

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Authority of His Preaching

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Authority characterized Jesus' preaching. Gathered in Temple, synagogue, or home, grouped in the freeness of a wayside stop, his audiences were awed by this strange element of authority, whose rarity was as attractive as perplexing. Their own honored leaders had not been like this new Preacher. Chagrined at his personal applications, angered at his rebukes, comforted by his promises, enlightened by his wisdom, accepting or rejecting his message, his varied auditors were compelled to confess to the dignity and authority of Jesus' preaching.

#### I. Authority Expressed

1. In tone.—The voice of Jesus rang with the royal splendor of the King of the Ages. The consciousness of kingship lent itself to his speech, giving a dignity and worth even to other themes than the kingdom of heaven. Character expressed itself in the tone as in the matter of his preaching.

Based upon his consciousness of God, vibrant with important truths for the world, intensive with personal applications, Jesus' tone of authority in its impassioned tenseness carried his message beyond the ceremonials of worship into the inner life. He was not a sycophant, flattering men into his cause. Regardless of the favor of the privileged classes and despising the shams of the accredited leaders, he put into his preaching the note of authority that impelled attention and directed men into discipleship. His was not the hesitating tone of a seeker for truth. He spoke with tones that sought no apology.

2. In address.—Jesus' personal bearing and demeanor were authoritative. With him there lacked any effort to secure the goodwill of men by acceptance of their senseless traditions, nor would he attempt to conciliate his enemies who might have the advantage of social, religious, or civic prominence and power.

His step was firm and confident with his unalterable purpose of salvation for the lost world. With undaunted courage he looked into the faces of his foes, scowling with disapproval, glaring with hatred, or contorted with envy. He carried himself with the air of one whose resources would not fail even under the most critical and severe demands. His manner of address, his customary appearance, and his unbroken serenity evidenced his right to speak with assurance upon themes that might control the destinies of men and nations. In his first visit to his boyhood home of Nazareth, when his fame had begun to spread, his application of the Scriptures to himself caused the enraged congregation to lead him forth with the intention to cast him from the cliff adjacent to the city; "but he passing through the *midst* (in the middle) of them went his way." He did not put out his hand in objection to the plan, but somehow his manner so awed and cowed them that their plan failed.

3. In imperatives.—His authoritative preaching further exhibited itself in his imperatives. Jesus did not confine himself to the *optative mood* (a grammatical mood that indicates a wish or hope; “I would be happy... If only.... Would that....) either in his inner emotions or his outward words. He commanded.

Men were impressed with the sense that obedience would bring welfare and joy, while disobedience would lead to ill results. The demons heard his voice and were glad to escape into their former habitat in the dark abyss. The sinful man and woman turned into the path of uprightness and discipleship at his word. The fearful disciples, whose hearts were moved with wonder that Jesus could speak to the turbulent sea and be answered with a great calm, voiced the prevalent impression created by Jesus’ imperatives. “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

## II. Authority Compared

1. With current teachers.—Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum. “And they were astonished at his teaching: for he taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes.” The people were not *long* (slow) in observing the new accent in Jesus’ method. The rabbinical method was familiar to them; here was something new. The scribes marketed the shelf-worn opinions of illustrious teachers of the past, but Jesus offered the uncut pages of a new revelation. They called to their support the names of the dead scholars, but he never cited any one in his behalf; his own word was more authoritative than that of all ancient scholarship.

Jesus did not care for the aristocracy and traditionalism of letters. His authority differed from the scribes and Pharisees in its source, methods, and worth. In contrast to their authority of book opinions, ancient traditions, and external ceremonials he presented an authority of personality, originality, and spirituality.

2. With later preachers.—Jesus spoke in his own name as the incarnation of truth. Later preachers have been discoverers and interpreters of truth. His authority was primary and personal, theirs secondary and interpretative. Prophet, priest, poet, and preacher with their visions of the eternal verities have been subject to the conditions of the nature and author of truth for their personal appreciations, for as seers and apostles they have been forceful and useful, but limited, in their concepts and declarations of truth. Jesus alone among men had the right to assert his preeminence. “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

The Christian ministry dares not arrogate to itself even the faint likeness to his authority. His is the only voice without uncertainty in commands and preaching.

