

The Issue of Authority
Matthew 21:23-32
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Jesus entered Jerusalem in Matthew 21 with the celebratory triumphal entry on Monday of the final week of Jesus' life. This on a donkey, to fulfill the prophecy of the coming Messiah from Zechariah 9:9, "*Behold, your King is coming to you, gentle and mounted on a donkey.*" Jesus returned "*on the next day*" (Mark 11:12, 15) to cleanse the temple, followed by His healing of the blind and the lame, along with confrontation by the chief priests and scribes over accepting the praise from the children who were at the temple. The praise of Jesus by the large crowds on the approach to Jerusalem and by the children in the temple stand in contrast to the religious leaders who plotted against Him (John 11:55-57).

As Jesus left Bethany for Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, He encountered a fig tree that was producing no fruit. The fig tree symbolized the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and Jesus cursed the fig tree for its fruitlessness. The following day (cf. Mark 11:12-14, 20) the disciples saw the withered fig tree and asked how this happened. This happened because of faith, and the lack of it by the nation of Israel moved Jesus to demonstrate the coming judgment.

For the remainder of chapters 21-22, Jesus will encounter various confrontations with different groups of religious leaders over His authority. This will conclude with His series of "woes" against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 and the teaching regarding His second coming in chapters 24-25.

The posing of two questions (21:23-27)

Jesus returned to Jerusalem from Bethany the day after He cleansed the temple, or on Wednesday of His last week (Mark 11:15-33). He came to "*the temple courts,*" which was likely the courtyard of the Gentiles, where He cleansed the temple and where the children praised Him. The chief priests and elders came to Him "*while He was teaching.*" This was probably consistent with the pattern of people coming to Him and asking Him questions, which led to this teaching opportunity (cf. Matthew 22:16, 23, 25). Luke's account described the interest of the Jews in His teaching, "*for all the people were hanging on to every word He said*" (Luke 19:48). This describes the difficulty the chief priests and elders faced in confronting Jesus.

The chief priests were descendants of Levi and Aaron, and they were the administrators of the temple. While they were the religious authority over the temple functions, they also were approved by the Romans (cf. Matthew 2:4).

The elders were leading men of the Jews, and were representatives for the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Like with the chief priests and scribes, the term “elder” connoted a function, rather than a religious party and theological philosophy, as with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, and Essenes. While the chief priests were more aligned with the perspective of the Sadducees, the elders would have been a variety of non-priests, and certainly some Pharisees. They came together to confront Jesus due to His popularity with the people and because He threatened their institutional control.

Therefore, the chief priests were initially involved with Jesus because of their responsibility over the temple, and the elders were with them because of their role in the ruling council that oversaw all the religious life of the Jewish people. Both the chief priests and the elders had positions of authority, which led to their question to Jesus, *“By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”*

This question arose primarily because of the cleansing of the temple the previous day. At issue was one of authority, and His dramatic assault upon the business of the temple could not be tolerated by the Jewish leaders. Their question contained two parts: (1) By what authority and (2) Who gave the authority. The presumption of the first part of the question was that He had no authority to do the things that He did, and the presumption of the second part was that the only people who could have given Him such authority did not do so.

The chief priests and elders viewed Jesus as a rogue teacher, one who was self-appointed and untrained. He did not move through the approved ranks of religious training like Paul the apostle did. He did not gain the approval of any of these established leaders before He taught. They did not appoint Him, and therefore, from their perspective, Jesus had no authority to do any of the things that He did.

Furthermore, these chief priests had authorized the very people who bought, sold, and changed money in the temple that Jesus had cast out on His own accord. Their business partners were publicly opposed by Jesus, and therefore, their income was threatened.

Of note, there was no question regarding the authority that Jesus possessed. He was fully able to heal the sick, overturn the tables of the moneychangers, and receive praise from the multitudes. His miracles were for the purpose of proving that He had authority, *“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—then He said to the paralytic, “Get up, pick up your bed and go home.”* Likewise, His teaching was powerful, *“He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* (Matthew 7:29). This was recognized by these leaders, which is why they asked where this authority came from. Jesus was a powerful force against them, and they were very wary of His popularity.

