



Like you, I have been richly blessed by having great teachers who were influential in my life. Dr. Harold Songer was one of my favorite seminary professors. I had him for a number of classes and he was one of the most outstanding teachers and lecturers I have ever encountered. I could enter his classroom in a state of exhaustion, after a long night of work and study, and listen to him for the entirety of the class and barely blink an eye. His lectures could be described as not just interesting, but fascinating. Throughout all my years of schooling, I encountered very, very few individuals with such a powerful gift of teaching as Dr. Songer.

It's hard to teach, whether it be in a classroom, a Sunday School room, or behind a pulpit (preaching is, after all, its own form of teaching). One of the most challenging parts of teaching is that of being interesting (it's not an absolute requirement to be interesting in order to be a good teacher, but I think all good teachers are interesting). I work hard to be interesting, but I realize that working hard is not a guarantee that I will be interesting. I once led a Bible study and one evening only two people showed up, and about fifteen minutes into our time together they were both asleep. As they seemed to be getting such a good nap I decided to sit quietly and wait for them to wake up. I will admit, however, it was a bit discouraging that only two people showed up, and both of them went to sleep! One thing I always try to keep in mind when leading a Bible study or preaching is that I have the benefit of beginning with really good material, that is, the Scriptures. If I am not interesting, it is not the fault of the material! I think the Bible is very interesting, and what I try to do is simply not get in the way of what it has to say, which can be easier said than done.

This morning we continue with the series of messages *What Is It About Jesus*, and come to his *Teaching*. In this series I have been speaking about the large crowds that Jesus attracted, and pointing to passages in the gospels that tell us what it was about Jesus that attracted those crowds, and continue to attract so much interest. Follow along as I read our Scripture text for this morning, Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 7:28-29 –

*17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

*18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.*

*19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

*20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

*28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching,*

*29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*

Matthew says that people were *amazed* at the teaching of Jesus. In 22:33 Matthew tells us that the crowd was *astonished by his teaching*. Sometimes we might be *impressed* by someone's teaching, or maybe even *enthralled*, but the reaction of people to the teaching of Jesus was on an entirely different level. Jesus was a very powerful teacher, obviously, as evidenced in this week's Scripture text, and the key word in that passage, I believe, is *authority*. Jesus did not, in his teaching, simply parrot the well-worn and familiar interpretations of the Mosaic Law as did the scribes, Pharisees, and experts in the Law. In his teaching, Jesus spoke from a base of authority that the others did not possess. *Well, that's obvious*, you might say, *as Jesus was, after all, God incarnate*. True enough, but most people either could not accept that reality or could not wrap their minds around such a concept at that point in his ministry, so authority became a very important element in the teaching of Jesus. It was the way in which Jesus differentiated himself from all the other teachers of the time and the way in which he appealed to the heads and the hearts of those who listened to him.

Authority is a necessary element if one is going to be taken seriously, and if others will listen to what one has to say. I would not, for instance, be taken seriously by anyone if I announced that I was taking a position teaching experimental advanced subatomic theoretical mathematics (if such a subject even exists). I would not be taken seriously because I don't have a diploma, any training, or any skill in math that would give me a claim to being an authority on the subject. The opponents of Jesus used the idea of authority to seek to undermine his ministry. In Matthew 21:23-27, for instance, we read the following – *23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.* By implying that Jesus did not have the authority to give credence to his teaching, they were attempting to undermine what he had to say. Authority is, then, a critical component of teaching, and this morning I will focus on that word *authority* as seen through three other words. Specifically, how did Jesus underline his teaching authority? He did so, the gospels show us, through his working of *miracles*, his use of *Scripture*, and his *divine nature*.

### *1. Miracles.*

I very much believe in miracles. I believe miracles still take place today. I agree with St. Augustine, who wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in his great book the *City of God*, about the reality that miracles still take place. In Augustine's day people questioned whether or not miracles still took place, and his reply was that God was always performing miracles, and those miracles are happening all the time, all around us.