## III. Authority Challenged

1. His critics.—Fearful of the turn of popular favor from themselves toward Jesus and unwilling to endure this degradation, the religious leaders strenuously resisted the authority of Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees were specially interested. They saw the increasing weight that came from this new accent of certainty and authority.

1. Their challenge.—Recall here the former discussion of the polemics of Jesus. Added to the numerous charges against Jesus was this challenge of his right to speak with authority and finality upon religion. This opposition went beyond a general attitude of antipathy and became definite and serious in its direct and formal challenges against his authoritative manner and words.

This new homiletical method of the Nazarene brought the methods of the scribes and pharisees into an unwilling eclipse. They became offended at him because they were really opposed to crowning Jesus as Master over their thoughts. Intellectual and professional pride stood in their way to prevent such abdication in his favor. Instances of special mention of his authority and frequent demands for signs show how large a place this homiletical trait held in provoking their hatred to Jesus. They presented a quasi-legal challenge in requesting his credentials for his Temple ministry, but their real spirit had been previously demonstrated in efforts to entrap him in word or deed. Jealousy is a keen inventor of weapons. The repeated calls on him for justification of his methods were really based on their knowledge that his authority far out-classed their methods and abilities and would easily win the people away from their leadership.

The scribes and Pharisees would have limited Jesus to the parrot way. They would have denied him the right to work miracles and to preach with freshness. Let him return to the ancient fathers for his statements of truth. But Jesus did not enter such bondage to the past. His word came with authority.

#### IV. Authority of Personality

1. Self-assertion.—Jesus' note of authority was due largely to his self-assertion. His authority did not depend primarily upon a codified system of revealed truths. He made extensive use of the Old Testament, but he did not base his right to speak with authority upon his similarity to or fulfillment of the teachings found there. He recognized in this sacred literature the divine message for ages past, but for the present and future needs of men he regarded his own words as of equal authority and force. In his own life he was his own final source of appeal, since he and the Father were one.

The authority of a book, however sacred and high in origin, may become ineffective because unread and therefore powerless to indicate the applications of truth to special cases. The authority of personality becomes communicative and directive for duties. The heart's throbs, the variety of endless contact, and the adaptability to actual needs were resident in Jesus' authority of personality.

This personal element was extended further and became self-assertive. Inexplicable, subtle, powerful, the force of personality lay behind the preaching of Jesus. The man behind the message is not less useful and directive of success than the man behind the gun. The sermon in ideal is really the preacher expressed. Omitting reference to the claims and offices of Jesus, it may yet be affirmed that he was authoritative in preaching because he impressed himself upon his audiences. Without personal appropriation and incarnation of the preached word the preacher would be only the spokesman of platitudes and generalities. Preaching and almsgiving are bound by the common law.

“Not what we give, but what we share;  
For the gift without the giver is bare.  
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—  
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me.”—Lowell, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*

Jesus' self-giving gave authority to his ministry. His preaching was neither a profession nor an avocation, but a life, his message coming as the outflow of personality. This spiritual self-assertion found spontaneous illustration in the contact with the woman with the issue of blood. The poor timid invalid came amid the crowd, as Jesus was on his way to the home of the prominent Jairus, and touched his garment with trembling fingers. “And straightway Jesus, perceiving in himself that the power proceeding from him had gone forth, turned himself about in the crowd, and said, Who touched my garments?” To his spoken words he gave the same self-giving that had so quickly and wonderfully responded to the appeal of the wretched woman. Directness and efficiency were thus guaranteed to his ministry.

2. Discipleship.—Jesus said, “Follow me,” and men assumed their new duties of discipleship with the feeling of satisfaction from right conduct. He called men to accept his Mastership. He did not coerce them into obedience, but somehow his authority impelled them to find in him their ambitions realized, their joys enlarged and purified, and their hearts filled with peace.

His method did not destroy the autonomy and initiative of the individual will. His personality and mission entered into the life of the believer. Those who answered his call to service rejoiced in their reflection of his glory and likeness, and felt no restraint in their preference of his will to their own. Regnant over the material world, whose laws gave no discordant token of infraction by his spiritual supremacy, Jesus changed not his claim of royalty when he commanded men to submit their plans to his direction, to forsake their homes for his sake, and to recognize his right to rule supremely over men. His authority was inclusive of lordship.

