

A Question of Authority

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Matthew 21:23-32

21 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” 24 Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

## A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Who gave you authority to do that? Has anyone ever asked you that question?

It’s happened to me a few times, and it was always an unpleasant experience.

The implication is that you don’t have the authority to do what you’ve done, and the boom is about to be lowered.

That certainly was the case in our lesson for today.

The chief priests and the elders came to Jesus while he was teaching in the temple and asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

What are the “things” that Jesus is doing that bring about this challenge?

## THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

The first thing that may have raised their ire was the way Jesus came into Jerusalem. In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel we read familiar story of the Triumphal Entry.

Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a fulfillment of the words spoken by the prophet, "See, your king comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey ..."

The crowd spread their cloaks on the ground and cut branches and spread them on the road. And the crowd shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

This did not go unnoticed. In fact the Bible tells us that the whole city was stirred up by this procession and was asking, "Who is this guy?"

The crowd answered that he was a prophet. But, the procession suggested that he was more than a prophet. Perhaps he was even the Messiah.

No wonder the religious authorities wanted to know by what authority Jesus did these things. Was he a prophet? Was he the Messiah? And if he was a prophet or even the Messiah, what was he going to do? What could they expect from Jesus?

So far, Jesus seemed like a real wildcard. And it was the responsibility of these religious authorities to make sure Jesus was kosher.

## CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

This brings us to the second thing that Jesus did that caused the religious authorities to challenge his authority.

Not only did Jesus enter Jerusalem like a Messiah; he also challenged the standard operating procedures in the temple.

When Jesus entered the temple area he turned over the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those who were selling doves.

And then Jesus quoted Scripture, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers."

Apparently temple worship had become big business, and Jesus actions hit them where it hurt, in the pocketbook.

## HEALING IN THE TEMPLE

Third Jesus immediately began to heal people in the temple. The Bible tells us that the blind and the lame came to him, people who were supposedly beyond help. And Jesus healed them.

In response to that the children began to shout *in the temple*, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

This was too much for the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They were indignant, and they asked Jesus, “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

In other words, they thought Jesus should tell them to be quiet because in their estimation the proclamations of the children were blasphemous and dangerous. The Romans would take notice of someone who claimed to be the Messiah, especially when that claim was made in the temple.

But, Jesus once again challenged the religious leaders by quoting Scripture. Jesus said to these indignant and fearful religious authorities,

“Haven’t you read that passage of Scripture that says, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?’”

With that final Scriptural smack down, Jesus left the temple and spent the night in the city of Bethany. But, he returned to the temple the next day and began to teach.

## AUTHORITY ALWAYS QUESTIONED

And that’s where we pick up our lesson for today. The religious leaders have had time to think about what Jesus said and did, and they now ask him, “Who gave you this authority? Why are you able to say these things and do these things?”

This was not the first time the authority of Jesus had been challenged. Many times during his ministry Jesus said what only God could say and then did what only God can do. And the religious leaders were very critical of the claims he was making.

For example, do you remember the story of when the paralyzed man was brought to Jesus by his friends? The first thing Jesus did was to forgive the man's sins. The religious leaders who witnessed this thought, "What's this guy doing, only God can forgive sins?"

But, Jesus knew what they were thinking so he told them, "So that you will know that the son of man has the authority to forgive sins I will heal this man." He told the man to take up his bed and walk, and he did.

The crowds were in awe that Jesus had such authority. In fact they often said that the teaching of Jesus was quite different from the teaching of other religious leaders. Jesus taught as one who had authority. When Jesus spoke, things happened.

Jesus was even able to give his disciples the authority to cast out demons and heal in his name.

And the people wondered out loud, "Can this man be the Son of David?" In other words, might Jesus be the long awaited Messiah?

But, the religious leaders constantly questioned the authority of Jesus. They said that his power came from the devil. They demanded that he give them a sign from heaven to prove his authority. (Apparently healing the lame and the blind was not enough for them. They needed more.)

And in our lesson for today this brewing conflict comes to a head.

The Sanhedrin, the very ones who will soon condemn Jesus to death question his authority. Who gave you authority to do all this?

#### ANSWERING A QUESTION WITH A QUESTION

And how does Jesus answer their question about authority? He answers their hostile question with another question. Jesus says if you answer my question I'll answer your question.

"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

In an indirect way Jesus' question does answer the question about his authority. John said that he prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. If John's baptism was from heaven, then Jesus might be construed to be the Messiah.

But, the religious authorities were not worried about truth. They were worried about perception. They talked among themselves and said,

“If we say that the baptism of John was from heaven, then Jesus will say, ‘Why didn’t you believe in him? Why weren’t you baptized?’

