

Chapter 29: Objections to Jesus' Authority

Matthew 8:18–34

In Matthew 8:18–34, Jesus continues to unveil the majesty of his authority. He has more authority than the scribal teachers of his day (Matt. 7:29), and more authority than the priests, temple, and sacrifices of the old covenant (Matt. 8:1–17). How far, though, does his authority really extend? In this section, Jesus addresses objections raised against his authority in the context of discipleship: some objections from his would-be followers, others from his actual disciples, and still others from his enemies. Scene by scene, difficulty by difficulty, we discover without fail that *the authority of Jesus withstands all objections*.

His Cost is Too High (Matt. 8:18–22)

In the first set of Jesus' miracles in Matthew 8:1–17, we observed Matthew's ongoing attention to the nature of Jesus' authority, which the crowds recognized firstly through Jesus' teaching (Matt. 7:29; 8:9). In this next set of miracles, Matthew is continuing to explore the nature of Jesus' authority, as he makes clear in the first verse of this next section: "Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side" (v. 18). This is a very simple test, where Jesus is attempting to discern who will follow him as he travels. If they cannot follow him on a boat, they will not be able to follow him in the rest of his ministry. Jesus, though, does not merely suggest or encourage the crowds to go with him to the other side. More, Matthew uses a verb to reflect Jesus' authority: "gave orders" (ἐκέλευσεν; *ekeleusen*).¹ By this word, Matthew is leading us to ask, "In what sense does Jesus give these orders to the crowd?"

To answer this question, Matthew narrates two test cases. First, Matthew narrates the story of the scribe who came to Jesus, vowing, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go" (v. 19). William Hendriksen observes an important detail in this approach: "the scribes were themselves teachers; yet this teacher acknowledges Jesus as *his* teacher and so addresses him."² On the surface, this seems like exactly the kind of response that Jesus wants: a scribe who acknowledges Jesus' greater authority (Matt. 7:29)! Nevertheless, Matthew subtly hints that there are problems. To begin, in the Gospel of Matthew, only those outside the circle of Jesus' disciples call him "Teacher," while his disciples prefer to call him "Lord."³

More than that, Jesus' response in v. 20 probes whether the scribe would be willing to endure hardship: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 325.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 402.

³ Yet, "with the significant exception of Judas Iscariot, who twice uses the Hebrew equivalent, 'Rabbi.'" (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 325–26.)

his head.” From this, John Calvin reasonably infers that Jesus had perceived that the scribe “had been accustomed to a quiet and easy life, had enjoyed honor, and was ill-fitted to endure reproaches, poverty, persecutions, and the cross. He wishes indeed to follow Christ, but dreams of an easy and agreeable life....The more eager he is, the less he is prepared.”⁴ Lenski similarly characterizes this scribe as “like the seed on stony ground which grew quickly but lacked root to withstand the hot sun. He is an idealist, enthusiastic, of sanguine temperament. He is superficial and does not count the cost.”⁵ We should observe that Jesus does not reject the man’s discipleship, but only discourages it. Elsewhere, Jesus praises the faith of a woman who persists after he similarly discourages her petition (Matt. 15:28). Pastoral wisdom often requires putting up roadblocks to test whether people are sincere in their commitments.

We should briefly note that this is the first place that the term “Son of Man” is used to describe Jesus. This term arises in the Old Testament in Psalm 8:4 and Daniel 7:13, but here its precise significance is difficult to determine.⁶ We will discuss this title for Jesus more as we continue our study, and otherwise pass over its use in this context.

In the second test case, another disciple asks Jesus, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father” (v. 21). Lenski captures the differences between the two cases well: “The scribe is overready and needs to be cautioned, this man would later join Jesus.”⁷ Jesus denies the request: “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (v. 22). In a society that highly valued the obligations of sons to their fathers, this is an astonishing response: “No rabbi would have been so cavalier, and normal Jewish piety would find such an attitude incomprehensible, a *prima facie* breach of the fifth commandment, even though Jesus himself elsewhere endorses it (15:3–6; 19:19).”⁸ Jesus does not mean to forbid all sons specifically from attending the funerals of their fathers; rather, as D. A. Carson writes, Jesus is insisting upon the general principle that “[c]ommitment to Jesus must be without reservation.”⁹

Through these two cases, Matthew is underscoring two aspects of discipleship. On the one hand, would-be disciples must count the cost to know what they are getting themselves into. On the other hand, even the most pressing social and familial obligations are not sufficient excuses to put off following Jesus, even for a short time. Jesus’ authority demands everything from us, all the time.

