

Text: Matthew 21:23-27

Title: A Question of Authority, or “Who is your boss?”

Truth: The Lord Jesus Christ has divine authority over all things.

Date/Location: Sunday July 24, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The text of Scripture here reports a straightforward account of the chief priests and elders confronting Jesus about how He could do what He was doing. They ask a question that put Jesus in a no-win situation. But Jesus turns the tables on them and asks them a similar question. They do not answer, and in turn He does not answer them.

The topic of the text—authority—presents a good opportunity to speak about that topic in more general terms.

Matthew 21:23-27 21 Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”

24 But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: 25 The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’

26 But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.”

27 So they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.”

And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

I. The Question, v. 23

A. The chief priests and elders of the people fashioned *themselves* as the temple authorities. Of course, the Romans were in charge governmentally, but the temple was under Jewish jurisdiction.

How could Jesus come in there and remove the merchandisers and take the spotlight from the existing leadership? They ask Jesus what his authority is and who gave it to him. “Just who do you think you are?” is the feeling that I get from their question.

The two questions are basically one and the same, though we can see distinct nuances between them— (1) “What part of what law are you appealing to here?” and (2) “Who was it that put you in charge?” The first is an impersonal source of authority, a document or law or principle; the second is a personal source of authority, namely the person or governmental body who put you as executor over that law or principle. For example, a police officer could say that (1) he is enforcing the law of the State of Michigan—by what authority—and (2) the governor or police chief commissioned him to be in the place of power where he can enforce that law.

B. If Jesus answered, “On my own authority,” this would undermine other things that He said up to that point. For example: He spoke about doing the same work as His Father (John 5:17) and seeking the will of the Father who sent Him (John 5:30). He said in John 8:28 that he does nothing on His own, but rather as the Father taught him. Moreover, the Pharisees would hardly believe a man on the word of his own authority. They should have believed *this* man because He had a unique authority as the Son of God, but they did not understand this.

On the other hand, if Jesus said that He did things “on the authority of God,” the chief priests and elders would certainly want to crucify Him because they believed He was saying and doing things contrary to the Law—breaking Sabbath, disrupting the priestly leadership, calling Himself Messiah, Son of God (John 5:18), etc. They would believe He was lying.

I do not see any other live options. There was no other human authority behind Christ. And He certainly did not operate on the authority of demonic power, though the Pharisees might think so (John 8:48).

C. Jesus could not correctly answer the first way, nor convincingly answer the other way. The first way is incorrect, and the second way was not going to persuade the hard-hearted Jewish leaders—

and it would only inflame them to want to attack him right then and there, and the time was not yet right for that.

D. Interestingly, Jesus has already answered the authority question and will answer it again soon:

John 7:17 "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is **from God** or whether I speak on **My own authority.**"

John 12:49 "For **I have not spoken on My own authority;** but the **Father who sent Me gave Me a command,** what I should say and what I should speak."

John 14:10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I **do not speak on My own authority;** but **the Father** who dwells in Me does the works.

E. In His humanity and human role, Jesus did not do things of His own accord. He was here to serve God the Father. "Not my will..." (Luke 22:42).

F. When Jesus had conquered death and was glorified, a new level of authority was committed to His stewardship by the Father:

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "**All authority has been given to Me** in heaven and on earth."

Beyond that, the Lord will be given a world-wide kingdom over which He will rule for 1,000 years. He will be King of kings and Lord of lords.

II. Jesus Answers with His Own Question, v. 24-25

A. Jesus quickly and wisely devised a clever tactic: do not answer the question until they answered a similarly hard question of His own creation.

B. The new question is this: what was the source of John's authority, whereby he prescribed baptism for the repentance of sins? Who gave him that authority?

- C. We know the answer to the question: **God** sent John to baptize. John 1:33 says “He who sent me to baptize with water...” And we know the answer to the priests’ question: Jesus was doing the things like cleaning out the temple, working miracles, and teaching on the authority of the **Triune God**.

III. The Non-Answers to Both Questions

- A. This put the priests and other leadership onto the horns of a dilemma. The Bible records their deliberation about it. They could say that John’s authority was from Heaven. If so, they would open themselves to the charge of not believing in God because they did not believe in the one whom He sent. Furthermore, if they said “Heaven,” they would have to believe John, who pointed to Jesus, and then they would be answering their own question, because it would follow that Jesus was operating on heavenly authority.

On the other hand, if they said that John’s authority was from men, they would endanger their credibility and perhaps existence because the crowds believed that John *was* sent from God. The “hoi polloi” knew better than the religious leaders, who were supposed to know. John’s authority was in fact from Heaven.

- B. Therefore, they said they did not know. Their answer reveals a lot about their character.

What they really meant was that they did not want to submit themselves to the authority of God and listen to His servant. Did they really think John’s authority was sourced purely in humanity?

Or suppose that they *did* believe John was a mere human messenger with no divine authority. In that case, their non-answer meant that although they would like to say that John’s authority was human—so they would not have to believe him—they did not have the guts to say so because they feared the crowd. If they really feared God and thought John was in the wrong, they should have said so. They feared people more than they feared God.

