

The Authority of King Jesus Challenged

Matthew 21:23-32

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Introduction

In Matthew 21, we have seen something of a change in the ministry of our Lord Jesus.

- He has become more public and open about the fact that He is the Messiah.
 - 1) The chapter opens with His messianic entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey colt.
 - We see Him receiving honour from the people as they spread their garments in road before Him and called Him the Son of David and shouted their Hosannas to Him, praising Him as their salvation.
 - Instead of telling them to be quiet about who He as He has done in the past, He allows the shouts of praise to swell.
 - 2) Then in verse 12, we found Him exercising His Messianic authority in the cleansing of the temple...
 - We see Him turning over the money changers tables...
 - We see him driving out those who were buying and selling in the temple.
 - We hear Him declaring that they have turned His Father's house of prayer into a den a thieves.
 - It is a marvellous thing.
 - Why doesn't anyone stop Him?
 - The high priest was in full support of this buying and selling.
 - The temple guard was always on duty, but he does not lift so much as a finger against a single unarmed man.
 - It seems that there was a kind of supernatural awe and stupor that came over them and paralysed them.
 - 3) And now in verse 23, we find our Lord teaching in the temple court...
 - No doubt, He is teaching as He always did...with a marvellous authority...
 - not in the way of the scribes who always backed their teaching up with quotes from some famous Rabbi!
 - No, instead, His teaching often corrected the traditional teaching.
 - You remember how, in the Sermon on the Mount where we have a full example of the kind of teaching He did,
 - He frequently says,
 - "You have heard it said... but I say to you..."

- To back up the authority by which He spoke,
 - He continually performed miracles greater than any prophet had done...
 - He even gave sight to the blind, a thing especially prophesied of the Messiah.
 - These miracles were unmistakable—not once did his enemies try to deny them...
 - All they could do was question by what authority they were done.

And that is the challenge that Jesus' enemies bring to Him in verse 23...

- The triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple, and teaching and miracles of Jesus have gotten to be too much for the Jewish establishment!
 - And so they come to Jesus to question His credentials...
 - “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”
 - Our text today has to do with this question of Jesus' authority.

First of all, I want you to consider that

I. The authority question is the question you ask when you are confronted by Christ's kingdom!

A. I hope you have been confronted by it...

- I mean, I hope King Jesus has broken into your life with the claims of His kingdom...

1. It doesn't happen to everyone...

- There are some people who go through their whole life without ever being confronted with His gospel...
 - They have never had Him break into their life and declare to them that they are all wrong in their living...
 - that they are full of sin and guilt...
 - that they cannot be delivered from this miserable condition except by His own saving work...
 - that they must repent of their own way and rely on His offering of Himself for their sins...
 - There are some who live in a place where the gospel is not known...
 - or it may be that even though the gospel is around them, they have never yet been directly confronted with its claims...

- It has never quite come home to them what Jesus' Kingdom is all about.

TRANS> I hope that all of you have come face to face with this gospel...

- That it has interrupted your life—
- That somewhere along the way, it has stopped you in your tracks and confronted you with its claims...

2. Jesus has His ways of bringing His gospel to us...

- For 1500 years, He brought it to Israel through the prophets who told of His coming and established worship that focused on the promise of His coming...
- And then 2000 years ago, He did come and preached His kingdom to them with signs and wonders accompanying...
 - That is the confrontation the Jewish leaders in our text were trying to deal with.
- And today, He sends out preachers into the world to confront the nations with the claims of His kingdom through the preaching of the gospel.
 - And it comes to us either directly through preaching or through friends and relatives who speak to us about it.

TRANS> But however it comes, this gospel confronts us with the claims of His kingdom.

- Our Lord tells you that you are a wretched sinner before the living God who will be judged unless you turn to Him for salvation.
 - He tells you that He has established a kingdom of righteousness by His obedience and atoning sacrifice,
 - and that no one can come to the Father but through faith in Him.
- That is the message that He brings to you when He confronts you with His gospel.

