**“Who gave you this authority?” Matt. 21:23-27**

**Intro**

As the youngest of three kids, one of the things I have never, *ever* been in my family is in charge. It’s never happened. But yet all through my life / at various times and places/ there are all kinds of people who have been in charge of me: parents, siblings, babysitters, etc. And I think you’d all agree: that that is incredibly unfair and unjust, right? And yet – even more than that – aside from not actually being in charge of anyone in my family, one of the most galling things for me growing up was when the reality that I was not in control was pointed out to me. And the reason it was so infuriating was b/c – although I knew I wasn’t I control at all – I was very good at fooling myself into believing that I still *was* in control.

You know, like when mom and dad would be going out to a dinner, and they’d tell my older brother and sister what time I was to supposed to go to bed. Even though I knew my brother and sister were *truly* the ones in control/ when they would let me choose the TV show, or the game, or the park we went to, or whatever/ *somehow* I would always be able to convince myself either that *I* was the one in control – or at the very least – that we were all co-leading together. And then things were great and fun. But *the moment* that one of them said to me, “OK Wes, time to brush your teeth and get into bed,”// that reality that I *wasn’t* in control hit me all at once like an ice-bucket challenge, and I was incredibly jealous and resentful of them.

But if you think about it – youngest child or not – each one of us has that same innate and desperate desire to be in control of our lives, don’t we? We all want so badly to believe, as William Ernest Henley famously wrote,

*“It matters not how strait the gate,*

*How charged with punishments the scroll,*

*I am the master of my fate,*

*I am the captain of my soul.”*

And we’re all so very good at fooling ourselves into believing that’s true. And yet ///each one of us also knows how devastated, and incredibly resentful, we can become, when it’s pointed out to us – by life circumstances or by others – that //we are not; that we are not the masters and captains of anything.

But this is nothing new, and it’s been this way since Adam and Eve were first presented with the idea that /*just maybe*/ life would go better if *they* were the ones in control of their own lives instead of God. Nor do constant reminders of the reality that we are not in control – however much we may resent them – cause us to stop grasping for it still, and deluding ourselves into thinking we’ve captured it. It is simply another one of the *many* frustrating evidences that God’s good design for humanity has been fractured by sin.

And in our passage this morning /we’re going to see this same grasping for power and authority being played out. And – just the same as in all these other cases - when it is revealed to the religious rulers of the day – the proud, prancing peacocks that they were – that they aren’t really calling the shots either //they react as obstinately and as furiously as a child who’s told by his older sister that it’s time to go to bed.

We’re continuing in our series this morning that we’ve been going through for the summer months entitled “Questioning Jesus”, and looking at how the way Jesus responds to the various questions that He was asked during His earthly ministry /reveal more to us about who He is. And in Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ question, “Who gave you this authority?” we’re going to see that Jesus reveals Himself as none other than the **Son of God**: sent by the Father into the world with all the power and authority of the Father Himself.

And in order to see that, I want us to look at this passage from Matt. 21 under three headings: **authority questioned, authority tested,** and finally, **authority revealed.** (x2)

So if you’ve closed your bibles, please open them again to Matthew 21 and we’ll get after this together.

So let’s begin by looking at our first heading:

1. **Authority questioned – vs. 23**

Now, as you often will hear me say, context is *very* important whenever we’re looking at the bible; whenever we’re looking at most things actually. And that’s certainly true here b/c – look at verse 23 with me; if we just read **(READ vs. 23)** we’d have no clue as to what the chief priests’ and elders’ problem is and why they’re bothering Jesus even. We’d also have no clue as what they’re referring to in their question, “By that authority are you doing *these things?*” I mean // what things? Teaching? Wearing that perfectly clean white robe with the blue sash that we see Jesus wearing in all the paintings people make of Jesus?

No, in order to even understand their question at all, we need to look at the verses just preceding our passage here in Matthew 21. I won’t read it all to you, but to sum it up; Jesus has just come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, to the praise and excitement of the people of Jerusalem, which has swollen from 50K people to about 250K for the Passover celebration. Jesus then came to the temple in Jerusalem, and began flipping over tables, driving money lenders out with a whip, and telling everyone that they had made God’s house into a den of robbers. Then finally, he had begun teaching in the temple and also healing all kinds of blind and lame people. That’s quite a list isn’t it? Not bad for a day’s work in Jerusalem.

