

THE CHALLENGE TO THE KING'S AUTHORITY

Matthew 21:23-32

Authority is a strong word...denoting *power, position, prominence, and privilege*. A person with authority exercises control over the lives and welfare of other people. Society can't operate without having people in positions of authority...the alternative would be *anarchy* and *chaos*.

- In the **family**...*parents* have authority.
- In **schools**...*teachers* and *administrators* have authority.
- In the **work place**...*owners* and *supervisors* have authority.
- In the **community**...we have *mayors, city councils, police, and firemen*...all of whom have spheres of authority.
- In the **federal government**...the *president, congress, and the judicial system* all have authority.

The conflict here in **Matthew 21** is an encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders...and was over this issue of authority...specifically over Jesus' authority. They confronted and questioned Him, as to who had given Him His authority...because they knew that they hadn't...and they feared that He would threaten their own positions of authority.

I. **THE CONFRONTATION:** (vs. 23)

It was still **Tuesday** morning of **Passover** week. After Jesus and the disciples had passed the *fig tree* that He had *cursed* the day before and found it completely *withered* (vs. 18-22)...**He entered the temple.**

When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" (vs. 23)...

The chief priests and the elders...Because of the seriousness of their confrontation with Jesus...this probably included **Caiaphas** and **Annas**...who served as **chief priests** concurrently...and had for several years (**Luke 3:2**). **The elders** would have been comprised of the **Pharisees** (**Matthew 21:25**), and **scribes** (**Luke 20:1**) for sure...and possibly **Sadducees** and other religious leaders (**Herodians, Zealots, and Essenes**).

Even though these groups had many differences between themselves...they found common ground in opposing Jesus...because He threatened their *authority* and their entire *religious establishment*.

While He was teaching...**Matthew** doesn't say exactly what Jesus was **teaching**...but **Luke** says that "**He was teaching daily in the temple...and preaching the gospel**" (**Luke 19:47; Luke 20:1**).

Regardless..."**all the people were hanging on to every word He said**" (**Luke 19:48**). He was probably reiterating the more important truths that He had taught many times before.

By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?...This was the same question that the **Jewish** leaders had been asking Jesus from the beginning of His ministry.

Doing these things...The **chief priest** and the **elders** were probably referring to:

- **His Triumphal Entry into the City** (vs. 8-11).
- **His reception of praise from the people** (vs. 9, 15).
- **His clearing of the temple** (vs. 12-13).
- **His healing of the blind and the lame** (vs.14).
- **His teaching** (vs. 23).

The religious leaders understood that Jesus was claiming authority as **Messiah** and wanted to know where He got such authority...because He certainly hadn't received it from them!

Jesus' *power* (Gk. *dunamis*) was undeniable. It was His **authority** (Gk. *exousia*) that was being questioned. *Dunamis* refers to *ability ...exousia to right*. By what *right* (authority) are **You doing these things?**

In asking Jesus to identify His **authority**...those leaders probably were hoping that He would say...as He had said many times before ...that He worked under the direct *power* and *authority* of God...His heavenly Father. That would have given them another opportunity to charge Him with *blasphemy*...and perhaps this time they could succeed in having Him put to death...as they had tried to do several times before without success (**John 5:18; John 10:31**).

II. THE CHALLENGE: (vs. 24-25a)

Jesus said 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” (vs. 24)...

In response to the religious leaders’ question...Jesus responded by asking another question...promising that if they answered His question, He would answer theirs.

Jesus asked...

The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men? (vs. 25a)...

The baptism of John referred to...and was characterized by...**John** baptizing those who *confessed* and *repented* of their sins (**Matthew 3:6**)...it characterized him as a *prophet* of God.

As the **chief priests** and **elders** quickly realized...Jesus’ question created for them a great dilemma.

III. THE CONTEMPLATION: (vs. 25b-27)

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.” (vs. 25b-26)...

Jesus had just put the *Jewish religious leaders* in the same position that they had tried to put Him in on many occasions...and they knew that they would be in trouble for whatever answer they gave.

If we say, “From heaven,” He will say to us, “Then why did you not believe him?”...To have accepted **John’s baptism** and *message* as being from a *prophet from heaven* would have required them to accept Jesus as **Messiah**...because **John** had declared...

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ...and...I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

~John 1:29, 34

...and they absolutely would not do that. No amount of *testimony* from **John** or *evidence* from Jesus Himself would bring them to recognize Him as **Messiah**.

But if we say, “From men,” we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet...They would lose what *credibility* and *respect* they had with the people if they denounced **John** as a prophet...and would even incite their *ire* and *anger*.

They firmly believed that **John** wasn’t a prophet...but they didn’t dare state that belief in public. Their only recourse was to confess with embarrassment...**We do not know**.

And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things (vs. 27)....Jesus knew that if He gave them an answer, that they would only have used it against Him. They weren’t interested in learning *truth*...their sole purpose was to have grounds for putting Him to death for *blasphemy*.

IV. THE CHOICE: (vs. 28-32)

In keeping with His word...Jesus refused to answer their question. Instead, He gave a *parable*...

“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ 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. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” (vs. 28-31a)...

In this parable, Jesus characterizes *two contrasting responses* to the gospel...and immediately applied them to the religious leaders.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you (vs. 31b)...

The **tax collectors** and **prostitutes**...*sinners*...received the message of **John the Baptist** and did the will of the Father. They *repented of their sin*...and therefore they will get into the kingdom of God.

“When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John.”

~Luke 7:29-30

For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him (vs. 32)...

The religious leaders who didn't *repent* (feel remorse) and **believe** ...they would be denied entrance into **the kingdom of God**. These religious leaders stood condemned.

No *rebuke* could have *cut them any deeper* or *infuriated them more*...because in their eyes...**tax collectors** and **prostitutes** were the scum of the earth...perhaps worse than even **Gentiles**. The fact that immoral people such as **tax collectors** and **prostitutes will get into the kingdom**...and they, the religious leaders of **Israel**, will not...couldn't be comprehended.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN:

- **Be careful how you question the sovereignty and authority of God!** When we make statements like...*“That’s just not fair!”* or *“God had no right to do that!”*
- **No position, power, privilege, or prominence will get you to heaven...even religious positions!** It's when a *sinner repents* and asks God's *forgiveness* and *receives* Him as Savior and Lord...that's when one *receives His free gift of eternal life*.