B. And I say that it is very natural for a sinner to ask the authority question when this gospel first comes to you...

- It is very natural to say,
 - "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"
- 1. It is natural to say this because the gospel collides with us in our whole way of life.
 - It breaks in and tells us that we are all wrong and that only Jesus can make us right...

- And because we **are** sinners, we call it all into question!
- Indeed, it is wonderful news, but our first reaction is often a resistant, questioning one...

2. We say,

- a. "What right do you have to tell me that my way of living is not right?"
 - Who are you to tell me that I can't have an abortion if I want?
 - Who are you to dictate to me about my sex life?
 - Who are you to tell me that I am not good enough for heaven?
 - Who gave you the authority to say that my religion is a sham?
 - What authority do you have to say that there is only one way of salvation?

- b. It is especially natural to say that when it is some preacher that tells you these things, or a friend!
 - 1) Even though Jesus speaks to us through preachers and friends...
 - It is very natural to say, "Who says?" when we are confronted with His Word.
 - It is very natural to have that as your first response because you have just been confronted with something very radical that challenges your whole way of living and that tells you you have all wrong!

 - 2) This can be very upsetting!
 - a) It was very upsetting for the Jewish leaders because they had put a big show of self-righteousness...
 - They had invested their whole lives in establishing their own righteousness...
 - They felt pretty smug about themselves,
 - But Jesus was cutting through all that and exposing their need of repentance...
 - All that they had lived for was being challenged...
 - so it was natural for them to put up their defences.

 - b) The truth is, most of us fell pretty smug about ourselves...
 - Tell me, even you who have trusted the Lord Jesus,
 - Don't you still find it hard every time our Lord's Word confronts you and shows you that you have been wrong?
 - Isn't your first reaction to say to that preacher or that friend who confronts you...

- “Who says?”

c) How much more is this the case when the gospel comes to you first time and calls you out of yourself to Jesus.

C. It is very **natural** to ask this question—“By what authority?”—

- but it is not **good** to ask this question.

1. Well, let me qualify that—there is a sense in which it is good...

a. I am not for a moment suggesting that you should blindly follow whatever any preacher or friend tells you...

- There are many that put the name of God to what they say when they are only speaking their own mind...

- And you are not to listen to them at all!

- There is little worse than to claim to speak for God when God has not sent you!

b. You have a responsibility to investigate and be certain that what a preacher or a friend says is of God.

- When the Apostle went to preach to the Bereans,

- he commended them because when he preached the gospel, they searched the scriptures to see if what he said was so.

- You should always be sure that what you are believing and doing is according to the Word of God...

- In that sense, it is good to ask the question when you hear something new:

- “By what authority are you saying these things?”

2. But I would submit to you that ordinarily this authority question is a rebellious question that really ought not to be asked.

a. You see, God’s Word is **self-attesting**.

- There is no authority that can back it up because it is God’s Word, and nothing is higher than God.

- It comes to us with authority because it is true.

- It bears witness to our conscience—it exposes us and tells us all that we ever did.

- It tells us what the creation itself teaches us—things we already know but don’t want to admit:

- that we have not honoured our God or served Him as we ought and that we are worthy of His judgement.
 - When you hear it, you know it is true—there is no escaping of it!
 - Questioning the authority of the message is just a way of trying to avoid it.
- b. But if you will only admit this self-evident truth about your own wretched condition—
- God’s Word then reveals to you the only possible way of salvation...
 - You may have never thought of it before,
 - but once you hear that the Son of God Himself came to take away our sins by His own offering,
 - every other religion leaves you dry and empty...
 - rituals, good works, giving to the poor, trying to do our best, following Mohammed, bathing in a special river... or whatever...
 - It all falls flat and you know that the gospel has to be true.
 - There is no other solution when you once admit the real problem.
- c. The only way a sinner can hear this glorious gospel and say,
- “Who says?” is because of plain old rebellion...
 - He knows it is God’s Word because God makes it clear that it is His Word.
 - Until God changes our hearts, we will go on in our rebellion, asking this question of our Lord Jesus...
 - “By what authority?”