Ok, so that’s the “these things” the chief priests and the elders of the people are asking Him about when Jesus comes back to the temple the next day. And the question the “in charge” guys; the guys with all the authority over the Jews, ask Jesus is: where has He gotten the authority to do all that stuff? Basically, what they’re asking Jesus is, “Who do you think you are coming into our sandbox and kicking over all our forts and sandcastles?! *We’re* the ones with the authority here, and we know it sure wasn’t any of *us* who approved any such entertainment for the Passover celebration. So … then, what?”

You see, the chief priests and the elders were very used to being the ones calling the shots and directing all the traffic. You didn’t just stroll onto their turf and start setting up bouncy castles and food trucks without asking them and getting their approval, and you *certainly* didn’t start disrupting any of the events and activities that *they* had already set up. Sure, maybe a legion of Roman soldiers might come in and try that, but then, every Jew understood that – as the occupying military force – they had the authority to do that. But one Jewish Rabbi with His 12 friends? Uh uh! No sir!

And it’s hard to see in the English text, but they actually question Jesus with a great deal of force and intimidation. They come in furious and saying, “Jesus, you better have a good answer for yourself //or this is about to go really bad for you!”

Like if I were to set up a little kiosk down on Cambie and 4th just outside the VPD building selling pot brownies and bags of cocaine. If I wasn’t tackled to the ground and arrested immediately, there would be some very immediate and stern questions as to what I thought I was doing.

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And so, sure, this whole scene feels very dramatic and intimidating for most of us. And yes, b/c this is the bible and we’re talking about Jesus, we’re *fairly* confident Jesus is gonna find a way out of this situation.

But I wonder how you would react if the “in charge” guys with all the authority were questioning you, instead of Jesus? If the powers that be in our modern day culture were forming a circle around you, and questioning you?

B/c – if you’re a Christian here today – I can guarantee you: if you hold to a biblical sexual ethic, a biblical definition of marriage, or you want to defend the rights of the unborn *as much as*/equal to the rights of the mother, you *have* experienced (or you’re *going* to experience) this same type of questioning.

I see two reasons for this:

1. Because we live in a day and age where people are pluralistic about their beliefs, and – for the most part – everybody’s personal standard is “right” and true, and above reproach. And so that means we don’t like being told “no” or “you can’t do that.” And so when our biblical beliefs bump up against the ‘sovereign”, individual beliefs of someone else, people view you as disparaging their beliefs and as saying “no” to them. And that’s going to quickly draw a crowd around you.
2. The other reason is – as I read recently in an excellent TGC post – that we are no longer living in the proverbial “Athens” where all ideas are equal and accepted and debated. We are living much more in “Babylon” where views that are seen as destructive, or unacceptable, are freely persecuted and are even openly allowed to be silenced.

And – if you didn’t know - the bible *promises* us that – b/c the people around us, love darkness rather than light – when you start shining the light of the gospel into the darkness around you, people are *not* going to take it kindly.

And so one of the only ways I think we can stand up under this kind of pressure and questioning in our modern, secular age, is to not just know *what* we believe, but *why* we believe it. It’s no longer sufficient in this post-Christian era to appeal to biblical authority when someone gets in your face and asks you where you get off saying a gay couple doesn’t have the same freedom to get married like you do. Why? B/c the bible is no longer generally accepted as a respectable, reliable source of authority by our culture, like it still was years ago.

But b/c God is the Author of the bible, as well as the Author of creation, we can God doesn’t just ask us to accept the truths of the bible on blind faith alone. The Christian faith is also a highly rational/reasonable faith; which is to say, the Christian faith isn’t just true, it also makes sense.

And if you struggle with knowing why you believe what you believe, or how to communicate it to others, I would highly commend some of the ministries here at DHBC, like LEAD and GROW, as well as books like Tim Keller’s “Reason for God.”

The other thing to say is that – even under this intense questioning and pressure – Jesus can be calm and collected, And do you know what? It’s b/c He already knows the end of the story. He knows how it all ends right?

I mean, if you’re watching a movie for the second/third time - even in the scariest places – you’re not afraid anymore, right? b/c you know how it all works out.

Well, if you turn to the back of your bible, the last book is called, what? … Revelation. You know what that is? /// The end of the story. How the whole story of human history is gonna book end. And so b/c God has shown us how the story ends – and also prepared us ahead of time for the fact that we will face persecution for following Him in this life – we too can remain confident and steadfast, no matter what we face in this life.

