

Did Christ Have the Power Of God?¹

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"The multitudes were astonished at his teaching: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."² With these striking words are [sic] a sort of editorial comment on the so-called Sermon on the Mount closes, "Not as their Scribes."

The scribes occupied a place in Jewish Religious life in the time of Jesus, somewhat akin to that a minister or teacher of religion today. They expounded the law, the ceremonial of religion. They spoke with authority, the authority of official position, the authority of tradition, the authority of the prophets, the authority of the synagogue, the full and complete authority of the established order.

Boldly and fearlessly, Jesus set forth his own faith and conviction. "Ye have heard that it hath been by them of old time... But I say unto you."³ With one sweep he brushes aside the time-honored tradition, even the ten commandments, and without apology announces, "The Way of Life." Without official backing, in the face of prejudice, with a conviction that must have taken away the breath of the timorous and astonished hearers, he pushed through their creeds, their conventions, and struck at their very vitals, shoving home his appeal with a skill and authority that meant business. He got their ears. They heard and

¹ Earl C. Davis clearly worked over the text of this sermon. Two envelopes survive one with the notation on the outside, "Did Christ Have the Power of God? Preached Sunday evening, Feb., 25, 1923." The other had this notation, "Did Christ Have the Power of God? Extra notes and sheets of sermon preached at Feb. 25, 1923." The transcribed text that follows is taken from the text in the first envelope. However, I have noted in the text with footnotes those places where alternative language is found in the second envelope; transcriptions of these alternative formulations are provided below after the end of the sermon.

² Matthew 7:28-29.

³ Matthew 5:33.

acted. Simon, called Peter, heard. James heard. John heard; publicans and sinners heard; the rich young man heard; the chief priests and the traders in the temple heard, trembled and struck him down in fear. He was speaking with authority, not as the scribes, but with authority.

The authority with which Jesus of Nazareth spoke, and the power with which he acted, were that authority and that power which develop in men who have knowledge of human life, who understand its deeper nature, and who develop out of that knowledge and insight, a conviction and faith in the meaning of life. The people heard him because he understood them, the deep nobler impulses and desires of their life. He went straight to the core of life, and men responded. He had moral conviction. He believed that the world is not a mockery, that the world is honest, that God exists; and he staked his whole life on this belief, this faith. This is the secret of his authority and power.⁴

I. He knew man. Why did he speak of authority? First, he was a man of knowledge, knowledge of the world he lived in. He knew his fellowmen. His knowledge was not merely a knowledge of books, and tradition, although he knew those. His knowledge was the knowledge that comes of experience and keen observation. He taught in parables. Why did he teach in parables? Because the knowledge and wisdom that he sought to teach had come to him in the parables of everyday life. He had no secret mysterious sources of truth. He simply kept his eyes open, and his mind alert. He saw the sower in the field. He saw the widow giving her money in the temple. He saw the publican. He saw the pharisee. He saw the poor, the weak, the halt [sic] the blind. He saw the peace makers, and the persecutors; the Marys and the Marthas; the children in the marketplace; the merchants; the lepers; the outcasts and harlots. His teachings are a mirror of the life of Palestine in his day. He lived among living men, saw them, knew them. When he taught, he was dealing with real men and women, with all their noble qualities and their sins and limitations as well. He had no delusions. He knew.

⁴ In the second envelope of extra notes for this sermon, ECD provides an alternative formulation for this paragraph—in several paragraphs. This alternative is provided below after the end of the sermon.

To illustrate: The Story of the Widow's Mite.⁵ Jesus and some of his disciples were standing in the court of the temple watching all them that cast their money into the temple treasury, as you and I might stand in the market watching our hurrying fellow humans doing their weekly marketing. Some we know and we exchange greetings as we pass. Some we know of. We watch them with a friendly human interest. Men of influence we see. Women gaudily dressed and loud spoken. Others quiet and unobtrusive. Some look care-worn and distressed. Others are gay and laughing.

