

Astonishing authority

*And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.
Matthew 7:28-29*

This final commentary from Matthew on the reaction of the Jewish people to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveals a major aspect of its impact. There were, no doubt, other aspects of the sermon that were new and surprising to its hearers. The very opening precepts regarding those who are blessed in the economy of the kingdom of God were, in large part, contrary to the popular sentiments and religious teaching of their day. For those oppressed by Roman rule, poverty of spirit, meekness, mercy, and persecution would have been unexpected sources of happiness. Then, to suppose that one's righteousness could exceed that of the well-known and respected pious members of the Pharisees and scribes would have certainly invoked consternation. To go to the extent of loving one's enemies, doing good to those who spitefully use and persecute you, just like your heavenly Father does, and in contrast to standard Rabbinical teachings, would have been extremely foreign.

All these strange sounding teachings were coming from one who claimed that He would fulfill the law, even though many of His teachings directly contradicted the teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees with which they were all so familiar. These long-standing doctrines of the Rabbinical commentators of the law were referred to by Jesus in this sermon with such expressions as "it has been said," or "ye have heard that it was said by them of old time." The scribes, who were mainly of the Pharisees' faction, would teach in the synagogues by quoting the various Talmudic commentators from the past as their sources of authority. It is said that they would also often debate some of the varying views of the ancient teachers. However, in contrast, Jesus put forth His doctrine with one authoritative claim, "But I say unto you." As the Son of God, He needed no other reference. He, as the living Word, was the eternal author of the law over which the scribes debated and was laying down the true intent of the law of the kingdom. They were not accustomed to hearing such authority. Yet He had shown and continued to show many miraculous proofs of His person and authority, and the gospel message culminates these proofs with His powerful resurrection. Mankind is thus called beyond astonishment to belief of the truth.