This is true. This is bad. Stop doing this. Repent. Run to the cross and beg Christ’s forgiveness for this. He is gracious and merciful and eager to pardon your offenses.

But that said, as faithful Christians who show up to worship on Sunday morning I’d hope that you’re already striving to do this. You don’t do so perfectly, but I’d hope your goal and desire is to live within the Commandments, to rightly submit to the earthly authorities God has placed over you, to refrain from anger and hatred and of course outright murder, to keep away from sexual immorality, to avoid greed and theft, to speak honestly and well of people, to be content in your blessings and not be covetous of what others have. Our prayer is that by the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to lead more holy, sanctified lives that keep from running afoul of God’s perfect law.

However, practicing Christians in all cultures I’d guess, but especially in our freedom-loving American culture, like to stop there when it comes to authority. We think along the lines of, “Okay, I’m doing my best to not violate those Commandments and be unloving to other folks because that is what God, the authority, tells me not to do. So apart from all that, I’m good to go ahead and be the authority to myself in every other realm of life because, you know, it’s my life.”

Where does such thinking take us? Usually right away from Jesus and into all things worldly. We’re about to go into Mardi Gras season. How many Christians think it’s acceptable to get inebriated and behave really badly because they’re “free” to do so and... it’s Mardi Gras!? How often in “righteous anger” does a Christian feel justified in holding a grudge against someone because it’s the other person who is the offender—they’re the sinner, not me!? We get this idea that we have the authority to act in all sorts of un-Christlike ways because we more or less have acceded to the letter of the law, if not the spirit of the law. We think we’ve yielded what is necessary to God’s authority, the rest of life is ours to do with as we like.

Just as bad and maybe worse is when we let the world be the authority be over us. The world tries to redefine God's perfect law to somehow make sin acceptable. I'm going to trust you are wise enough not to fall for that hogwash. But again, once we step away from the law we tend to let God's authority fade a bit and allow other things to take its place.

Just look at how Christians allow the world to be the authority in defining what success looks like—bigger house, fancier toys, others looking up to you, maybe even being able to look down a bit on others—hardly the humble being content in all circumstances St. Paul describes. Or the evil of the world happens and we give it the authority to define us as afflicted victim... oppressed and dying and that definition brings us to despair. We give the world the authority to steal our joy and hope and thus rob ourselves of the truth.

The people listening to Jesus rightly said, *"What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."*

That new teaching is the Gospel or Christ Himself. Remember, the Pharisees saw the Law as their authority and obedience to it as freedom—not freedom from sin so much as freedom from God. Having obeyed the written rules they thought themselves free to be unloving and self-serving, condemning others as sinners while they stood a cut above. Jesus condemned them for that.

What they missed, and what we can miss also, is that while God's Law is good and holy and right, obedience is not all that we are called to, as if once we tick off that box God is satisfied and doesn't bug us anymore. God has always called us to be His created creatures, living all of our life to His glory according to His perfect design of love. The Commandments are simply an outline of what that looks like. Living under God's authority is being His in everything, honoring Him and giving Him glory in every thought, word and activity of life under His rule.

And I know a part of us rails against that, supposing this sounds like some sort of tyranny robbing us of freedom. But Jesus makes clear that is a fallacy. What does the authority of Jesus do? In the reading today His voice of authority casts out a demon: *"Be silent, and come out of him!"* Was that Jesus being tyrannical? Or was it Jesus freeing that man of an evil curse? Right!

His truth is no different for you. You may not be demon possessed, but outside of Christ you are indeed sin-possessed, cursed and bound for death. By His death and resurrection Jesus has claimed the authority to free you of that curse. Therefore, the faithful do not try to limit that authority, to bind our life in Christ to mere obedience of the Law. We seek to live in Him—in the freedom He grants us to be the holy people of God!

One of the big reasons we come to worship on Sunday mornings is to be reminded how wonderful Christ's authority is. We live a life in the world during the week facing no end of temptations to serve ourselves and chase after the world. Satan, the world and the fallen nature within each of us continually scream that Jesus is a tyrant, keeping us from the "fun" stuff our sin desires. We need to be reminded that stuff doesn't lead to life! That stuff asks us to leave the authority of Christ behind, but the only other authority out there leads to death and condemnation.

Here in the Divine Service Jesus clearly not only shows you what His authority does—His authority does the deed! "By Christ's authority...I forgive you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." "Eat...drink...for you, for the forgiveness of sins." "The Lord bless you and keep you...and give you peace." Right here, right now, the authority of Jesus is casting out your evil, making you alive to God forever. Here explicitly, every day of the week in your baptism and your faith in the Gospel.

Our true problem with authority is that we don't seek enough of it—the gracious, loving, forgiving, renewing authority of Christ. Whenever anything of this world causes you to in anyway to

resent Your God's hold on your life, consider the evil death from which His authority daily frees you and repent, rejoice and give thanks. Amen.