Such was the human stream that was passing in and out of the temple as Jesus and his disciples stood there watching, while they cast their money into the treasury. Here came the rich and haughty Sadducee; or perhaps the prosperous merchant, ostentatiously displaying his gift; or possibly a traveler, lately returned from a foreign country, stopping to greet his friends as he passes. Next comes one learned in the law swinging by among the more humble folk. Thus they pass: great and small; rich and poor; saint and sinner, while Jesus stands hard by, his keen searching eye following the passing show of Palestine.

Suddenly his attention is arrested. Something important has happened, something worth calling to the attention of his disciples. You can almost hear his keen alert voice, "Peter, John, come here. I want to show you something." Perhaps he wished to impress upon these humble disciples the conviction that even they counted in God's world. "What is it?" you can imagine John asking. Then came the reply born of knowledge of human life, "Verily I say unto you, this poor widow cast in more than all they that cast into the treasury, for they all did cast in of their superfluity; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living."⁶

Knowledge! He saw the real thing that was happening, the parable of life, the incident of consecration, the witness of the Living God. When he spoke, they heard. When he appealed, they answered; because he spoke from a knowledge of the real life they lived, and because he appealed to their deepest and most precious hopes and aspirations.

II. A Man of Insight. Many people have an idea that Jesus was some sort of lovely but utterly impractical dreamer. He might

⁵ Mark 12:41-44.

⁶ Mark 12:43-44.

have beautiful ideas, but he would be utterly impossible in the practical affairs of life. But quite the contrary is true. He was a man of exceedingly keen judgement, with a quick and witty mind out of which flashed those thrusts of wit and satire that sent the heckling lawyer and the smart pharisees slinking away, smarting with the sting of merited rebuke. Far from being a soft, sentimental and rather womanish person, he was on the contrary markedly powerful in those qualities, that we call, in our current language, red-blooded. He was the match of the keenest men of his time, and he would be the match of the keenest men today, a man of great insight and capacity.

But he differed from most men of his time, and from most men of today in that he used that insight, not for his own gain, his own profit, his own advancement, but for all men. He was not an exploiter of human life, but a teacher. He had set for himself the task, not of using his power and authority in taking advantage of his fellow men, but in preaching good tidings to them, in proclaiming release to the captives, and recovering the sight to the blind, setting at liberty them that are bruised, in proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord. With his keen knowledge of men, and this penetrating insight, he called forth their unused talents, their reserve forces, set them to new tasks, new life, new purpose, new efforts. "Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men"⁷ said he to the humble fishermen. Life is more than meat and raiment, more than pleasure and self-indulgence: To a new way of life, you are called.

Why should one follow this new way of life? Why should one love his neighbor as himself? Why should one forego the grosser purposes of life? Nay why do men and women love truth, honor, goodness? Why do they honor the hero, even if they themselves are cowards? Why do they honor the good in human life, even when they themselves have done evil? The answer of Jesus to this question is a clear illustration of his insight into life and life's meaning.

Life is an open secret. "Seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given you, knock and it shall be opened unto you."⁸ The world and life bring forth from its treasure that which you seek. What does life mean? What is the world like? What is God like? "What man is there of you, who, if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; or if he shall ask him for a

⁷ Matthew 4:19.

⁸ Matthew 7:7.

fish, will give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil (being finite or human) know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"⁹ God is at least as good as you are. The stream cannot rise higher than its source. As you at your very best towards your children, so also is the love of God towards you. If you desire to have your children grow in wisdom and power, honor and goodness, so does God the infinite father, desire to have you grow. There are no tricks in the world. The universe is honest. It does not make sport of your high purposes? The heart of the universe, like the heart of the father and mother, is a heart of love for mankind? Your child asks you for bread, you do not give him a stone; he asks for a fish, you do not give him a serpent. You play no tricks with him. You care for, lead, teach, watch over him, work for him, work with him, that he may attain unto a noble and worthwhile life. That, says Jesus, is the attitude of the world, of God, the heavenly father towards men and women, his children. God, the heavenly father, does not mock you. He does not give you ashes when you ask for beauty and fullness of life. "Everyone that asketh, receiveth, he that seeketh findeth; and to everyone that knocketh it shall be opened."¹⁰ The way of life is before you, ready to respond to your search for its deepest and most precious treasures. That was and is Jesus' answer to our query as to the meaning of life. Life does have meaning. God does exist. The world is honest. The living God, the heavenly father, does care for his children.

