

Mark 1:21-22

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Jesus and His new disciples go to the Galilean town of Capernaum. On the Sabbath they enter a synagogue, where Jesus teaches. Those in attendance are amazed at the authority with which He teaches.

The parallel gospel account for this passage is Luke 4:31-33.

After Jesus called the pairs of brothers Andrew and Simon; and James and John to be His disciples, Mark writes that *They went into Capernaum.*

Capernaum was a key Jewish city in the district of Galilee. It was situated along the middle of the northern shore of the 5x10-mile Sea (or lake) of Galilee. It was a Jewish town that prospered from fishing and other industry.

The name, *Capernaum*, means “Nahum’s village” or “Village of Comfort.” *Capernaum* was in a strategic location because two major trade routes ran near the town. It was smaller than the larger cities on the shore of Galilee. Tiberius was the political capital of the area, and located on the western shore. It could be considered a Roman city. Hippas was on the eastern side of Galilee, and was a Decapolis City, established by the Greeks.

Capernaum was one of a number of Jewish villages on the northern side of Galilee ([See Map](#)). It was a bustling town largely populated with religious Pharisees, fisherman, and merchants. *Capernaum* would be the functional headquarters of Jesus’s earthly ministry. It seems Jesus chose a very Jewish town in a very strategic location for spreading His message, but substantially removed from the political capital in Jerusalem.

Mark keeps the action of his Gospel narrative moving by means of his often-used phrase: *and immediately* (καὶ εὐθὺς – pronounced “kahee yoo-thoos”). *Immediately on the Sabbath* Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach. Mark’s phrase *on the Sabbath*, refers to the day that Jesus entered the synagogue.

The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week in the Jewish calendar. The tenth commandment declared how *the Sabbath* was to be holy day, dedicated to God and rest from work (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The Lord created the earth in six days, but on the seventh day He rested from His work (Exodus 20:11). Aside from resting from their work, one of the ways the Jews kept *the Sabbath* was by attending *synagogue*.

Synagogues were community centers where Jews gathered to worship God and listen to teachings from rabbis who interpreted God’s word. The synagogues were the domain of the religious party called the Pharisees. The Pharisees viewed themselves and were largely seen by the people as champions of righteousness and the protectors of Jewish law. But in reality, the righteousness of the Pharisees was fake. Instead of serving people, they manufactured an ever-

multiplying web of laws designed to exploit others and make themselves look good (Matthew 23).

At this point Jesus was a new rabbi. Rabbis were teachers of the law and had followers. Apparently, *He* was invited *to teach* on this *Sabbath*. In order for Jesus to be able *to teach* in a *synagogue* *He* had to be invited to do so by the head of *the synagogue*. We know from Luke 2:41-52 that even as a young boy Jesus possessed amazing knowledge and insight into the scriptures. As a thirty-year-old man, Jesus would have grown even further in wisdom and knowledge. The ruins of ancient synagogues are observable among the ruins of ancient *Capernaum* as well as the nearby ruins of villages identified as Chorazin, and Magdala . ([See the ruins of a 1st century synagogue in Capernaum](#))

As and after Jesus taught, Mark sums up the impression of those who were present—*they were amazed at His teaching* (vs 22). The reason *they were amazed at His teaching* was because *He was teaching them as one having authority* and Mark adds: *and not as the scribes*.

The scribes refers to those who were experts in the written Law of Moses and the Mishnah, the oral tradition. The Law of Moses are the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis-Deuteronomy). The Mishnah was the oral tradition said to have been passed down from Moses to Joshua and subsequent generations of teachers. The Mishnah was largely an interpretation of the law. Its influence expanded with the rise of the Pharisees during the Babylonian exile.

The Mishnah was an oral tradition during the time of Jesus (it was redacted and written down around 200 A.D.). But during Jesus's day, the Mishnah was only heard and not read. This is why *He* often said phrases like: “you have heard that it was said...” (Matthew 5:27, 38, 43). In Jesus's day, to bolster their authority/legitimacy, rabbis would often ground their teaching in what influential rabbis of the past had said, what had been passed down in the Mishnah. Rabbis did this because (in their opinion) it gave their own teachings more authority and weight.

Jesus however did not seem to ground His teachings in the authority of either respected rabbis or the Mishnah. Remarkably, *He* grounded His authority in Himself and in the words of His Father. And it was this authoritative way of teaching, as much as the teachings themselves that amazed the people when *He* taught them. There are many verses in Matthew where he records the way Jesus grounded His authority in Himself *and not* in other rabbis *as the scribes taught*. The way Jesus grounded His teachings in His own authority was through the expression: “I say to you...” (Matthew 5:18, 20, 22, 26, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

It seems Mark does not record this expression (“But I say to you”) here, because his style is to make the point and move along to the action. He may also have been aware that this expression would not mean much to his intended Gentile and Roman audience. The meaning of this reference would be largely lost on them.

Mark does not want to slow things down or take up valuable papyrus (the material they wrote on) to explain its meaning to the Gentiles. So, Mark just points out that the people *were amazed at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*, then moves on.

Matthew explains a similar point (Matthew 7:28-29), but he frequently quotes Jesus as using His self-authoritative phrase: “I say to you” before quoting the teaching itself because his Jewish audience would instantly understand the meaning and likewise be amazed at the authority with which he spoke as well.

After pointing out that the people in *the synagogue were amazed* at His teaching, Mark then describes an amazing miracle that Jesus performed that *Sabbath in the synagogue*. This miracle is first of many that Mark records Jesus doing in his Gospel account. This miracle will be discussed in the next section of commentary.

Biblical Text

²¹ They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. ²² They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.