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HE SPOKE WITH AUTHORITY

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Last week, we sang a song which I love, “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” The third verse might sound to our modern ears a little strange and out of place:

Crown Him the Lord of peace,
Whose pow’r a scepter sways
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,
And all be prayer and praise:
His reign shall know no end,
And round His pierc-ed feet
Fair flow’rs of paradise extend
Their fragrance ever sweet.

Back when this song was written, there was a popular belief among Christians that the world was getting better and better and would continue to do so until we made the world such a wonderful place that Jesus would come back and assume the throne of the earth peacefully. Think of the late 1800’s: technology was making life easier, missionaries were reaching new lands with the gospel, and it seemed as though we were getting a handle on domestic problems and foreign wars. In fact, the 1890’s as a decade were known as “the gay nineties” (in the strictly traditional meaning of the words). It was a happy time to be alive. Many Christians believed that the world would just continue to get better until Jesus came back. They believed that this optimistic view of the world was what Jesus meant when He talked about the Kingdom of God.

World War I burst that bubble. The Great War was ferocious and terrible. In addition, there was a world-wide influenza epidemic that killed millions. Death and violence were everywhere; yet some believed that this was the final battle, the War to End All Wars, which would usher in a new era of peace. The rise of Communism and Fascism, and the next great war that followed, pretty much put an end to this line of thinking: while technology was getting better, and medicine was getting better, and many other things were getting better, the world as a whole was certainly *not* getting better. When we see a song verse like the one I mentioned, or like the beautiful verses of “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” or “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” we have to realize that these songs represent a view of the Kingdom of God which is just not correct.

What, then, did Jesus mean when He talked about the Kingdom of God? Let’s look today at Mark 1, starting in verses 14 and 15:

¹⁴ *Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,*

¹⁵ *And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.*

If you compare these few short words to the other gospels, you’ll see that Mark has fast forwarded to the second year of Jesus’ ministry. That’s fine; it simply shows us that Mark’s purpose is not to give a

full chronological account of Jesus' life. Instead, Mark focuses on Jesus' overall work. Mark focuses our attention on two facets of Jesus' ministry. First, He came preaching. Preaching was His primary method. He came to the people to explain the truths that God wanted them to know. Preaching is an essential part of ministry and where we see Christians abandoning preaching the Word of God, we soon see them abandoning everything else but the title of Christian.

Second, He came proclaiming that "the time is fulfilled" and that "the Kingdom of God is at hand." If that be true, if the Kingdom of God really is here, why is the world in such terrible shape? Why is it that as we Americans look to the future, we see very little hope for our nation?

The phrase "the time is fulfilled" means that God's work in bringing about the Old Testament's promises of a Messiah is now bearing fruit. The Messiah has come!

As a way of defining "the Kingdom of God," let me ask you something: what does it take to have a kingdom? Well, there must be a king, there must be the activity of ruling, and there must be a domain of rule. Now, spiritually speaking, it's not hard for us to see that God is King, that He rules, and that His domain is in our hearts. We enter His Kingdom when we are saved, which is why the next part of Jesus' message is so important: "Repent and believe the gospel."

But when we put something in spiritual terms, we have to be careful because it's easy for us to just relegate the concept to something abstract: "Well, you know, it's spiritual." And we leave it at that. In fact, this is what the Jehovah's Witnesses do. Their early leader, Charles Russel, promised that Jesus was coming back in 1914; but, as you know, World War I broke out instead. So Charles Russel told his followers that Jesus actually *did* come back, but that He had come back "spiritually"—meaning that there was no visible, tangible effect (except that you can't have communion among the Jehovah's Witnesses unless you were born before 1914.) The Kingdom of God is not just some abstract concept. It is central to Jesus' message, for as He told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again He cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven."

The Kingdom of God is not just an abstract concept; it is a reality experienced by every believer at the moment of salvation. When we are saved, we enter the kingdom of a beneficent King who rules our hearts with love even if we live in a physical world that is filled with hatred, vice, and every sort of evil. The Kingdom of God within us is what allows us to shine a light of love into a darkened world. The Kingdom of God within us allows us to sing "It Is Well with My Soul" when all the world seems to crash in upon us. The Kingdom of God within us allows us to bless those who persecute us, and to say with Jesus and Stephen, "Father, forgive them." The Kingdom of God within us gives us the hope to continue in this world, which we know will someday pass away, because beyond this world is an eternal dwelling under the loving rule of our great and mighty King. So the Kingdom of God right now exists *along with* the physical world, but it is *not* the physical world, and the mistake is to think that this physical world is going to be refined and be made better until it is transformed into the Kingdom of God.¹ The Kingdom of God is a real kingdom with a real King who holds real authority; and that authority is what we are going to see here in the book of Mark.

The next section of Mark 1 gives us an astonishing look at a day in the life of Jesus.

¹ The Kingdom of God, now hidden from the world but alive in our hearts, will be revealed to the world for a thousand years; but even so, there will be a large number of people who reject Jesus' love and authority and will wish to fight Him. In other words, the Kingdom of God is spiritual and eternal but will be physically and temporarily manifested.

¹⁶ *Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.*

¹⁷ *And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.*

¹⁸ *And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him.*

¹⁹ *And when he had gone a little farther thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets.*

²⁰ *And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him.*

Now, remember, we've skipped a year of Jesus' ministry. These men have been with Jesus before; but this is the point at which he calls them away from their regular jobs—forever! His call to them as Master meant that they would have to trust Him to provide for them. Not only that, but these men at this point in their lives are simple Galilean fishermen, untutored, untrained, and seemingly unfit for a high calling; yet Jesus takes the responsibility upon Himself to make them “fishers of men.”

