

“Authority and Power” (Luke 4:31–44)

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Recently, we’ve had another mass shooting.¹ This time, seventeen people died. The alleged shooter is a very troubled young man, Nikolaus Cruz. This shooting is an evil act, to say the very least. The consequences are horrific. And in the wake of this shooting, there have been many reactions. Some demand action, often talking about gun control. Some who support the Second Amendment push back, talking about the need to balance safety and freedom, security and constitutional rights. Others said that local law enforcement knew that this young man was dangerous and should have acted in some way. If the authorities had acted responsibly, this young man should never have had access to guns. Not only do we have to deal with the horror of the seventeen lives lost too soon, but we have to deal with the confusing and controversial debates that follow this event.

Now, my point in bringing up this issue isn’t to get into specifics about gun laws. I’m certainly no expert in public policy. But my point is this: This shooting is another reminder that we live a broken, fallen world that contains evil. And when evil is on display, we often cry out for authorities to do something. We long for someone to have the power to stop such a tragic event. We want someone who can fix this broken world.

Today, we’re going to see that Jesus has the authority and power to fix what is broken in this world. We’ve been studying the book of Luke together over the last three months and today we’ll look at Luke 4:31–44.

Before we start to read this passage, I want to say one thing about it up front. Most of us don’t have a problem accepting that there are supernatural elements to the Bible. Obviously, God is supernatural—he is beyond the world of nature, the world that we can see, hear, and touch. But there are other elements of the Christian worldview that are beyond nature, things like the devil and demons and the possibility of miracles. And some people have a hard time believing such things are real. If you’re one of those people, I want to ask you to suspend your disbelief for a while. And then, later, I’ll address some objections that you may have. We suspend our disbelief when we watch superhero movies in order to enter into a different world. We don’t say,

¹ This shooting occurred in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018.

“Wait, there’s no planet called Krypton! Radioactive spiders can’t make a person climb walls! There’s no such metal called vibranium!” For now, I want you to enter into a world of spirits and miracles. This may seem like a fantasy, but I believe it’s true, and I’ll try to convince you of that, too.

Before I read today’s passage, let me explain the context briefly. Jesus has recently begun his ministry. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus began his public activity by reading Scripture and teaching in a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Here, he is in another town in Galilee, Capernaum. Capernaum was one of the larger villages in Galilee. It had anywhere from 600 to 1,500 people and it was known for its fishing industry, since it was on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was teaching in this place on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest and worship. It seems that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, the place where Jewish people gathered to pray, read Scripture, and hear teaching.

While teaching in the synagogue, Jesus encounters a man who was possessed by a demon. That same day, Jesus also heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law as well as other people as well.

So, let’s now read the whole passage together. Here is Luke 4:31–44:

³¹ And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, ³² and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. ³³ And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ “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.” ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. ³⁶ And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” ³⁷ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

³⁸ And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

⁴⁰ Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. ⁴¹ And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

⁴² And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,

⁴³ but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.²

I want to make four basic points about this passage. The first is that Jesus’ word possesses authority and power. If you’ve ever read the Gospels, the four biographies of Jesus in the Bible, you will see that Jesus does some amazing things with words. Obviously, Jesus is an amazing teacher. There is simply no one who taught like him. He speaks with complete authority. He is self-assured, never doubting who he is or what he teaches. Jesus not only explains the true meaning of passages from the Hebrew Bible—our Old Testament—but he adds powerful new teachings, too. It would be impossible to mention all of his astonishing teachings in one sermon, so I would encourage you to read through one of the Gospels. Perhaps start with Matthew and read chapters 5–7, the famous “Sermon on the Mount.” If you want to learn more about Jesus and his teachings, you could go to our website and listen to sermons from two sermon series I have presented here: “Who Is Jesus?”³ and “Conversations with Jesus.”⁴

We’re not told about the content of Jesus’ teaching. We’re only told that his teaching was astonishing. In the Gospels, we see that Jesus preached the message of the kingdom of God. Here, it’s called “good news” (verse 43). That’s what the word “gospel” means. Jesus often taught the good news that the kingdom of God had arrived. The kingdom of God is God’s rule over God’s people in God’s place. Jesus is the true King, not just of Israel, but of the world. People who respond to his message are his people; they belong to God and his kingdom. And the true place of God is wherever Jesus is. Jesus often told people about their sin, how they had ignored God and done what is wrong. But he also told them how they could respond rightly to God and be forgiven of their sin. I’ll talk more about that later.

What we see here is that Jesus’ words have power to do things. He’s not just a great teacher. But he can also rule over the spiritual realm and heal people with his words. Jesus drives out a demon from a man in the synagogue and then later he casts out several demons. Then he heals Peter’s mother-in-law of a dangerous fever and heals others.