In addition, they rejected that which God had kindly given to them. With such rejection, they cannot (nor can we) expect to receive *more* from God. If you do not accept what you *can* understand, how do you expect to be given clarity on what you cannot?

- C. What they *should* have done was to admit that John brought a manifestly a heaven-originated message. He was calling the people to repent; he looked an awful lot like an OT prophet in his lifestyle and manner; he came like Elijah was promised in Malachi 4:5-6 and Isaiah 40:3; he said nothing wrong in terms of the Law of Moses. But, like so many prophets before John which the Jewish people killed, they were glad to get rid of John as well. By the way, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 comprised the very last words of the Old Testament. Matthew's gospel comes next, and its events were the first of God's new revelation to the Jewish people after 400 years of silence.
- D. Because the Jewish leaders would not answer the question of Jesus, He told them that they did not hold up their end of the bargain. Therefore, He would not answer their question about the source of authority that He had. But as we said above, Jesus answered the question elsewhere to anyone who was willing to listen.
- E. They would have immediately perceived that he put them into the same kind of situation they tried to put Him into. They would know that He knew their question was not really an honest question because they refused to believe His testimony. But His question served the second purpose of exposing that they fear man and not God.

IV. Application: The General Question of Authority

- A. Let me adapt the question of the Pharisees to you. By what authority do you live, and who gave you that authority? Or I could adapt the question of Jesus to you: the way you live—where is that from? From heaven, or from men?
- B. The most common answer: "from men." That is, from culture, from science, from common agreed-upon customs, from conformity to my group, or from myself. Basically, all those answers boil down to "me" as the authority. It is a philosophy called self-autonomy. It is a kind of libertarianism and demand for personal freedom. Whether well thought-out or not, many people live this way. This self-centered mindset, coupled with the postmodern philosophy

that absolute truth does not exist, gives rise to moral relativism. What this says is that “others have told me, or I have thought up myself that my system of morals is just as good as yours, or yours is just as good as mine.” Finally, this results in the “you cannot judge me” mentality. Why not? Because your morals simply do not apply to me.

- C. But this entire philosophy is unworkable. A society cannot be successfully based upon a purely moral relativistic approach. If murder is not wrong to some people, and stealing is not wrong to other society members, anarchy and chaos will result. In other words, it is impractical. There are certain areas of life where this approach may be tolerable, but there are others where it is simply intolerable.
- D. Not only is such an approach unworkable, but it is unbiblical. God had made it known both in written revelation as well as the unwritten law of conscience that murder is wrong. Stealing is wrong. You know it intuitively in your conscience, and your parents taught you those things from earliest youth. You also know that it is right to restrain and punish evil so that the society does not become unworkable, and so that if you are a victim of a crime, say, that your loss or suffering is addressed properly.

God also tells us that blaspheming Him is wrong, and worshipping false gods is wrong, and that coveting and lying and dishonoring your parents is wrong, as is adultery. Some of those may not seem “intuitively” as bad as murder or lying, but they are part of the same moral code given by the same God.

- E. There are several problems with the “I make my own rules” life. One is this: Proverbs 14:12 (and 16:25) says that there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. Another is that a society that does not have these basic rules will be broken. A third is that these things displease God and turn Him against you. Your sinful nature wants self-rule. In your heart, you desire to be your own boss. Since Eve and Adam in the garden, humans have been choosing their own way over God’s way (Isaiah 53:6).
- F. The other option for your authority is heaven—God—Jesus Christ. “All authority” has been given to Him. Every knee will bow to Him

(Phil. 2:10-11). He is Lord. Each of us must come to terms with the fact that we are not the masters of our own destiny. That absolute truth comes into focus especially at the end of life. But if you confess Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved—from sin, and self, and the devastating impact of self-autonomy (Romans 10:9-10).

G. You might think that there are other “live options” such as the various world religions. But all of these are man-made or Devil-inspired and do not provide a sure way to be right with God. Those who sacrifice to idols actually sacrifice to demons, and not to God (1 Cor. 10:20).

Conclusion

We ask again: what is the source of authority for how you live your life? God, or you?

If you, why do you believe so much in yourself? Do you have enough knowledge, experience, and wisdom to make the right decisions? Be honest and realistic with your answer! For instance: do you know, in yourself, what happens to a person after death? If you do not know that in yourself, how do you even have a *prayer* of guiding your steps aright in this life?

Why should I believe in your ability to do that as over against God’s infinitely wise and experienced ability to do far better? Remember, there is a way that seems right to a man, but... (Prov. 16:25). Our lives are not our own, and it is not in our ultimate purview to direct our own steps (Jeremiah 10:23). If Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in his humanity, was not His own authority, how could you dream to be your own authority? He did the will of God, and thus modeled for us how we ought to think of ourselves.

Do you fear God? Do your objections to His moral demands really justify you to ignore those demands and try to make up your own morality?

Real joy comes when you can honestly say that you are living your life in accordance with the authority of God. When He is your Lord, guide, boss, teacher, counselor, etc. then you can have confidence you are doing the right stuff with your life.

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