Ok, so that’s **authority questioned**. But now, how will Jesus respond to this questioning and intimidation? We’ll see now as we look at our second heading:

1. **Authority tested – Vs. 24-27**

We see Jesus’ response in vs. 24 – look with me there. We read **(READ vs. 24).** Now maybe that sounds weak, or even juvenile to you at first. Of course, in our modern, western culture, responding to someone’s pointed question like this by asking another question would be considered rude, or even be seen as trying to avoid answering the question.

I mean, growing up, if my mom or dad asked me, “Wes, did you make you bed this morning?” and I said, “Well … let me ask you this question first and then I’ll answer your question!” It would’ve gone very bad for after that.

But again - b/c it’s the bible and it’s Jesus we’re talking about – we can be fairly confident that Jesus isn’t trying to avoid the question and is up to something else. Beyond that, in this culture and particularly in rabbinical tradition, this was considered an entirely legitimate and acceptable form of discourse. You can see that too b/c – in vss. 25-27 - the Pharisees immediately seek to answer the question and offer no such charge of avoiding the question.

So in response to the priests’ and rulers’ question, Jesus asks them this question in verse 25, with the promise that – if they answer Him - He’ll tell them where He got His authority to do what He did in the temple yesterday. Look with me at verse 25. Jesus asks **(READ vs. 25).**

Now, again, reading that in a C21 context, we don’t understand why this question is such a big deal or why it’s so hard for the rulers and priests to answer. Two things to remember that will help us understand:

1. This whole conversation is taking place in public with people all around listening and recording it on their cell phones. So there’s a greater pressure on the “in charge” guys to respond well to Jesus’ question.
2. John’s ministry was an incredibly contentious issue for the religious rulers of the day b/c – like Jesus – John appears out of nowhere (He just “appears in the desert” Luke’s gospel tells us) and starts preaching a message of repentance (turning away from your win) signified through water baptism. But he does this totally (ostensibly anyways) on his own authority without any sanctioning or requests for permission from the religious rulers of the day / the “in charge” guys.

And so what Jesus is doing here is, really, linking his ministry directly to the ministry of John’s. And /really/ He’s saying that the answer to their question to Him is in honestly answering the question He was asking them now. Jesus is saying, “Figure out where John got the authority to do what he did completely apart from yours, and you’ll know where I get the authority to do what I did yesterday in the temple.”

And b/c I think in a cinematic way, if this was a movie, I can imagine Jesus asking this question and then sitting back in His chair and sipping His coffee: watching them with knowing eyes.

And beyond that even, think about this: what was the whole point and emphasis of John’s ministry, from beginning to end, but to point out Jesus as the coming Messiah? All four gospel writers talk about John being the forerunner to Jesus and pointing Him out specifically when He came to be baptized as “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And, surely, some of these rulers and priests were either present or heard direct accounts of the divine witness of who Jesus was from heaven, as He came up from the water after being baptized, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and God the Father speaks from heaven and identifies Jesus as His Son whom He loves. I have no doubt that Jesus was intending for them to remember this account as well as He put this question to the religious rulers.

And then – of course - we see in the second half of verse 25 to the beginning of vs. 27, that the religious rulers reveal that what they are really concerned about is not the truth at all, but simply in maintaining their illusion of being the ones in charge. They won’t admit what is clearly evident about John’s ministry, but they also won’t say what they want to say b/c they don’t want to lose their status among the watching audience around them. And, then, they truly do avoid Jesus’ question by responding in vs. 27 “We don’t know.”

Now, I don’t know if the religious rulers imagined somehow that their response would have more rhetorical power than it did, and that – *just maybe* – Jesus would still publically answer their question to Him. But I love how vs. 27 ends with Jesus just keeping to the bargain and being like, “Oh OK. So you’re not going to answer my question? OK – then I don’t need to answer yours’ either.” And yet – of course, as we just saw - He actually *has* answered their question; they’re just not willing to admit that He has before this watching audience.

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And - very quickly - there’s a lesson for us here in Jesus’ reply to the religious rulers, particularly as it relates to what I said before about standing up under questioning. And the lesson is simply this:

When I was doing my training for the fire department, one of the skills we were taught was called “sounding.” Now sounding is simply taking an axe, or a pole, or whatever, and striking the ground or the roof in front of you before you step when your in a burning building, to ensure that you don’t step somewhere where the fire has burned away the support and you are either injured or killed by stepping there.