Such was the faith of Jesus. It was not a tradition accepted without question. It was not an infallible scheme presented to him for unquestioned acceptance. It was a living personal faith, born of his doubt, his questionings, his knowledge, his experience and his insight. He knew the deeper real values of life. He had no magic knowledge about the meaning of life, or the nature of God, or God's purposes. He saw the choice of life. He saw the way of indulgence, lust, greed, leading to torment, remorse, and ashes. He saw the way of truth, love, and loyalty, leading to values that he believed to be imperishable and eternal. He made his choice. He staked his life on the higher values, love, honor, truth, on the faith that God exists, that life has eternal significance. The multitudes were astonished at his teaching. Not as the scribes, appealing to tradition, to the Law and the prophets, appealed he unto them, but as one having

⁹ Matthew 7:9-11.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:8.

authority, as one having conviction, as one who saw life, saw it whole, and out of his experience, knowledge and insight, believed with all his heart and mind and soul in the eternal worth of life, in a living God.

III. Jesus' Test of Faith.¹¹ Some believed, and some did not believe. Jesus had paid a great price to gain his faith. With a still greater price he was to confirm it. There were people then, as there are people now, who want faith without paying the price that life requires to attain faith. The story of the Rich Ruler is to the point.¹² You know the sort of man he was. There are thousands of such today. He desired some assurance. He had kept the commandments; he had observed all the customs and traditions; he had gone through all the motions from his youth up. But life lacked that zest, that glow, that buoyant passionate ardor that belongs to those who have a faith and a conviction of their own.

When he came in contact with Jesus he felt a zest, a glow, a power, a spirit of adventure that made his own life of ease and luxury seem tame and stupid. He knew his life lacked something that this obscure carpenter had found. "What shall I do?" said he to Jesus. Jesus replied, "One thing you lack. You lack faith. Get out of this prison of convention and wealth you live in. Life is an adventure. Forget your ease, your ceremonials, your traditions. Live one day for something that you believe true and eternal. Be yourself for once, then you shall taste eternal life. Cast your wealth, your social position behind you. Come follow thou me." "You seek an infallible guide to eternal life. There is no such guide. You seek from me an infallible program that you may follow? There is no such infallible program. Life is adventure. Life is faith."

"But," says the Rich Ruler, "how may I know what you say is true?" The answer is, "You do not know. You never can know except as you try it out, live it as if it were true. Out of your own experience, your own doubts, your own travail and pain, your own trials, mistakes and errors you must find faith and the kingdom of God for yourself. Seek him, and ye shall find him, and life eternal. There is no other way. You must pay the price for faith that faith requires."

¹¹ In the second envelope of extra notes, ECD provides an alternative formulation for this section. A transcription of this alternative is provided below after the end of the sermon.

¹² Matthew 19:16-30.

Jesus spoke with authority because he had paid for his faith the price that faith requires.

IV. The Moral Courage of Jesus.¹³ Finally there was in Jesus that supreme quality of faith, that moral courage that carries through. He spoke with authority because he meant business. His faith was real. He had given himself to a thing that was of greater importance to him than his own self-interest and life. His young life had been stirred to faith and conviction. He had left all to teach the way of life. His decision had been made. He was now coming to the great test which was resulting from his decision. He was to face the test as to whether or not he had the courage to face the consequences of his own life work. He was to be called upon to give up that precious thing, life, for the truth he believed, for the men who believed in him, for the God he had called Father.

