

Sunday March 12
Lesson 2: The Source of Jesus' Authority
Scripture: Matthew 21:23-27

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, "The Life of Faith." In the first unit, "The Journey to the Cross," we will reflect on the season of Lent and examine the lessons in Jesus' final time with the disciples. We will continue to focus on the gospel of Matthew and Jesus' ministry in the city of Jerusalem, moving to the Temple as the setting. The focus of the lesson will be to reflect on the source of our true authority.

The unit today is part of a larger unit which can be split into two categories. In today's scripture passage, there is the first category with Jesus' authority being challenged and he responds with parables.¹ The second category will be various antagonists setting out to entrap Jesus, followed by a passage of Jesus silencing them with a question they cannot answer.² Both accounts will play a role in the arrest of Jesus as questions of authority usually lead to concerns of what will take place in the future and what is acceptable.

The question the chief priests and elders present to Jesus is a serious one. The question, "By what authority?" is ambiguous in the standard English translation.³ Yet most scholars assert the question means there are several kinds of authority, and the issue is where does Jesus derive his power: from God, from Satan, or from himself?⁴ There is clearly a concern of what else Jesus could do with his authority and where does the power come from to do such things.

Yet Jesus is on to how this is not a simple question. His engagement is to offer them several questions to get at whatever their motivations might be with their queries. He asks them about the ministry of John the Baptist and where he received authority. This episode puts them in a dilemma as their answer will reveal their own motivations. Thus, Jesus closes the conversation and tells them he will not reveal where he received authority.

This encounter is also unique to Jesus' ministry in the way he chooses to engage. Unlike other encounters in scripture, Jesus does not seize the moment as an opportunity to preach the gospel.⁵ This event will also be a turning point in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as the next time Jesus will meet with the Sanhedrin, he will be judged.⁶ He proceeds to go into several parables to make his point and infuriate them. In revealing where he receives authority through parables and

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. "Matthew." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 244.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 245.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 246.

⁶ Ibid.

questions, Jesus ultimately helps to usher in his own arrest and death.

Application

When I was a seminary student at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, we had to take Field Education our second year where we were placed at a local church or religiously affiliated non-profit to explore our call and the practice of ministry. During Field Education, you would go to your work site and then return to a small group, writing case studies where you would process events and encounters exploring theological themes, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics, and one's calling. It was an incredible rewarding and life-giving experience. I was fortunate enough to continue my internship at a local church I had started the previous year so for me the class was an opportunity to reflect and process what God was doing in my life with a group of peers I enjoyed and loved to be around.

After reading one of our reflections, we would take turns writing on a big board the various themes we saw popping up in case studies. After the first case study was read, the supervisor wrote on the board the word "Authority," and proceeded to reveal this was a word she had seen written nearly every time when presenting these case studies. Questions of who has authority and where does it come from always pop up, especially in religious circles where the focus is of course on God, the one who is to have ultimate authority.

For those in the Christian tradition, authority has always had a tenuous relationship with individual autonomy. Every judicatory body, even if it is congregational by nature, has some accountability structure by which people are granted authority to do things. Yet even within those structures, there is usually some kind of question from time to time of who receives authority and where does it come from in a person or people moving forward.

As Christians, we believe God is the ultimate authority. Only God judges us and God is the one who gives gifts to people and calls us to certain vocations or missions. One of the things I always tell mentees as they go through the candidacy process is while a District Committee of Ministry may approve them, or a District Superintendent may say they have an appointment for them, or a Bishop might smile at them and say how much they like them, their call first and foremost comes from God. So, when people fail or disappoint others, as we are all apt to do, they will be listening for what God requires of them first and foremost. God is the one who gives authority and God is the one who asks us to follow what has been asked of us.

Perhaps the greatest danger we can do to the Christian faith is when we use authority and the phrase "God told me..." and proceed to harm others. There are times when we use the card of God telling us to do things to cover up our own motives or fears, withholding the possibility of how we are running from God and the call placed in our lives. It is much easier to use authority in God's name and then figure it all out later.

What I have concluded with authority from God is asking the question of how it helps and spreads the good news of Jesus Christ to the good, the vulnerable, or those in need. If our words or actions do things which harms others or cause division, I have participated in evil and abused the authority given to me by God. If the things I say or do somehow reflect the goodness of God, then I have participated in God's kingdom and have used authority justly.

In our lesson today, Jesus' authority threatened an establishment as his words and teachings invited people to think and perhaps even change their minds. He did not harm others yet perhaps did step on toes. He gave people a new view of how to ask the question of how to love God and neighbors. Note he did not say he came to abolish the Temple or get rid of the law; instead, he offered people a chance to think of how they operated in their own lives. Jesus took

his authority to help shepherd people to new ways of being.

For our own calls to ministry, whether we are lay or clergy, we are called to ask by what authority we do things. If any of those responses involve hurting others or even attacking established places of authority, we would do well to revisit this passage and see how Jesus came in peace and love, not war and winning. Jesus used his authority for good and thus we are invited to do the same. We are called to ask if our words, our actions, and our behaviors represent the light of the one who came to set us free.

How do you define authority? In what areas do you hold authority in your life? Have you ever thought of your calling and the authority given by God to you? Why is it important to be respectful of those in authority positions? How can you use authority for good in your life? Who in your world needs love, encouragement, or an advocate?

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