



Scripture & Sermon

September 27, 2020

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Matthew 21:23-32

23 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.

Gracious and Sovereign God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

I just shared with the kids a bit of an anecdote to introduce our scripture for today. It is simple, but it retells the parable from this morning's scripture quite well. Imagine you are the parent of two kids, similar in age. They are grown enough for them to make some choices on their own when it comes to taking care of things. You notice that their rooms are quite messy and they aren't getting their homework done very effectively. So, you take each one aside on a Saturday morning and you ask them to clean their room. The first tells you, "No thanks! I'm good. But when they go to start their homework, they realize you have a point and they clean their room. The second, knowing what you want to hear, says, "Yeah, I'll clean my room." But you stop by their door Sunday evening and you see that they didn't follow through, the room is just as messy as it began, maybe worse. Which one of your kids are you happier with? Which one do you feel did as you asked? Yes, I am asking for the obvious answer like Dora the Explorer and Jesus in this morning's text. Now those are two people I never expected to compare! The parable Jesus told, and the version I just told, make it seem pretty simple. But, as usual, Jesus tells this story to make a point about how God wants us to live out our faith. It is easy to say who is doing right when it is something like doing the dishes or cleaning your room, but it can feel a lot harder when it's the more complicated things that God asks us to do.

It is easy to hear this parable and think about it only as Jesus reminding us to do our chores for God. But this parable, as part of the conversation he was having with the Chief Priests and Elders, has a bit more for us to think about. Imagine you are that parent to two kids who had opposite reactions and actions to you asking them to clean their rooms. You said you would be happier with the first who said no, but then changed their mind and did it anyway. Fair enough. Why are you upset with the other one? Is it just because they didn't clean their room? That's surely part of it, but I imagine, if it were me, I would be more upset that they seemed to lie when they told me that they would do it, and that they didn't trust my guidance that having a cleaner room would help them do their homework better. I would be upset that they didn't trust my authority as their parent, and instead stick to what they think is best for themselves. This is what Jesus is really speaking to in this whole interaction with the Chief Priests and Elders. They challenge him, questioning his authority, which is just the tip of the iceberg of all that has gone on, instead of being faithful to what God is doing through Jesus or trusting God's guidance toward new things.

I say it is the tip of the iceberg, because this questioning from chief priests and elders carries a whole lot more drama than just another battle of wits with Jesus. Would you have guessed that this piece of the story actually happens during Holy Week? Without knowing where this is in the bigger story, it would be easy to think about it as just another random episode. But, its timing is pretty interesting. I know that Holy Week was not very normal this year. We were online. We were unknowingly near the beginning of this long stretch of pandemic. I'm sure it didn't feel quite right. So perhaps you didn't feel the same connection to this part of Jesus's story as you do most years. That's okay, but let us all think about what that week was like originally for a minute. Today's passage depicts one of the last of its kind of Jesus's time here on earth. It happens in Jerusalem, which means that this story is happening between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. The text says the Chief Priests and the elders ask, "By what authority are you doing **these things?**" Yes, they are referring to the teaching that Jesus was just doing in the temples as we are told in verse 23, but they are surely also referring to more of what Jesus had been up to. As this is part of Holy Week, we know that this is near the end of Jesus's ministry. He has been going around performing miracles, collecting followers, converting Gentiles and tax collectors, healing and eating with the undesirables of society, and teaching a whole lot of radical stuff. The word on the street is he has brought a couple people back from the dead, he has had multiple battles of wit with the Pharisees, he has cast out demons in God's name, he has challenged the status quo and taught much about how to rethink the way they do faith. Jesus was a challenge to their power, to their way of life and faith, and not at all what they believed the Messiah should be like. If that weren't enough on its own, here comes this hotshot riding into town creating a whole ruckus. The chief priests and elders watched as all those they deemed least righteous welcomed Jesus with much fanfare. Shouting and celebrating, calling out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" It is important to remember here that the original Palm Sunday wasn't just a happy parade. Jesus coming into town openly and with the celebrating crowds of the lowly in society, on a steed as disgraceful as a nursing Donkey, was itself already a critique of the way things were going in Jerusalem where the Roman Governor would parade in with the best steed, best armor, and full pomp and circumstance just to flex his power and remind the people who is in charge. Jesus entering this way is a big declaration against that hold of power and a challenge to the Jewish leaders who didn't agree with his Messiahship as well. Today isn't Palm Sunday, so I won't spend more time diving into all that now. That will be for Palm Sunday next year. The idea that Jesus's entrance was not this happy-go-lucky parade is important though as we consider why those Chief Priests and Elders are unhappy with Jesus.