Here we come to the inner secret of his life. He had not boasted or talked vainly. He had meant business. It was not unique in him. There have been others along the way of human history who have had the moral courage to die for some great cause they have loved. To them we owe more than our poor lives can ever repay. For the sake of faith, in religion, in science and knowledge, in adventure and discovery, in the daily rounds of humble life, there have been those who have given their life for their faith, their loved ones, their duty, their God. It is a noble company, greater perhaps than we dream. "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for the brethren."¹⁴ We touch the garment hem of God's spirit when we come in touch with those who lay their own life upon the altar for the sake of truth and the brethren?

To this holy ground the trail of Jesus of Nazareth leads us.

V. The Garden of Gethsemane.¹⁵ The rumblings of discontent among the high priests of the established order had been increasing. The heresy hunters were on his trail. Did he not speak with authority? Did not the people listen? Was he not destroying faith in the law and the prophets? Had he not said to

¹³ In the second envelope of extra notes, ECD provides an alternative formulation for this section and through to the end of the sermon. A transcription of this alternative is provided below after the end of the sermon.

¹⁴ John 15:13.

¹⁵ Mark 14:32-50.

many, "Follow thou me." Now the critical hour was at hand. "Recant or resign."

The last meal together with his disciples was finished, those close intimate friends. They had believed in him, left all to follow him and work with him. Now his hour of test had come. Can you imagine the thought that might have passed through his mind? How he thought of the many to whom he had given faith and hope, and a meaning to life. He might have said to himself, "I have told them that this is the way to life that is eternal. My Father, I love this life, these friends, these familiar fields, those mountains and hills and roads, the haunts of my fathers, but 'if this cannot pass away except I drink, thy will be done.'"

Let us pause for a moment. It is easy to declare our faith in the face of the applauding multitude; it is easy to stand in the church surrounded by precious memories and dear friends and say that we believe in the moral values of life, and that we believe in God. But when the tide of approval has run out, and the tide of angry opposition and violence is already lashing against the walls of life's most precious possessions, then the test of faith comes. When the multitude has vanished, when friends have been left behind, and, alone under God's open sky, you are called upon to make the decision of sealing your faith with your own life's blood, then you really declare your faith. Did you mean business or were you just talking when you so glibly recited your credo? In the gardens of Gethsemane, you are not condemning the heretic for his faith. You are not stoning some helpless soul for the sins of the flesh; you are not sending to prison some man who has had the courage to declare publicly his belief. No. None of these things happen in Gethsemane. In the Garden of Gethsemane men measure the quality of their own soul, whether or not they have the moral courage to face the ignominy of trial, condemnation and death for truth's sake, for that spiritual value that we call integrity. In Christ's Gethsemane he made that choice. That is the supreme moment of his life. He had staked his life on the faith, the conviction, not the proven knowledge, but the conviction that God exists, that truth counts, that life has eternal qualities. That faith, that conviction held good in the Garden of Gethsemane. He came through clean. "You rich young man" he might of thought, "you once asked me what you could do to inherit eternal life. You believed me not. Again I say unto you, 'Follow thou me.' I believe. I believe that the Father lives."

That was the authority that Christ had and still has, the power of a faith tested in life, confirmed in death. Others have had it. Their gracious and holy lives have lighted the way of human history. They have kindled fires of noble purpose in thousands of souls. They have stimulated and confirmed that greatest of all human adventures, the faith that God is, and that life has eternal meaning. That is the power of God in the human soul. It was in Christ. It is in you.

END OF SERMON

Alternative Texts for Various Sections of this Sermon found in the "Second Envelope."

Alternative Text: In place of the paragraph, "The authority with which Jesus of Nazareth spoke,..." ahead of "I. He knew man" ECD provides the following alternative:

What was that authority? Faced with the question as to the source of this power, this authority, some said that he was appealing to the lustful, greedy evil passions of man. He was linked with Satan. He was stirring people to revolt and plunder. Possibly it was under the cover of this explanation that judgement was secured against him, and his death assured. Such explanations always appear whenever a man of power appears upon the scene of human history.

