

“The Authority of Jesus,” Luke 4:31-44 (Seventh Sunday After Epiphany, February 24, 2019)

³¹ And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, ³² and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. ³³ And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. ³⁶ And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” ³⁷ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

³⁸ And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

⁴⁰ Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. ⁴¹ And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

PRAY

We are in a series on Sunday mornings at Grace in the gospel according to Luke and we are looking at the question: who is Jesus? What we’ve seen so far is that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The divine and the human come together in Jesus. He is the Messiah, the promised savior and deliverer of God’s people.

Now, though, we look beyond who Jesus is. Today we begin to examine the extraordinary power and authority of Jesus Christ.

And here is the question I want us as followers of Jesus to answer: to what extent does this immense power and authority extend to us? In 1 Corinthians 2 the apostle Paul writes, “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” 1 Corinthians 2:4-5. The power of God – that’s what we have access to as Christians.

But why so often does it not seem that way? Why does our faith so often look to outsiders and feel to us on the inside as puny? Where is the power and authority in Christianity?

I'll try to answer that today under three heading: *first, Jesus' authority over demons. Second, his authority over sickness. Third, his authority in preaching.*

First, his authority over demons. Jesus, we read, is teaching in the synagogue. He's preaching the Bible, when all of the sudden a man who "had the spirit of an unclean demon" began to scream at Jesus. Imagine what a scene this would have been.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus and the apostles we read that demons so dominated certain individuals that the demons, basically, worked them like a puppet. This demon controlled this man's movements, even controlled his vocal cords and spoke through him.

If you're here today and you are not a Christian or new to church, welcome, we are glad you're here. I realize all this talk about demons may sound absolutely bizarre to you. But the Bible teaches that demons can exercise tremendous power over people, and there are accounts of this kind of phenomenon across cultures throughout virtually all of world history.

Yet look at how Jesus reacts to the demon. The demon screams, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." Luke 4:34. And Jesus just says, "Be quiet, and come out of him."

Jesus doesn't roll up his sleeves. He doesn't have to gather himself and focus his energies. We know from reading history that the Jews had specific formulas they would use when they performed exorcisms. Jesus doesn't do any of that. No effort, no hard work, and he doesn't have to recite a specific formula or incantation.

He just looks at the man and says to the demon, "Be quiet, and come out of him." And the demon submits, immediately. He simply and quickly obeys the command of Jesus.

How can Jesus do this? ***Because all the power of the God of the universe is at his disposal.*** The demons know they cannot resist him.

One of my favorite passages in all the Bible is from Mark 5 where Jesus meets the demon possessed man in the land of the Gerasenes. A naked man lives in a graveyard. The people in the area have tried to chain him up to keep him from terrorizing everyone but he keeps breaking them. The man is absolutely miserable. We read in verse 5: "Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones." That's a picture of misery.

The man runs up to Jesus and falls down at his feet, and the demon speaks through the man. It says, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." Mark 5:7. Then we read this in verse 9: "And Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' [The demon] replied [and I'm so tempted to change my voice here into something sinister, but I shouldn't], 'My name is Legion, for we are many.'"

The demon's name is a reference to a Roman legion. A Roman legion in that day – different commentators give different numbers – would have had at least three thousand men. So, conservatively, thousands of demons are in this man.

Does Jesus say, “Whoa, you're Legion? I didn't know that. Let me go get my apostles and we'll pray about this and try again tomorrow.” No, Jesus just casts him out.

The demons can indeed be powerful over people, so powerful they can take people over and use them like puppets. ***But they are no match for Jesus.*** The demons tremble at the name of Jesus. That's James 2:19: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!”

Martin Luther had a lot to say about the devil and his demons. At one point he wrote a letter to a Christian terrified that the devil was going to get him and do something horrible to him. “Why should you fear? Why should you be afraid? Do you not know that the prince of this world has been judged? He is no ... prince any more. You have a different, a stronger Lord, Christ, who has overcome and bound him. Therefore let the prince and god of this world look sour, bare his teeth, make a great noise, threaten, and act in an unmannerly way; he can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, which may bark, run here and there, and tear at the chain. But because it is tied and you avoid it, it cannot bite you. So the devil acts toward every Christian.”

