

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew

Part 9: Authority

At the end of the chapters dealing with the Sermon on the Mount we heard in Chapter 7:28-29: *“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”*

Chapters 8 through 11 deal with the authority of the King. We have seen from the start of his gospel Matthew is developing a picture of the king who is also a servant, whose kingdom is not a place in geography but a way of life that can only be discovered by living out it’s rule in our hearts. Welcomed by Wise Men, baptized by John and then teaching with authority, now Matthew takes a different direction and takes us through a series of incidents which seek to demonstrate the authority of Jesus.

Interspersed within the narratives of healing, casting out demons and calling sinners to repentance are challenges to follow His way and further indications of the peculiar nature of the Kingdom of God.

Before delving into the text itself it is worth considering the Greek word translated as authority which is ‘EXOUSIA’.

‘EXOUSIA’ has a number of meanings that include:

- the power of choice and liberty of doing as one pleases
- physical and mental power
- the power of authority (influence) and of right (privilege)
- the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed)
- the sign of regal authority and a crown.

Matthew appears to interpret authority in the sense of having ‘total freedom of action’. Freedom oozes out of the life of Jesus; freedom from sin, from oppression, from sickness, from fear, even from death. A simple word picture to aid the memory:

† = CROSS = X

The Cross is a place of freedom.

Freedom, hope and love ‘ooze’ out of the life and ministry of Jesus

Hence ‘x-oozier’ ... a prompt to recall the Greek word ‘EXOUSIA’

(Well it works for me!)

Only Jesus had this unique authority based upon a love that seemed to flow directly

from God. This is something those who followed Him were quick to recognize, whilst those in positions of power found it to be a threat. For sure both His supporters and detractors would be asking 'But is He really all He's making Himself out to be? Did He really have the authority He claimed?' Lest there be any doubts that His "EXOUSIA" was more than just words, the actions that are to follow confirm the words He spoke.

Matthew offers us a series of narratives about healing.

- A man of a dreaded skin disease
- A Roman Officers Servant
- A whole bunch of people.

In each case Jesus acts with total freedom and authority.

Read: Matthew 8:1-17

Matthew 8:1 When He came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed Him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before Him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."³ Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. "I am willing," He said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.⁴ Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, asking for help. ⁶ "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."⁷ Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."⁸ The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following Him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

¹⁴ When Jesus came into Peter's house, He saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever.¹⁵ He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on Him.¹⁶ When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Him, and He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.¹

⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." (Mat 8:1-17 NIV)

We read that the first miracle, the healing of a leper, takes place as Jesus comes down from the mountain. It appears that the man senses Jesus power, but questions His intent. 'Lord, if you are willing...' is a way of saying, 'Sure, you are special, but are you really interested in an outsider like me?' As some translations have it, "If you want to, you can make me clean". The reply of Jesus is, "I do want to".

When we deal with the area of healing and miracles many have difficulty with the

whole concept. Though accepting the idea of God, the thought that God may intervene in certain particular instances in ways that are impossible to quantify or measure, seems beyond reasonable. It is easy to become bogged down with questions of 'Well maybe this is what happened ... or maybe it was that'.

From my own perspective I'm aware that sometimes we have prayed for folks healing and it seems nothing has happened. At others, though nothing physical has taken place but there has come into the situation a new sense of peace and resolve that has helped people through. At other times, Praise God, we've seen folk healed. Although even then it is not always clear what role prayer has had in the process.

Matthew's purpose in these chapters is not to give us a detailed theology of healing and miracles. His purpose is to say; "This is how the authority - the 'EXOUSIA' - of Jesus was displayed."

In this first healing we see a statement of divine intent. To the question, 'Does Jesus want healing to take place?' is given the answer "Yes He does!" From the context of the healing of the leper, we can phrase that in different ways for ourselves.

