

The King's Authority

Matthew 21:23-27

Introduction

In this chapter we find ourselves in the final week of Christ's earthly ministry. From this passage all the way through Matthew 24 and 25 Jesus deals with his enemies—critics—the self-righteous political and religious leaders. The events seem to take place on Tuesday (Matt.22:23; 25:1; 26:1-2). Jesus will deal with self-righteousness and unbelief head on.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem (vv.1-11) marched into the Temple (vv.12-17); overturned the tables of the money-changers (v.12) and cursed a fig tree (vv.18-21). Jesus has exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, pointed out their inward corruption and their outward fruitlessness. Jesus loves them. They are angry with Him. It is the nature of Jesus to love people. Jesus loves you—even though you may be inwardly corrupt or outwardly fruitless. Jesus calls the religious leaders to repent, confess and expose sin and throw ourselves on His grace and mercy and love. Jesus pleads with you not to reject the Father (God) who sent the Son (God). Do not reject the Holy Spirit who convicts us of our sin and reveals Jesus as the Father's remedy to our horrible problem of sin. **The religious leaders question Jesus' right to do such things.**

In this passage we learn several things about unbelief. Unbelief is willing to treat Jesus with treachery and disdain. These religious leaders are not interested in the truth—if the truth threatens who they are or what they have. Unbelief treats Christ with contempt.

I grew up in a generation where we placed bumper stickers on our cars. **Question Authority.** In the nineties the new slogan could have been **You Are The Authority.**

In an episode of *Frazier* Kelsey Grammar who plays Dr. Frazier Crane —psychiatrist and talk show host is clearly wrong about something. Rather than admit he is wrong—he goes through a series of denials. When asked to confess his wrong, he says, “I have a medical degree from Harvard. When I am wrong, the world makes less sense.” Like Frazier we live in a world where human reason and human experience should decide what is right and what is best. This passage of Scripture invites us to consider whether or not Jesus has the right to be the authority for our lives.

Question The King's Authority (v.23)

Matthew 21:23 (NKJV)23Now 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?”

The religious leaders are still seething and steaming over the episodes of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the shouts of hosanna, the overturning of the tables the disruption of their lives; **Jesus asserting His authority and questioning their authority.** Gone are the peddlers and the hucksters and the religious leaders want to know; “what gives you the right Jesus?”

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The religious leaders in effect ask two questions; “By what authority are You doing these things?” and “who gave You this authority?” The first question asks for justification of Christ’s works—who gave Jesus the right to do what he was doing! The second question goes to the heart of His person!

The word authority translates the Greek “*exousia*” and sometimes translates to ‘power’ or authority (John 1:12).

There is no exact or corresponding word for *exousia* in either Aramaic or Hebrew. The word expresses both freedom and legal rights.

In the Bible authority is a word that describes God’s absolute power—sovereignty —freedom—and so God is the source who authorizes all other powers. No wonder Paul writes—“there is no authority except from God” (Romans 13:1).

Unbelief always questions both the work and the person.

The religious leaders know that Jesus can only appeal to one of three sources; either the authority comes from God; or it comes from Jesus Himself or it comes from some other external authority whether human or divine. If Jesus said that His authority came from Heaven they could ask for some sign to substantiate the claim and have grounds to accuse Jesus of blasphemy. The religious leaders are hoping that if Jesus appeals to some kind of self-authority the people will reject His claims.

The religious leaders have every right to question the authority of Jesus. They sit in the Seat of Moses but they also have the responsibility **to examine His claims, his words, his deeds and His character.**

The word ‘authority’ gives many people the creeps.

And for good reason. Lord John Acton wrote; “No authority has power to impose error, and if it resists the truth, the truth must be upheld until it is admitted.”

No authority has the power to impose error. God centered authority affirms truth and refutes and resists error. Self-centered authority affirms “I know what is best for me.” In Judges 21:25 were read “In those days Isarel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (NIV).

What happens when people act based on their own opinions of what is right and wrong, good and evil?

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Sir Thomas More rightly said, “Men desire authority for its own sake that they may rule, command, and control other men, and live uncommanded and uncontrolled themselves.”

But we know that authority is a necessary part of home, church and government.

God gave authority to humans over nature (see Genesis 1:28); to husband over wife (Genesis 3:16) and parents over their children (Lev.19:3).

Authority is the right and power to control.

In the Bible authority is a word that describes God's freedom to act.

The Bible teaches that Christ has authority over all flesh. In the high priestly prayer of John 17:1-2 Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and says ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, 2 “as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.”

Jesus has the authority from His Father to lay down His life (John 10:18). “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power (authority) to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I received from My Father.”

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins (Matt.9:6). Jesus gives authority to those who receive Him—to be the children of God (John 1:12). Jesus gave His disciples authority over disease and demons when He was on the earth (Matt. 10:1).

In Matthew 28:18-20; “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus spoke with authority. The Apostle Paul wrote; “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16 NIV).

According to Paul—Jesus is the source of authority. Jesus is equal to God (Phil.2:6) and is in fact God (John 10:30). He not only reflects God but reveals God to us (John 1:18). Jesus came from Heaven and is holy and has both the right and authority to judge the world. Jesus is supreme over this world—and the spirit world.

