

Authority Issues

Matthew 21:23-32

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The Pentagon recently spent billions of dollars developing a supercomputer that would be able to solve any military problem—large, small, tactical, strategic. The day came for a demonstration of the new machine. The computer room was filled with high-powered generals and admirals, as well as the proud design engineers. The project's lead manager instructed the officers to enter into the supercomputer the parameters to a difficult military problem. The military leaders proceeded to enter their hypothetical situation into the computer and then asked the pivotal question: should we attack or retreat? They then pressed the enter key and awaited the computer's response.

After about 10 seconds the computer printed out its one word answer: Yes. The generals and admirals looked at each other, somewhat dumbfounded. Did the computer mean, "Yes, attack" or "Yes, retreat"? Finally, one of the generals walked over to the computer and typed in the question, "Yes, what?"

In an instant, the computer responded, "Yes, sir!"

Clearly, no problem recognizing authority there, right?

In our gospel lesson this morning, though, there are people who had trouble accepting the authority of Jesus. At this point in Matthew, Jesus was in the last week of his life. He entered Jerusalem in the manner of a great king with overwhelming popular acclaim, and the Jewish leadership was forced to watch--silently, jealously. After that, Jesus entered the Temple where he didn't like the crass commercialism he saw there in the only place in the Temple where Gentiles were allowed to worship, and so he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. The next day, Jesus came back to the Temple, and it is at this point where our text picks up, as the chief priests and the Temple elders confront Jesus: By what authority are you doing these things?¹

By what authority...?

The religious leadership of Jesus' day had spent a great deal of time and energy trying to discredit Jesus, trying to find some way to get Jesus out of the way. Now, they come at Jesus from the angle of authority: By what official permission does Jesus do these things? Who has conferred upon Jesus the

¹ Matthew 21:23

power, the official capacity, to do these things?

If Jesus were to openly confess that his authority has come from God, then they could label him as a heretic, or at least as a lunatic, and discredit him; if, on the other hand, Jesus claims his authority has been conferred upon him by the people, then they could turn that information over to the Romans and have Jesus tried for treason.

By what authority...?

In a manner that is not unusual for Jesus, Jesus answered the officials with a question of his own: “John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from people?”²

The chief priests and elders assumed that Jesus was asking them an either-or question, and they immediately thought that he was trying to trap them just as they were trying to trap him. If they were to answer, “from heaven,” they would affirm John the Baptist’s ministry, though they had previously rejected it; if they were to answer, “from people,” then they invoke the wrath of the masses, for John was viewed as a prophet by the general population. And so their answer to Jesus is, “we don’t know.”

In truth, though, the correct answer would’ve been to say “both.” You see, the officials were coming at the issue of authority from only one side, when it is in fact a two-sided issue. It’s one thing for authority to be conferred by some sort of official empowerment; but conferred authority is not complete—conferred authority is not true authority—until it has been accepted.

There was a slogan that was popular in the anti-war climate of the 1970s. You would see it frequently on bumper stickers. It was a buzzword around university campuses. “Question Authority.” It typified an attitude of contempt toward people upon whom some official authority had been conferred. It was an attitude that said, “I don’t care what kind of authority you have. You can’t tell me what to do.”

You see, conferred authority is meaningless if it is not also accepted. And that, I believe, is the point of the story that Jesus told. He told of a father who gave the same command to two sons. One son said “no,” but later repented and went and obeyed his father; the other said, “yes, sir,” yet he did nothing.

By their words alone, we would think that the second son was the one who honored the authority of the father. But the real proof was in the actions of the two sons. It was the first son, who though he said “no”, ended up doing what the father had said. He, and not the one who gave lip service to the father, is the one who truly honored the authority of the father.

The father, by virtue of his family position, had authority which was

² Matthew 21:25

conferred upon him. His authority derived from the social system that said that the father is the head of the house, and that the other members of the family are to submit to the head of the house; yet that authority was realized in only one of the sons.

Jesus is saying to the chief priests and elders, and through Matthew he's saying to us, "It doesn't matter where my authority comes from if you have no intention of accepting it." Conferred authority is meaningless if it is not obeyed. Official authority means nothing if people don't submit to it.

We've gotten glimpses of this dynamic every time there is an evacuation order for a hurricane. Whether it's in Texas, or in Florida, or along the Atlantic coast, when the governor gives the order to evacuate, there are always some who ignore the order. I realize that there are different circumstances, and some people are not in a position to evacuate; there are some things that merit not evacuating even when there is an order. Mainly I'm referring to the people who cavalierly imply that their decision to stay was made out of a stubborn desire to resist the governor, and not for other reasons. The ones who say, "I don't care what the governor or the mayor or the police chief say – I'm not evacuating."

For our part in the church, if the governor orders an evacuation of an area that includes this property, then we will cancel activities because it would be irresponsible for us to ask people to come into an area when the governor (a person of conferred authority) is saying we should be leaving the area. It has little or nothing to do with whether or not we believe the governor's order is right; It has everything to do with whether or not we choose to honor the authority of the governor.

Conferred authority only means something when it is obeyed.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."³ You see, it's one thing to say that Jesus our Lord; it's altogether something else to make Jesus our Lord.

"Lord" is more than a word. It's not saying "Jesus is Lord" that makes him Lord; it's obedience that makes him Lord.

We have this idea that there is a necessary separation between faith and works, when in fact that is an artificial separation. It is true that it is not works that save us, but faith; it is also true that faith without works is not faith at all. Obedience is not subordinate to faith; it goes hand-in-hand with faith. Jesus cannot be Lord if all we do is confess with our mouths that he is Lord. It takes more than words to make Jesus our Lord.

Jesus has the conferred authority; his authority has been given to him by

³ Matthew 7:21

God. The question is, have you accepted his authority? Have you submitted your life to him? In Philippians, Paul looks toward the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We're quick to confess with our lips, but the bowing of the knee doesn't come so naturally for us, does it?

The leaders asked Jesus, "By what authority do you do these things?" It really didn't matter how Jesus would answer them, because where Jesus' authority came from would mean nothing to people who had no intention of accepting his authority in the first place.

In reality, Jesus' authority doesn't just come from God; his authority is not complete until you have accepted it in your own life.

In just a few moments we will observe the Lord's Supper. Jesus invites us to this table, to receive in faith the gift of salvation. Now, faith in Jesus entails more than simply accepting that he died in order to save us from our sin. Faith in Jesus also means that we submit to him as our Lord.

But here's the deal: Long before any of us ever decided to surrender to Jesus, Jesus first surrendered to his Father in heaven. On his way to the cross, he prayed to the Father, "Not my will, but thine be done."⁴ Jesus gave up everything – literally – in order to accomplish our salvation. Because Jesus submitted to the authority of his Father, Jesus was given all authority in heaven and on earth.

Jesus, by what authority do you do these things, and who gave you the authority?

I'd say he's earned the right to be called our Lord. The question is, will you make him your Lord?

4 Mark 14:36