

When I say the words “power and authority,” what comes to mind?

Have you ever been pulled over by a policeman? He walks up to your car and asks to see your license and registration. It's not his car but you obey him because he has the authority to do that. In fact, he can even write you a ticket. That's power and authority.

Or an umpire calls a third strike on a batter and the batter looks at him like, “Are you blind?” It doesn't matter. He has the power and authority to call balls and strikes.

Or perhaps we watch a movie like the new *Star Wars* and we encounter The Force, a metaphysical and omnipresent power wielded by a variety of characters, both good and evil. The Jedi utilize the “light side” of the Force, while the Sith exploit the “dark side.”

Let's face it, sometimes we're not sure what we think about this idea of power and authority, but in the text we're looking at today Jesus shows us what true power and authority look like through several encounters.

We're picking up where we left off three weeks ago in the gospel of Matthew. Sometimes when we read these accounts of the life of Jesus we find ourselves a little lost, like we're wandering through the mist unsure of where we are. We read about Jesus meeting people, teaching people, healing people, confronting people, and again teaching. We read story after story and sometimes we get lost and we need some way of marking our path. And that's exactly what Matthew gives us as we end chapter 7 and start chapter 8.

At the end of chapter 7 we ended a long section of teaching by Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount. And when Jesus was done, Matthew says, “*When Jesus finished saying these things...*” That's the kind of thing you might just pass over, but don't be because it's an important marker placed there to help us find our way through this gospel. This is the first of five such markers. Each time Matthew uses the same formula as he moves from a section of Jesus' teaching to a section of his doing—his actions, or what scholars call “narrative.”

7:28 When Jesus finished saying these things...

11:1 After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples...

13:53 When Jesus had finished these parables...

19:1 When Jesus had finished saying these things...

26:1 When Jesus had finished saying all these things...

There are five of these markers. You might wonder, Why did Matthew give us markers like this? We know he was Jewish and

wrote for a Jewish audience familiar with the OT, especially what were called “the books of Moses.” Remember Moses would go up on Mt. Sinai and meet with God and then come down and deliver God's word to the people. Eventually these words became the Torah, the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Those books were considered absolutely authoritative.

Matthew is saying Jesus is like Moses, only more so. Just as Moses gave us five books, so Jesus gave us five blocks of teaching. Unlike other teachers of his day, Jesus didn't just quote Moses, he taught with his own authority. In fact, Matthew says in 7:29 when Jesus came down from the mountain “*the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority.*”

This question of authority and power is what's on Matthew's mind as he moves from this block of Jesus' teaching to a new block of his doing. And what we're going to see is Jesus walks his talk. He doesn't just **teach** with power and authority, he **acts** with power and authority, and that has tremendous implications for how we live our lives.

Jesus Shows His Authority by Healing Three Outsiders

A man with leprosy

The first encounter comes in verses 2-4 with a leper. Much like HIV/AIDS, leprosy was a dreaded disease in Jesus' day. It's a contagious skin disease that affects the skin and the throat, but even worse destroys the nerves that allow us to sense pain. Lepers were unable to feel the heat of fire or the cut of a knife. They often lost the tips of fingers and toes. Basically, your body rotted away and there was no cure.

But the worst part of the disease were the social implications. No one wants to get near to them. Lepers were considered unclean, not just physically but spiritually. In fact they had to go around yelling with their raspy voice, “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn anyone near to keep away. No one dared touch a leper. In Israel it was illegal to even greet a leper. They weren't allowed to share in the services of the synagogue or temple. There's never been any disease which separated a person from fellow humans like leprosy. That's why what happens here is so remarkable!

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” (Matthew 8:2-4)

This leper breaks all the rules. He somehow plows through a large crowd and comes right up to Jesus. But he comes with an attitude of humility and respect, kneeling before him and addressing him as "Lord." His faith in the power and authority of Jesus is clear in what he says, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." And he doesn't say, "Lord, if you can, make me clean." He says, "Lord, you have the power to cleanse me, so will you?"