Does God desire our utmost best? Yes, that is God's intent. Does God care for the least of people, even people society excludes? Yes, that is God's intent. Does God desire all peoples healing and wholeness? Yes, that is God's intent.

Of significance in this healing is the fact that Jesus instructs the man to say nothing to anybody about it, except the religious authorities. He is instructed to show himself to the priest and make the appropriate religious offering. There is something almost Presbyterian... decent and in order... about the whole affair! Don't make a show of yourself and get it verified! Why? As a testimony to the authorities of Christ's authority.

In the second healing, that of the centurions servant, again the issue of authority 'EXOUSIA' is raised. The centurion declares. "**I myself am a man under authority**" and has said to Jesus, "**Just say the word, and my servant will be healed**". Jesus is astonished by the faith of this Gentile as it is of a quality that went beyond that of his own Hebrew people.

Matthew is keen to introduce the idea that the gospel of the kingdom was not just for Israel. Earlier we had the Wise Men welcoming the infant Jesus, now we see healing-faith also being the inheritance of the Gentiles. We are told that healing takes place as Jesus recognizes the faith of the centurion. He returns home to find his servant restored.

From verse 14 we see a whole host of people receiving healing and deliverance through the authoritative word and touch of Jesus. These include Peter's mother-in-law. Matthew is keen not to let us lose sight of the fact that Jesus is the promised one of the prophets and offers us a quote from the prophet Isaiah: "**He took up our infirmities and**

carried our diseases."

Interspersed within these stories about authority are passages which speak about the challenge of discipleship. To say "Jesus is Lord" implied a high level of commitment. Lest we are unclear about that, we have texts such as this one from Matthew 8:18-22.

¹⁸ Now when Jesus saw great crowds around Him, He gave orders to go over to the other side.

¹⁹ A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." ²¹ Another of His disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

²² But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (Mat 8:18-22 NRS)

A scribe declares that he will follow Jesus wherever Jesus may lead. Jesus questions his commitment. By saying '*the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*' He is telling the scribe, "Be careful what you commit yourself too. If you think by coming along with me it's a one way ticket to everything you ever dreamed of, then you are making a huge mistake". The road of discipleship had no guarantee attached. It wasn't a homecoming. There were hard times up ahead.

There is a deep sense of urgency in Jesus reply to the second disciple who seeks time out to bury his father. Remember this is a person who is already made a commitment to discipleship. It is as though this were someone who has said, "Yes, I'll follow you wherever you lead!" then realized that they have no control over how things may turn out and is thinking "Hmm... on second thoughts."

Jesus tells him that there is no room for second guessing. The Kingdom was near. Get with the program or go home and stay with the dead. An important detail in this passage is that whilst the man asks to go home and bury his father, it is not clear that his father has actually died! It is Jesus who brings death into the equation.

Now was not the time for hesitation. The mission of Jesus would lead to the darkness of the passion. Fair weather friends and those having second thoughts were not welcome. Too much was at stake. These were critical years of intense focus.

What right did Jesus have to make such monarchical demands upon His followers? What sort of 'EXOUSIA' authority did He truly possess? The disciples who stuck closest to Him were about to have that demonstrated to them in no uncertain terms.

²³ And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him. ²⁴ A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but He was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke Him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" ²⁶ And He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (Mat 8:23-27 NRS)

This is the first of the nature miracles. As with any miracle, we can speculate as to what really happened. The simple observation that Matthew wanted us to understand was

that Jesus even had authority over the most feared of earthy elements such as wind and waves. The Hebrews were not a sea going nation. The sea was a place of monsters and unfathomable depths. A place of fear, as we see demonstrated by the disciples who cry out, *'Lord, save us! We are perishing!'*"

Jesus uses the occasion to help the disciples question the nature of their faith. He is not so much reprimanding them as He is encouraging them to believe that placing their faith in Him was an extremely positive step to take. They could trust Him with their lives, no matter what kind of storm was blowing all around them.