Others tried to explain the power, the authority of Jesus by asserting that he had some special and particular relation with Deity. By some unusual process he had received from God a supernatural power. He knew things that man could not know. He could do things that man could not do. He was a special agent of God. He was playing the game of life with human beings, but the dice with which he played were loaded by a peculiar power from God, a power that other men did not have and could not have. That explanation has made out of Jesus the Christ of creeds.

The real answer. But the real answer as to the nature and source of Jesus' power and authority is to be found, neither in the suggestion that he was in league with evil, nor in the explanation that he had some special super-human gift from God.

Alternative Text: In place of the section, "Jesus' Test of Faith" ECD provides the following alternative:

III. The Test of Faith. Some believed and some did not believe. With a great price he had gained his faith. With a still greater price he was to confirm it. There were people then, as there are people now, who want to gain a certain and sure faith without paying the price that life requires to attain faith. The story of the Rich Ruler is to the point.¹⁶ He desired some assurance. He had kept the commandments; he had observed all the customs and traditions; he had gone through all the forms from his youth up. But somehow his life lacked that zest, that glow, that buoyant passionate ardor that comes only to those who have the faith and a conviction that they have made their own. You know the sort of man this rich ruler was. Respectable, well-mannered, careful observer of all the conventional standards of life, obedient [to] the ceremonial law, frequenter of the synagogue, a good neighbor, kindly and generous. He had never doubted any of the traditions, never questioned the conventions. If he had sinned, he had sinned the conventional sins in a perfectly conventional way. But when he came in touch with Jesus he felt that in Jesus there was a certain zest, a certain adventurous glow to life, that made his own life of ease and luxury seem tame and deadly. He knew that his life lacked something that this obscure carpenter, and his obscure followers had found. "What shall I do?" said he to Jesus. Jesus replied, "One thing thou lackest. You lack faith. Get out of this prison of convention you live in. Life is not deadly conformity. Life is adventure. Forget your ease, your luxury, your ceremonials, your traditions. Live one day for something that you believe true and eternal. Do something on your own faith. Be yourself for once, then you shall have eternal life. Cast your wealth, your social position, your luxury to the winds, come follow me. You seek from me an infallible guide to eternal life. There is no such infallible guide. You seek from me an infallible program that you may follow? There is no such infallible program. Life is adventure. Life is faith." "But," says the rich man, "how do I know what you say is true?" "You do not know. You never can know except as you try it out, and out of your own experience, your own doubts, your own travail and pain, out of your own trials and mistakes and errors, you find the kingdom of God for yourself. Seek him and ye shall find him, and life eternal. There is no other way. You must pay the price for faith that faith requires." Jesus spoke with authority because he had paid for his faith the price that faith requires.

[Here another paragraph crossed out:] You ask me today for an infallible guide to eternal life and faith. There is none. There

¹⁶ Matthew 19:16-30.

are helps. You may live the conventional religious life. You may go the rounds of custom and tradition. But that is not the real great faith that Jesus had. It is not power at which the multitudes marveled. That power, that faith comes only as we test it, full and free, in the laboratory of God's world. Jesus had done that, and some there were who understood and believed.

Alternative Text: In place of the section "The Moral Courage of Jesus," and to the end of the sermon, ECD provides the following alternative:

