

Matthew 7:28-29

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[0:00] Well, some years ago I was having a conversation about religion with a man who was not a Christian.

And I asked him in the course of our conversation whether he had ever read the Bible for himself, and he said that he'd read some of it. I asked him what parts he'd read, and he said that he had read the Sermon on the Mount.

That's the very portion of the Gospel of Matthew that we're finishing tonight and that we've been preaching through in the evenings here at Trinity. Now, I don't know where this man had read the Sermon on the Mount, but my guess is that it was in school somewhere, either an English class or a comparative religion class.

I think a lot of people encounter the Sermon on the Mount this way. And it's no surprise that someone would choose this text of all texts in the Bible as a kind of summary of Christian teaching.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Love your enemies. Don't show off when you pray. Don't be enslaved by the love of money. Don't be a judgmental hypocrite.

[1:18] These are the kinds of teachings that all sorts of people can get behind. You don't have to be a Christian to think that people ought to treat one another the way they want to be treated. And that, I think, is why the Sermon on the Mount has such a wide following.

In fact, when people talk about liking Jesus but not liking Christianity, I think they're usually thinking about the Sermon on the Mount and teachings like it. I can almost guarantee you, though, that they are not thinking about the two verses that we are going to be talking about tonight.

Matthew chapter 7, verses 28 and 29. Now, if you're following along in one of the Pew Bibles, you can find that on page 812. The big numbers are the chapter numbers.

The small numbers are the verse numbers. And I'm going to start reading a little bit above this in verse 24 just for a little bit of context. Matthew 7, chapter 7, starting in verse 24. Jesus said, Now, verse 28.

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching. For he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

[2:58] Now, the sayings talked about in verse 28 are the entire Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapters 5 through 7. At this point, Jesus is done preaching. He's just ended his exhortation to actually do the things that he's said.

And Jesus knows it's a lot easier to listen and not along than to actually put teachings to use. So Jesus tells them, Do what I say. And Matthew then wraps up this sermon with a short little comment about how people received it.

They did not fall asleep. They did not secretly text in their laps. As I know some of you may be tempted to do tonight. No, it says that they were astonished.

Now, every preacher has had the experience of preaching a sermon and afterwards having someone come up to them and say, I loved your sermon so much, especially when you made such and such a point.

Only they never actually made such and such a point or even said anything about it. This happens all the time to preachers. People often hear what they want to hear. But sometimes people are pretty perceptive.

[4:04] And here it seems that the audience actually got it. They got it right. Now, I'm sure afterwards they talked with one another about the specific things he said. But the summary Matthew gives is of their reaction of astonishment at Jesus' authority.

So let me ask you, How do you feel about authority? I think there's something very American about distrusting authority.

This is a country with a revolutionary beginning. It was a country from the beginning where you didn't have to tip your hat to anybody. We know our rights and we're not afraid to invoke them.

And if that's true in politics, well, how much more true is that in personal beliefs and actions? You know, our national motto is, E pluribus unum, out of many one. But it could just as well be, You can't tell me what to do.

You're not the boss of me. Do you think that there is a place for legitimate intellectual and moral authority? Or should everyone be able to just find their own way?

[5:11] Be their own authority? If you're not a Christian and you're here tonight, you're very welcome. I'm glad you're here. This is a key question for you to be thinking about as you evaluate and consider the Christian faith.

Because at the very center of Christianity is a king. He's a kind and wise king. But he's still a king. And he claims to have the authority to tell you what to do. If you are a Christian already, this is just as important.

For we don't like being told what to do any more than anyone else. We must come to grips with the authority of Jesus. In fact, I think it's safe to, in my mind, it's safe to say that the most important lesson from the Sermon on the Mount comes in these two seemingly inconsequential verses.

I want to suggest that most of us don't really get the Sermon on the Mount when we read it or when we hear it preached about. Oftentimes we like the Sermon on the Mount because it affirms the things we already believe.

People read it and say to themselves, quite right. Just so. I don't like those religious hypocrites either. We might not actually follow Jesus' teaching, but we think that they're actually pretty good as far as it goes.

[6:24] Of course, some parts of it are harder than others. Loving your enemies is not a very comfortable or easy thing to do. And it might never actually occur to us that we are the hypocritical religious types, whatever we believe.

But at least we agree with the Sermon in theory. We're not astonished. This seems like self-evident moral truth. And so we miss something critical.

What is so astonishing about this sermon? What causes the crowds to gasp and murmur? If you read these two verses, you'll see that it's not the message of the Sermon on the Mount that amazed people.

Although I'm sure there was some of that. It's the way Jesus taught. So our goal for this evening is to try to enter into Jesus' world as best we can and learn to feel this astonishment again with the people who heard him at the beginning.