It's a passage that should cause us also to examine our own faith. Do we trust in God to hold us through the winds of trouble and waves of uncertainty that come our way? Can we hear the voice of God's Spirit in such a way as our spirits are calmed and our anxieties quenched?

I'm reminded of William Whiting's seafaring hymn 'For Those in Peril on the Sea'

*Eternal Father, strong to save
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave.
Who bidd' st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep
Oh hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.*

Also that of Horatius Bonar : "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say"

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto Me and rest;
Lay down, O weary one lay down,
Your head upon My breast."
I came to Jesus as I was,
So weary, worn and sad;
I found in Him my resting place,
And He has made me glad.*

The 'EXOUSIA' authority of Jesus is demonstrated over sickness , over disease and even over nature. In our next passage Jesus demonstrates authority over evil, though not without ramifications.

²⁸ When He came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met Him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. ²⁹ Suddenly they shouted, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" ³⁰ Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. ³¹ The demons begged Him, "If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." ³² And He said to them, "Go!" So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank

into the sea and perished in the water. ³³ The swineherds ran off, and on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. ³⁴ Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.

There are many things of significance happening in this passage. We see the authority of Jesus over demons. We hear Him given the title of 'Son of God' for the first time. We also see the beginning of the rejection of His authority. Up until now everybody had nothing but good to say about Him. But from chapter nine onwards His authority is called into question. Indeed His actions raise all sorts of dilemmas. For example, which was more important, a couple of folk in their right minds, or a herd of pigs? What happens when spirituality meets economics? How do we deal with the tensions that arise when our discipleship affects the way people earn their livelihood?

One thinks of the debates over slavery that occupied previous generations. Some of the arguments against the abolition of slavery came from those who argued that slavery was an institution ordained by God for the advancement of humankind. They were concerned, that should slavery be abolished, the whole economic base that allowed peace to be maintained and profit created would fall apart and the nation descend into anarchy.

We still live in a world that is economically out of balance. Were it not for the unjust labor practices of third world countries we would pay a whole lot more for many of the products we eat and much of the clothing we wear. We really don't want to hear about children in other lands, forced by economic circumstances to abandon education and work in sweatshops manufacturing goods they will never be able to afford. Our world remains a place of great injustice.

Thankfully we do occasionally take steps to make a difference, such as our Fair Trade Coffee. But they are but tiny drops in a huge ocean. However that is taking our observations in places Matthew doesn't take us. The observation he makes in this passage is simply that when the 'EXOUSIA' authority of Jesus is exercised there can be ramifications and not everybody will be pleased that some have come to their right minds!

The huge challenge in this chapter concerns the price to be paid in order for the rule of the kingdom of God to be extended over our lives. Our commitment to be disciples is called into question. How far are we willing to go? What are we prepared to believe? What foundations are we building our lives upon? Have we considered the true implications of calling Jesus Christ our 'Lord'.

Such implies placing our whole lives under His 'EXOUSIA' authority. It questions our allegiances to just about everything and everyone! Yet the benefits are also described. Healing. Wholeness. Calm in the midst of storms. Deliverance from evil. Freedom.

We ultimately have to consider whether or not His is the ultimate authority we are prepared to trust our lives to. We know in life there are authorities we trust, and others we pay little attention to.

When the astrological column in the newspaper suggests that because the moon is in the third quadrant we may have a great day, we may say "Really?". When we see the favorite at Belmont is running at great odds some may want to place a bet, because those in the know reckon it's a certainty. Or maybe not! There are authorities we don't really trust.

But if we are pulled over by the law for speeding or have a diagnosis from the doctor that seriously is going to affect our quality life, then we pay attention to their authority.

In our next chapter we will see more examples of how the 'EXOUSIA' authority of Jesus, the Servant King, is demonstrated, and more challenges to consider what discipleship really requires. We shall also see how resistance to both the acts and teaching of Jesus continue to grow.