

Such Authority (pt. 2)

Matthew 9:9-13

The Problem of Authority

With so many things cancelled or postponed or migrated online, I was reflecting this week on how thankful we ought to be that our ESCAPE weekend was able to go ahead earlier in the year. What a blessing it was to share that time of fellowship together, to all sing together, to share meals and walks and games with each other. Truly a highlight.

And if I had to pick a highlight from the highlight it would be a conversation Issy and I had over lunch one day with one of the youth group girls. Of course we were poring over the train-wreck of the book of Judges. Which was a bit of a break from poring over the train-wreck that is the book of 2 Kings.

And our young sister had picked up a tension. In Judges, the problem was there was no king, and so every did what was right in their own eyes. In 2 Kings, the problem was there were plenty of kings, and most of them were terrible! One was an absence of authority. One was the presence of corrupt authority.

The question was: *the Bible says it's not good to have no authority, but what about all the examples of bad authority, the dictators and the tyrants that fill the pages of history?* It's a great question isn't it. We have an authority problem. On the one hand we long to throw off the shackles of power, follow our own hearts and pursue our own desires. On the other hand we long for clear guidance, for a protective hand, for someone who will stand with us and for us. In both cases we can so easily find ourselves in trouble.

We can end up in a pit by our own foolish choices, or we can end up in a pit because someone with power over us has thrown us in there. So what's the answer to our problem with authority?

No prizes for guessing that we find our answer as we meet the person of Jesus. Last week as he forgave and healed the paralysed man, the crowd were amazed. Matthew 9:8 told us

*When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, **who had given such authority to man.***

They were not marvelling at the *amount* of authority that Jesus had. They were amazed by the *kind* of authority that he had. And the 5 verses in front of us today are, at one level, an exploration of the kind of authority that Jesus possesses. It's an otherworldly authority that at once commands us and cares for us. It's a kind of authority that takes us by the scruff of the neck and leads us into feasting and fellowship. It's a kind of authority that bears us tenderly in his arms and carries us into healing and health. And it's gloriously good news for people like us who live in a world marred by our own destructive intuitions, and by disappointing and damaging institutions. So let's read Matthew 9:9-13

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

1. Personal Authority and the Master of the Banquet

This is God's word.

And as we meet Matthew the tax collector, we come face to face with the problem of *personal authority*. Matthew, like most of the people who come to Jesus in these chapters, is an outsider. Unlike the others, Matthew is in a mess largely of his own making.

It's hard for us to grasp, I think, just how despised the tax collectors were to the Jewish people of Jesus' time. They were part traitor, part thief. Lining their own pockets by working for the enemy. Securing their own comfort by exploiting their own flesh and blood. They were so bad that they were not just grouped among the sinners but they had a category all of their own. *Tax-collectors* and *sinners*, the mockers would say.

But no one had forced this on Matthew. He had evidently made a series of, largely selfish, choices to get to this point. He had pursued his own prosperity. And he got it, at a price. Matthew the tax-collector was loaded, but he was a loner. He was cut off from his people, and as a card-carrying "sinner" he was cut off from the presence of God.

See here is the *big* problem with our own personal authority. It's not that our own choices and decisions fail. It's that they succeed. Only for us to realise that our success is not at all satisfying, or is downright destructive. How striking that our modern western societies are the wealthiest in human history and the most worried. We are constantly accumulating things, and becoming more isolated from people. We are free, but in our freedom we've rejected fellowship with God.

There are plenty of Matthews in our modern world who have pursued their own prosperity at great price. In fact, you can find Matthews in every place and every age.

The 5th Century bishop Augustine was a famously ambitious young man. He relentlessly chased after success and status and worked his way up and up in the Roman Empire. And yet for every success he was not satisfied. He wrote,

*I flowed abruptly downward from you and wandered off my God;
in my young manhood I went on an awfully erratic course away
from your steadfastness, and **I turned myself into a famished
land I had to live in.***

That's some picture isn't it. That's where our own authority leads us. I read that and it reminds me exactly of myself when I was in my early 20s. And it's Matthew isn't it. At one level he had got everything he wanted. Yet in reality he was utterly empty. He had turned himself into a famished land. And he had to live there.

And so what could bring him out? The powerful Word of Jesus. Jesus' word is the power by which lepers are cleansed, the sick healed, the waves stilled.

By his Word Jesus brings freedom to the spiritually enslaved, forgiveness to spiritual failures, and direction to the spiritually lost.

Matthew is wandering in a wasteland of his own freedom. And here is the strong voice of Jesus that says, *follow me*. As one commentator says, "This Word is invested with the nuclear power to tear persons away from all that was most precious to them before, or from all that most debased them."

The discipling word of Jesus takes Matthew by the scruff of the neck and sets him off on a new path. It's not his own path, but the path of Jesus.

And where does this path lead? Look again at verse 9:

"Follow me", Jesus told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

Matthew's own selfish choices has made him an outcast, socially and spiritually. But following the voice of Jesus leads him into community with others, and with the Lord himself! This is where the command of Jesus leads.

Here is Augustine again, who speaks beautifully of the satisfaction he finally found when he ran *towards* not away from the voice of Jesus.

*Rest is with you, **lavishly**, and a life without distress. The one who enters into you enters into the joy of his Master, and he won't fear, and he'll do unsurpassably well in the one who's unsurpassed.*

Jesus has unsurpassable authority. His word has this commanding force unlike any other. He is, as Augustine recognises, Master with a capital M. But stunningly, when Matthew recognises Jesus as Master, he finds that Jesus is also the Master of a banquet.

Following our own hearts, chasing our own dreams, listening to our own voice will always lead us into a famished land. This is where the authority of Jesus takes us: it leads to feasting and fellowship and fullness of life in the very presence of God.