IV. The Moral Courage of Jesus. "But," you are saying, "if disregard of the conventional standards of life is the secret of faith, and the open door to eternal life, then this generation is assured of its salvation. Is not that disregard of convention, that lustful wanton tampering with established standards, that open violation of law and order, the most striking characteristic of this generation?" The question has a point, but also it misses the point. Jesus was a leader by virtue of his moral courage. "Except you righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven."¹⁷ I came not to mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. Some there are who break the conventions and established standards of life for the simple and sole purpose of a more unrestrained license. They are moved, not by a desire for truth nor a desire for the common weal; they are moved solely by an unrestrained lust, greed, and selfishness. They seek not a faith for which they are willing to pay the price that faith exacts. They seek their own satisfactions regardless of the price that society may have to pay. Such we have with us always. Faith may support tradition, custom, established conventions. In fact much of the best faith of this day and all days has given its loyal sincere, and unstinted devotion and support to tradition, to customs, to things established. But it supports them because it has measured them, doubted and tested them, and made them its own. How deeply we respect, love, and honor, those who honestly passionately, loyally and sincerely love the very customs and traditions that we ourselves have been compelled in our own life to abandon for conscience sake. No, the mere breaking with convention has not much to do with the power of our faith. The real thing is to give our loyalty to that which we can wholeheartedly give it, not for our own advantage, but for truth's sake, for the sake of the brethren, for God.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:20.

That was the supreme quality in the life of Jesus, the quality that gave color and meaning to his knowledge and his insight. He meant business. He was not running about trying to compel others to be good. He was not seeking to force his opinions on anyone. He was not asking anyone to do anything that he himself would not do. His alternative to the rich young man was the alternative that he had faced. He had left all to teach the way of life. The rich young man wanted such a faith as Jesus had. Follow thou me.

Here we come to the heart of the source of Jesus' power. It was not unique in him. There have been others along the way of human history that have passed over the same via dolorosa. To them we owe more than our poor lives can ever repay. For the sake of faith, in the fields of religion, of science and knowledge, and in the humble rounds of daily life, there have been those who have given their life for their faith, their loved ones, their duty, for God. It is no less wonderful in Jesus Christ because we acknowledge it as a fact in other lives, and as a latent possibility in many more lives than we imagine. "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for the brethren."¹⁸ Plenty of men will sacrifice someone else's life than their own for what they believe to be true, or for some other reason. But we touch the garment hem of God's spirit when we come in touch with those lay their own life upon the altar for the sake of brethren and the truth.

To this holy ground the trail of Jesus of Nazareth leads us. The Garden of Gethsemane.¹⁹ Long it had been apparent to him that the high priest of the established order, the heresy hunters, the spokesmen of special privilege sought his apprehension. Did he not speak with authority? Did not the people listen? Had he not said to many, "Follow Thou, me." Now the critical hour had come. "Recant or resign." The last meal together with the disciples had taken place, those intimate friends with whom he had been so intimately connected. Can you imagine the thoughts that might have passed through his mind? I have roused the hopes and established the faith of many. I have told them that this is the way of life that is eternal. Now I have come to the parting of the ways. My Father, thou knowest I love this life, these friends, these familiar fields, these roads, these haunts of my fathers; but "if this cannot pass away except I drink, thy will be done." It is easy to declare our faith in the face of

¹⁸ John 15:13.

¹⁹ Mark 14:32-50.

applauding multitudes; it is easy [to] stand in the church surrounded by precious memories, and dear friends and say that we believe in the moral values of life, and that we believe in God. But when the tide of approval runs out, and the angry tide of storm and violence is already crashing about the shores of our life's most precious possessions, then the test of faith comes. Do you still believe when the multitude has vanished, when friends have been left behind, and alone under God's open sky with only the stars to remind you of that infinite power, you have to make the decision of sealing the testimony of your faith with your very life's blood. Did you mean business, or were you just talking? You are not condemning the heretic for his precious faith. You are not stoning some helpless soul for the sins of the flesh. You are not sending to prison some fellow man because he has had the courage to declare what he believes to be true. No. Not any of these things. In the gardens of Gethsemane men are deciding whether they have the moral courage to go through the ignominy of trial, condemnation and death for the truth's sake, for conscience sake, for the conviction that the universe is honest, that the living God is, that the moral and spiritual values of life have eternal meaning. The supreme moment of Christ's life was in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he vindicated the faith that was in him. "You, rich young man, once asked me what you could do to inherit eternal life. You believed me not. Again I say to you, 'Follow Thou me. I believe, I believe that the Father lives.'"

That was the authority, the power that Christ had and still has. The power of a faith tested in life, confirmed in death.