

## AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2015  
First Presbyterian Church  
Marianna, Florida  
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MARK 1:21-28

As I was preparing this sermon, I couldn't help but recall some conversations that I had with my late friend, Mike Pooser. Mike, maybe more than anybody I've ever known, understood the difference between authority and responsibility. Mike was chair of the pulpit committee that took me to Arcadia, Florida, and was Clerk of the Session for about half my ministry there. Mike had been a man under authority, a man with responsibility, and he understood the difference.

In the New Testament, the word that is used for authority (εξουσια) is also translated as power, and even privilege.

When Jesus taught in the synagogue, there was power to His words. There was power in His presence. I doubt that Jesus quoted sources, or the "ancients" or any other "authority." What He spoke were His words, really the Word of God, and that is the ultimate authority.

Authority is the ability to make a decision, to set a policy. Responsibility means the carrying out of those decisions and policies.

Thus, someone who has the authority always has to take the blame, even if it wasn't his or her responsibility to carry out the "orders from headquarters."

That's what Mike Pooser taught me, any way.

You see, Mike retired from the US Army Reserves as a full Colonel. He was a veteran of World War II and the Korean War. He spent World War II in India, helping the effort in the China/Burma/India Theater of War, where the pilots flew "over the hump."

And, as he liked to put it, he fought the Korean War in the Army Post Office in Paris, France. In addition to his service in the military, Mike served in the US Postal Service, retiring as Arcadia's postmaster. He, like the Roman Centurion whose servant Jesus healed, was a man under authority. He had responsibility, and he had some authority, but he was under a higher authority, part of the chain of command.

Jesus had authority. He had power. Not only did He teach with authority, He commanded with authority, and His commands extended even to the unclean spirits. And there was no higher authority, no chain of command. Jesus spoke with the authority of the Living God.

I've always found it kind of ironic that the unclean spirits were the first to recognize Jesus, to understand who He was, the Holy One of God, the Messiah.

The story here in Mark's gospel is really the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. This is the first time He spoke or taught in the synagogue, and the first time He encountered a person possessed with an evil spirit. It would not be the last. And every time, those spirits knew who Jesus was. They might not have called Him by name, but they called Him who and what He was.

And they obeyed Him when He commanded them.

That is another thing about authority: it demands obedience. One in authority has the right to command.

And those under authority have the responsibility to obey.

How ironic is it that time and time again, those whom Jesus has come to save defy His authority, deny Him, while the evil spirits recognize Him and obey Him!

But authority is a lot like respect: it can't be earned. It must be given.

One can be totally worthy of respect, and yet be disrespected, ridiculed, reviled. As was Jesus. One can have all authority in heaven and on earth, as Jesus did (see Matthew 28:18), and if that authority isn't recognized, it is nothing.

Part of the responsibility of those under authority is to recognize that authority, and obey it.

Great leaders inspire great respect. They have great authority because of it.

Theodore Roosevelt, when he commanded the Rough Riders, and stormed San Juan Hill in the Spanish American War, was a figure to be admired, respected. His men followed him into battle, and into history.

Now the truth is, he didn't lead the charge. Not physically. He wasn't out in front. He ordered the charge, and his men responded to his order, and stormed the heights.

I've often wondered what would have happened if he had issued his command, "Charge!" and the troops had not charged. If he had commanded and no one had obeyed.

But those Rough Riders would have followed his orders, as well as his leadership, into hell and out the other side, and that is about what they did on that fateful day. There are legends and myths about that day. One of them is that the regular troops refused to charge, and that the volunteer Rough Riders took up the assault. What is true is that there were no orders from a higher command to initiate the charge. It appears that Teddy Roosevelt issued the command to charge on his own initiative. He assumed not only the authority but the responsibility of his actions. Had that charge failed, he might have been court-martialed. He might have become a laughingstock, a disgrace instead of a hero.

But history blessed Theodore Roosevelt. And he became the very symbol of America's victory in that little island war, and rode that success to the Vice Presidency, which led to his succession to the Presidency at the youngest age of anyone to ever serve, 42 years.

But you know, Theodore Roosevelt was subject to a higher authority. And he recognized it. His mother was a Presbyterian, and as a child, he attended church with her. He joined the Dutch Reformed Church, our sister denomination (well, close cousin, anyway) and often worshipped in Episcopal churches when there was no Reformed or Presbyterian church in the vicinity where he was.

As an adherent of the Reformed tradition, Roosevelt understood the sovereignty of God, and the authority of Scripture. He knew that God was the absolute authority, and that the Word of God as revealed in scripture was the highest authority on earth.

He assumed the responsibility of the Presidency, as he assumed the responsibility for his men on San Juan Hill, not be divine authority, but subject to it.

Jesus is the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth given to Him. All who lead, whether it be troops in battle, nations, businesses, churches, all who have authority over others, all who are under authority, are all under the authority of Jesus the Christ.

And being under His authority, we are responsible to Him.

What is our responsibility to Him, as Christians, as disciples?

Well, last week, we learned that we are called as disciples to be fishers of men.

That passage that comes on a page or two before our text this morning, which tells us that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, contains the Great Commission, the orders that Jesus gave to the eleven

disciples gathered on the mountain in Galilee. He told them to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

And then comes the punch line, the last line of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

Jesus has promised us that He will be with us, always. If we take Him with us, if we display Him to the world, if we show everyone we meet what a difference Jesus has made in our lives, then maybe some of those folks will want to become His disciples, will want to be baptized. Maybe if we teach them to observe all that He has commanded us, we will change the world.

And isn’t that our responsibility? Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. And we’re responsible.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, help us to love up to our responsibility, and to our Great Commission, and to our defining vision, by your grace and in your power. Amen.