Along with revealing their hypocrisy, Jesus’ response to the religious rulers is teaching us to “sound out” our questioners. Did you know you don’t have to respond to every question that people ask you? Did you know that every question that is put to you is not going to be an honest, legitimate inquiry?

Sometimes, what we need to be able to do in a conversation is to discern whether or not someone is truly asking a question, or if they are just wanting to fight/argue or to try and trap you somehow into an endless debate. If you can see that the latter is the case, and that your questioner is just wanting to argue with you, that’s not a legitimate conversation and you don’t have to even continue in it. It’s totally good and right in that circumstance to disengage with a polite, “Well, I guess we just don’t agree on that!” or whatever and to walk away. Totally legit to do that.

Ok, so we’ve looked at **Authority questioned, and then authority tested**. The last thing I want us to see from this passage is under our third heading:

1. **Authority revealed – 21:28-2:13**

Now, Jesus has clearly won this battle with the religious rulers, and so He could also easily walk away here with no regrets. But just as His interrogators start packing up their tents to go home, and the people listening in begin checking their phones and tweeting about this latest epic battle between Jesus and the religious rulers /// Jesus keeps talking!

Now – it sounds so bad – but you almost wanna be like, “Nooooo Jesus! Dude you just won! Just walk away now or you might say something dumb and spoil your victory!” That’s what you’d think if you were there, right?

But you see, Jesus knows there’s an audience around Him as well. And along with knowing and caring about each one of them, Jesus also knows are cares about each of those religious rulers too. And so, to expand on His answer and really drive home the point about where He gets His authority, Jesus continues the conversation with His adversaries. And He does it by telling three short stories/parables: one about two sons asked to go and work, one about tenants working in a vineyard, and finally, one about a wedding banquet.

Now, each one of these stories Jesus tells could be a sermon all on its own, so we’re not going to look at each one in any real detail this morning. But what I do want you to see if how the point of each story is about revealing who Jesus is and where He gets His authority from. And then additionally, each one is also revealing to the religious rulers that Jesus’ authority is far superior to theirs and – actually – that they’ve been derelict in the tiny amount of authority they do have from God in their positions. So Jesus is both revealing His own superior authority as well as rebuking the religious rulers at the same time. So in a sense, these stories are like a slip knot that tightens more and more as the animal trapped in it struggles.

So let’s look at these three stories. The first is in vs. 28-32. Look with me there. Here we have a story about a father who asks his two sons to go out and work in his vineyard. The first son tells his dad ‘no’ but then thinks twice and goes to work anyways; the second son says, ‘sure dad - you bet!’ but then he never goes. And then after telling this story Jesus asks the religious rulers which one obeyed the father and they correctly answer that the first son had. But then Jesus applies the story directly to them and His question about John the Baptist; He says that all the people the religious rulers despise but who listened to John and repented, are like the first son, and that they are like the second son in that they claim to be obedient to God’s law but they are actually selfish and rejected John’s call to repent.

So Jesus is saying, John’s authority *was* from heaven, and by rejecting him and his message b/c he didn’t come through you, you ended up rejecting the God you claim to follow.

Next, Jesus tells a story about a landowner who plants a vineyard and rents it out to tenants. But each time the landowner sends his messengers to collect his fruit, the tenants send away, beat, and in some cases even kill, the messengers! Finally, the landowner sends his son who would have come with all the authority of the father – he was no hired hand. But now, the tenants see an opportunity to take over the vineyard and they kill the son as well! And Jesus asks the rulers what they think the landowner should do about those tenants? And they reply in vs. 41 – look with me there **(READ vs. 41).**

Then / it’s here /that Jesus quotes from ps. 118, identifying Himself as the Son, sent by the Father – essentially – telling the religious rulers what it is they’re about to do to Him.

Now, Jesus is being somewhat subtle in this group setting by telling stories and not rebuking them directly, and the religious rulers understand very well that Jesus is talking about them. What’s ironic is that they still don’t see – or at least want to accept – that Jesus is also talking about Himself here. And so, rather than heed Jesus’ warning and rebuke here, they continue right down the very path He just warned them they were on.