And in order to do that, we need to do two things. First, we need to ask ourselves, how did the scribes teach? These teachers of the law. Our text tells us that Jesus did not teach like them, so we need to know, well, how did they teach?

[7 : 36] And second, we need to say, how was Jesus teaching different? We see that he taught with authority, but what does that actually mean? If we can understand this question, we will unlock the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

And in fact, I think we'll unlock the whole message of the Bible. So how did the scribes teach? Well, the word scribes here just means teachers of the Jewish law, the Torah.

The Jewish teachers of the law had a method of teaching that I think most of us will find very familiar. They taught by referencing and citing authorities. Of course, their chief authority was the Bible, the books of the Old Testament.

But they also collected the sayings of wise and learned biblical interpreters. A century or two after the Sermon on the Mount, some of these teachings were collected and began to be codified in the Talmud, the classical Jewish book of biblical interpretation.

And if you've ever seen a copy of the Talmud, it has a central body of text, and then it has notes around it on that body of text, and then it has notes around that on the notes, and it kind of goes out in concentric circles kind of like an onion.

[8 : 42] It's a book, but it's also an ongoing conversation among scholars over the centuries about how to understand and apply the Bible. Now, the Talmud wasn't around when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, but the teachers of the law were operating under similar principles.

So, if you were teaching or debating about a point of theology or biblical interpretation, you would cite biblical texts. You would reference famous scholars in order to make your point.

Now, this makes a lot of sense to us. The scribes wanted to be faithful to the Bible. They wanted to make the very best use of scholarship they could. What they didn't want to do is just make things up.

And that can be dangerous. If you've grown up in the church, then you've no doubt been in a lot of Bible studies that went something like this. First, we will read a few Bible verses aloud. And second, we will go around and ask the question, what does this mean to you?

But what it means to us is actually not nearly as important as what it means. You can't just make things up. You need evidence. You need a solid authority. This is why college students are supposed to argue a certain way when they write research papers.

[9 : 49] You cite the proper authorities to show that you know what you're talking about. And no, Wikipedia doesn't count. But Jesus doesn't really teach this way. He doesn't name check famous teachers who came before him.

He doesn't include any citations. I mean, you can imagine how some of these scribes might have reacted to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, I can tell you worked hard.

You have some interesting ideas, but a really scanty works cited page. Go and read Rabbi So-and-So, and then let's try again. C+. Or if you're at Yale where they don't give Cs, B+.

Here's the key thing about the scribes. They wanted to teach with authority. But they taught with a borrowed authority. You should believe what I say because it's what the best scholars before me have said.

It's what the prophets themselves says because it's what the law of Moses said. It's authority, but it's a borrowed authority. So then what was so different about Jesus' teaching?

[10 : 54] Well, he taught with real authority. With personal authority. Now, certainly Jesus often cited the Bible to make points himself. He did that all the time.

And it's not that he was unwilling to wade into these sort of scholarly rabbinical debates. He did that too. But here's the key thing. Jesus taught with a unique authority that was rooted in his person, in who he was.

He thought people should believe him because he said it. And I think the best way to just make this clear is actually just to look at some examples. We could look almost anywhere Jesus teaches, but let's stay in this Sermon on the Mount.

Turn back with me to Matthew chapter 5. I'm just going to run through a bunch of them very quickly. This is the first section of the Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew chapter 5, verse 21. You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Verse 27. You have heard it said that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

[12:04] 531. It was also said whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.

533. Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all.

Verse 38. You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. Verse 43. You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Now it's the same pattern again and again. And it's meant to drive this point home.

This is what astonished the people. Most of the teachings Jesus quotes here are from the Bible. From the Old Testament law. Even from the Ten Commandments. Jesus doesn't say that these teachings are necessarily wrong.

[13:05] But he does say that they're out of date. They have been rendered obsolete by the fact that he is now on the scene and he's teaching. What the rabbis say, what the Bible says, those things don't matter as much as what I'm about to say to you now.

I say to you. It's his personal authority that matters. I hope you can understand why people are so astonished. Several years ago I got a parking ticket.

And it was only a \$25 parking ticket, but it came with \$130 in court costs. So it ended up being pretty expensive. I thought it was outrageous. And I actually thought I wasn't guilty of the violation.

So I decided to fight it. I went to the place where I'd been assigned the parking ticket and I took pictures. I paced off the distance from where I'd parked to the nearest no parking sign. It was like 60 yards. And I took my pictures and my evidence into court.

I showed them to the prosecutor beforehand. And he dropped the charges. And I walked out of that courtroom feeling like Perry Mason. That was the high point of my legal career.

[14:08] I don't know much about being a lawyer. But I do know that there's a certain way that you argue in a court of law. I did not walk into the court and say, the law says that I cannot park on the street. But I say to you.