Of course, Jesus not only had authority, He had taught where His authority came from. His authority came from God, *“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me”* (John 6:38; cf. 5:27). The Gospel of Matthew ends with this statement regarding His authority, *“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth”* (Matthew 28:18). The source of Jesus’ authority was not from any man, but from God alone.

While their question was to thwart Jesus’ actions, He did not allow them to succeed by answering their question with a question of His own. This was a form of rabbinical debate, which Jesus had employed previously (Matthew 15:2-3; 22:15-22). By responding to them, *“I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things,”* Jesus set up a precondition for Him to answer their question. This requirement to answer His question first is consistent with His previous refusal to provide revelation once people had rejected what was given to them.

This was the reason Jesus began to speak in parables. *“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ Jesus answered them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”* (Matthew 13:10-13). Once men finally reject God’s revelation, there is no longer continued ministry toward them. Further revelation will not bring any additional understanding. This is what Jesus said in a parable Jesus told to the Pharisees, *“But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead”* (Luke 16:31).

Jesus posed the question to the chief priests and elders about John the Baptist in a savvy manner to expose their hypocrisy. By asking, *“The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”* Jesus connected His ministry with the ministry of John. The phrase *“the baptism of John”* referred to all of John’s ministry, as can be seen by the response of the chief priests and elders.

Jesus had earlier taught the crowds about the hypocrisy of the criticisms of these religious leaders in Matthew 11:18-19, *“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”* It was John who announced Jesus in John 1:29, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* John himself testified to Jesus as being from God, and therefore, John answered the question these leaders posed regarding the source of Jesus’ authority.

The chief priests and elders recognized that listening to John would result in following Jesus, by their professed dilemma, *“And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’”* They did not truly believe John, nor accept what He taught about Jesus, so therefore, they had completely rejected the prophetic ministry of God through John.

Yet, the chief priests and elders also were very concerned about the response of the crowds, *“But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.”* This led them to avoid either answer and just respond, *“We do not know.”* They prioritized their fear of the crowds over the fear of God. They couldn’t rightly answer Jesus’ question without condemning themselves one way or the other. Either they condemned themselves by their opposition to Jesus by not respecting John as coming from heaven, or they condemned themselves by declaring John was not from heaven and having to face the antagonism from the crowds that revered John.

Their statement *“We do not know”* is in one sense disingenuous, for they were convinced that John’s testimony about Jesus was not from heaven. However, in a real sense, they truly did not know, for if they had actually known the answer to Jesus’ question, they would have responded completely differently. Their lack of faith in God led to these words, and there was no amount of argumentation that would change their perspective, because it was a matter of faith. Their opposition was rooted in their heart, not just their head.

The parable of two sons (21:28-32)

The parable of the two sons is the first of a series of three parables that Jesus told the chief priests and elders. It will be followed by the parable of the tenant farmers (21:33-46) and the parable of the wedding banquet (22:1-14). All three refer to these leaders, including their failure to respond to God's revealed will and the consequences of this failure. These three parables appear to be taught on the same occasion as the questions of 21:23-27.

The parable of the two sons only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. This parable is preceded by Jesus' question, "*But what do you think?*" This is the third question of this section, and is a phrase we see Jesus asking elsewhere in Matthew (cf. Matthew 17:25; 18:12; and 22:17). This is a leading question to spark one's attention.

This parable regards two sons who give two contrasting responses to their father's request to "*go work today in the vineyard.*" The vineyard represents Israel, as it typically does in the Scripture (cf. Matthew 20:1-16), and the father represents God. The normal way the word "first" would be understood by those hearing would be that he was the oldest son, and the "second" would be the younger son.

