

Matt. 7:28-29

I. The crowds responded to the Sermon on the Mount with astonishment and amazement (28)

A. This is what happened when Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount (28a-b)

1. And it happened (28a)

This is a typical Jewish idiom to introduce a change of scene in a narrative. It is shorthand for something like “moving on to the next major event that took place...”. This marks a major transition out of the Sermon on the Mount to the people’s response to the Sermon on the Mount, and then to the next major block of narrative in the book of Matthew.

2. When Jesus finished these words (28b)

This obviously gives the time for the events of the next proposition. The crowd responded in a certain way (to be described) when Jesus finished speaking those particular words. And the word “finished” typically has a connotation of not only ceasing, but of having reached a goal, to have completed something. Jesus had successfully completed giving all the words which He intended – all the words which were necessary for them to hear at that occasion.

B. The crowds were greatly amazed at His teaching (28c)

The crowd was filled with amazement to the point of being overwhelmed. There was something about this sermon that was totally astounding, especially compared with the kind of teaching which they were used to hearing. And this assessment of the Sermon on the Mount has been shared by its readers throughout the centuries. This truly is an overwhelming, astounding teaching, given by a truly overwhelming, astounding teacher. But as, the rest of the Book of Matthew makes clear, Jesus was much more than just a fantastic teacher. His amazing teaching, and the authority behind His amazing teaching comes from His amazing identity and nature, and is only part of His amazing mission.

The word “teaching” could refer to the content of His teaching. But it could also refer to the manner in which He taught. Based on the following verse, the second option is more probable in this context. But even this presupposes the astounding nature of the content of His teaching, which is the product of the astounding nature of His teaching style.

II. Because He taught with an authority that was not typical of their scholars (29)

A. Pos: Because He was teaching them as One having authority (29a-b)

1. For He was teaching them (29a)

This proposition introduces the reason why the people were astounded. It is the first part of a Positive/Negative contrast. And each part of this contrast starts with a simple assertion about his teaching, which is the occasion for a comparison in the following proposition, which gives the manner in which He did or did not teach. In this first part of the contrast, this proposition introduces the way that Jesus did teach, which will be defined by the comparison to be given in the next proposition.

2. As One having authority [teaches] (29b)

Jesus taught like One Who had authority. He did this because He actually has authority. It is possible to falsely claim to have authority. It is possible to pretend to have authority. It is possible to be placed in a position or role, or to be given a title that is supposed to have a level of control inherent in the position, but to be without the actual relational or institutional backing to actually get anything done. We’ve all probably seen someone who claims to be a leader, but no one is actually following them. There are people in positions of authority, but who are completely ineffectual to actually accomplish anything. But the authority which Jesus has is different from all of these things.

Similarly, we may have seen someone who does not have an official title or position of authority, but who is the person everyone looks to for leadership, because their own personal integrity, character, and ability instills this kind of trust in the people around them. True authority is much more than just personal charisma. But it does become evident over time that certain people garner authority by their character, ability, and their initiative in taking of responsibility.

The kind of authority with which Jesus spoke was similar to this second kind of authority of character, but it was so much more. Jesus did not speak as one just passing on information. But He spoke as the authorized source of this information. He placed Himself on the same level as the Law: “You have heard that it was said, but I say...” He claimed to be the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. He Himself promised the blessings and threatened the judgments of heeding or ignoring His teaching. He did not speak as a mere man talking about God. And He did not even speak as a man speaking for God. He spoke with the same authority as the revelation from God, because He is God. And He spoke in a way that empowered people, not only to hear His words, but to obey them.

The entire crowd recognized that He taught with authority. But few (if any) could have recognized the true extent of His authority on that day. Throughout the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, the true extent of Jesus’ nature and authority is revealed, until, after His resurrection, He said that “all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me.” (Matt. 28:18).

B. Neg: And He was not teaching like one of their Law scholars (29c-d)

1. And [He was] not [teaching] (29c)

This proposition is elliptical, depending on the previous context to fill in the content. It is simply “and not...”. But from the surrounding context, it is clear that this introduces the second part of the Positive/Negative contrast. It introduces the way in which Jesus did *not* teach, as described by the comparison given in the next proposition.

2. Like their Law scholars [taught] (29d)

The term “Law scholars,” which has been traditionally translated as “Scribes,” refers to a specific group of people who were trained experts in the divine revelation, and in all manner of religious teachings, laws, and customs in the Jewish society of that time. They were experts both in the revelation we know as the Old Testament, but also in all of the traditions and regulation and teachings which had grown up around the divine revelation of the Old Testament.

This group is often connected with the Pharisees in the Gospels. Some Pharisees were scribes, and many of the scribes were Pharisees. So, they could be distinguished, but they could also be addressed together in the same breath. Throughout the rest of the Book of Matthew, Jesus agreed with and commended the Scribes and Pharisees for their teaching on the Law of Moses, and told the people to listen to and heed their teaching. And at the same time, Jesus strongly criticized and rebuked the scribes and Pharisees, both for holding to their own human traditions (giving them the same reverence and authority as God’s revelation), and for their hypocritical failure to live up to the things that they taught, and for failing to help others live out what they taught.

In light of Jesus’ criticism of the Scribes, it is not surprising that the people recognized the faults of the Scribes’ teaching compared with Jesus. They seemed only to pass on what they had been given by tradition. And therefore, their teaching seemed to lack a personal investment and passion in what they were teaching. And therefore, their teaching lacked the power to apply to the lives of their students and to empower the students to put it into practice. Their teaching, especially because it had been obscured by the addition of human tradition, seemed to keep God’s revelation and power at a distance, compared to Christ’s immediate appeal as authoritatively, directly speaking for God with power.