That I can. I'd have been laughed out of court. I don't get to make the law. I'm subject to it. I answer to the law.

But Jesus is different. When he says, I say to you, it means something different. You'll never hear Jesus say, well, that's just one man's opinion. I'm not going to tell you how to live your life.

You have every right to think differently. Your sex life. What you do with your money. How you treat your employees. The resentment you harbor to people who have hurt you and treated you terribly.

And all these things. Jesus comes to you and he says, I make the law. And the Gospel of Matthew is an amazing book.

- [15:08] Everywhere we see Jesus acting with real authority. And if you keep reading into Matthew chapter 8, you'll read the account of Jesus healing a man with leprosy. The sick man comes to him and says, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

And Jesus says, I will be clean. It's his word and his will that counts. And then the man is clean. Jesus' authority is not merely moral or intellectual. It extends even over physical creation.

You may have heard the story of King Canute. The man who was king of England and most of Scandinavia around the year 1000. And the legend has it that King Canute once commanded that his chair should be set on the shore when the tide began to rise.

And then he spoke to the rising sea saying, you are a part of my dominion. And the ground that I am seated upon is mine. Nor has anyone disobeyed my orders with impunity. Therefore, I order you not to rise onto my land nor to wet the clothes or body of your Lord.

But the sea carried on rising as usual without any reverence for his person and soaked his feet and legs. Then he moving away said, all the inhabitants of the world should know that the power of kings is vain and trivial.

- [16:16] And that none is worthy the name of king but he whose command the heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws. Now if this story is accurate, Canute had sense enough to recognize the limits of his own rather impressive authority.

And he also recognized the infinite extent of Christ's. If you keep reading all the way through the Gospel of Matthew, you'll see that the Gospel is always talking about God's kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven. What is it? What is God's kingdom? Well, it's wherever God's rule is established. More than that, the Gospel of Matthew tells that it's wherever Jesus Christ himself is established.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't just a collection of moral sayings that reasonable people can agree about. No, it's Jesus' way of saying, this is what life is going to be like when I'm the king.

Once you understand this point about Jesus' authority, it changes the way you read the Sermon on the Mount. Lots of religions have some version of the golden rule. But the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, the teachings, are the personal commandments of a king over his people.

- [17:27] You've heard all sorts of things said by all sorts of people for a long time. But now I say to you, So what is Jesus saying to you?

And how will you respond? The Sermon on the Mount exists to bring you face to face with that question. To cause you to meet Jesus' authority in a narrow alleyway so you can't get around it.

And force you to make a decision. Because Jesus isn't just speaking to crowds on a mountaintop 2,000 years ago. He's speaking to individuals like you and me right now.

Perhaps you sometimes pray the Lord's Prayer. Or maybe just memorized it when you were a child. That's in the Sermon on the Mount. That's how Jesus teaches us to pray.

And if you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That's another way of praying that God's rule will be recognized and obeyed as fully here on earth and in our lives.

- [18:35] As it is by the angels in heaven. Can you pray that prayer with full sincerity? What would your life really look like if you put yourself under his authority?

I don't know what's happening in your life. I know that some of you are probably at points of transition. Maybe you've just moved to town and you're setting up a new life here. Maybe you're starting a new job or academic program.

If so, it's worth thinking about how you can recognize Christ's authority in your life. What truths is Jesus calling you to believe?

What acts of courage or compassion is he calling you to take? What wicked desires is he calling for you to resist and put to death?

Now, Jesus is a humble man. Next week in the evening service, we'll begin a series through the book of Philippians. A book which talks all about Jesus' humility. He doesn't consider himself above asking nicely.

[19:41] He's still a king who speaks with real authority.

Now, there's another aspect of Jesus' authority here in this sermon that we haven't mentioned yet. Jesus can command. But he can also make promises. And the Sermon on the Mount is full of promises.

Let me just point out a few. Matthew 5, 6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matthew 6, 6.

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6, 31 through 33.

Therefore, don't be anxious saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things. And your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

[20:42] And all these things will be added to you. Matthew 7, 7. Seek and you will find. Jesus can make these promises to all of us because he speaks with authority.

He doesn't have to check with the boss and make sure it's okay. The kingdom and the satisfaction and the truth and everything else that we need is his to give.

Now a little bit later in Matthew, the scribes come to Jesus and they challenge him. You can just listen as I read from Matthew 16. And the Pharisees and scribes came and to test him.

They asked him to show him a sign from heaven. He answered them, When it is evening, you say it will be fair weather for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be stormy today for the sky is red and threatening. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky.

But you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asked for a sign. But no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. So he left them and departed.