Finally, Jesus tells a story about a big wedding banquet in ch. 22:1-14 where a king prepares this huge wedding banquet, but when his servants go out to invite the guests to come in, they ignore them and go on about whatever they were doing before. And then in anger at this snub, the king tells his servants to go out and invite anyone they can find who will come, to come to the banquet.

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In each of these stories, what Jesus is highlighting is an attitude of misplaced importance and of entitlement in the religious rulers. Particularly in the first two stories, talking about a vineyard in the story would immediately trigger in the mind of a C1 Jew the passage in Isaiah 5 where God identifies Himself as the Owner/Planter of the vineyard, and the vineyard itself as being His people Israel. An by using that imagery, Jesus is telling the religious rulers /basically/ that they’ve been working in this “vineyard” for so long, that they’ve forgotten who the vineyard really belongs to; who really has the authority here. And, of course as I said, Jesus is also identifying Himself here as **the Son** sent by God the Father with all of His authority to claim what was rightfully His.

So, through all of these stories, Jesus is saying, “Do you really need to ask, ‘Who gave you this authority?’ I am the Son, sent by the Father, and all My authority comes from Him!” Jesus is saying, “You want to know where I get off acting the way I did yesterday in *your* house?! Please!! That house belongs to my Father and, as His Son who comes with all His authority, I’m the One who should be asking *you*, where you get off acting like this is your house and not His?” Jesus is reminding the religious rulers whose really in charge and - just like when I was a kid being told to go to bed – the religious rulers are jealous and resentful of being put in their place. *So* resentful in fact, that in a few days’ time, they will falsely accuse Jesus and have Him put to death, just as Jesus’ story predicted; ignoring the rest of Jesus’ second story where He plainly tells them that killing the Son does not end the story and put them in charge: it only ignites and enacts the revenge of the Father on the wicked tenants.

But here’s the crazy thing to think about: Jesus is telling this story about the tenants to rebuke the religious rulers and reveal who He truly is; that’s one side of it. But what Jesus doesn’t say, is that being put to death by the “wicked tenants” was actually the Father’s plan from the beginning. You see, unlike the story that Jesus told the religious rulers, the story of the bible is that we are *all* the wicked tenants; living out our existence on this earth that God made in bodies that He created, acting like *we’re* the ones running this show. But //rather than simply destroying us for our rebellion, God sent His Son into the world *knowing* that we would hate being reminded that weren’t the ones in charge and even that we would put Him to death to shut Him up. Never knowing that God was actually sending the Son to suffer the wrath that we deserved on our behalf and in our place. That was the only way He could restore what was broken in the garden of Eden and it could only be accomplished by His Son.

**That’s** the God of the bible. Not the selfish, ego-maniacal despot who rules with through divine brute force and intimidation, but the God who uses His rightful authority to serve his creation and call all who will respond to Him to share in the riches of His wedding feast for all eternity.

**Conclusion**

Who’s authority are you submitting to in your life? That’s a question worth asking yourself early and often.

Maybe you’re here this morning, and you’re like the religious rulers in our passage; behaving like that second son who claimed to be obeying the father but who was actually obeying himself. Maybe you go to church and read your bible and put that fish on the back of your car:

* But when God isn’t answering your prayers like you’d hoped, you follow your own path to get what you want
* Or when the competing voices of the culture around you become too strong or intimidating, you submit to their authority and compromise on God’s word

But, look at me: this is not at all uncommon – all of us do this. I confess in my own life, there are still many times that I submit to my own authority pursue my own path when I feel like God isn’t moving fast enough, or doing things the way I think they should be done. And I’ve needed to swallow *many* a bitter pill in being reminded by God that I am *not* the captain of my soul; Jesus is. That I am *not* the master of my fate; Jesus is. My guess is, we will always struggle with this to some degree. My hope and prayer is that – as we grow to look more and more like Jesus – we at least can see that’s we’re doing it earlier and repent faster.

And if you’re here this morning, and you don’t know Jesus or maybe you’ve wandered away form Him for while and are just on your way back home to Him. My prayer for you is that in looking at the way the God of the universe – who has all rights and authority over His creation – uses that authority to serve you and to recue you, that maybe you might see Him differently than you used to; and that you might submit your life to His rule and reign. I promise you: if He would use His authority like that; to bless you and to rescue you, do you really still think that He’s a God you can’t trust with everything?

Let’s pray.