Watchman Nee, a wonderful Christian author, has made an observation which continues to astound me. He said that Jesus, in calling these men, took their natural inclinations and taught them to use them for Him. Notice for example that we see Peter and Andrew casting their nets when He called them. Watchman Nee observes that casting the net for the lost also was the hallmark of their ministry. They truly did become “fishers of men.” But notice also that James and John are within a ship, mending the nets. We see these two later as teachers and equippers of saints, working within the church. In fact, the word “mending” here in this chapter is the exact same Greek word Paul uses in Ephesians 4:12: “*For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*”

We see then that there is room for each kind of gift, and many more besides, in the work Christ is calling us to. Not only that, but when Jesus calls you to a work, He takes the responsibility of preparing you to do it. What a blessing! Jesus knows who you are and what you are able to do before you even know it yourself. I'll bet Peter, casting his net that morning, never imagined that someday he'd be preaching to thousands of people! I'll bet John, sitting in that boat that day, never thought he'd be in charge of the church in Ephesus. Yet God called these simple men to extraordinary work, and He prepared them for it.

That leads us to the next passage, which is absolutely vital to Mark's overall portrayal of Jesus Christ. Let's look at verses 21 and 22:

²¹ *And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught.*

²² *And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.*

Capernaum was an important city in that region, there on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was customary for the person in charge of a synagogue to invite a visiting rabbi to speak; and so, very likely at the invitation of the leader, Jesus opened the Word of God and began to speak. Mark often records for us that Jesus spoke in synagogues, but does not often tell us what He said. Instead, Mark measures the reaction of the audience. Apparently, this audience was in for quite a shock that day! You see, very often when people would read and instruct from the Old Testament, they would say things like, “Well, this rabbi says this means such-and-such, but others believe it means thus-and-so.” Jesus

didn't do that. He said, "This is what this means. Period." He taught with authority! They weren't used to such forcefulness.

In our own day, we are often tempted to step away from the authority of God's Word. While there are some things that are preferences which we hold, such as, perhaps, how we dress in church, we have to realize that those things are preferences and not judge others by how their preferences differ from ours. That's not what I'm talking about. What I mean is that when the Bible shows us clearly what is right doctrine and what is wrong, we need to abide by the Bible's teaching. We've gotten very wishy-washy as Christians.

About a month ago, I was talking to a man who said that it was arrogant for us Christians to insist that Christianity is the only way to heaven. Well, as a sidepoint I would say that Christianity *per se* is not the way to heaven; Jesus is the way to heaven. There are a lot of people who call themselves Christians who have never accepted Jesus as Savior. But to the point—this man believes we are bigoted and wrong if we say that we can only get to heaven one way, because we're saying our way is right and everyone else is wrong. Joel Osteen tripped up on this point when confronted by Larry King, as some of you may remember.² But what did Jesus Himself say? He said with very clear authority, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6). When Jesus makes a clear, authoritative statement, we need to claim it with that same authority. If we don't, we will be proclaiming a lie, and people will perish.

For example, if I were to say, "You know, I really do think it's arrogant to believe that we alone have the key to heaven; surely anyone who is sincere in their beliefs will get there," what would be the result? The result would be that people would not hear from me the message that they need to hear! So while I am pretending to love them and allowing them to go on in their beliefs unchallenged, the reality is that I do not love them enough to reach out to them and try to rescue them. That's not love at all.

Jesus speaks clearly and with authority on the issues that really matter. He speaks about the true nature of marriage. He speaks about false teachers. He speaks more about the dangers of loving money than just about any other topic, because, after all, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." He speaks about the very miracles and stories of the Old Testament as fact which liberals and skeptics mock.

And this is crucial—He speaks about the reality of hell. In fact, He talks more about hell than He does about Heaven! And the truth is that Jesus doesn't want anyone to go there. People like Rob Bell, who says there is no hell, are actually making it easier for people to go there. Rob Bell doesn't like the idea of hell, so he just pretends Jesus was wrong about it. But the message to the lost becomes, "Don't worry. You don't need to do anything. You don't need to get saved. You'll be okay," when in fact they are not going to be okay. Folks, Jesus suffered and died to redeem mankind from hell! He loves us that much! In fact, if anyone does go there, they go there over Jesus' dead body! Do you realize that? And it is shameful to preach in such a way that makes Christ's sacrifice for nothing. Following that logic, Jesus' death was just a tragic mistake.

Folks, wherever Jesus speaks with authority, we also must speak with authority. If we do not, we really are saying, "Well, maybe Jesus just didn't know what He was talking about."

² CNN. "Larry King Live: Interview with Joel Osteen." June 20, 2005. Available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>

Look, if God calls you to a ministry in this church, He knows what He's doing. He made Peter and Andrew fishers of men. He can equip you and train you to do what you never thought was possible. When He calls you, He speaks with authority.

When the Word of God tells us what we ought to believe or what we ought to do, we need to believe and we need to act in accordance with the Word. Jesus, the living Word of God, speaks with authority.

When Jesus reveals the way to the Kingdom of God, through repentance and belief, He speaks with authority. His Kingdom is eternal because He is an eternal King. His reign is marked by love and peace in our lives, even when the world is in turmoil around us. Will you accept His authority today?