

Sept. 28, 2014 – Matthew 21:23-32 (OT: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 Epistle: Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18)

Turn to and believe Jesus, the only One with true authority.

When someone tells us that we are doing something wrong, we often resent it. We may even say something like, “Who gave you the right to tell me how things should be?” When someone agrees with what we are doing, however, we have no problem accepting what they say.

“Question Authority” is a popular slogan from the 60s, but it started much earlier with the Greek philosopher Socrates. In the United States we are encouraged to question authority and keep the government and politicians in check – or at least try to. It can also be good to look at what or who has authority in our lives, so that we are influenced only by the appropriate things or people.

As we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, we often seen the Jewish leaders challenging Jesus’ authority. The challenge in our Gospel reading took place on Tuesday of Holy Week – just three days before Jesus would be nailed to the cross. Two days before Jesus had made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the crowds shouting, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*” (Matthew 21:9). The previous day Jesus had cleaned out the temple by driving out all those who were buying and selling and changing money. On this Tuesday Jesus again went to the temple and was teaching the people.

“*The chief priests and elders of the people confronted Him*” and asked, “*By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?*” (v. 23) They wanted to know what authorization Jesus had to drive out the vendors and teach in the temple. We cannot criticize them for questioning Jesus authority. As the elders elected by the people, it was their job to safeguard the temple and ensure that things were done properly as God wanted. They were also to guard against false teachers.

In John chapter 1 we read that they also sent a contingent out to John the Baptist to ask him “*Who are you?*” (John 1:19). Again, they were doing their job by investigating this man who was attracting and baptizing a large number of people.

The problem is that they did not accept John’s God-given authority and message, nor did they accept Jesus, the Son of God, who is one with the Father (John 10:30), and the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

When they came to Jesus, it seems clear that they had already made up their minds. There was no answer that would have satisfied them. In fact, they were probably looking to trap Jesus, as they had often tried to do. If He claimed to have divine authority, they could accuse Him of blasphemy.

Jesus, however, because He is God, knew where they were coming from. He also knew it was not quite His time yet. He responded, “*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?*” (v. 24-25). He directed them back to John the Baptist, His forerunner, who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. John had pointed again and again to Jesus as “*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?*” (John 1:29).

This question was not what they were expecting. “*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.’ So they answered Jesus*

and said, *'We do not know'*" (v. 25-26). They had two options: either John's baptism was from God or it wasn't. They didn't like either choice.

The Jews had found no way to discredit John. If they admitted that he did have divine authority they would condemn themselves, because they had refused to repent and be baptized by him (Luke 7:30). But they were also swayed by public opinion. Luke tells us that they were afraid that the people would stone them if they said John's baptism was not from God (Luke 20:6).

While the multitude was correct in this case – John was a man sent from God (John 1:6) – popular opinion should not be our authority. God's will is not determined by majority vote! The multitude today approves of many things of which God does not, like killing children in the womb, homosexuality, and divorce for any reason.

You may not be tempted to go along with the multitude on these things, but do you find it easier to not say anything rather than to stand up for what God says in His word? Are you moved to be silent by the multitude?

As important as these things are, however, far more important is the message that John the Baptist brought: Jesus is the only One who takes away sin – and we are all, by nature, enslaved to sin and children of God's wrath (Ephesian 2:3). It is only because of Jesus' death and resurrection that we can be adopted as God's children and be heirs of eternal life, rather than eternal death. There is only one true God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Worshipping any other god or honoring anything above God is a sin and an offense to God. This is not a message that is popular today.

What gives us the right to claim and proclaim these things? Our right does not come from our own authority or convictions, but from the authority of God's word, the Bible. Jesus is the only way to God – not because we believe it, but because God said it Himself. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."* The Bible does not just contain God's word, but is the very word of God given to us.

