

The human reaction to authority is...complicated. I could offer an infinite number of examples at this point, but few statements get right to the heart of things better than singer/songwriter John Mellencamp's "Authority Song." Do you know it? From 1983: "I fight authority/authority always wins" goes the chorus. Human beings are, by nature, rebels. This is as old as the garden of Eden and as modern as this month's breaking news.

And yet, humanity doesn't despise all authority. I told you, 'it's complicated.' When someone comes along with a so-called 'air of authority,' they tend to get our attention. When someone seems to know what they're talking about, we are apt to sit up a little straighter; listen a little closer; maybe, finally, we've found someone worthy of trust, respect, and co-operation.

So it is that we find the people who heard Jesus teach being "blown away." They said, "There's something different about Him. He teaches as One Who has authority." Unlike the scribes and teachers of the law, who were always carefully citing rabbinic precedent, Jesus just said, "Here it is." People noticed the difference; and they noticed the difference in the way that what Jesus said matched up with what he did. It was almost as if he had written Scripture himself.

There was an individual sitting in the synagogue that day who agreed, but in the strangest way possible. This person was not pleased with Jesus and what He had to say. This man, Scripture tells us, had an unclean spirit. No sooner had Jesus finished speaking than this man gave voice to the thoughts of the evil spirit within him: "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."

The demon not only recognized Jesus; He also acknowledged Him as God's perfect Son. Implicit in His words is the knowledge that Jesus would do what no sinner could. The demon knew Jesus had entered this world to offer His life as the payment which would break the stranglehold that Satan had placed on humankind. This demon demands to know: "Have you come to destroy us?" And of course, that's exactly why Jesus had come.

Through His life, His suffering, His death, and resurrection Jesus offered His perfect Self as the only acceptable substitute for our endless rebellions. For thirty-three years lived; cared; healed; and taught; and when He had done all the prophets had promised He would do, He died for us. Then, in a glorious, victorious moment, three days after His lifeless body was placed into the tomb, He came back to life for us. In that moment, the demons knew that Jesus had completed the Lord's plan to save us from joining them. From that moment, all who were called to faith in God's Son would find light replacing darkness, hope replacing despair, and heaven replacing hell as our final residence.

It's a strange place to look for confirmation, but in Capernaum's demon you hear evidence given about Jesus and His mission. You hear an informed opinion: the opinion of a being who knew that because of Jesus, its days were numbered. There's a whole sermon here about how one can know who Jesus is without trusting in Him, but that will have to wait for another time.

Of course, that day in Capernaum's synagogue, Jesus was not looking for the endorsement of the devil. He knew that this exchange could be easily misunderstood by those who were there. That's why, before the demon could say anything else, Jesus ordered it to be silent and come out of the man. That the demon obeyed and did as God's Son had ordered did not go unnoticed. And what did the people say? Once again they commented, "What's going on here? Not only a new teacher... but a new teaching with authority. This is incredible. He commands the unclean spirits and they have to do as He says." In short order the power of Jesus' authority spread all over the countryside.

Even so, during his teaching ministry, Jesus encountered one unreceptive audience after another. But within those audiences were individuals who were compelled to put aside their preconceived notions when confronted with the truth of Jesus' words and actions. They found it impossible to say He was a fake when, at His command, a dead girl was restored to life; it was impossible to brand Him a charlatan when a lifelong cripple began to walk; it was impossible to count Him a fraud when a possessed man was freed from a demon which had run his life. Question, doubt, and hesitation were eliminated when they stood before the risen Christ, when they touched the nail holes in His hands and feet, the spear wound in His side. They knew, as I pray you also know: Jesus Christ has done that which only God's Son could do. He has shown an authority that is somehow not prideful, but humble; and authority displayed not in flexing muscle but in sacrificial service; an authority uninterested in 'winning at all costs' but is instead ready to 'lose it all' for the sake of love; but make no mistake, it is authority that demands a response.

And sadly, in our era, the song goes on. "I fight authority/authority always wins." Our age has many who deny Jesus, who deny what he's done and the grace which He alone can give. Why? Well that's a question, isn't it? Could it be that the skeptic senses—correctly, as it turns out—that if Jesus is who he says he is; then they have no right to be the authority over their own lives any longer? It's the greatest threat to the natural, rebellious mind; if I welcome Jesus as my King, that means I am dethroned. That is a terrifying thought if King Jesus is a tyrant. And it is a thrilling thought, a life-changing thought, if King Jesus is a Healer; a Shepherd; a Warrior unafraid to make the heroic sacrifice. If King Jesus is going to come into my life with compassion and the commitment of the Cross, he won't need to coerce me. I will place every part of my life in his hands with confidence. Hands that were scarred for me. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And we are his.