TRANS> That we ask this authority question is the first thing I want you to consider from our text...

- Secondly, see how

II. Our Lord Jesus exposes the hypocrisy out of which this question arises.

A. In verse 24 & 25, He asks a counter-question to expose the insincerity of the particular inquisitors who stood before Him...

- The text says:

- Matthew 21:24-25: 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: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

1. With these words,

a. Jesus was talking about John the Baptist...

- John had recently been killed by Herod,
 - but before that he had preached for several years so that all Judah and Jerusalem had heard his doctrine.
 - He had announced that the kingdom of God was hand,
 - and he had called all men to repent and be baptised in preparation for the Messiah’s coming.
- He had told his hearers that they needed to confess their sins and their need of the cleansing that Messiah would bring...
 - He had said, “I baptise you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”
- John’s baptism was a picture of cleansing that Jesus would give in truth...
 - It was the sprinkling of clean water on them that Ezekiel spoke about...
 - a cleansing that would give them a new heart, a new record, and a new life.

b. By asking if John’s baptism was from heaven or from men, Jesus was asking if it was of God or not...

- 1) If it was from men, then it was not of God and should be rejected...
 - If John had made it up himself, he was a false prophet...
 - But if he received his doctrine from heaven, then he was to be obeyed without qualification, the same as Moses or Elijah.
- 2) There was no middle ground...
 - Either John was a very wicked man who falsely claimed to speak in the name of God and introduced an ordinance that God had not appointed...
 - or he was the very voice of God bringing the truth of God to His people.
 - You might note as an aside that no man is authorised to invent his own rituals or ceremonies...

- John's baptism was evil unless it had come from heaven.
- We must not accept any sacrament except the two that are instituted by the Lord... baptism and the Lord's Supper.

TRANS> Jesus hits His inquisitors hard with this question...

2. This question was particularly adapted to these particular men.
 - a. When they asked Jesus about His authority, they were **pretending** to be concerned about what God had authorised...
 - They were the Chief Priests the elders of the people who represented God to them.
 - They pretended to be following the Lord in all that they did with absolute obedience...to follow nothing but what was backed by heaven...
 - They were the guardians of the truth, and it was in this capacity that they were confronting Jesus.
 - *They were truly concerned for what was right*
 - At least, that is what they pretended!
 - b. But when Jesus asked them this counter-question about the authority of John, they were put into a bind...
 - 1) As the appointed guardians of truth, they were the ones who ought to have known about John...
 - If John was true, they should themselves have submitted to his baptism and directed the people to hear him.
 - or, if John was false, they should have put him down as a false prophet...
 - 2) But they had done neither!
 - If they had really cared for the truth, they would have done one or the other...
 - c. But Jesus' question exposed their **real** reason for asking Him about His authority...
 - 1) They did not really care at all about whether Jesus was from heaven or earth...
 - All they cared about was preserving their own status.
 - Listen to how they reason among themselves and it becomes quite evident what they were concerned about:

- v. 25-26: And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.”

- There was no discussion among them about what was true or false!
- The only consideration is how their answer will make them look in the eyes of others...

2) My friends, it is terrible to do religion this way!

- to have your eyes on what other people will think of you if you do this or that instead of having your eyes on God and what is true...
 - These men did not care at all about what was from God and what was from man!
 - All they cared about was their own reputation and position in the church!
- How insecure they were!
 - Instead of simply being true and speaking truth, they had to calculate and weigh the possible outcome of everything they said and did.
 - They didn't have the freedom of one who simply follows the Lord.
 - All he has to do is determine what is right and do it.
 - If the truth lands him in prison or in a lions den, he will serve the Lord there...
 - If it lands him in a king's palace, he will serve the Lord there.