I have witnessed many miracles over the course of my ministry. Many of those miracles have taken place in medical settings, as a test result suddenly came back very different from the original, difficult

diagnosis. I have heard, on more than one occasion, a doctor explain a sudden health reversal by saying *there is no other way to explain it except to say that it is a miracle*. I have seen miracles in other settings as well. I have seen the miracle of greatly changed hearts and lives. I have seen the miracle of healed relationships that seemed broken beyond repair. Miracles happen all the time, and they are evidence, I believe, in the way God works in our lives and the world around us.

I must add, at this point, however, that there is always an element of faith in the perception of miracles. Not everyone who witnessed the miracles of Jesus were moved or convinced by what they saw, and not everyone believed in him, in spite of the miracles he performed. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, for instance, the Pharisees were told about what had taken place, but their response was to join with the chief priests in calling a meeting of the Sanhedrin. They acknowledged among themselves that Jesus was *performing many signs* (John 11:47) but those signs did not sway them to accept him for who he claimed to be. In his hometown of Nazareth Jesus found resistance as well. Matthew 13:58 tells us that *he did not do many miracles there (Nazareth) because of their lack of faith*. Mark 6:5 tells us the same, but Mark also adds, in verse 6, the note that Jesus *was amazed at their lack of faith*. People often clamor for miracles as proof for God's existence, but I think we can say from the experience of Jesus, what does it take to convince some people? There was plenty of proof in the miracles performed by Jesus, yet it was still not proof enough for some people. In spite of the fact that Jesus performed miracles, some people did not accept him. The teaching of Jesus, while it contained authority, must be *granted* authority by the faith and belief of the hearers.

But it wasn't simply proof Jesus was seeking to provide; Jesus performed miracles also as a means of demonstrating the authority that was behind his teaching. In Matthew 9:1-8, for example, we read that *1 Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. 2 Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." 3 At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" 4 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? 5 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? 6 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." 7 Then the man got up and went home. 8 When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men*. In this instance, Jesus healed the man as a way to underscore the authority he possessed to offer forgiveness. Jesus not only taught about forgiveness; he also had the authority to grant forgiveness, and by performing this miracle demonstrated that authority.

## 2. Scripture.

Jesus knew there were those who accused him of either ignoring or seeking to subvert the Mosaic Law, but Jesus was not out to do away with the Law. In Matthew 5:17, part of our text for today, Jesus says *do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*. Jesus then proceeds to say, six times, *you have heard it said, but I say to you* (he said this in relation to commands about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and loving our enemies). Jesus was not at all undermining the Law; what Jesus was seeking to do was to point out that the teachers of the law, the scribes, and the Pharisees had drifted far from the original intent of the law. Jesus, in contrast, was seeking to call people back to the original intent of the Law. Over the years, for instance, there were hundreds of laws that had arisen to define what it meant to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. Hundreds! It was forbidden, for example, to eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath, because the chicken had to work to lay the egg. One could not spit on the Sabbath either, because the dirt would gather around the saliva that hit the ground, and that was considered to be tilling of the soil. How in the world could anyone keep up with such a myriad of laws? What began as a good intent – defining what it meant to honor the Sabbath – actually led to the very thing the Sabbath was intended to

do, which was to take away burdens from people so they could find rest and refreshment, but who could find any refreshment on the Sabbath while trying to keep up with the demands of hundreds of laws?

