

“Trustworthy”
Psalm 111:1-10; Deut. 18:15-20;
Mark 1:21-28

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I was taken by those words in Deuteronomy 18:19, where it says, “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.” Accountability. It’s an idea that I don’t often think about, but as I began to wonder about it, I began to think about where I feel accountable in my life.

The first thing that came to mind about where I feel accountable is my work. Maybe that is one of those obvious places where we have a sense of accountability – in the work we do, in our job, or in a job we’ve done. Maybe we feel accountable in school, or to family, or friends, or spouse. Where is it that we feel accountable these days? What does it mean to be accountable to our community or to our nation?

As I think about that idea of accountability, it feels to me like the main way that I should be accountable, the way society encourages me to be accountable, is to myself. Society tells me to think of being accountable to who I am, what I believe, my understandings, my needs, and my views of success, and that is where I am really accountable. So when I read this passage again about being accountable to God, I was reminded of that sense of being just accountable internally to myself, and whether there is true external accountability and where does that lie? What do I think I’m accountable to, and how am I accountable to God?

As I think about being accountable to God, I realize if I’m truly to be accountable to God, I need to hear how I should do that. I need an authoritative voice to show me the way. That is what I found in the Gospel passage. As Jesus came into the synagogue, they began to say, “He teaches with authority.” Initially, it seems like they recognized something different in his voice—perhaps a lack of hesitation, a confidence. Then they saw him do a healing, sending the unclean spirit packing. So there is true authority here. He has the authority to do this.

As I thought about how Jesus had the authority, and we might look to him for that authority, I also had this little voice in my head that worries about authority. It reacts to authority. It reminded me of a story of a young

child who is being picked up from day care. When the parent came to pick the child up, they walked out into the playground but the little one really didn't want to leave. Wasn't ready to head home. So the child picked up a rock. In picking up that rock, the child felt like it now had power over that authority of the parent, and told the parent, "No! I'm not going. And if you try to make me, I'll throw this rock at you." In that moment, that child found that the parent didn't pay attention to the power of the rock, to the power the child thought it had. The parent picked up the child and disciplined the child appropriately.

That story reminds me of how it feels we can sometimes react to authority. I think I have some sort of power that I can use to thwart that authority, especially if I feel like the authority isn't telling me what I want to hear. In the scripture, the unclean spirit seems to recognize that it is face-to-face with an authority and it picks up a rock. Its rock seems to be simply outing who Jesus was. It thought maybe that knowledge, that power, would be enough to keep Jesus away. Of course, Jesus doesn't pay any attention to that rock, and sends the unclean spirit packing.

Yet, it makes me wonder, how many times do I pick up a rock? How many times do I think I have a particular way of seeing things, a particular understanding, or simply not want to do something I think Jesus is telling me I need to do. How often do I think I have my own power, my own way of doing things? How do I react to authority in my life, and do I see Jesus' authority? Do I see how Jesus is teaching me to live so that I might be accountable to who God is and what God wants? In hearing the prophet's voice, by paying attention to who Jesus is and what Jesus has to say, do I actively engage in listening to what Jesus is about and what he is describing and who Jesus is? Do I bring my own unclean spirit? Do I let Jesus overcome any rock I might want to throw, to cleanse me, to engage me, to let me be actively engaged in being a disciple of Jesus?

Sometimes I think the struggle I have with this whole set of words, the idea of accountability and authority that actively engages me, is that it can feel coercive. If I think about somebody telling me that I'm accountable to a particular power that has authority over my life, I often feel that nobody is going to coerce me into acting a particular way. Oftentimes, I think we come to this idea that Jesus has the authority and that we are accountable to God as if it's a coercion to make us be something we don't want to be. Sometimes it is about something we don't want to be, perhaps. Sometimes

I don't feel like being forgiving or loving or caring. So, yes, there are times it feels like I'm asked to do something I don't want to do. And yet, where else can I find the authority and accountability that comes to me by way of grace? It feels to me that the world keeps presenting me with lots of authority and accountability and taskmasters that don't show much grace. Instead, they leave me feeling like a failure, or fearing failure, or recognizing a frizzle in my expectations.

So often it feels like the way the world has power over us is one of coercion, that puts up a harsh taskmaster ahead of us. Instead of bringing us life, it feels like the failure, the fear, and the frizzle come too easily. The difference, I think, is as Jesus invites us to recognize his authority and that we are accountable to God, it is as a child is accountable to a parent. The parent is going to discipline the child in order to guide them into a better life, into goodness. It is only by grace that instead of becoming a failure and being a failure, God forgives and enables us to not live as failures, but to live as children of God. Children who, yes, sometimes fail, but are not defined by our failures, but by the very love and grace of God that gives us a new chance and a new way and invites us to be God's people.

So let's think about who we are accountable to and what it means to be accountable. Let's begin by being accountable to God as those who hear God's prophet, who hear God's Son, who hear what Jesus has to say to us, and to recognize his authority, that he has that derived power, the real power of God come to show us the way. Let's actively listen to what he says and realize that in that active listening, we are given a gift of grace that guides us into the goodness of life, that overcomes the failures, the fears, the frizzle, and engages us in the work and will and way of God.

This passage invites us to recognize where we are first accountable – to the God who loves us, who has created us, who has given us life, and engages us with a voice of authority, the word of Jesus, that we can continue to go back to and learn from and be guided by as we actively listen and actively engage in the world he gives us. Thank God for this grace, this goodness, this gift. Amen.