Christians have nothing to fear from demons at all. We have a stronger Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has bound and plundered the devil. The demons can't invade our homes and possess us. They can't make us do things against our will. They can't make furniture levitate and fly at us and crush us. We have nothing to fear from demons, they are like a dog on a chain, *so long as we avoid them. So long as we don't get close enough to them to bite.*

The only way demons can influence us or gain power over us or harm us *is if we invite them into our lives.* Do not under any circumstances buy or play with a Ouija board. Do not go into one of those voodoo shops in the French Quarter the next time you're in New Orleans and buy something, even if it's just as a joke. Don't attend seances or inquire into the names of demons. I know of one man, a minister now, who when he 12 or 13, went to an occult bookstore in his hometown and bought a book of magic spells and incantations, just as a gag. But when he brought it home and began to read through them, a powerful sense of dread came over him. So he took it into his backyard that same day and burned it. But 35 years later as he's telling this story he says he can still remember some of the phrases from that book, even though he's tried hard to forget them.

The Bible says any kind of contact with the spirit world outside of a relationship with God himself through Jesus Christ is strictly forbidden. The demons do not have power over Christians, but we can give them power by drawing close.

There is, however, one way the demonic realm can get at us that no amount of vigilance on our part can totally eliminate. In John 8:44 Jesus says about the devil, “When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

The devil and his demons are skilled, practiced liars, and by getting us to believe a certain set of lies in their arsenal they can slowly but surely entangle us in their evil schemes and bind us with their power.

What lies? Lies about what will make us happy, bring us contentment, satisfaction, and peace. In his book *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis imagines a correspondence between two demons, an older, senior demon named Screwtape and a junior demon named Wormwood. The letters consist of Screwtape's advice to Wormwood about how to turn the people he is tempting away from God (referred to as the "enemy" in the letters) and toward the devil. At one point he writes this: "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage to humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees which He has forbidden.

"Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least [evocative] of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever-increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula."

The demons talk to us about things like sex and money (good things made by God, by the way) and twist our use of them so that, over time, they become less and less pleasurable. They say, "Money is great, but it's so expensive to live in Oxford, so you really can't afford to give any of it away. You need it all for yourself." And we believe it. We start spending it all on ourselves. But we wind up miserable because wealth divorced from a lifestyle of generosity breeds only selfishness and anxiety, never happiness.

The demons lie to us and say, "You deserve to be happy your sex life, even if it means breaking God's rules. It's unhealthy to repress your carnal appetites by limiting them to just one person, or even just the opposite sex." And we believe them. So we use this gift outside of marriage, instead of inside as God designed to make the lifelong union between a man and woman strong, to provide the best and safest environment for children to be raised in, which in turn builds strong communities. And when it's used outside of marriage, contrary to God's design, yes there is often intense, short-term pleasure. But it always leaves in its wake broken hearts and broken spirits, and often broken health.

If you ever wonder why we don't see demonic possession today like the kind we read about in the Bible, maybe it's because the devil thinks it works better for him to keep a low profile. Don't you think he looks at the success his lies have had with us and says, "I'm controlling people far better in the United States today than I ever did with outright demon possession in the old days." But that means that as the church of Jesus Christ, even though we have authority from Jesus Christ and we share in his power and glory, we can't really cast out demons like this anymore. We don't have the opportunity.

Now, second, Jesus' authority in healing. After Jesus cast out the demon in the synagogue we read this: "And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's

mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.” Luke 4:38-39.

Again, as with the demon, Jesus just speaks to the fever and it’s gone. It’s no effort for him, he doesn’t break a sweat. And note that as soon as he speaks Simon’s mother-in-law gets up and begins to wait on them. She had a *high fever*. The Greek is literally *mega-fever*. This wasn’t a 100 degree temperature. For days this woman had such a high fever that she would have been delirious, she wouldn’t have eaten, and she wouldn’t have really slept. She would have been confined to writhing around in bed.