His Call is Too Dangerous (Matt. 8:23–27)

The next section begins with a statement that underscores Jesus’ authority by stating that the disciples “followed him” as he got onto the boat (v. 23). Importantly, the sentence structure pushes the phrase “followed him” before the subject (“his disciples”) for emphasis: “*they* followed him, his disciples.” Immediately, though, the scene shifts to the problem of a “great storm” on the sea that covers the boat with waves (v. 24a). While parallels to this story show up in the other Synoptic Gospels (Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25), Lenski observes that “Matthew alone has σεισμός [*seismos*],

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:388.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 338.

⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 147.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 343.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 330.

⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 247.

the word for earthquake, here used with reference to the tossing of water; other accounts speak of the storm of wind.”¹⁰

Through all of this, remarkable, Jesus “was asleep” (v. 24b). His disciples, however, went to wake him, uttering three words in the Greek: Κύριε, σῶσον, ἀπολλύμεθα (*Kurie, sōson, apollumetha*): “Lord! Save! Perishing!” When Jesus awoke, he calmly critiqued their faith: “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” (v. 26). Then, “he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm” (v. 26). Craig Blomberg makes an important observation: “The ‘rebuke’ of the elements employs the same term (*epitimaō*) used elsewhere in exorcism stories (Mark 1:25; 9:25; Luke 4:41). Jesus demonstrates power over the destructive forces of nature, which remain under the devil’s sway.”¹¹ The context strengthens this connection, since Jesus will assert his authority directly over demonic forces in the next section (vv. 28–34).

In what sense, then, do the disciples lack faith? R. T. France is surely correct when he writes, “Cowardice in such a situation shows that they do not take God’s fatherly care seriously, which is the essence of practical faith.”¹² Indeed, Jesus taught extensively about dependence upon the fatherly care of God during the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:8, 9, 25–34; 7:7–11). While the disciples *followed* Jesus onto the boat, they did not *follow* his teaching. John Calvin has an interesting pastoral application of this text, by observing that God intends for fear to “awaken” and stir up our faith, even though we so often (like the disciples) fail by falling into fear:

Thus we see that fear, which awakens faith, is not in itself faulty till it go beyond bounds. Its excess lies in disturbing or weakening the composure of faith, which ought to rest on the word of God. But as it never happens that believers exercise such restraint on themselves as to keep their faith from being injured, their fear is almost always attended by sin. Yet we ought to be aware that it is not every kind of fear which indicates a want of faith, but only that dread which disturbs the peace of the conscience in such a manner that it does not rest on the promise of God.¹³

After their failure, however, they marvel at Jesus’ power: “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” (v. 27).

We did not read the responses of the first two would-be disciples to Jesus’ challenges in vv. 18–22. Presumably, they did not end up coming with Jesus, so that they never really saw whether Jesus’ authority was truly worth whatever sacrifices he might require. While these disciples falter in their faith, they have the privilege of marveling as they see Jesus’ authority put into practice. Even though following Jesus’ requires everything and puts us directly in the path of dangerous storms in life, only those on the boat get to see Jesus’ power as he commands the winds and the sea to obey him.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 345.

¹¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 149–50.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 336.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:425.

His Command is Too Powerful (Matt. 8:28–34)

In this final scene, Jesus' authority is challenged most directly. As Jesus arrives at the other side of the sea, in the country of Gadarenes, two fierce demon-possessed men meet him from the tombs (v. 28). As we will see through other narratives where Jesus encounters demon-possessed individuals, Matthew's accounts of Jesus' casting out of demons are very simple.¹⁴ In this case, the demons demand that Jesus depart from them: "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" (v. 29). The "time" of which they speak is "the final judgment when Satan and his minions are thrown into the lake of fire."¹⁵ Thus, the demons both freely acknowledge their coming doom, but also revile Jesus by claiming that that time has not yet come. In his commentary on this passage, John Calvin captures the paradox of demonic rebellion well: "Thus we see that the devils breathe nothing but rebellion against God; and yet, with all their swelling pride, they are crushed and fall in a moment: for their malice and obstinacy, which is never subdued, ceases not to struggle against the government of God, and yet it is compelled to yield."¹⁶

