

Luke 4:31-37

Sermon: **Authority worthy of hearing**

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1. (Luke 4:31–32) “And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbaths, and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word was with authority.”

1.1. After Jesus escaped certain death, he decided to return to Capernaum, the place from which he had come. Capernaum was a small town located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. When we study the Gospels, we come to the conclusion that Capernaum was the center of Jesus' ministry. It was there that he chose most of his apostles. Matthew, the tax collector, was also stationed in Capernaum. Because of the heavy trade in various goods—especially fish—Capernaum needed a tax collector to ensure that the Roman tax was paid during transactions. The other apostles were mostly fishermen who made their living and supported their families through fishing. From the text we see that Jesus had a custom of teaching on the Sabbath, the day of Shabbat.

1.3. It is very likely that he taught the people both outside the synagogues and within them when he was invited. Why on the Sabbath? Because the Jews rested on Shabbat and listened to the rabbis (teachers) who spoke to them about God's promises to their nation.

IT MADE SENSE

2. “They were greatly astonished at his teaching.” Unlike in his hometown, where he grew up, the people who listened to him here in Capernaum approved of his teaching. Not everyone—we know this from the Gospels—but some did. Why were they astonished? The text gives us the answer: “For his word was with authority.” Today, as Christians, when we read this statement, it is easy for us to conclude: “Of course it came with authority—he is God! If anyone has authority and knows what he is saying, it is Jesus.” And that is true. But I think such reasoning, when we observe this event, can actually lead us in the wrong direction. At that time, they were not looking at Jesus as God—for them, he was just a peasant from Nazareth, an ordinary man. Only later in his ministry did Jesus

gradually reveal who he really was, as in the statement in John 10:30: *"I and the Father are one."* If we view this event only through our modern lens—"He is God"—we will miss the full weight of their reaction.

2.1. The Jews of that time were accustomed to listening to teachers; it was part of their culture. But Jesus was different. Something in his teaching compelled them to conclude: *"His word was with authority."* What exactly was it?

The word "word" in this text comes from the Greek *logos*. If we explore the meaning of *logos*, we find that it carries many nuances—depending on context—yet its root is in the concept of "reason." I personally believe the author here is emphasizing that Jesus' teaching sounded reasonable to those who listened to him—it made sense.

2.2. But what does it mean that it came "with authority"?

In those days it was normal in Jewish culture to listen to teachers. But who were these teachers? Judaism had several schools of thought, among them the Pharisees and Sadducees, and most of the people listened to the Pharisees. Every teacher who taught the people came from one of these traditions. When someone would teach, he would first read a passage from the Torah, and then say: *"Rabbi so-and-so has said that this passage means such-and-such."* In other words, the individual was not making his own conclusions, but was relying on the authority of another teacher. His teaching did not carry real authority. Why? Because he did not enter the text himself to try to understand what the authors of the Torah intended to communicate. Out of human laziness (among other reasons), they borrowed the authority of other teachers, convinced themselves that it was the truth, and then continued to teach the people in the same way.

2.3. Jesus did the complete opposite. He entered the Scriptures himself, connected everything together, stepped into the minds of the prophets and writers (Jeremiah, Isaiah, Psalms, Deuteronomy, the Books of Kings...), and arrived at the idea—the truth—that the author intended to convey. Jesus judged the meaning of the text on his own. If his understanding did not harmonize with the rest of God's promises, he went back to the text until he found the real truth, consistent with all of Scripture. That is why his teaching carried authority—it did not come from some rabbi, but from himself.

GIFT OF DISCERNMENT

3. Jesus encouraged his disciples to do the same. He did not keep them away from study but inspired them to enter the Scriptures themselves and seek the truth. Unlike many teachers then—and even today—Jesus allowed his disciples to arrive at their own insights and truths. He was not bothered when they questioned every word he taught them—on the contrary, he encouraged it. How could he do this? Because, with the gift of discernment he had received from God, he studied the Torah and was able to connect all of God's promises into one clear and meaningful picture. He passed that truth on to his disciples, encouraging them to use their own God-given gift of discernment to test whether what he was saying was truly the truth. In the Gospels we clearly see that questions were welcome. This shows Jesus' incredible humility, because he allowed someone beside him to reach his own conclusion about whether what he said was true. And how could they do that? Just as he did—they had the gift to discern what made sense and what did not.

3.1. The same applies today. Unfortunately, most teachers do not practice Jesus' strategy. In my brief experience, I have noticed that many avoid questions. They fear those who use reason—such people are often not welcome. Based on the tradition they belong to, they use the Bible to prove their theological claims. They believe other teachers from their own tradition simply because those others have authority over them. They use their titles to silence those who want to use reason. Sometimes they even go so far as to say: *"Go and read again until you see what I am telling you is the truth. Repeat and repeat until you see what I see."* In other words: *"Stop using the gift of discernment God has given you, turn off your reason, and just listen to me."*

AUTHORITY WORTHY OF HEARING

4. I want to emphasize this: all of us have received the gift of discernment from God. Through reason we can recognize whether something makes sense or not. None of us is lacking in that area. Some may have attended theological schools, some may have more experience in studying the Bible—and for that reason they teach others. That is noble. But their reason is no better than the reason of their students. As long as what a teacher says makes sense, and by my own discernment I see that it is true, then he is an authority I should listen to. But if what he says does not make sense—he loses that authority.