It was the *interpretation* of the Law that led to this point, and this is where things can get really tricky because we must interpret the Scriptures. In Disciples churches we are very fond of the expression *in opinions liberty, in essentials unity, and in all things love*, but there is a big hole in that expression and it is this – my opinion may be your essential, or vice versa, and then what do we do? Must I observe your essential or you observe mine? Once we start down the road of interpretation, a road we must always travel, we begin to have a good deal of problems. I was a bit uncomfortable, for instance, on Palm Sunday while performing in the Easter play. I was given the role of Paul, and some of my lines had to do with his prohibition against women speaking or leading in worship. During the play I was thinking, *our congregation understands where we are on the role of female leadership. They know and appreciate that we ordain women and see equality in leadership. But what about someone who might be visiting or who is newer to our congregation? What if they think we do forbid women from serving in roles of leadership?* I very firmly believe that Paul gave the prohibitions against women in leadership for very specific reasons that were bound to a very specific context, but those reasons and that context are no longer applicable. In fact, those reasons and that context were not always applicable in Paul's ministry, as he did not always follow that prohibition (and I would add, for those individuals and congregations that follow that prohibition, you might want to go back and read Paul a bit more closely. He says in I Corinthians 11:6, for instance, that *if a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off*. If you still believe in the prohibition of women leaders then tell me why you don't follow the command to cut off their hair). When we interpret the Scriptures we must remember that some things are eternal and some are time-bound, and how do we know the difference? And how do you know I am right in what I say? Does the title of minister mean my opinion carries more authority? Do the degrees listed after my name indicate that I am an expert in what I say? (It doesn't at home!) And how do we manage the competing interpretations between churches, denominations, and even within congregations? Are those differences and arguments between or among churches a hindrance to the witness, mission, and ministry of the church as a whole? How does a congregation live with those differences? Should we mandate an official view? (in Disciples churches, we certainly don't).

I often get letters and emails from people (outside of our church) who insist on telling me how I must interpret Scripture. They often tell me (after reading one of my sermons online or one of my columns in the *Sentinel-News*) that I am very much in error and they see it as their responsibility to set me straight. I received a very long email the other day and made it about halfway through before giving up, thinking, *I have no idea what this person is trying to say*. I do not claim to have all the truth, and I do not claim to be always right. I believe what I believe and I have come to those beliefs after a great deal of thought, study, and prayer. I am comfortable in what I believe, but I am most comfortable in understanding that Jesus is the ultimate in determining how we interpret the Word because he was the Word, which leads us to our final point –

### 3. Nature.

John 1:1-18 tells us **1** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* **2** *He was with God in the beginning.* **3** *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* **4** *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.* **5** *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* **6** *There was a man sent from God whose name was John.* **7** *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.* **8** *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.* **9** *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.* **10** *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.* **11** *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* **12** *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the*

right to become children of God—**13** children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. **14** The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. **15** (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") **16** Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. **17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. The ultimate proof of authority for Jesus was his nature, that is, that he was God incarnate.

As a church, we do not have a creed. We do not have a statement of faith that we require people to accept. We do not ask people to sign anything. We have only a common confession of faith, and it is a confession of faith that is based upon the nature of Jesus as the Messiah. It is the confession found in Matthew 16:13-16 – **13** When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" **14** They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." **15** "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" **16** Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter's response – *you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God* – is the confession we acknowledge, and it is the foundation for all we believe.

The earliest followers of Jesus lived by this confession of faith, and in doing so they were making the most important commitment they could possibly offer. In the time of Jesus, titles such as *Prince of Peace*, *Son of God*, *Savior*, *Messiah*, and others that were applied to Jesus were to be used only for the Emperor. It was a capital offense to use any of those titles for anyone other than the Emperor, and yet the followers of Jesus did so. They did so because they recognized Jesus as the true *Prince of Peace*, *Son of God*, *Savior*, and *Messiah*, and as they did, they recognized the authority not only for his teaching, but for his authoritative claim on their lives.

I was ordained almost thirty-nine years ago, and I have served vocationally as a minister for almost thirty-eight years. My vocational identity is serving as a minister, and doing so is very important to me, but my primary identity is as a follower of Jesus. I hold fast to the same confession that Peter offered, and that confession serves as the basis of my life. I do so because I recognize the authority of Jesus over my life, and I recognize it not only because of his miracles and his teaching, but most of all I do so because I believe he is *the Word*, God in human flesh.