Then Jesus did something that must have stunned everyone. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Of course, he didn't have to touch him. He could have cleansed him with a simple command. But with great compassion he touched him. How long had it been since someone touched that man? A year? Two years? Ten years? Imagine never being touched. But Jesus touched him, tenderly, like a mother touches the forehead of a sick child.

Something else not to miss: According to Leviticus 5:3, the moment Jesus touched him he himself became unclean. But, it's almost like Jesus transcends the law because instead of becoming unclean, he makes that which he touches clean. He barks out an order, "Be clean!" and immediately the leprosy is gone. So there's compassion, but also power and authority. Can you imagine watching this? Watching this man's skin and wounds heal before your very eyes? The tips of fingers, perhaps even his nose, growing back?

Now this was something that should have made the headlines in the morning paper! But instead, look what Jesus does next. He commands the man not to tell anyone but to go straight to the priest and do what the OT says to do—get certified as clean so you can re-enter society and make an offering. Just don't go making a scene. Don't tell anyone. If the pastor wants you to give your testimony at church, don't do it. Keep quiet. You see, Jesus understood proper timing. He didn't draw attention to himself as just a miracle worker. He wasn't putting on a show to draw a crowd. He came to do more than that and he didn't want people to misunderstand his ultimate purpose.

So Jesus demonstrates his authority by cleansing a man of what made him a complete social outcast. His is an authority to heal; an authority with compassion.

A centurion and his servant

The second encounter also deals with an outcast, but this one is different. The leper might have been unclean, but he was Jewish. The next man is a Gentile.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their

places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment. (verses 5-13)

Do you like surprises? There are five surprises in this story. The first surprise is that this man would come to Jesus at all. Not only is he a Gentile, but he serves in the Roman military! He's a centurion which means he's a man with some authority himself. Centurions were the actual working officers, the backbone of the Roman army. So this guy was of the wrong race and on the wrong team, yet he calls Jesus "Lord" twice in this story. That's surprising!

Second, it's surprising he makes a request on behalf of his servant. Literally, that word "servant" means "young man" or even "boy." He'd likely be a slave and the surprise here is this rough and tumble centurion cares so much about this boy. In that day the average slave owner cared less about the welfare of his slaves. One Roman writer wrote the only difference between a slave, a beast and a cart was that a slave talked. So it's quite surprising this man is so concerned about this boy.

The third surprise is Jesus seems quite willing to go to this centurion's home. He asks him, "Shall I come to heal him?" which can also be translated, "I shall come to heal him." The surprise here is Jesus is willing to go to a Gentile's house. Jews weren't allowed to do such a thing. Jesus seems quite willing to cross a cultural and racial boundary that would have been unacceptable to law-abiding Jews.

The fourth surprise is the attitude of this man toward Jesus. He demonstrated both humility and great faith. His humility is seen in how he feels unworthy to have Jesus come under his roof. To him Jesus might just as well be nothing more than a peasant preacher of a subjugated people. He didn't even have a home. But he treats Jesus like he's the King of England—too important to even enter his house! Coupled with this humility is faith. He says, "You don't have to come to my house. You can just say the word and my servant will be healed. I know all about authority. When I give a command, people do what I say. I believe it's the same with you, Jesus. So just say the word and my slave will be healed." And it's that faith that actually even surprises Jesus. He didn't get amazed by a lot of things, but he's amazed at this man's faith. He's amazed someone who didn't grow up with the OT scriptures and all the spiritual benefits of the Jewish people would have this kind of faith. He teaches us something of what faith really is. It's not just a general religious attitude, it's not just being a spiritual person, but it's recognizing Jesus' unique authority and power.