But Jesus rebukes the fever *and she gets up*. Now that just doesn’t happen. As some of you know I missed a Sunday a few weeks ago because of a fever. I woke up Sunday morning and I got out of bed and Mimi had planned to go out of town with one of our children and I started to say, “I don’t think you can leave me like this. I can’t take care of myself today.” I was never delirious and the highest fever I had was 103, but I felt awful and it took me two or three days before I could really get back to work. But when Jesus rebukes her far worse fever *all her body’s physical strength is immediately restored*.

Whenever Jesus heals in the Bible that’s what happens. In chapter five we’ll read where Jesus heals the paralytic. After Jesus heals him, Jesus doesn’t say, “OK, you’re better. Your spinal cord is repaired. But you’re very weak and you’re going to have to go to a physical therapist and learn how to walk again. Hopefully your insurance will cover it.” No. When Jesus tells the man, “Get up and walk,” he does.

So not only does Jesus heal his spinal column, his actual injury, but he also immediately restores all the muscles in his back, his legs. He restores the neural pathways between his brain and his feet. Even with all the medical technology we have available today, if someone for whatever reason can’t walk for a period of time – because of an injury or illness – they have to learn to walk all over again. But when Jesus speaks the body heals and the mind remembers how to move. Same thing in chapter six when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, same thing in chapter seven when Jesus raises the widow’s son from the dead.

Some Christians today claim that they have the same miraculous ability to heal as Jesus did. They say, “The signs and wonders the apostles could perform, we can perform.”

There can be no doubt that God does still heal today. Many times over the years I’ve heard of or even been a part of a group of people that asked God to heal someone and he did. The doctors said they couldn’t explain it happened but now the sick person is well. That absolutely does happen and we should pray for more people to be healed like that. We have two elders’ meetings per month. One is after this service. If you want us to pray for you, come and we will.

But I strongly disagree with those Christians who say they have the same gift of healing, the same ability to proclaim to someone else they are healed, the way Jesus and the apostles did. Why? *First of all, the “healings” that come from these Christians nothing like the healings Jesus and the apostles did.* They are not in the same league.

In Acts 19:11-12 we read this: “⁴¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.” That’s amazing; that’s miraculous.

But the reports that come from the healing ministries are nothing like that. Instead you hear, “I had rotator cuff pain, and now it’s gone.” “My vision is better, I’m not as farsighted – I used to have to hold books out this far, now I can hold them closer.” “I don’t have the urge to smoke right now.” “I have more flexibility in my knees now that I did an hour ago.”

These ministries claim to have access to the same miraculous power Jesus did, but their miracles are, by comparison, so puny. In fact, when someone with some serious disease or injury does come to their healing events – someone who is a quadriplegic, someone who has ALS or cerebral palsy, someone who is blind, someone with stage four pancreatic cancer and they’re on oxygen and all their hair has fallen out – the volunteers actually steer these people away from the stage so the crowd doesn’t see the failure to heal these people.

If they really believed had the same power as Jesus, then why hold a service and ask the sick to come to them? Why don’t they just go into the hospitals, the emergency rooms, the cancer wards? Why don’t they go to LeBonheur and St. Jude? I think it’s because they know they don’t have the same power as Jesus.

Second, many times these Christians will also say that it is always God’s will to heal the sick. That’s not true. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that. In fact, just the opposite. In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul writes Timothy to give him some instructions on his health. “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” Now, maybe wine would have helped Timothy’s stomach feel better, but if he had a chronic intestinal disorder the wine wouldn’t heal it. If it were always God’s will for the sick to be healed, why didn’t Paul heal Timothy? Why didn’t Timothy heal himself?