What are we to make of demons? The Bible says two important things regarding the presence of evil in the world. One thing the Bible acknowledges is that behind all evil lies a

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

⁴ <https://wbcommunity.org/conversations-with-jesus>.

mysterious figure, Satan, and that he has many demons. We assume that these are angels who became evil. The Bible doesn't explicitly teach us the origins of Satan and his minions, though there are some hints as to where they come from. The Bible is more concerned about reporting that these beings are real.

I can't spend too much time this morning on this issue, but I do want to address it because I know some people have a hard time believing it's true. So, let me make a few quick points. One, the realm of the demonic is real. Many people have attested to the reality of demons or evil spirits. Craig Keener, a biblical scholar, has written a large book on miracles.⁵ Toward the end of this book he has a long section on demons and exorcisms and he reports this: "[A] psychiatrist warns against viewing most sorts of emotional problems as demonic but notes that he has seen a few clear cases of possession by a genuine spirit 'even in my own psychiatric practice.'" This was a psychiatrist writing for the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*.⁶ (I assume this was an American psychiatrist.) Specifically, this psychiatrist offers three examples of people who were involved in occult practices.

Craig Keener also writes, "Still another psychiatrist notes that 70 percent of his work deals with psychosomatic cases, but in 4 percent of the cases he has treated, he has needed to undertake exorcism. He notes roughly 280 cases that required exorcism, especially resulting from the occult practices of the person or their family (such as Ouija boards, witchcraft, horoscopes, etc.)."⁷

Now, if you paid attention to those quotes, you'll see that demon possessions are rare. A lot of unusual behavior in people can be traced to physical or psychological problems. But there are some cases that cause people to act in strange and evil ways, and these cases can't be treated with therapy and medicine. In these cases, people often speak in strange voices or do things that are destructive. I can't say that the shooter in Parkland, Florida was demon-possessed, but I also can't rule out that he was influenced by demonic forces. Committing such evil acts is an irrational act that cannot be easily explained by pointing to chemical imbalances or a bad

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁶ Walter C. Johnson, "Possession," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 34.3 (1982): 149–154. The quotation appears on p. 839 of Keener, quoting p. 152 of Johnson.

⁷ Keener, *Miracles*, 839. Keener refers to Kenneth R. McAll, "The Ministry of Deliverance," *Expository Times* 86.10 (July 1975): 296–298.

upbringing. There are a lot of people with chemical imbalances and bad childhoods who don't shoot dozens of innocent people.

So, demon possession may be rare. Also, demonic forces don't seem to be evenly distributed in space or time. It seems like there are times and places where the forces of evil are more active. A number of reports of demonic activity come from places where the gospel, the message of Jesus, is breaking new ground. It seems that during Jesus' time, demonic activity was heightened. And that shouldn't surprise us, because Satan opposed Jesus and tried to thwart his plans. We saw that a few weeks ago.⁸

I don't know that demon possession is common in America. But that doesn't mean Satan isn't at work. Whenever people lie and kill and reject God, they are under Satan's influence. And it seems we do a great job of doing these things without demon possession. In fact, Satan's greatest trick seems to be getting people to doubt that he and his preternatural powers are real. Whether we see the reality of spirits and miracles is a matter of what we presuppose to be real. In short, whether we believe nature is all there is or whether we believe there is more to reality than meets the eye, our position rests on faith.

To get back to the point of this passage, Jesus is able to exercise authority over the demonic realm through his word. All he has to do is rebuke demons and tell them to leave and they do.

The other thing that the Bible says about evil is that all bad things like illness and even death entered into the world because of our sin, our rebellion against God. When the first human beings failed to trust, love, and obey God the way that we were made to, the world came under a curse. Part of that curse includes illness and death. We see here that Jesus has the authority and power to heal people who are sick. Jesus heals by his word. Simon Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a high fever. This was probably a very serious condition, particularly in an era before modern medicine. Jesus simply rebukes the fever and it's gone. Later, he heals all kinds of sick people. He lays his hands on them not because he has to, but to show that he cares. Often, sick people wouldn't be touched. They were considered unclean. But Jesus wasn't afraid to touch them and heal them.

Now, you may wonder why Jesus doesn't heal all diseases today. You may wonder, "If Jesus could rebuke that fever, why doesn't he rebuke fever itself?" You may think, "If Jesus

⁸ See the sermon, "Tempted," that I preached on January 28, 2018: <https://wbcommunity.org/tempted>.

could make a blind person see, why doesn't he remove blindness from the world?" I'll address that in a little while. But now, let's move on to the second main point of this passage.

The second point is that Jesus has authority and power because of who he is. Jesus isn't just a great teacher or even some kind of faith healer. He is "the Holy One of God" and "the Son of God" (verses 34 and 41, respectively). This passage reveals Jesus' identity. He isn't just a man, he is the God-man. He is the divine Son of God, equal in divinity and power to God the Father. As the Son of God, he knows no beginning; he is eternal. Yet over two thousand years ago he entered into this world by being conceived in a virgin's womb and being born in humble circumstances.