This leads to the fifth and final surprise; maybe it surprises you. Jesus pictures the Kingdom of heaven as a feast, but that's not it. Revelation 19:9 tells us about the wedding supper of the lamb; a great celebration party of the Kingdom. Or maybe it surprises you Jesus talked about Hell in such a graphic way, but that's not it either. He talked about Hell more than anyone else in the Bible. No, the biggest surprise is what he said about **who** will to be

sitting around the table at that feast in the Kingdom of heaven. Who are the many who will come from the East and the West? Gentiles! Who are the “sons of the kingdom” thrown into the outer darkness? Unbelieving Israelites! So the big surprise is who’s in and who’s out. The big surprise is faith rather than race is the criteria for entering the Kingdom of heaven.

Yes, this encounter is full of surprises. Maybe the only thing that isn’t a surprise is as soon as Jesus told the centurion, “Go! Let it be done to you just as you believed,” it was a done deal; the boy was healed.

That’s authority. That’s power. And once again it’s an outsider, one we wouldn’t expect, a Gentile, who gets it.

Peter’s mother-in-law

The final encounter is with an outsider of another kind. In Jesus’ day there were strict boundaries between what was appropriate between men and women. Some said even touching a woman’s hand infringed on the law. But look what happens.

When Jesus came into Peter’s house, he saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. (verses 14–15)

Someone once said the reason Peter later denied Jesus was Jesus healed his mother-in-law, but I don’t think that’s true! It is true Peter was married and owned a house. And there’s really nothing surprising about this encounter except that this was the only one of the three miracles in which no request was made. Apparently, the woman was very sick with a fever, which in those days could be fatal. But, Jesus, again crossing the gender boundary, touched her hand and immediately she got up and began to serve him. She didn’t need a few days or even a few minutes to recuperate, she was immediately restored to full strength! Then Matthew tacks on this summary.

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

**“He took up our infirmities
and bore our diseases.” (verses 16–17)**

Again, Jesus’ authority is seen not just in his teaching but in his doing. He drove out demons with just a word, and he healed all who were sick!

But the real kicker is the quote that sums up all of these encounters. It’s a quote from Isaiah 53:4, **“He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.”** Matthew wants us to know there’s something more going on here than Jesus just healing people. This is about more than simply his power and authority. Somehow, Jesus was entering into our suffering and sickness. He was taking it upon himself in the same way he’d take our sin upon himself on the cross. You see, both sickness and sin are part of this broken world he came to heal and restore. Like the leper, sin makes us unclean. Like the boy, it enslaves us. And like Peter’s mother-in-law, it renders us unable to even ask for help. You might call it sin-sickness.

Jesus came to take all of that upon himself. Yes, he’s powerful. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. But now we’re starting to get a new and different picture of what real authority is all about. His power and authority were such that he’d bear in his own body all of our sin and all of our sickness so that in the end we might be healed. It’s the authority of suffering; the authority of obedience. Jesus doesn’t have absolute power and authority for its own sake, but for our sake—to cleanse us, redeem us, and restore us. And in each of these encounters we see a foretaste of the world’s true healing and restoration.

In his book *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller writes: “We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible tells us God did not originally make the world to have disease, hunger, and death in it. Jesus has come to redeem where it’s wrong and heal the world where it’s broken. His miracles aren’t just proofs that he has power but also wonderful foretastes of what he’s going to do with that power. Jesus’ miracles aren’t just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.”

So the Kingdom of heaven will be a place where there’s no more sin, sickness, pain and grief. And it’s all because of Jesus who took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.

Jesus Shows His Authority by Calling Two Folks to Follow Him at All Cost

This truth is important to understand as we look at the last two encounters in this text. These aren’t healing stories, but rather stories of two men we might call “would-be disciples.” The question these encounters bring is this: In light of what we just learned about the power and authority of Jesus, what will it mean for us to follow him? In verse 18 it says when **“Jesus saw the huge crowd around him, he gave orders to cross the other side of the lake.”** The question is, who will go with him? Let’s look at each of these encounters.

A man with great intentions

Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (verses 19–20)

Someone very different from the previous three approached Jesus—a teacher of the law. After three outsiders now we have the ultimate insider. A smart guy. A guy people wanted to be around. And he’s very confident about his own commitment to Jesus, “I’ll not just cross the lake with you, Jesus, I’ll go anywhere with you!” He doesn’t ask to follow Jesus, but he announces he will follow him—anywhere! He’s ready and able, offering Jesus a darn good deal! “With lepers and Gentiles and women flocking around you, Jesus, you could use a man like me on your team! Bring a little respectability to this crew!”