B. My brothers and sisters, you should care and care deeply about what is from heaven and what is of men...

1. Your salvation does not depend upon what your neighbour thinks of you...

- It has nothing at all to do with man's approval...
- You can have all the honour in the world from your fellow man or from your church...
- But if you are living for human praise rather than following God's truth,
 - you are clearly on the path to destruction.
 - As our Lord says in another place, you already have your reward!

2. Your whole life ought to be oriented around what God has said!

- a. You ought to be continually asking yourself,
 - “Is this from heaven or from men?”
 - “Has God authorised this or not?”

- b. This ought to be your way of every day living—in matters great and small...
 - Has God authorised you to speak to your wife the way you do?
 - Has He authorised you to withhold correction from your children because you are tired?
 - Has He authorised you to be lazy?
 - Has He authorised you to talk back to your mother when she asks you to help her in the kitchen?
 - Has He authorised you to complain when it’s time to leave the playground?
 - Has He authorised you to do what you do on the Sabbath?
 - Are the things you believe about Him from heaven or from men?
 - Does it matter to you? Do you care?
 - or are you only concerned what the people around you think—that you can get by okay before them.
 - When Paul talks about the different practices of Christians regarding what we eat and drink in Romans 14,
 - He makes it very clear that what matters is that you do what you do as unto the Lord...
 - That you live before Him.
 - I am concerned that too often our eyes are not toward His approval, but only the approval of others.
 - It ought not to be this way!

- c. God always sees you... His truth matters!
 - If you really belong to Him, you will be concerned for the truth and not for expediency.
 - Do not be deceived, God is not mocked.
 - Don’t say you are living for Him and that you care about what He says if you don’t.

TRANS> So let Jesus’ counter-question search you out this morning...

- Are you really concerned about what God says?
- Do you really care that what you believe and do is authorised by heaven?

- Our Lord does not stop with this counter question that reveals the hypocrisy of those who pretend to care about what God has authorised...

III. With a powerful parable, Jesus makes it clear that your real attitude about God's authority is not demonstrated by what you *say* about it, but by what you *do* with it.

- **This is the third thing I want you consider this morning...**
 - **it doesn't matter what you *say* about God's authority—it only matters what you *do*.**

A. This parable is very simple...

1. A father has two sons.
 - a. He tells the first one to go and work in his vineyard.
 - The son says, "I will not", but then he regrets what he has done and goes...
 - b. The other son says, "I go sir," but then he does not go.
2. Jesus asks his inquisitors which of the sons did the will of their father...
 - a. The answer is, of course, very obvious—
 - "the first one,"
 - the who at first said he would not go...
 - God had made it clear to His people in Ezekiel that He accepts the one who at first refuses to do His will if that one repents and begins to do it.
 - b. Jesus applies the parable very directly to the chief priests and elders who had come to question his authority...
 - At the end of verse 31, He says:
 - "Assuredly I say to you that the tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you."
 - He compares the tax collectors and harlots to the son who at first said "no," but then repented and submitted to God's counsel.
 - He compares the chief priests and elders to the son who at first said "Yes," but then did not follow through.
 - This was very offensive to the chief priests and elders because they considered the tax collectors and harlots be the lowliest of the low.

- B. Now I want you to see from Jesus' parable that there are two kinds of rebellion:
1. The first one is a bold, impudent, in your face kind of rebellion.
 - a. God says, "Work in my vineyard today," and he says, "I will not!"
 - 1) It is just a flat refusal!
 - There are no excuses or justifications given.
 - 2) This person has heard the call of the gospel,
 - He understands it, but He is going to go His own way...
 - He simply doesn't want to be shackled by the will of God...
 - He wants to go his own way and to do his own thing!
 - b. Do some of you do this?
 - You know what God wants, but you refuse?
 - 1) You know that God calls you to a new life in Jesus Christ...
 - You see that new life in others, but you say,
 - "No, that is not for me...I will not go."
 - 2) You know that He calls you from your immorality...
 - You know that He calls you from your rebellion against your parents...
 - You know that He calls you from your lies...
 - You know that He calls you from bitterness and vindictiveness...
 - But you say, "No, I will not go and serve my Lord."
 - c. Well let me tell you that you are very foolish to defy your Lord like this!
 - God's judgement will be very severe for such open rebellion!
 - You are one who openly signs on with the devil.
 - Israel marked their door posts with the blood of the lamb, but you mark yourself with rebellion...
 - You wear the uniform of an open enemy of God.
 - You surely deceive yourself...
 - Unless you repent, God's judgement will be very severe...
 - You dare God to strike you, and strike He will if there is no change of mind.