In one of the great ironies of existence—the believer—under the authority of Christ—are given permission to exercise authority—Jesus in Mark 3:14-15 appointed 12 that they might be with Him and He sent them to preach, (15) and to have power (same word—authority) to heal

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sicknesses and to cast out demons.” Power over demons—power over darkness power to become the children of God (John 1:12).

The church and the Christian possess genuine authority—only—and if—they serve the mission of Jesus and embrace faithfulness—to the Bible—and the building up—of the Church. We accept the authority of the Scriptures by faith. This prompts love and obedience to Jesus—because the Scriptures invite us to love and obey Christ and one another.

The religious leaders question the authority of Jesus—in order to gather evidence against Him, to bring forth an accusation.

The King's Question Concerning Authority (vv.24-25a)

24But 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:

25The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

The question reveals the condition of the religious leaders hearts!

The unbeliever—the skeptic—has no problem questioning the person and works of Christ but are quite annoyed when Jesus insists on asking a few questions Himself.

Since we are on the subject of authority let me ask you a question. The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

Why does Jesus bring up the ministry of John the Baptist? Because Jesus knew the religious leaders attitude toward John would reveal their true attitude about Him.

Jesus is in effect suggesting the source for John's ministry and the source of His own ministry shared **a common authority. If you love the ministry of John you will love the ministry of Jesus.**

If John's ministry is from heaven the religious leaders would have to concede that Jesus is the Son of God. Why? Because John's message of repentance and baptism included; “Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. . .and I saw and bore record that this is the Son of God” (see John 1:29; 34).

The question that Jesus asks the religious leaders forces either confession or denial.

The same is true today. Certain questions force confession or denial. Was the ministry of John the Baptist from heaven or men? If John's ministry is from Heaven that Jesus is God's Son. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the one who is greater—the one who must increase.

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If John's ministry was from men—than how do we account for so many changed lives? How do we explain the willingness of Jesus to be baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness?

Think for a moment. Did John in some kind of self-directed way wake up one morning and decide for himself to become the forerunner of Christ? Did John just make up the whole thing in his mind? In Luke's gospel (7:29-30) "*And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. (v.30) But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.*"

Throughout the New Testament the questions of Jesus force confession or denial? Mark 8:27; "Who do men say that I am?"

The Consequences Of Willful Unbelief (vv.25b-27)

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

26But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet."

27So 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.

Someone once said, "Unbelief is not the cause of sin; sin is the cause of unbelief."
The question of Jesus places the religious leaders on the horns of a dilemma.

The religious leaders are hypocrites. And because they are hypocrites they cannot say that John's message and ministry was from heaven because it would place them in the uncomfortable position of inconsistency.

But they are also cowards. The religious leaders feared the multitude and popular opinion because the common people received John as a prophet.

The religious leaders remained strangely silent over the arrest and execution of John the Baptist by Herod. If they accepted John's authority they would have to accept John's statement about the religious leaders as a brood of vipers who refused to repent (see Matthew 3:7-10).

In verse 27—the Greek text reads "We don't know"—*ouk oidamen*. This seems to be a deliberate lie (based on their earlier discussion vv.25-26).

The religious leaders concern—is **not for the truth but for themselves.**

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Unbelief brings the silence of Christ. “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

How does Jesus honor unbelief? With judgment. The first judgment is silence.

“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Unbelief is unconcerned about evidence. Unbelief will not be convinced or persuaded by truth. This is not can't believe—but rather won't believe.

Clearly you are not really interested. Unbelief will not be persuaded by truth.

When the sins of unbelief are pointed out; people retaliate—sometimes legally, sometimes within society's rules. The unbeliever will at first denounce and then attempt to discredit and sometimes persecute.

The question of Jesus—and the answer of the religious leaders reveal several things:

1. The religious leaders were compelled to admit to an utter lack of discernment in regards to John the Baptist's ministry.
2. The religious leaders were convicted of guilt because they rejected the testimony of the Baptist concerning the work and ministry of Jesus.
3. The religious leaders exposed their utter hypocrisy and cowardice and therefore their incompetence to occupy their religious offices.

What happens when **unbelief bears its bitter fruit?**

Hypocrisy will become a part of your life.

Cowardice will become a part of your life.

You will deliberately deny Christ.

You will choose ignorance—over possible shame—embarrassment—ridicule and persecution.

No wonder Jesus said (Mark 8:38) “Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of His Father with the Holy Angels”.

The religious leaders had already made their decision about Jesus; they rejected John and Jesus as God's messengers. **The plan was to kill Jesus.** Israel had a long history of rejecting God's prophets. That was the point that Jesus would make in the parable that follows (21:28-32).

Conclusion

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Every thoughtful person must be prepared to answer the question that Jesus asks; the baptism of John, was it from heaven or man? Who is Jesus?

How can you acknowledge the truth about John the Baptist or the truth about Jesus and fail to follow Him?

It is easy to say "I don't know."

What would cause a person to say "I don't know" when in fact they do know?

Human beings love sin—so much they do not want to give it up. We think we can control our sin and control its consequences. We make choices. We think God should honor and accept our choices.

Some people are afraid of what people might think. Others are afraid that if they truly accept Christ God might make demands that some are unwilling or unable to fulfill.

The unbeliever finds human reason and human experience as the basis of authority. The unbeliever can quite comfortably appeal to the Bible so long as it is consistent with reason and personal experience.