

Amazed...With Authority

Mark 1:21-28 (NIV84)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." ²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

When you hear the word, "Amazing," what comes to mind? "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound?" (It is now that I said that.) What else do you attach "amazing" to? Amazing movie? Amazing book? Amazing play (might see that tonight)? Amazing event?

When I think of the word "amazing," I'll be honest, my mind gravitates towards video games. That game has the most amazing graphics! They said it back in 1972 when Pong was introduced. They said it when the first Nintendo came out. They said it near the end of 2013 when the Xbox One and Playstation 4 debuted. In the world of gaming, and technology in general, you are always trying to one-up the "amazing" factor. Each new thing is trying to be more amazing than the last. But Pong isn't amazing anymore. It's still a milestone in technical achievement, but it's a dot floating back and forth across the screen. Super Mario Bros. is still one of the greatest games of all time, but it's pixilated and simple by today's standards. As the trend continues, when you look back on what amazed in the past, it really isn't that amazing anymore.

When Jesus came to the city of Capernaum, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath – he went to church. And what a Sabbath that must have been. Jesus came not only to worship, but also to teach. We heard the effects: "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (verse 22) From the moment that Jesus started teaching, the people knew that this was something different. He spoke without referencing other teachers. He didn't base his opinion on local rabbis. He didn't cite teachers in Jerusalem. He simply said it, taught it, and let it be what it was. This was not how it was done. You quoted teachers. You quoted rabbis. You don't have original thoughts or things to say that didn't come from another renowned person's work. So, how Jesus taught "amazed" the people.

Do you feel "amazed" when you come here to hear the Word of God? Maybe you do, maybe you don't. Maybe you started out being thrilled with what you were hearing, but over time each sermon started sounding more and more the same. Pastor says I have problems. I do bad things. God should punish me. I can't fix it myself, but Jesus died for me. So, it's all good. Amen. It's the same message week in and week out and it gets tired and old. How can I get jazzed up about that?

How can I amaze you when I teach you God's Word? How can I make it more compelling, more thought provoking, more engaging?

A well-intentioned believer gave me advice on how to improve my preaching. The advice was that when I preached, I should preach longer. Agree/Disagree? Not buying that one? Well, that is what they said. They also said that I should dive more into the commentaries on the Bible. I should tell people from the pulpit more about what Martin Luther thought on a particular part of the Bible or what other scholarly theologians came up with. If I did that, then my sermons would be elevated to an entirely new level and would be so much better. If I only spent time quoting renowned theologians on what I was preaching, I would become an expert in my field and bring that "amazing" factor that's been missing. How I took what they said was that I should be one-upping myself. I should stand on the shoulders of giants to make my preaching better. Those men are smarter than me so I should be quoting them instead of preaching my words. I should do what the teachers of the law did back in Jesus' day.

What do you think? How can I amaze you when I teach you God's Word? Do I amaze you by quoting church fathers and famous theologians? Do I amaze with magnificent PowerPoint presentation skills? Do I amaze with video illustrations, a dramatic and theatrical performance from the front of church? Do I need to take a class on public speaking and storytelling so that I can make the Word of God come alive? (In the interest of full disclosure, I have actually given thought to all of these things, and done many of them.)

Maybe, though, I am asking the wrong questions. Maybe there is something more than style and references that will amaze you. How did Jesus amaze the people at the synagogue in Capernaum?

Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught, but he does lead us to why the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching. It wasn't because Jesus was teaching "new" things, as if they never heard them before, but that he "taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (verse 22) It wasn't theatrics. It wasn't mind-blowing illustrations. It wasn't re-quoting other Bible scholars. Jesus preached and taught with the authority of God. He simply taught people the Word of God and that amazed them.

Satan, though, couldn't stand this. He tried to one-up Jesus, tried to out-amaze him. "Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'" (verses 23-24) You puny humans are impressed with what this guy is telling you? Watch this. I'll do something greater. I will be more amazing. People will think I am more powerful, and they will all stop listening to you, Jesus.

Admittedly, such a display would probably stop a lot of us in our tracks. A man, in church, speaks for a demon. What if that happened here, right now, during this sermon? How would we react? What would we do? Do we pass this one off to the ushers? Does the pastor perform a simplified rite of exorcism? Do we try to ignore it? Do we ask the person to leave? Would they even leave if we told them to? I don't know, to be honest with you, and I pray that never happens.

But Jesus knew what to do. His Word, as true God and true Man, had amazed the people there that day because it carried with it the authority of God. With his words, Jesus used that authority again. "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek." (verses 25-26) Jesus spoke, and Satan's attempt at one-upping Jesus fell flat on its face. But Satan didn't go without a fight. He didn't go off to sulk in a corner. With a violent convulsing and bone-chilling shriek the demon was ripped from this person. The demon had no control. Jesus amazed once again with the authority of his Word. "The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'" (verse 27)

That's how Jesus did it, but how can I amaze you with my teaching of God's Word? I'm not Jesus. I'm not Peter or Paul or Martin Luther. But you know what? I don't need to be. It's not the person who makes God's Word amazing and authoritative; It's God. And Jesus is God; that's why his Word carried God's authority.

As for me, I get up to preach each Sunday morning knowing that it won't be my energy, my turns of phrases, my quoting of theologians, my drama productions, my PowerPoints, my video illustrations that will cause you to be amazed at God's Word. The only way any of those things actually work is when they bring to you the Word of God, the same Word that amazed those people in Capernaum, the same Word that had the authority to drive a demon out of a man.

Don't get me wrong, I still use all the talents and energy that God has given me to bring you the Word of God, but at the beginning of each sermon and each Bible class, I have the quiet confidence that I am about to proclaim God's Word. He uses that Word to change lives. When God's Word comes to you, it changes you. It does things that I can't. It affects you, not just mentally with various stimuli, but it actually works on your heart. It changes your beliefs. God's Word comes to you with his authority and drives out unbelief much in the same way his authoritative Word drove out that demon on that day in Capernaum. That's what the authority of God's Word does for each and every one of us as we hear what our Savior and our God has to say to us in his Word.

When God's Word is proclaimed, when it is read, when it is discussed, when it is shared, God uses his authority to cause people, just like you and me, to believe it, to live according to it. His Word powered by his authority makes me not just want to be different, but to actually be different. Any other earthly teacher or public speaker can learn tactics to manipulate your emotions. Sometimes they work. But only the Word of God actually changes you because it uses the authority of God. This is why God's Word is not made more effective by style. It's effective because it is God speaking to you.

God's primary way of communicating with us has always been with words. He recorded his own Word, using people, so that we can hear his authoritative Word at any time. You hold this authoritative Word of God in your own hands. In fact, you even have it sitting in your minds as you are able to tell Bible stories and recall Bible passages. When you speak those word, when you tell those stories, when you share this with your neighbors, your friends, your own family, that same authority of Jesus is at work that drove out a demon, that drove sin out of our lives hearing how Jesus was perfect for us and died for us to save us. Listen to that Word and its authority will work on you. Use that Word of God on people, and those words will carry the authority of God.

I don't need to one-up my presentation of God's Word. My confidence is in God's Word, not mine. When I preach his Word, it has his authority. It drives sinfulness from us. Listen to your Savior, and you will be amazed as his authoritative Word works on you and others. Amen.