- You put up a direct challenge to God as if you can somehow resist Him.
- d. I counsel you to follow the example of the first son in this parable...
- He looked at what he was doing—he looked at his rebellion and obstinacy—and he regretted it...
 - He regretted it so much that at last he turned and went to do his father's will...

TRANS> This open defiance is the first kind of rebellion.

2. But the second son at first does what everyone ought to do when God's call comes...
- a. He hears the call and immediately he says, "I go, sir."
- This is a proper response to the living God who made us...
 - This is a proper submission to His authority... no questions—just obedience.
- b. But this son is all talk and no action...
- He promises, but he does not deliver on the promise...
 - As soon as it comes to actually following His Lord, it never happens...
 - And then instead of repenting, this one always justifies himself...
 - He always has a reason for his disobedience...
- c. And in the context of this parable,
- The reason for disobedience is uncertainty about the will of God...
 - Uncertainty about what God wants Him to do...
 - Is following Jesus really authorised?
3. Jesus says that of these two sons, the first one is the one who is nearer the kingdom...who will go in first...
- By that, He means that the openly defiant one is more likely to go in than the one who pretends to serve God, but doesn't.
- a. There is good reason for that...
- The openly rebellious at least knows that he needs to repent...
 - He is not pretending to live in God's favour and nobody thinks he is...
 - In the parable, he is the one who repents as did many of the publicans and harlots when they heard the preaching of John...

- They knew it was true and they know that they were resisting the truth and at last their heart was melted and they turned.
- b. But the second son had a good reputation as one who served God...
- He would have to tell everyone he had been a sham—
 - He would have to face the fact in himself that he had just been pretending that he was God’s servant...
 - That is much harder to do, and there are few who do it...
- C. Now I want you take a good hard look at this second son...
- and examine yourself...
1. He is the one who claims that if he knew it to be God’s will, he would do it...
- But He is not sure...
 - He does not want to believe something that is not true, does he?
 - How can you know if the gospel is truly of God?
 - You say, “By what authority do you do these things?”
2. Let me tell you, your question about authority is not really the problem...
- a. If you really want to do the will of God, you will know what is true!
- If you hear the gospel and remain ignorant about what God wants, the problem is that you don’t want it!
 - You don’t **really** want to do His will, even though you pretend.
- b. We have seen with these men...
- Though they talked this way, when it came to determining if they should have submitted to John,
 - It had nothing to do with God’s will.
 - Doing God’s will was not **really** what their life was all about because they were not born again...
 - They had not been given a new heart that delights in the Law of God from within...
 - They were not really interested in that.
 - John’s testimony and Jesus miracles and teaching were quite enough to satisfy anybody that really wanted to know if He was from heaven.
 - The problem is when you don’t really want God’s word to break into your life...

- You are not about serving Him, but about serving yourself.
 - You don't really want God messing with your life...
 - You are content to go on as you are.

- c. And this is where each one of you needs to examine yourself...
 - Is your life really about doing the will of God?
 - Or does God's word come to you and you say,
 - "Who says?"
 - When your gossip is confronted...
 - When your play is interrupted...
 - When you have a secret life of lust or bitterness—or indulgence in self-pity.

 - Our gracious Lord stands ready to save all who will come to Him.