



Sermon: The Disciples' Authority

Scripture Readings:

“Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart they do no wrong but follow his ways.” (Ps.119:2-3 NIV)

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

^{4:1} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (2Tim.3:14-4:5 NIV)

The Problem

Many everyday Christians can struggle with confidence in displaying and sharing Jesus' Good News. One root of this problem is because of misunderstanding the authority of God in our lives and how that is to be shown to others. A Christian's worldview is, or should be, different to that of others but it can be hard to be different, to have a different worldview than those around us and not to be affected by those views. For example,

I've witnessed Christians attempt to assert the authority of Christ over others – defaming the world culture with a 'hell fire and brimstone' approach; a little like James & John the sons of thunder tried when they asked Jesus if they should ask God the father to reign fire down on people who spoke against Jesus. Their God is a God of wrath.

I've witnessed Christians do the opposite by employing a 'mind your own business' attitude and staying quiet in the face of opposition to Jesus. They've bought into a perception that equality means Christian faith should not be shared and may cause offence. Their Jesus is meek and mild.

I've witnessed Christians express a desire for others to behave better and be nice but feel a lack of authority and so they wait for someone else to bring Christ into the Community. Their Jesus is personal but private.

I've witnessed Christians' attempts to be public about their faith, sharing testimonies with families and friends, offering to pray for them and hoping God's Spirit will make a breakthrough with them. Their Jesus is alive and full of potential.



Most Christians experience something of every type mentioned above, and others besides. Our confidence wavers between strength and weakness. Sometimes we get angry at the world, sometimes we despair and sometimes we play along, to fit in without disruption or offence and hope someone else will do the deed of Gospel-bringing.

Through the events of Palm Sunday to Resurrection Sunday we've learnt of Jesus' disciples experiencing a similar range of confidence and doubt. In the letter from Paul to Timothy we hear the early church experienced the same pressures and anxieties.

Paul voices the problem clearly and directly, "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2Tim.4:3-5 NIV)

How might we build confidence as disciples bearing Jesus' authority?

Everything starts with God's Voice – His Word.

The good news is Paul has good advice. His starting point in his encouragement to Timothy and the church he served was to establish a most important priority that the disciples' authority starts in and with the Word of God.

Eugene Peterson observes that the 'first word has to be about God and his work in us'ⁱ as exemplified by Paul in his letters:

The letter to the Romans dedicates 'eleven chapters to the activity of God before he writes four on our conduct.'

Galatians first four 'are oriented around God's plan, the last two toward our response.'

Ephesians has 'three chapters on God's purposes [then three] on our part in it.'ⁱⁱ

Writing to Timothy Paul said,

'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' (2Tim.3:14-15)

Example from David:

Recently I finished watching a series called the House of David. The first series ends with the David defeating Goliath. When David first hears Goliath's challenge to the Israelites and his defiance against God, the producers add in an extra-biblical scene where David challenges his brothers on why no-one has responded in the Lord's name to remove Goliath. In the heated discussion David is told of how big and trained for war that the giant is. David's response is to remind them that no-one is greater than God, including Goliath. This, he tells Goliath too. (You can find out more in 1 Samuel 17)



It was the Word and Testimony of God that shaped David's worldview and this he applied in his life. He got his priorities right; he did not shape his God-view from the presiding worldview but shaped his perception of the world from God's viewpoint.

This is being 'wise for salvation' and for it we need to know God's Word – which is not ancient history, but still alive with promise, meaning and purpose.

My former tutor Peter Morden admits on behalf of us all that,

'we do not know God's word anywhere near as well as we could, [...] we fail to live [it] out [and] are not shaped by a biblical world view'.ⁱⁱⁱ

To gain confidence as the people of Jesus we must 'read the Bible with a frequency [and] seriousness which befits our view of it as God's word'.^{iv}

Thankfully, there is a remedy, and I gladly share Morden's words that 'none of this is said to make people feel guilty. Jesus has taken our guilt on the cross and we have free and full forgiveness. We praise God for his glorious grace, freely given to us in Jesus'.^v

As Paul told Timothy,

'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (2Tim.3:16-17 NIV)

Encouragement!

God does not speak empty words, nor does he speak idle words that may appear good in theory but have no solid practice.

Even when his words are instructional or for correction, we must not think that God speaks from a place of wrath, of legalism or from an ivory tower without understanding of the human condition. Instead, let me offer you two pictures that I hope will encourage you to take more pleasure and seriousness in God's Word.

Through His Word our faith is being made stronger, and we are much better equipped to deal with both the challenges of those against faith and those of shallow faith where God's Word is adapted to suit self-desires (2Tim.4:3)

First: an example from the apostle John. In the Revelation he shared there is no single direct quote from scripture, though some references are very close. Peterson has studied this and reveals 'in those 404 verses there are 518 references to earlier scriptures'.^{vi} The reason John does this, and in a very natural way, is because John is, to use Peterson's words again, 'absolutely immersed in Scripture and submits himself to it. He does not just repeat regurgitate or cite proof texts. As he preaches the Scriptures are recreated in him. He first assimilates Scripture and then lives [...] the Scripture he has internalised'.^{vii}

Second: Imagine Jesus as a wise counsellor with whom you are having a conversation. During the conversation you admit that you often don't understand God and even when you do, have failed to love his Word or apply it completely. Jesus nods his head



thoughtfully, gives a little smile of assurance and says, “Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart they do no wrong but follow his ways.”

(Ps.119:2-3 NIV)

Failing again to understand you reply, ‘that’s the problem, I keep going wrong.’

Jesus gives another little smile, places a reassuring hand on your shoulder and says, ‘those who seek me with all their heart do no wrong. Have you considered doing this? Come, follow me’

‘Well, I want to, or I think I want to, but it seems too hard and as you probably know, I like some of my creature comforts and have a habit of rushing my bible reading when I do read’.

‘I know’ he replies, ‘but you’re still missing my point. I don’t expect you to get it right all the time and my word is not ink on a page, rules to be remembered and verses to be quoted. My Word is an unhurried ever-deepening relationship with me, the living God. So, quit putting me in second or third place and come, follow me. Immerse yourself in my Word and you will know both me and yourself better. Remember what the disciple Peter said, There is no-one else who has the Words of Life.’ (See John 6:68)

Today, let us renew a deep appreciation of God’s Words as the Words of Life and commit to immersing ourselves in them.

ⁱ Eugene H Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018), p.308.

ⁱⁱ Peterson, p.308.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Morden, *The Message of Discipleship: Authentic followers of Jesus in today’s world* (London: IVP, 2018), p.73.

^{iv} Morden, p.73.

^v Morden, p.73.

^{vi} Peterson, p.323.

^{vii} Peterson, p.323.