But that isn't all! That is just the first 9 verses of chapter 21. Jesus stirs things up more in 10-22. Once Jesus has entered town, he goes to the Temple and he doesn't stay quiet. Instead, we hear about the famous flipping tables scene or what is called the

“Cleansing of the Temple.” Jesus sends out all those that had set up shop in the Temple, he flipped the tables of the money changers and the seats of dove sellers. He calls out the Temple for the ways it has strayed from being a House of Prayer. He is indicating that the Temple is corrupt. Then, he cured the blind and lame, who entered the temple for that healing, even though they wouldn’t have been allowed inside the Temple at all by the Priests and Elders. And Jesus didn’t just let them in, he healed them. So he cast out and called unclean the things they liked in the Temple and welcomed in and made clean the people they labelled as unclean and unwelcome. Ooo they were mad! After a little back and forth, Jesus leaves and stays the night in Bethany, outside the city. He comes back in the morning, hungry. Which brings us the cursing of the fig tree, which many interpret as an object lesson to critique that no fruit was coming from the Temple while they did not have faith and doubted Jesus as the Messiah. It is with all that happening in basically a span of hours, that Jesus now, in verse 23, enters the temple and begins to teach. We know in hindsight, that this is Jesus’s last time entering the temple and that it is these High Priests and Elders that will plot his death and will cast judgment on him.

Needless to say, tensions are running high in this scene, more than just a simple battle of wits. The High Priests and Elders are seemingly at their last straw, and Jesus, knowing what is to come in just a few days, is finally laying it all out there, nothing more to lose. The Chief Priests and Elders know that disagreeing with him individually will not fix their problem, so they challenge Jesus’s authority publicly, trying to trap him into delegitimizing himself. They ask, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” This question acknowledges that he has gained authority, there are people that follow him and believe in him, so their question is pointed not towards, “What are you doing?” but “How are you doing all this?” It is important here to understand the Jewish leaders’ experience of where Authority comes from. For them, their authority is ultimately centered in Rome and the Temple. They were the social, economic, political, and religious elite who were closely allied with and legitimated by Rome. Their authority over others came from social status and power which the Chief priests gained by birth, the Scribes gained by training, the Elders by wealth and all of them by political alliances. They were given the power that they have in Judea by the Romans who put them in charge to keep order in their part of the empire. So, all of their power and authority came from sources that legitimated them, so with this question, they are asking what Jesus’s legitimation is. Which they know has three answer options: God, Satan, or Himself. This is why it is a trap in their minds. If Jesus says he gets authority from himself, it would delegitimize him. If he says Satan, obviously that would super delegitimize him. And if he says God, it would be blasphemy because they didn’t think he was the Messiah. They really thought they got him.

Alas, Jesus outwits them. He poses a counter-offer. If they can answer his question, he will give them his answer. And so he asks, “Did the baptism of John come

from heaven, or was it of human origin?" This question fully turns the tables on them in a couple ways. First, asking this question at all, implies that the issue that they have with Jesus is not his identity but whether they will recognize it. Meaning, whether or not they recognize it, Jesus's identity is the Messiah, they can't change who he already is. Second, because of that it becomes a bit of a backhanded comment, basically saying, "Even if I tell you the truth, we all know you won't believe me." Third, it is a trap because of the answer options Jesus makes them choose between. First option, John was of human origin, meaning he is a false prophet, which would have angered the crowds who did believe he was a true prophet, which could lead to the Jewish leaders being delegitimized in the eyes of the public. The second option is to say John's baptism is from heaven, AKA from God, which, because of the way that Jesus posed the question, would have legitimized Jesus, thus cancelling out their question and making them look like idiots. They are afraid of either of those options, so they respond with the copout, "We don't know." A note here. Typically, someone admitting they don't know would be a great thing! I am all for humility and for even the highest experts admitting they don't know is so much better than spinning some BS answer. It is great when parents, teachers, pastors, are willing to admit that they don't know. But humility in the face of uncertainty is not what is happening here.