We should notice that Jesus does not respond to their questions. Earlier, Jesus had not responded to Satan's temptations beyond than quoting God's Word (Matt. 4:1–11), and now he is largely silent as the demons rage at his presence. As a part of their submission to Jesus, Matthew tells us that the demons "begged" Jesus, asking him to send them into the nearby herd of pigs (v. 31). When Jesus gives them permission to enter into those ceremonially unclean animals, the demons send the pigs into a frenzy, rushing down into the sea and drowning into the waters (v. 32). While the response of the demons to Jesus' authority is understandable, the response of the pig farmers is shocking. After telling the people of the city what Jesus had done by freeing the demon-possessed men from their oppression, the people came and "begged" Jesus to leave the area (v. 34). Leon Morris, noting that the same word appears to describe the begging of the demons and of the people from the city, asks, "are we to see this request as having something demonic about [their request]?"¹⁷

Matthew does not tell us much about the specific motivations of the people who beg Jesus to leave the area. It is possible—and, indeed, probable—that the people were "heartless,"¹⁸ so that they "feared, not the sorcerer Jesus, but further loss to themselves."¹⁹ It is indeed curious that the townspeople were not grateful even that Jesus made it safe to pass past the graves of Gadarenes again (v.28b). Matthew, however, leaves their precise motivations hidden from us. Blomberg is probably on more solid ground when he appeals less to the reasons the people ask Jesus to leave, and more to the fact that they did not marvel at what Jesus had done: "The Christological question is again posed

¹⁴ "In his exorcisms, and especially in Matthew's abbreviated version of this one, there is a striking lack of the quasimagical formulae and techniques (including the control of the demon by discovering its name) which seem to have been characteristic of other exorcists. A simple command suffices; indeed, in Matthew's concise narration here even the command is not directly reported, but assumed in the demons' response in v. 31." (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 338.)

¹⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 320.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:431.

¹⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 212.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 415.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 354.

starkly, but these people are unwilling to face it. A man with Jesus' power must be divine and holy, but sinful humans recoil in the presence of holiness because it points out their own shortcomings all the more glaringly."²⁰ The demons challenge Jesus' authority, but they ultimately obey it; the herdsmen, on the other hand, "fled" Jesus' authority (v. 33), and then ultimately rejected it.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the scribe offering to Jesus (v. 19)? What does Jesus' response tell us about the scribe's readiness to follow through with this offer (v. 20)? What kind of a discipleship arrangement was the disciple bereaved of his father offering (v. 21)? Why does Jesus respond so sternly (v. 22)? What cost weighs most heavily upon you regarding the prospect of following Jesus? What about Jesus tells you that his value is worth the cost of discipleship?
2. What do the disciples experience when they follow their Master onto the boat (v. 23–24)? Where is Jesus in the midst of the chaos? What sort of a man is Jesus to lead them into this storm, and then fall asleep? What do we learn about their condition by their terse request to Jesus (v. 25)? How does Jesus respond to them (v. 26)? What sort of faith does Jesus expect from his followers? What sort of a man is Jesus, since even winds and sea obey him (v. 27)?
3. How much information do we have about the demon-possessed men in Matthew's Gospel (v. 28)? What do the demons possessing these men say to Jesus? What is "the time" (v. 29)? What does Jesus say in response to the defiant challenges of these demons? What do we learn about the demons when they beg Jesus to send them away into the pigs (v. 31)? What do we learn about the townspeople when they beg Jesus to go away from them (v. 34)?
4. What costs paralyze you from following Jesus? While counting the cost is good and right (Luke 14:28), how should we calculate the value of Jesus? Where have the waves of danger covered you over in your life? How might fear stir up, awaken, and activate faith to seek out Jesus, when you might not have otherwise? How does Jesus' holiness feel burdensome to you? Why doesn't Jesus leave you alone? How will you respond to his presence?

²⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 152–53.