That’s all great. We understand that demons aren’t as active today and we see that we just can’t heal like the apostles did. But where does that leave us? Does that mean that there is no power or authority in the church today? Does that mean, as some people accuse, that the church is dead? Absolutely not.

Third, Jesus’ authority in preaching. ⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” Luke 4:42-43.

Now that’s remarkable. Do you realize what Jesus is saying here? He’s saying, “Casting out demons and healing the sick is good work. It’s a worthy endeavor. But it’s not the ultimate display of my power and authority. It is of secondary importance. I did not come primarily to do that.” Jesus says, “I came here to preach; this is my purpose.”

Friends, every single person Jesus healed, even the people he raised from the dead, guess what happened to every one of them? They died. The healing they received was only temporary.

And even some of the people out of whom Jesus cast demons, apparently sometimes the demons would come right back in after Jesus left. In Matthew 12 Jesus talks about this phenomenon, and how the man would be worse off than he was before if that happened.

Casting out demons and healing the sick are only temporary solutions to the problem the human race faces. Do you know what our problem is? Our problem is that we are sinners and we are enemies of God. All our sicknesses flow from the brokenness of the world caused by sin. All our susceptibility to the lies and influence of demons comes from our lack of a relationship to the God who created us and loves us.

And Jesus, by saying, “I must move on and preach the good news of the kingdom of God; I was sent for this purpose” is telling us the ultimate answer to all these problems is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The word “gospel” just means “good news,” and the heart of the good news of Jesus is that he is the Son of God, and he came to earth to live the life you should have lived, but didn’t. On the cross he died the death you deserve to die for your sins. And if you trust that Jesus substituted himself for you, then you are reconciled to God, you are adopted into his family, and you will have everything you need to do his will and be happy in him for the rest of your life on into eternity. That is good news, and this good news has tremendous power in the lives of sinners.

You say, “How?” “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ ...” 2 Corinthians 10:4-5. The gospel comes into a person’s life and when they believe it transforms their minds. When you hear and believe the gospel, you go from being spiritually blind and deaf to being able to see the truth about yourself and your sin. When you hear and believe the gospel, you go from being in bondage to the lies of Satan to being able to understand and love the truth of God. That’s power, and that will change someone’s life.

So if you want to see deep healing, if you want to see people around you delivered from all kinds of hurts and hangups, if you want to see addictions broken and cold hearts warmed, then lovingly and patiently and carefully and wisely preach this gospel to people. Invite them to church, invite them to small group Bible studies, invite them to coffee. And over time you will see people change. You will see people change you never thought would change. You will see transformation that will make a blind man seeing look like child’s play in comparison.

And If you want to see power in your life – power to change, power to endure suffering, power to love others, even those who hate you and treat you with contempt – then preach this gospel to yourself. This gospel that tells you that you were so wicked the son of God had to come to earth and die for you, and that you were so loved that he was glad to do it. Read it in your Bible, turn it around and speak in back to God in prayer, listen to it in sermons, meditate on it, soak in it, and the lies of the demons won’t have any power over you any more.

Martin Luther, as I said earlier, had a lot to say about the devil. He believed he had encountered him many times. At one point Luther wrote a letter to a friend of his named Jerome who was going through a time of intense temptation and despair, and he didn't know how to handle it. He asked Luther for help, and Luther told him whatever you do don't argue with the devil. When he starts telling you how bad you've been and how poorly you've loved others and how you've ignored God, don't try to defend yourself. Don't say, "I'm not that bad."

Instead, Luther said this: "Laugh your adversary to scorn ... This devil is conquered by mocking and despising him, not by resisting and arguing with him ... When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made a satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God' ... [say to him] 'I am a Christian, of the same flesh and blood as is my Lord Christ, the Son of God. Settle your account with him.' Then the devil does not stay long."

That's healing. Yes, casting out demons and healing the sick is impressive. But it's not as powerful as liberating someone from their captivity to sin and lies by preaching the gospel. That's where the church's power and authority is. Let us take it up ourselves and be about the work of setting the prisoners free. AMEN.