The Priests and Elders are just afraid of the consequences of either of those answers and ultimately, this answer of non-commitment betrays where their commitment actually lies. Not with truth, not with God's work in the world, but with what will maintain their own power and authority. Now, the whole point of this story in scripture is to basically tell us to not be like them, but it is also important to not vilify them too much. These Priests and Elders, though in a place of great privilege, were also beholden to the oppressive Roman rulers. They had to walk a stressful line between leading faithful practice of their Jewish faith and appeasing the Romans. They were not acting as they should have, or as God would have liked, but their position is all too relatable. I am sure that you can think of sometime that you compromised your true beliefs for what you considered to be the common good or what was feasible in the moment. Maybe not as great of a scale as the high priests and elders are at in this story. And so, Jesus's parable that acts as a his teaching to the Priests and Elders, is also a reminder to the Disciples, and to us today.

He tells the short story of the man with two sons and poses this question to the Priests and Elders, "Which of the two did the will of the father?" The story is simple, the answer is obvious, Jesus asking it makes it so the High Priests and Elders have to answer, because they couldn't look that stupid, but answering this question also forces them to choose the answer that condemns the way they have been acting. The parable is warning against the hypocrisy of saying you will do or are one thing, but then not following through with your actions. This is what the Jewish leaders were doing. They claim to be followers and worshipers of God, but here is God working in the world, and

they aren't willing to trust that it is God at work. They cling to their own ideas and the comfort of the authority and power they have collected, instead of listening to the Will of God. Meanwhile, it is the people that they condemn and would label as the unclean sinners that have recognized God's Will at work and have joined in to be a part of it.

Though this interaction started with the High Priests and Elders trying to trap Jesus into delegitimizing himself, Jesus flipped the tables and turned the spotlight onto the ways that they were hypocritical as they were not willing to follow God's Will in a new way. Jesus gives this warning to the rest of us, through time, to avoid trying to hold onto our human ideas of authority no matter what and risk becoming hypocrites, and teaches us that it is better to be a repentant sinner, recognizing we got it wrong and changing our mind when we recognize where God is leading us. Through this story, Jesus challenges us to seek out Divine authority instead of Earthly authority.

There are a couple of ways that we live into this today. First, it means that we need to stay vigilant and open to wherever God is at work and wherever God is leading us. Like with the coming of Jesus, God does unexpected things or things that go against our status quo. So, we cannot dismiss things that maybe don't make a lot of sense to us. Second, it means that we should do our best to not let earthly authority supercede Divine authority. Just because someone has authority or power does not mean that it is given by God. Though the High Priests and Elders should have had faith in Jesus's authority from God, this passage is **not** to tell us to not question authority. Quite the opposite. We are being challenged by Jesus to discern the difference between Divine and Earthly authority, and to do that, we need to be able to question it. This is a lesson that seems particularly important for us to remember during election years like this one. All of the positions of power that we are or will be voting on are positions of authority created by people, not by God! The authority that they are given is legitimized by the people and structures, not by God! So much of what our politics are about is in maintaining the institutions and structures that we already have, maintaining those systems of human authority. God is not stuck by those limits and encourages us to put in the work to move our human structures toward God's Will. God has and is speaking to us about God's Will for how to treat each other, how people should be cared for, and what justice should look like. We should be listening and be willing to follow, putting those in power, giving authority to those that will help us make our community, country and world look more like what God wants it to be. As people who claim to believe and have faith in God, Jesus challenges us from this passage to live it out by following God's authority and working toward bringing about God's Will. So, I hope we all become emboldened to seek out the movement of God in the world and to follow it even when it challenges our standing and the status quo.

Just and loving God,

You are so faithful and patient in your work among and around us. You are always at work and always have guidance of where we ought to go. We are not always perfect at recognizing what that guidance is. Help us to be willing to hear you, especially when it is not the guidance we expected. Inspire us to commit and follow through with doing the work you tell us to do. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we may be brave to work against authority and status quo when needed. Sometimes we get stuck in the normal motions of life and faith, break us out of those ruts so we can be a part of your next new thing amongst us. May it bring about more of your Will in the world instead of more human will.

We pray these things in the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.