But Jesus senses he really hasn’t counted the cost. Perhaps it was because he called Jesus “Teacher.” In Matthew’s gospel, whenever someone calls Jesus “Teacher” it’s a bad sign; they’re not a

true follower. Jesus sensed this and so he throws cold water on his offer by basically saying, "Do you really want to follow me? I spend a lot of time on the road. Most of the time I don't even know where I'll sleep. You have no idea what you're getting into. We're going into some dark places; places of pain, hunger, demonization and disease. And soon I'll march right into Jerusalem where I'll get executed as a criminal. That's what you sign up for when you follow me." I have little doubt that this big-headed scribe scurried away.

I've seen folks like this. Folks who think Jesus could really use them on his team. But they really don't understand following Jesus is hard, it's uncomfortable, it's demanding.

A man with other priorities

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (verses 21-22)

At the next encounter Jesus is approached by another would-be disciple. This man comes to Jesus with a request: before following Jesus he wants to go home and bury his father. Sounds reasonable to me. So why does Jesus rough him up? Aren't we supposed to honor and care for our parents? I can't even attend my father's funeral?

It helps to know the cultural background behind this request. For one thing, in Israel the dead were required to be buried on the same day they died. If the man's father had just died, he wouldn't have even been there in that crowd following Jesus. But since he asked permission to bury his father before following Jesus, what he means is he wants to remain at home until his father dies and then he'll follow Jesus. By the way, that was also the only way he'd be certain of receiving his inheritance! So the reality is this guy wants to postpone getting serious about following Jesus. If the first guy is too fast, this guy is too slow. He's a spiritual procrastinator. It's like, "By golly, Jesus, someday I'll get really serious about following you. I can't do it right now, but I will later." Today, someone might say. "It's complicated, Jesus. I have kids, a job, sports, school. I have a lot on my plate and I have too much to lose right now, so I can't totally commit, but I will soon enough."

Jesus essentially says, "Let those who are spiritually dead take care of those matters. Those who are truly alive will follow me."

It goes back to what he said earlier, "*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (6:33).

We started with three encounters where Jesus demonstrated his power and authority over sin and sickness; an authority of compassion; an authority which enters into the world's suffering; an authority which in the end will redeem where the world has gone wrong and heal where the world where is broken. But then we saw Jesus doesn't just comfort and heal broken sinners, he also calls us into costly discipleship. His authority is both tough and tender; grace-filled and demanding. And our discipleship is always a response to his grace and kindness in our lives. When he touches us, cleanses us, heals us, we want to follow him.

And so, here at the start of a new year, I ask you to examine where you're at in following Jesus. That's our mission here at CPC. We're all about making and maturing more followers of Christ. Maybe you're like the leper, or centurion's servant, or Peter's mother-in-law. You know how broken you are and you need his touch, his powerful word, his cleansing power. You can come to him. He's the One with all authority in heaven and on earth. But it's an authority like nothing else we've ever seen. It's an authority that enters into our brokenness and heals us.

Or maybe you're like one of these would-be disciples. Maybe you're at that moment where you realize Jesus is calling you to take another step; to cross a line. You've been playing a game called Christianity, but you realize now it's not a game. His authority is calling you to count the cost and follow him today. Follow him into dark places where you may have a few sleepless nights, where you may have to touch a few lepers. Will you take that step?

Lord Jesus, we come to you today as our healer, our redeemer and our master. We come to you as the One who one day will take all the broken pieces of our lives and of this world and make them whole. We need your touch today. We need to be cleansed, freed and empowered. We confess how often we come to you with our own agenda, but you call us to let that go and follow you on your terms, rather than our own. And you are worthy of that, Lord. You are worthy of not just a portion of our hearts, but all of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.