

Understanding the Authority of Jesus
Matthew 7:28-29
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At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, just like every sermon that Matthew records, he includes the words “*when Jesus had finished*” (literally, “and it happened” cf. Matthew 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). This forms a structural construction that transitions the reader to the next section of the narrative account.

Matthew 7:28-29 describes the audience as the multitudes, not only Jesus’ disciples (cf. Matthew 5:1). Therefore, these words are for all mankind. These were the large crowds that followed Him “*from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan*” (Matthew 4:25). They were attracted to hear His teaching when the news of His healing various diseases spread far and wide (Matthew 4:23-24).

The response of the crowds was dramatic. They “*were amazed at His teaching.*” Their amazement could be translated as “they were beside themselves.” His teaching truly astounded the multitudes and they continued to follow Him (Matthew 8:1). This awe continued for a time, as indicated by the imperfect tense.

Matthew describes the crowds’ amazement and then explains why. This is replicated in Matthew 9:8 after Jesus healed a paralytic, “*but when the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.*” Christ’s authority was impressive in both His words and His works.

This amazement by the crowds over the authority of Christ’s teaching and healing is encompassed by the description of His traveling ministry:

“Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

“Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Matthew 9:35).

Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 bookend Matthew 5-9 as the first stage of Christ's public ministry. He began His public ministry with miracles and He concluded this section with miracles before turning His ministry to His disciples.

The reason the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5-7 amazed the crowds was because *"He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes"* (Matthew 7:29). It was not the style of His teaching that astounded them but it was the content of His teaching. God did not send His Son in superficial packaging but for a meaningful purpose. *"He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him"* (Isaiah 53:2).

This teaching based upon content was followed by Paul as well. People did not consider Paul a master orator for he wrote the Corinthians, *"but even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge"* (2 Corinthians 11:6). Like Jesus, his physical presence was not impressive as evident from his words, *"for they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.'" Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present"* (2 Corinthians 10:10-11).

Just as the teaching of Christ amazed people by His content, we ought to focus our teaching on God's revelation. Any substitute for content to make an impact upon our hearers is devoid of the power of God. We ought to follow the example of Jesus and of Paul, who wrote *"I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God"* (1 Corinthians 2:3-4).

Specifically, the content that drew the amazement from the crowds was Christ's authoritative teaching. He did not teach as their scribes, who were the teachers of the Jews. The possessive pronoun "their" views the scribes as the group opposed to Jesus and distinct from His disciples. Their scribes gained their authority by quoting others, while Jesus simply spoke with the authority of God. He did not support His teaching by the traditions of other teachers. He presented Himself as the authority intrinsic to Himself. His authority even extended to His role in the judgment of the end times as well. For a teacher in Israel to involve themselves in the final judgment was quite unprecedented.

Jesus demonstrated His unique authority in the Sermon on the Mount in the following ways:

1. Jesus juxtaposed His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (5:17) against the failure of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).
2. Jesus contrasted what the hearers had been told with what He said to them (5:21-48). Jesus presented Himself as the authority on the Law, countering the teaching they had grown up under.
3. Jesus presented Himself as the authority on the Law without arguing why He was right to do so. His explanations of the internal nature of the Law presupposed that He was correct.
4. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who practiced their righteous acts to be noticed by men (6:1-18). He described the hypocrites as having their reward in full, showing Himself as having authority to declare what the ultimate reward each would receive from God.
5. Jesus repeatedly referred to God as "Father" fifteen times in this sermon. While the Old Testament speaks of God as the Father of Israel, the Jews were reticent to speak of God this way. Jesus went so far as to speak of God as "My Father" (7:21).
6. Jesus used the term "Lord" for Himself (7:21), which equates Himself with God.
7. Jesus takes the role of the judge when He said, *"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'"* (7:23). In doing this Jesus is taking upon Himself the role of God.
8. Jesus portrayed Himself as the basis by which men will be judged when mankind's eternal destiny is described by whether they hear His words and act upon them or they hear His words and do not act upon them (7:24-27).

These are remarkable words that placed Jesus above any prophet, even Moses who received the Law. Jesus is not merely bringing the word of God in an instrumental fashion, He defines the revelation of God.

Jesus' teaching about the coming judgment was beyond the temporal judgment of the prophets, it was about the final judgment by the Messiah. Jesus did not come to merely teach the Law and the prophets as their scribes, He came to fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17).

Conclusion

The authority that Jesus spoke with in Matthew 5-7 would be proven as authentic by the powerful and undeniable miracles in Matthew 8-9.

Throughout the rest of Matthew's Gospel, the issue of authority will be the essence of all the coming events and controversies. In the next chapter even the Roman centurion, who represents the human authority in power over the land, recognizes the authority of Jesus, in contrast to the religious leaders. *"But the centurion said, 'Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me'"* (Matthew 8:8-9). In the following chapter, Jesus will give the disciples authority as He sends them out. *"Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness"* (Matthew 10:1).

Often authority will be addressed specifically, such as whether Christ would tell the chief priests and elders by what authority He did things (Matthew 21:23-27) or by explicitly telling the disciples *"all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28:18). But the issue of authority is embedded through the book in His birth, Old Testament fulfilled prophecies, His baptism, His temptation, His teaching ministry, His conflict with the leaders, His miracles of authority over diseases, nature and demons, and ultimately by willingly laying down His life for the sin of the world.

Recognizing the authority of Jesus is absolutely fundamental to saving faith. The essential question for man is the question that Jesus asked His disciples in Matthew 16:15, *"But who do you say that I am?"* The only acceptable answer is to respond with the words of Peter, *"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'"* (Matthew 16:16). True belief in the Lord Jesus Christ requires the belief in His authority over all things.