We cannot physically bring people to see Jesus; He ascended into heaven and no longer physically walks this earth. The people we talk to today have not personally seen or heard John the Baptist. But we have God's inspired word that tells us what John said and did, and most importantly, what Jesus said and did when He was here on earth. The Bible tells us how Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life to fulfill God's law. It tells us that a few days after this confrontation in the temple, Jesus was put to death on the cross, even though He was innocent, to pay the penalty for the world's sins. And it tells us that He rose again from the dead three days later to conquer death, and forty days after that He ascended into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God to intercede for us. Because God has revealed these things to us in His word, we can believe and trust in them.

Jesus continued His discussion with the Jewish leaders in the temple by telling them a parable of two sons. The father told the first one to go work in his vineyard, but the son said, *"I will not"*, but later regretted it and went to work. The second said he would go, but he didn't. Jesus asked the question, *"Which of the two did the will of his father?"* (v. 31). The Jews correctly answered, *"The first."* – the one who later went even though he first refused.

Jesus demonstrated in this story that "lip service" doesn't count. It wasn't the son who said he would work but the one who actually did go and work who did what the father wanted. The Jewish leaders were like the second son. They claimed to be religious, to be on "God's side", but they did not believe John, God's messenger. God condemned the people of Isaiah's time with

these words: “*these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me*” (Isaiah 29:13). Over seven hundred years later, Jesus again uttered these same words to condemn the Jews for setting aside what God commanded and teaching their own way of righteousness by inventing laws and things that people needed to do to earn God’s favor (Matthew 15:8).

It may be easy to look down on these elders and criticize them for their hypocrisy and their lack of faith. But how often do you fail to honor God’s word? Do you ever come to the Bible with your own preconceived ideas or judgments, like these leaders who came to Jesus with their minds already made up? We should conform our thoughts to God’s word, not try to make God’s word say what we want it to.

The Bible contains many passages that are comforting, but also parts that can make us uncomfortable. Do you prefer the encouraging parts but avoid the others that you may not like as much?

I believe that we all would say that God’s word, the Bible, is our authority and the only source for faith and life. But does that become just “lip service” when we fail to turn to God’s word in our daily life? We can read or hear what people say about God and the Bible on-line, on the radio, and on TV, but it is God’s word itself has the final say. We should always turn to the source, rather than be swayed by the multitude.

In Jesus story of the two sons, it seems that the emphasis is on working in the vineyard. We may conclude that Jesus is saying that we should obey God’s word, that is, do what God says we should, not just say we will and then fail to do it. While that is true, it isn’t Jesus’ message here.

Listen again to Jesus’ own interpretation of His story: “*Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him*” (v. 31-32) Did you notice a word that was repeated three times in Jesus explanation? “*For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.*”

Jesus was once asked, “*What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*” (John 6:28). Jesus answered, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent*” (John 6:29). The point of the parable is *believing* – believing John’s message – the message that we are all sinful and Jesus is the Savior that takes away our sins. We can try to do as many good works as we can, but without faith in Jesus, they won’t get us anywhere. Faith and salvation come first and produce good works as fruit. Because the Jewish leaders did not believe, all their so-called righteousness and pious acts were just “lip service” to God. They were not entering the kingdom of God, but others were going ahead of them.

While these Jews did not believe, those who at first had pursued an ungodly life did believe. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed John’s message and were baptized. They turned to their Savior for the forgiveness of their sins. These corrupt and immoral people were welcomed by God.

This should give us hope! These are people that the religious leaders had written off as being unredeemable. But they were redeemed by Jesus. In the same way, Jesus has paid for and taken away your sins, no matter what you have done. He calls you to turn to Him in faith for forgiveness as His beloved child and heir to the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' words here also encourage us to not write off others. No matter how sinful or hardened they may seem, God is greater. God's word "*is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword*" (Hebrews 4:12). It has power to convert the soul (see Psalm 19:7). The faith of the tax collectors and harlots shows the power of God. They believed and entered the kingdom of heaven.

So who or what has authority in your life? Which son in Jesus' story are you more like?

May God grant that we always turn to and believe Jesus, the only God and the only Savior. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. Amen.

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