What's interesting is that it's the demons who recognize who Jesus really is. The Bible says that even the demons know that God exists, and they shudder at the thought (James 2:19). Being a Christian is a lot more than believing in the existence of God. Satan and his forces believe that much. Being a Christian means loving and trusting God. Yet these demons don't love Jesus. No, they're afraid. They ask, "Have you come to destroy us?" Yes. Jesus comes to take back God's world from the forces of evil.

Yet Jesus also commands the demons to be silent. Why is that? There may be several reasons. One is that he may not want this testimony coming from demons. After all, they are probably not the most reliable sources. But I think the better reason is that it was not time for this to be revealed. Verse 41 says that Jesus "would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ." "Christ" and "Messiah" both mean "anointed one." In the Old Testament, there are passages that talk of a king who was a descendant of King David, a king who would come and crush his enemies and rule with righteousness and justice. If people heard that Jesus was the Christ, they might have thought he would come to overthrow the Roman Empire, which was the superpower of the day and which ruled over Israel. But Jesus didn't come to be a military ruler or a political revolutionary. He is the true King who will one day remove all evil from the world, but he didn't come to build a geo-political nation when he came the first time.

Jesus surely also knew that if everyone went around claiming he was the Christ and the Son of God, he would be killed. Of course, Jesus is ultimately killed for claiming to be equal to God. Those who didn't believe Jesus was telling the truth thought he was committing blasphemy. They were also threatened by him, and they eliminated that threat. Jesus knew he would die, but he knew that his time hadn't come yet. He first had to teach more. He had to perform more signs

and wonders. When the time was right, he would be crucified, treated as an enemy of the state even though he had done nothing wrong. But that time hadn't come yet.

Still, I think Luke wants us to know that Jesus is God. Because Jesus is God, he has the power to deal with evil in this world. In fact, only God can decisively and finally remove all the evil of this world, and he will do that one day.

The third point of this passage is that salvation leads to service. Deliverance should lead to devotion. Healing should lead to helping. We see this with Simon's mother. Simon is better known as Peter, generally thought to be the leader of Jesus' disciples. We'll learn more about him next week. But for now, we see that Simon's mother-in-law was sick, that Jesus healed her, and that she then started to serve them.

As a side note, we should see that Peter was married (see also 1 Cor. 9:5). The Catholic Church believes that Peter was the first pope. But they also believe that the pope and all priests shouldn't marry. Yet Peter was married and later tradition says that he had a daughter.⁹ There's nothing wrong with being married and having children, and Scripture expects that church leaders will be married and have children (1 Tim. 3:2, 4). So, we must conclude that the Catholic Church is wrong.

Back to the point at hand, it would be easy to miss this brief description of Simon's mother-in-law. The focus is on Jesus' healing. But once she's healed, she serves. This is often how things work in the Bible. God saves his people and they serve him. He rescued the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt so that they would serve him (Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). And God rescues us from our own sin and the condemnation that we deserve not just so we can live lives of comfort and ease. No, he rescues us so that we will worship him and serve him. That is always the pattern. So, when people claim to be Christians and don't actually worship Jesus and serve in a church, I have to wonder if they've been saved in the first place. At the least, they're not acting like it.

Here's the fourth point of this passage: Jesus destroys evil without destroying us. Look back at verse 35. After Jesus rebukes the demon, we're told, "And when the demon had thrown

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.30.1. Eusebius only says that Peter had a child. An editor's footnote mentions a tradition that states that Peter had a daughter. See Eusebius of Caesaria, "The Church History of Eusebius," in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890): 1:162fn2.

him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.” The demon looked like he would harm this man. Yet Jesus is able to remove the demon and the man was left unharmed.

Now, here’s the importance of Jesus dying on the cross. He didn’t just die because people thought he was wrong and people thought he was a threat. Ultimately, he died to pay for the sins of everyone who is united to him by faith. If you trust Jesus, your sins were destroyed on the cross. As the apostle Paul puts it, God has canceled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

We can think of sin in two ways. Sins are wrong actions. They are actions that violate God’s design for our lives and transgress God’s commands. But sin is also a power, a force of evil that we can’t control. Sin distorts our desires so that we don’t want to love and serve God. Sin corrupts God’s world, a world that was initially good. Because God is a perfect, holy judge, he must punish evil. He must punish it and remove it from his world. If it were not for Jesus, every one of us would be condemned. We would be punished for our own sin by being removed from God’s world, cast out into hell. God would be just to do that. But God is also merciful and loving and kind. So, he provided a way for our sin to be destroyed. He sent his Son to take our punishment for us. That’s what Jesus did on the cross. He died so that we can live. He was bound to the cross so that we might go free. He was possessed by evil so that we might be healed.