In the success of his leadership in his own day and in the Christian centuries Jesus rescued from presumption his demand for absolute trust from men. His personality and destiny confirmed his authority.

Disregard for this call to discipleship brought a guilty conscience. The rich ruler, whose record had been so upright and legalistic, received from the new Preacher the condition for entrance into eternal life: “Come, follow me. But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful.” Jesus had required of him the test of character, the exchange of wealth for discipleship, and the man could not part with his money. But with the choice there went the consciousness that he had followed the lower road. His sorrow indicated a recognition of Jesus' authority. A bitter conscience testified to the truth. The foes of Jesus doubtless had certain promptings to follow him, but these impulses were stifled in more intense hatred and opposition to him.

## v. Authority of Purpose

1. Message.—Jesus spoke with the authority of a message divine in origin and universal in its application. He did not come for philosophical disputations and social entertainment. Definite in his own mind, committed to him by the Father, and essential to the welfare of men, his message was worthy of attention and acceptance. It was God's promised but delayed revelation of eternal life through the Messiah. It carried an obligation to everyone who would enter such a life. Jesus was more than a prophet and preacher of righteousness. His demand for civic righteousness would have justified his tone, while his appeal for personal integrity could hardly have been expressed in other forms of address.

Efforts to better the social and economic conditions of society would have given a great incentive to Jesus' preaching, which greatly affected these as secondary results, but his chief concern was to prepare men for the eternal estate of the soul. Upon the darkness of sin, suffering, and human inequalities in the strife of life had fallen prophetic glimmerings of the future world, but it was the duty of Jesus to declare the noonday splendor of the doctrine of immortality with its consequent worth to the present life. To such a message, burdened with the instruction for two worlds, there could not be found place for an apologetic tone. The tone must comport with the dignity of the message.

2. Mission.—To his message Jesus united the authority of his mission. He had a message that had never fallen on human ears; he had a mission that no other could perform; a message to deliver, a mission to accomplish.

The marvel would have come if Jesus had not spoken with unusual authority. His message told of God's plan for human salvation, his mission realized this plan; his message was expressed in words and deeds, his mission in life and death. His message made him the Preacher, his mission the Savior. His full vision of himself as the Man of Sorrows, despised and rejected of men, his anticipation of the struggle in the shadows of Gethsemane, his prospect of Via Dolorosa, and his insight into the coming tragedy upon the Place of the Skull gave him the right to speak absolutely and authoritatively. His unique advent was for this end.

Peerless in personality, isolated in greatness, uniquely the Son of God and Son of man, and gifted with a world's redemption, Jesus knew that his mission entitled him to speak as no scribe or Pharisee could speak. His words were full of grace, strength, and confidence, since they were the children of his purpose to fulfill his mission. Not once do we read in the Gospels of his lack of assurance. He kept the unbroken equation of his message and his mission. There was no discord between duty and service with him.

## VI. Authority of Relations

1. To God.—Jesus' relation to God gave authority to his ministry. The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel suggests some of these relations. The Gospels agree in sketching from varied angles of vision the same Word of God. Of himself Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then shall you know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself, but as the Father taught me, I speak these things." The same truth of relations is acknowledged in the Intercessory Prayer: "The words which you gave me I have given unto them." Behind the Preacher stood the

Father, loving, helpful, and omniscient. Jesus could measure his authority by his union with the Father. More fitly than prophet or seer, whose visions of truth would be limited and mediated through minds touched by sin, Jesus could preach and declare to men his holy union with God as the basis for his ministry. The Son knew what lay nearest to the heart of God. He had God's authority.

Jesus departed from the prophetic custom in the use of the formula, "Thus says the Lord." He never used it, or appealed to a higher source than his own words for their confirmation. This intimate fellowship with God brought him the right to say, "Truly, truly, I say unto you." His own words were to be obeyed equally with those of the Father. Out of the depths of his own unity with God and his own immediate conception of truth he brought his message. He really exemplified the original root meaning of the word "authority" in the Greek ἐξουσία, derived from ἔξοστι (ἐκ out of, ἐπι to be). The ministry of other days must present a "Thus says the Lord" for its delegated authority.