On the other hand, if we say that the baptism of John was from earth, that John wasn’t really a prophet, then the crowds will be angry with us because they all believed that John was a prophet.”

So, like good politicians these religious leaders decided not to answer the question. And Jesus said, “Okay. I won’t answer your question.”

### THE PARABLE

But, Jesus does give them an answer in the form of a parable. He said,

Let me tell you a story about two boys who were asked by their father to work in the vineyard. One boy said, “I don’t think I want to do that today.”

But, then he changed his mind and went out and worked.

The father asked the other boy to go out in the vineyard and work. And this second boy said, “Yes sir dad. I’m glad to do whatever you say. Your wish is my command.”

But, then this second boy just didn’t go.

And then Jesus asked, “Which one of these boys did the will of the father?”

The answer was apparent, and almost without thinking all of the religious leaders said, “The first did his will.”

And then Jesus lets them know that his parable was not about two boys being asked to work in their father’s vineyard. It was instead about the religious leaders’ response to the call of God.

The Bible tells us that the tax collectors and the prostitutes heeded God’s call through John. They repented and were baptized.

Though they had rejected God's call before now they were like the son who said "no" to his father's call to work in the vineyard, but then went and did the father's will.

On the other hand the religious leaders were like the son who talked a good game, but when the time came to actually enter the vineyard and work, they didn't go. They did not repent

And so Jesus tells them,

"Those tax collectors and prostitutes who repented and were baptized will enter the kingdom of heaven before you will."

### A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY TODAY

Who rejects the authority of Jesus today?

There are some obvious answers. Some do not believe that God exists and so they reject Jesus and any other form of religion. Others think that Jesus was a great teacher or a prophet, but not the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

But, what about Christians who say "yes" to the call of Jesus, but then say "no" to that call by the way they live? Unfortunately there are too many of us who fit this category.

The problem is a question of authority.

We say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But, the way of Jesus is not always the way that we want to follow. What is this way?

The authority that comes from Jesus is the authority of humility.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians that our lives should be modeled after Jesus. We should not do anything out of selfish ambition but in humility regard others better than ourselves.

We should not look out for our own interests but instead to the interests of others. Christian authority is an authority based on love and selflessness.

The Christian leader does not lord it over others but instead finds joy in serving. While others try to obtain authority through power and control, the follower of Christ seeks authority through vulnerability and sacrifice.

These are not the usual characteristics associated with authority. And that's why some people don't recognize the authority of Jesus even today.

The cross is a stumbling block instead of a sign of salvation. Even today religious leaders seek authority in some place other than the teachings of Jesus.

### EARS TO HEAR

The religious leaders who questioned the authority of Jesus had the power to destroy him. And eventually they did. But, ironically it was Jesus who had the power to save them, if only they had ears to hear.

Do we have ears to hear the voice of Jesus?

We too reject the authority of Jesus when we worship pride and power instead of taking up a cross and following him. And instead of being saved by the power of the cross we are deaf to the message of salvation.

Jesus said that not everyone who calls him "Lord, Lord" would be recognized at the last as his follower. Ironically, sometimes we religious people are the very ones who are blind to the work of Jesus among us. And sometimes we are not aware of our need for repentance.

This passage should cause all of us to soberly reflect on our actions. Being religious is no guarantee of being right. Indeed, it is still possible to good men and women in the worst sense of the word!

### PROVOKED TO GOOD WORKS

We need to help each other have eyes to see and ears to hear the message of Jesus. In fact, that's the purpose of the church, that's the reason we get together each week. The book of Hebrews puts it this way,

"And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Today's parable is not so much about those "other people" who don't practice what they preach and so break the heart of God. This parable is about how we refuse to do what faith requires. This parable is about how we tell God "yes" and then we fail to follow through on our promise.

Jesus in our lesson for today asks the religious leaders, “What do you think?” I think that question is directed not only toward those religious leaders who lived long ago. It is directed also toward us.

What do we think about faith and practice? Do we practice what we preach? Are we laying down our lips for the gospel but not laying down our lives?

Are we trying to make Christianity into an arid philosophy instead of a way of life? Are we politely saying, “yes” to the call of our Heavenly Father and yet not going to work in the vineyard?

Jesus didn't tell the religious leaders of his day that they were worse than “prostitutes and con men” because he wanted to put them down. He wanted to shock them out of their complacency.

He wanted to warn them that faith without works has no foundation.

I would suggest that many of us need that same warning. Faith requires more than promises. It requires practice.

And each and every day we have an opportunity to repent of our sin and serve the Lord with gladness.

Amen.