As I said, Jesus’ death pays for the sins of his people. Only those who put their faith in Jesus, who trust that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that Jesus did what the Bible said he did, will have their sins forgiven. Only those people will be reconciled to God. Only those people will escape God’s judgment and will live with God forever in a perfect world.

Earlier, I raised the question of why Jesus hasn’t removed all evil in the world. Why does God allow things like mass shootings and cancer? The answer is that God will put an end to those things. We don’t exactly when that will happen, but when Jesus returns from heaven to earth, he will make all things right. But when that happens, God will remove all evil from the world. That includes evil people. Those people who don’t have their sins punished on the cross will pay that punishment themselves. In other words, God will punish all sin. Those who trust Jesus already have had their sin punished. Those who reject Jesus will pay the price themselves. When Jesus comes again, it will be too late to turn away from sin and turn to him in faith.

When Jesus comes again, he will purge the world of all evil. Satan and his minions will be cast out into hell. But so will all who reject Jesus. And God will transform the character of his

people so that they will not sin. They will receive perfect, immortal bodies and they will live with God in a perfect world.

So, why doesn't Jesus remove all evil in the world? The answer is that he can't do that without removing all people who now reject him. He is giving them more time to turn to him in faith.

It may be hard to understand why God would allow evil to happen in the world that he made, particularly since God is all-powerful, perfectly good, loving, and in control. But we can never say that God doesn't care. We know he cares because he sent his Son into an evil world. His Son performed miracles, which are signs that demonstrate his power and also what he came to do—to rescue us from the forces of evil. And Jesus subjected himself to evil. He let people mock him and arrest him and torture him and kill him, all to save us from our sins. And we're given the promise that one day he will return to make all things right.

But before he returns, he has given us the opportunity to respond to him. How do we do that? How should we respond to today's passage?

If you're not a Christian yet, I would recommend that you learn more about Jesus. Again, read through one of the Gospels. We're studying the Gospel of Luke, but I would recommend also reading Matthew or John. (There's nothing wrong with Mark, but he doesn't spend as much time reporting Jesus' teachings.) If you read either of those Gospels, you will encounter Jesus' amazing teachings. I think you'll find that his words are unequalled in terms of authority and power. There is simply no one who speaks like Jesus.

When we see that, we have a choice to make. We can believe what the Gospel writers tell us. That is, we can believe they reported the truth. Or we can believe that some fairly ordinary Jewish men just so happened to create the greatest fictional character ever. We have evidence outside the Bible that shows that Jesus actually lived and died on a cross, and that Jesus' followers claimed to have seen him alive again.¹⁰ And I don't think the writers of the Gospels ever could have created such a powerful fictional character. Jesus is real and his words are real—and really powerful.

Once you are exposed to the real Jesus, you have to choose whether you must put your faith in him or not. I would urge you to trust him. There will be no other answer to the world's

¹⁰ For evidence that supports the Gospel accounts, see the sermon, "How Can We Know Jesus?" at <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

problems. Yes, we can restrain evil and make improvements. But evil has a way of escaping our best restraints. Even the best nations with the best laws experience evil. We are foolish and naïve if we think that we have the power to remove pride, greed, lust, hate, and even murder from the world. No amount of law, military might, money, education, medicine, or technology will be able to do that. Only Jesus can, and only Jesus will.

If you claim to be a Christian today, are you serving Jesus? Has Jesus really saved you? One mark of a Christian is service. We can serve people in our everyday lives, and we ought to do that. But we should be serving in a local church. We always have a need for people to serve. If you feel God moving you to serve in this church, please talk to me about it. We'll talk about your desires, your talents, and your spiritual gifts, and we'll see if there's a way those things can line up with needs that we have in the church.

We should also consider how we pray for those who are hurting. We often pray as if the end goal were healing. But it's not. The end goal of everything is God's glory. And God is glorified when we love, worship, and serve him. So, when you pray for those who are hurting, yes, pray for healing. But pray that they would be healed so that they would then be able to serve. We should pray that God would comfort the hurting so that they can comfort others who are hurting. We should pray for good health so that we can serve God well and for a long time. I don't think it's a sin to ask God for money, but you should pray that God would give you more money so that you can give more to the church, to other gospel ministries, and to the poor.

Finally, we should think about whether Jesus' words have authority in all of our lives. What would it look like for Jesus to be Lord of your money, our marriages, our work, our time, and our possessions? Are we inviting the word of God to speak into those areas of our lives? For Jesus' words to carry weight in our lives, we must first know those words. Jesus can't speak through a closed Bible. And we must not only read or hear God's words, but we must put them into practice. When we do, we'll find that Jesus' words carry authority and power, and it is then that we will experience God's power in our lives.