2. To men.—Jesus was the Son of man, the heir of all the ages, hence he could preach more clearly than others upon the vital problems of man's destiny. The myriad voices of men in distress came to Jesus as calls upon his sympathy. Men were saying,

"But what am I?  
An infant crying in the night:  
An infant crying for the light:  
And with no language but a cry!"—Tennyson, *In Memoriam, Canto 54*

Jesus answered this infant cry with himself. Upon his heart fell the shadows that saddened others; the minor chords of human woe made his own heart-strings quiver with the sympathetic melody; the threnody of misfortune and the dirge of death found a response in his tenderness and help. He entered into fellowship of a common life with his fellow men, alive to their disappointments, touched by the feeling of their infirmities, tempted with their struggles, and able to succor every tempted soul. He knew the trials, aspirations, and needs of men, for his insight into life was piercing, comprehensive, clear, and interpreted by his own experience.

His words were authoritative with the strength of a fulness of his entrance into the entire life of the world. His mind and heart garnered the full harvest of human experience, excluding the thorns and thistles, which they could not house. His preaching caught the authority of the double relationship. Out of his complete divine Sonship he could bring the message, which could be applied according to his knowledge of men that he brought from his complete human sonship.

## VII. Authority Correlated

1. To miracles.—Though not thus primarily designed, Jesus' miracles accented his note of authority. The popular mind was easily impressed with this marvelous display of superhuman power. Misunderstanding of its function led the people to ask for false exhibitions of it, expecting that Jesus would satisfy their demands. Those who had been the beneficiaries of this power, either personally or from family ties, would naturally respect the word of the miracle-worker and consider it

as binding, while the beholders of his deeds could but acknowledge the presence of the extraordinary in him.

The ability to force disease and demons to forsake the body and mind carried with it the presumption of ability to speak duty for the cured. The blind man at the Pool of Bethesda, when healed, was willing to brave the censure of the leaders for having violated the ordinance about the Sabbath, for Jesus had given him what no other person had attempted to bestow. It might be wrong to heal on the Sabbath, according to the traditions, but the rejoicing man accepted the word of his benefactor. This relation of miracles to his authority needs but a reference to emphasize it as true.

2. To forgiveness.—Power to forgive sins lent authority to Jesus' preaching. More than once he made the penitent sinner rejoice over the gift of forgiveness. When criticized for this Jesus attested his right by miracles. It would be as easy to do the one as the other. The case of the Capernaum paralytic correlated the two prerogatives of the Son of man. God had revealed himself in Jesus that men might have the blessing of forgiveness personalized and applied.

Through this divine right Jesus caught the ear and heart of the sinner whom all other teachers had spurned and despised, but whom Jesus made the basis of his work. In two worlds his word became supreme—the world of the penitent sinner and the world of the rejoicing saint.

## VIII. Authority Limited

1. By the soul's right of choice.—The preaching of Jesus was not with the authority of spiritual despotism. He respected the dignity of man as a selecting intelligence. The soul has the supreme right of choice, competent to follow the narrow, upward path that leads to the eternal city, or to walk the broad, popular road whose end is lost in the pit without bottom, the wailing-place of the damned.

Jesus offered the privilege of life or death; but he recognized the free and sovereign soul, whose destiny another could not assign. Here obtained the limitation of the law of free personality. The great Preacher held this inviolable. He would not compel a free man, though the compulsion would bring the higher destiny and joy. Motives to stir the soul to act, incentives to right conduct, and instruction as to the right were given, but not coercion. This pristine and essential right of the soul was respected. It limited his authority.

2. By Jesus' life-plan.—The general treatment of the place of authority in religion belongs to theological philosophy, and our study is limited to homiletics. It is here pertinent to remark that Jesus himself limited his authority according to his life-plan. He came to save sinners, not to exploit wonderful theories. He confined his authority and themes to religion. Ambition for honor as poet, philosopher, or scientist did not disturb the serenity that came to him through the consciousness that he was doing the will of God and in so doing was accomplishing the most possible for men. The religious sentiment is the most vital and powerful of all human capacities. Jesus spoke to this part of men. He did not make excursions

into byways of truth. He spoke, and men have learned to believe in the finality of his words, because he kept to his purpose of Saviorhood.

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