There is an intriguingly complex textual issue with this parable, for there are three competing readings:

1. The first son refuses to go to the vineyard to work, but then regrets his answer and he goes. The second son agrees but does not go. In verse 31, the leaders admit that the first son truly did the will of his father. This reading is supported by a number of the best and oldest manuscripts and is the option that most English translations have adopted.
2. The first son agrees to go to the vineyard to work, but then does nothing. The second son refuses but then repents and goes. In verse 31, the leaders say that the second son did the will of his father. This reading is also supported by a number of the best and oldest manuscripts.
3. The first son refuses to go, but repents and goes into the vineyard to work. The second son agrees but does not go. In verse 31, the leaders state that it is the second son that did the will of his father. This reading is supported by one older Greek manuscript, and a number of older, regionally located translations.

It is possible for a commentator to consider the hardest reading (option 3) to be the best because it is so difficult and therefore more likely for someone to want to change. However, it is quite nonsensical, leading to the conclusion that the leaders believed that only what a person says matters and not what they do. Because of the limited manuscript support, we are really only left with one of the first two options.

The reason the first option is preferred by the majority of English translations is (1) there are slightly better textual support for this reading; (2) It follows better that the father would ask the second son to go after the first son refused; (3) some consider that the more natural copying error would be to transpose the order to the second option; and (4) some view the identity of the first son with the Jews, and particularly the chief priests and the elders, who fail to do God's will, fits the story better, with the second son representing the Gentiles, who are resistant to the father but eventually respond.

Probably the most significant practical reason why most English translations follow the first option is because this has been the translation from the beginning of the English Bible. The Greek text underlying the King James Version, and translations before it, show the first option. Absent compelling evidence to move to another reading, the clear preference of nearly all English translations is to follow the established reading in order to avoid controversy.

An example of this challenge is the New American Standard Bible, where in the first editions beginning in 1963 until the major revision in 1995, the second option is used, *"And he answered and said, 'I will, sir'; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, 'I will not'; yet he afterward regretted it and went."* After 1995, the NASB reads, *"And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go."* The Phillips New Testament also follows the second option, as it is a paraphrase which was willing to be different from the common readings.

Because either of the first two options functionally results in the same meaning of the text, there is an additional reason to leave it the way people have been accustomed to reading it. Whether the first or the second son is the one who repented, and is identified as the one that did his father's will, the point stands. It is the one who ultimately repents and acts according to the will of God that will enter the kingdom of God, not the one who declares that they will do the will of God and does not.

This parable is notable as Jesus specifically applies it to the chief priests and elders. They are unlike certain tax collectors and prostitutes, who had begun to feel remorse and believe in Jesus. These sinners would get into the kingdom of God before the religious leaders would, meaning instead of them.

John the Baptist is the person Jesus used to judge the chief priests and the elders in the same way as Jesus used John to test whether they would acknowledge that he came from God and not from men (21:25). This parable is then linked with the refusal of the leaders to acknowledge the authority that John possessed as a prophet of God, and by extension the authority of Jesus Himself.

John came in righteousness and taught the way of righteousness, which was through the Messiah. Because they did not believe John, they did not believe Jesus. By their resistance to John, they opposed righteousness. In contrast, the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed John, and therefore, they believed in Jesus. They served as an example of God's mercy to these hard-hearted leaders who failed to feel any remorse themselves and believe.

Conclusion

The chief priests and the elders considered themselves to be the authority over the temple, yet Jesus considered it to be His Father's house, not theirs (Luke 2:49; John 2:16). The Father had given authority to the Son (John 5:25-29), but these leaders viewed Jesus as having no right to cleanse the temple. Why they asked Him who gave Him such authority, Jesus did not answer them, for their question was not sincere but was antagonistic.

Jesus compared the chief priests and elders to a son who claimed to do his father's will but did not, unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes, who like the first son, felt remorse and repented. This addressed the wicked heart of the chief priests and elders that underlies their religious claims. Their selfish opposition to the will of God was manifested in their questioning of Jesus' authority and desire to put Him to death.

When people consider themselves to be righteous, but show no compassion for the outcasts of society who are turning to the Lord, they walk in the manner of the chief priests and elders. Words that affirm a desire to honor God are meaningless if they do not result in works that truly honor God. To truly believe in Jesus requires a recognition of His authority in our lives.