4.1. In today's world of biblical teaching, Jesus' approach is desperately needed. He relied on Scripture, not on himself. Throughout the Gospels we see that he always began and ended with Scripture. At that time he brought a new approach to studying Scripture and to relating with his disciples. Many teachers today do the opposite—they claim to rely on Scripture but in reality rely on themselves. If we spend enough time with them, their fruits expose this. They fear questions, hide behind titles, intimidate, manipulate... And we, people prone to laziness, not wanting to use reason, have been yielding for centuries and allowing them to shape us as they please. This is my general perspective, concluded from the information available to me. Precisely because my perspective is incomplete, I believe there have been—and still are—unknown teachers (unknown to me) who throughout history have promoted Jesus' approach to Scripture. But in the major Christian denominations, such people, at least in my opinion, are not welcome.

TWO POSSESSED?

5. (Luke 4:33–35) *"Now in the synagogue there was a man with the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice: '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!' But Jesus rebuked him, saying: 'Be silent and come out of him!' And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, it came out of him, having done him no harm."*

5.1. "In the synagogue there was a man possessed by an evil and unclean spirit." From our perspective, it is very difficult to visualize exactly what this event looked like. Hollywood films have tried to portray what a possessed person might look like. But was it really like that? We don't know. In our culture we rarely hear of events that are supernatural in nature. Notice—I said hear—and even then, the testimony almost always reaches us second-hand or further. How can we be sure that such a person is telling the truth? Most of these stories seem to happen in secret. And it

is precisely this secrecy that usually surrounds such testimonies. If it is secret—it is not reliable, at least in my opinion.

5.2. I want to tell you a story that did not happen in secret. The witnesses were four nurses and myself.

In the hospital room where I was being treated there were three beds. I was in the middle, and on my left and right lay two elderly men. All day long they did not utter a word, and their motor skills were essentially nonexistent. The nurses had to wash them, feed them, and change them.

When night fell, around 10 p.m. the lights went out and we all fell asleep. Around 1 a.m. I was awakened by a loud crash. I opened my eyes and could not believe what I was seeing—both old men, who during the day could not even walk, had fallen out of bed and were violently thrashing their arms and legs on the floor. The nurses had to tie them down to keep them from falling again. But what followed was terrifying. For the next two hours they fought the restraints with all their strength, screaming, growling, spitting, thrashing up and down on their beds without pause. One of the nurses, seeing the horror on my face, asked her colleagues to move me to another room so I would no longer have to witness that unexplainable scene.

And to this day I ask myself: where did those men suddenly get such strength? During the day they were completely dependent on others' care, and at night they pulled against the restraints for three hours straight. Perhaps I could understand if one of them had behaved this way—but both, at the same time? This is an event that will remain etched in my memory as long as I live. An event for which I have no rational or logical explanation. Judging by the nurses' behavior, it did not seem to disturb them as much as it did me—they had likely seen similar things before—but to me, those two looked possessed. For me, that was a supernatural event.

OLD WORLD vs MODERN TIMES

6. What is the difference between the time when Jesus walked the earth and the time in which we live today? What we can notice in the Gospels is that possession by an evil spirit was not unusual to people of that time. They were often witnesses of such cases. Proof of this is Luke—a physician by profession—who wrote this Gospel. He had no problem recording that someone was possessed by an evil spirit. This means that he himself, as a doctor, had been a witness to people who were possessed. He knew how to distinguish between someone suffering from an illness such as schizophrenia and someone who was truly possessed.

6.1. If you remember, I mentioned earlier that Satan's reign over the world was drastically reduced by the coming of Jesus. The world in which they lived back then now appears to us in the "civilized" world as utterly incomprehensible and hard to imagine. Things that were normal for them are abnormal and almost unthinkable for us today. That is why we cannot really know what exactly the event with the possessed man looked like. But the text clearly shows that he had a supernatural connection with demons. Were the demons invisible companions whispering what he should do and say, or were they literally dwelling within his body? We do not know. But in Luke 4:34 we see that they directly addressed Jesus. They knew who he was and what he could do. They knew that he could cast them out. They knew that he was the "Holy One of God"—the Messiah promised to David, the image of the invisible God the Father.

6.2. When the demons cried out: *“You are the Holy One of God!”* Jesus rebuked them: *“Be silent and come out of him.”* Why does he say this? Why does he not want the public to hear what the demons are declaring about him? Had he not just recently said of himself that he was the one Isaiah had prophesied about?

Jesus knew that their intention was evil. Just as Satan had cunningly tried in the wilderness to persuade him to leap to his death, so here the demons wanted to stir up trouble. By publicly proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, they sought to spark premature celebration among the Jews, which could easily have escalated into rebellion against Rome—or even war. That would have placed Jesus squarely on Rome’s radar and led to his execution too soon. But the time had not yet come. Now was the time of grace, not judgment. That is why Jesus silenced the demons—he knew they were seeking to provoke chaos by proclaiming his name.

THESE ARE NOT MIRACLES DONE IN SECRET

7. (Luke 4:36–37) *“And amazement came upon them all, and they said to one another: ‘What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!’ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.”*

7.1. We see that all the witnesses of this event were astonished at the authority this man possessed. Never before in history had anyone been able to do what Jesus did right before their eyes: *“Here stands a man who can even command evil spirits.”*

The Jews had seen possessed people before in their lives, but they had never seen a man who could order demons to leave someone. That is why news about him spread everywhere.

Notice this—Jesus’ miracles did not happen in secret. They were public, before crowds of witnesses. Jesus did not hide, unlike most other “miracles” we hear about throughout Church history, which are almost always surrounded by secrecy.