[21:45] The teachers, some of the same people we're talking about, they came and asked him for a miracle. And the issue is the exact same one we're tackling in Matthew 7, 28 and 29. Who are you to be saying and doing these things?

By what authority do you do these things? But these Pharisees and Sadducees, here they don't want a biblical verse or a citation of a rabbinical scholar. What they want is a miracle, a sign from heaven, undeniable evidence.

You might be asking the same question. Yes, you can see as I talk and as you look at the Bible for yourself, you can see that Jesus claims a great deal of authority, incredible authority, astonishing, improbable authority.

But maybe it's just insanity or vain glory. How can I really know that this authority is his? Well, Jesus says the only sign these people will get is the sign of Jonah.

And he's talking about the resurrection. You may remember the story of Jonah. Jonah's swallowed by the whale. Three days, he's in the belly of the whale. And then he's sort of vomited back up onto the beach. And Jesus is saying, look, three days I'll be in the grave.

[22:54] And then I will emerge again before many eyewitnesses. This is the sign that these teachers will receive. This is the sign that all of us receive. It's the seal which guarantees the message.

If you were here this morning, you heard Greg preach about his own investigation into the resurrection when he was wrestling with the truthfulness of the Christian teaching. That's where you should go to the resurrection if you have questions about the veracity of Jesus' authority.

But Jesus also talks about the weather. He answered them, when it is evening, you say, it will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.

What is he saying? If we really boil it down, Jesus is saying, look, you look at the sky and you can predict the weather, but you can't see what's right in front of your face. Jesus doesn't need to give a sign from heaven.

He is the sign from heaven. And so we all of us find ourselves in the very same place that those crowds did on the lakeshore so many years ago.

[23:59] Jesus speaks like no one else. He claims authority that we could never dream of. Real authority that gets into the details and decisions of our lives.

We are witnesses to his words and deeds. How will we respond? How will we respond? Let's pray. Father, you are the king of all.

And you have sent your son to share with us the truth that can save us, that can fulfill us, and make us stand today and forever.

We ask that you would give us strength to obey. Give us wisdom to recognize the truth. And the humility to lay aside our own foolish claims to authority.

It does not belong to us. And we pray these things in the name of our Lord, the only Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[25:05] Amen. At this point we do some Q&A.; So if you have a question you've been wanting to ask, now is a great time to go ahead and ask it.

Does anyone have a question? Does anyone have a question? Does anyone have a question? Any at all?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

So the question is, what are my thoughts about how Christians are supposed to take on Jesus authority or express Jesus' authority? Yeah.

In the book of Titus, no, sorry, in the book of Jude, it talks about the deposit once and for all entrusted to the saints, which is the body of Christian teaching, which is entrusted as a gift, and it's meant to be kept sort of pure and undiluted and passed on through the ages.

[26:26] And so this is why we have a Bible that comes from the apostles' teachings and is passed on. I think the primary way that we kind of can transmit Jesus' authority, we can never claim this kind of authority, our authority is borrowed as well, is by holding fast to the apostolic teaching, which comes from Jesus, and faithfully proclaiming it where we go.

And so that's our goal. And to the extent that we do that, we can teach with the authority of Christ. And in any way we depart from it, our authority is lost.

So we ought to have some humility because, of course, we ourselves cannot ever perfectly understand and know the mind of God and communicate his truth. But we should strive to do it.

So good question. Any other questions or comments? Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Okay. You're moving on Wednesday. We'd like us to pray for you. We're happy to do that. And what's your name? Barbara. Barbara. Okay. Let's actually do that real quick. Let's pray for Barbara real quick. Father, we pray for Barbara. We pray that on Wednesday her move would be smooth and everything would go well and that your power and provision would be apparent.

[27:51] We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. All right. Let me close with a question for you. And we'll just have one or two people answer it. Use your historical imagination and imagine that you are there in this crowd as Jesus is teaching on the mount.

And assume that this crowd leaves and departs still talking about Jesus and the way he taught with authority and that some of them leave convinced that he teaches with a real authority and that some reject the authority.

What's different in the paths and lives of those two groups of people? In the months or years following the sermon, what would you expect to be different? You can't hear me?

So imagine some of the crowd who heard Jesus preach heard him teach with authority and they placed themselves under it and believed that he had the authority that he claimed to have and that others did not.

What would be the differences in their lives following that sermon as they leave and go about in the weeks and months to come, they go about their everyday lives. How would their lives look different from the group that rejected the authority?

[29:00] What would they be doing differently? Yeah.

Yeah. Okay, so they would try to kind of change their behavior and their life to match up with the teachings in specific ways and not just do things based on their feelings or impressions.

Okay, great. Absolutely. Any other thoughts? All right, well, something for you to think about as you go from here. You can reflect about Jesus' sermon as well.

Thank you so much.