2. Religious Authority and the Doctor for the Sick

And yet, sadly, this is not what a lot of people see in Christianity. Many people are skeptical of Jesus because they are skeptical of those who have claimed the name and the authority of Jesus. They have seen churches that are not marked by the welcome and joy of Jesus, and far more by exclusion and exclusivity.

And so we find ourselves in a position today where many will much sooner take the perils of their own personal authority than risk the religious authority of the church. And we see this in our passage today as well.

For if we meet the problem of personal authority in Matthew, we meet the problem of religious authority in the Pharisees. As one preacher says, these guys do something pretty strange: they gate-crash a party and then they complain about the guest-list. Jesus, you're doing religion all wrong, you're meant to keep people like *this* out, not let them in!

These are men of serious religious conviction. And they have a serious reputation. People looked to these guys for guidance and help.

But you get the sense in this comment that these Pharisees are less like the shepherds that God had called them to be, and more like the wolves that Jesus warned about in his Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus welcomes people into a dinner party, but the Pharisees are more likely to eat you up.

The commands of Jesus liberate people into freedom. The demands of the Pharisees bind people.

People come to Jesus and he offers rest, the pharisees pile up burden upon burden.

You can imagine that Matthew and his mates are laughing and talking with Jesus as they share their meal, but a night out with the Pharisees you'd be walking on egg-shells, sitting in awkward silence not wanting to offend your hosts.

And so how *sad* is it that so many people have experienced the church to be a place of burdensome weariness. Where no one can really be honest about all the mess in their lives because what if someone found that I was really a sinner. It is so easy for the church to become a joyless and lifeless place, because there's a little Pharisee in all of us that wants to lift ourselves up above others and look down on them, just so we can feel good about our own seat at the table.

But that's the irony of all this. Life with Jesus just doesn't work like that. For do you notice *where* the Pharisees are in all this? They are out on the edge of the party. They can't even speak directly to Jesus, they need the disciples to pass their message on.

Those who wish to exclude sinners, find themselves excluded. Those who withhold mercy from others, find themselves without mercy. Those who take a stand on their own religious righteousness are cast out from the presence of God.

And so Jesus says, no *you're* doing religion wrong. Your authority is about lifting yourself up above others so you can look down on them. *My* authority is about coming down to others so that I can heal them. And so Jesus is not only the Master of the Banquet, he is the doctor for the sick. He says in verse 12:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus reveals that the deepest heart of God for sinners and sufferers is not to pile up demands on them, but pour out his grace over them.

Like a good doctor, Jesus diagnoses the state of our hearts. He doesn't defend his guests saying, "They are not sinners, deep down they're really good people if you give them a chance."

And like a doctor who dedicates her life to helping the sick, Jesus literally gives *his* life so that sinners can be forgiven.

Why is he dining with tax collectors and sinners? Because they need healing, and that's exactly what he came to do.

Such is the authority of Jesus. He commands us in our lostness and sets us on the path of following him. And he heals us in our sickness, setting our hearts right before God. The marks of Jesus' authority are the scarred hands and wounded side of one who has suffered and served in order to save sinful people like you and me.

That's the answer that we need to our problem with authority.

The Redemption of Authority

And, to finish today, it also shows us how our problems with authority can be redeemed. Jesus doesn't simply remove all authority, but he restores it and redirects it. And when individuals and institutions arrange themselves under the authority of Jesus, our authority can become something truly good and beautiful.

For our passage today is the beginning of a stunning transformation that takes place in Matthew's life. He goes from being a selfish so and so, to a disciple of Jesus. And the tradition holds that this same Matthew is the source of the gospel which still have before us today. He went from using everything he had to pursue his own prosperity to using the rest of his life to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And it's beautiful to me that that of all the gospels, Matthew the outsider most highlights the love of Jesus for the outcast.

And the same is true for Augustine. When he turned his ambitions to the service of the gospel, God used him in powerful ways. And the same is true of everyone who comes to Christ. Instead of simply serving ourselves, Christ fills us with his Spirit so that in small ways and great we can genuinely choose to love and serve the people around us as we serve Christ as our King.

And Jesus offers a different sort of religious authority from that of the Pharisees too. He told his disciples that they are never to lord it over people but to lower themselves in service of others. Right at the end of Matthew's gospel he told them "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." And he commissioned them, giving them authority to teach and baptise in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And this has been the task of the church ever since.

To help people *hear the commanding voice of Jesus* in his teaching, and to *receive the healing forgiveness of Jesus* in the washing away of their sin. Christian history is littered with examples of Christians and churches failing to fulfil this task. Sometimes the church has denied the existence of sin altogether. Other times the church has piled demands on sinners, or used people to further their own power.

Like a hospital that denies the reality of sickness, or that doesn't offer treatment because people are *too sick*, these kinds of churches are no good to anyone. But when the church crowns Jesus as Lord of all, and faithfully proclaims his gospel; when we humbly point others to the healing and help **we have found** in Christ; and when we welcome in the outsider and the outcast with all the joy of an outsider who has been welcomed by the King, it's a beautiful thing. There is new life, and new community, there is feasting and joy, and mutual service, all in the presence of God.

And I thought Simon's sermon last week was a great example of that. Wasn't it great. As our pastor Simon has a position of authority in our church. And he used it last week to humbly express his own need for forgiveness, and pointed us to the place where he has found it. I want to be like that when I grow up. To be a forgiven sinner who leads many to meet the doctor who has made me well.

So can I ask you this today: have you heard the voice of Jesus and followed him? Have you confessed your sin to Jesus and received his healing and forgiveness. Not only does he want to do that for you, he can. Such is his authority. He says to all of us today

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."