

A MATTER OF AUTHORITY

Matthew 21:23-27

THE SETTING

Matthew 21 begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, humbly mounted on a donkey, surrounded by thousands of people shouting out Messianic phrases. The entire city was stirred up as a result.

Jesus entered the Temple and found it to be exactly as He expected: a den of thieves. It was His Father's house, and His house, and was meant to be a place of prayer, a place for sinners to come and receive mercy. But wicked men made it a place of profit, convinced they were out of God's reach. **Jesus demonstrated how wrong they were** by forcefully evicting them. **For a few moments, at least, the Temple was restored** to its rightful purpose, and people who were blind and crippled came to Jesus for healing.

After spending the night in Bethany, Jesus and His disciples started back toward Jerusalem. **On the way, Jesus was hungry** and approached **a fig tree in full leaf**, looking for figs. He found it to be **empty of figs**, however, and so He cursed it. Odd as this episode with the fig tree might sound, it's very important because it sets the stage for much of what will be revealed in the coming chapters.

We covered this passage a few weeks ago, but let me give you a quick summary. **The fruit of fig trees begins to grow before the leaves**. Fully developed leaves are a sign that the fruit is ripe and ready to eat. So, this tree was advertising its own fruitfulness, but **it was all a lie; there was no fruit**.

It's not about figs, of course; **it's a picture of Israel** at the moment her Messiah arrived. She

had the appearance of fruitfulness and yet was barren. **She had a form of godliness but denied its power** (Second Timothy 3:5). **By the mercy of God, there was a believing remnant**, including eleven of Jesus' disciples, though clearly not Judas Iscariot. But **Israel was a barren tree**, nothing but leaves, nothing but an empty boast of spirituality.

This brings us to our passage this morning. Let's read through it, and I'll comment as we go, and then we'll consider what Jesus says.

CONFRONTING THE TEACHER

Matthew 21:23

23 And 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?"

I imagine that when the merchants saw Jesus and His disciples enter the Temple, they got a little nervous. "He's back! Watch out!" But Jesus didn't rebuke them again. Instead, **He found a place to sit and teach**, perhaps under the covered walkways called "the porticoes of Solomon." You know, Jesus could have quietly taught in Bethany or on the Mount of Olives. But this is His passion week, and **He is pushing the leaders to a decision point**: to either humbly trust Him or violently oppose Him. Of course, we know which way they are headed.

Matthew mentioned the chief priests and elders in previous chapters, but this is their first conversation with Jesus. **They are eager to establish *their* authority by requiring Jesus to prove *His* authority.**

A REASONABLE RESPONSE

Matthew 21:24-25

24 And Jesus answered and 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. 25 The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”

I love multiple-choice questions. This one is pretty easy to answer. John himself was very open about his ministry, identity, and authority. **He was the forerunner to the Savior.** His job was to prepare the people to receive the Savior. He did that by preaching a simple message: repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. He baptized people who repented as a sign that they recognized their sin and wanted to be cleansed of it.

The chief priests and elders were not able to put Jesus on the defensive. No one was ever able to put Jesus on the defensive. It didn't matter what the situation was, including His own trials. People today might say that Jesus was His own man, but it was more than that. Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh, completely submitted to the Father. He is the **King of kings** and **Lord of lords**. That meant He was, and is, the **Judge of judges**. No one could stand in judgment on Him, putting Him on the defensive. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was not only the Creator of the world but the Savior of it. He had His eyes set on the cross of Calvary on which He would bear all the sin and guilt of His people and satisfy God's wrath against His elect. He had His eyes set on His own resurrection, which would demonstrate to all the universe His own Lordship over all things. **He was not about to get nervous** because some self-satisfied creatures flashed their badges at Him and demanded answers.

Still, Jesus answers in a very reasonable way. If they will answer a simple question, He'll tell them what they want to know. By the way, **Jesus' response to them echoes Yahweh's response to Job.** Job wanted to know what gave God the right to be, you know, God. Yahweh responded by requiring Job to **prove his own right to have that information.** Jesus requires the chief priests and elders to demonstrate that they have **the discernment and humility** to hear what He has to say.

AVOIDING THE ISSUE

Matthew 21:25-27

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ **26** But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the crowd; for they all regard John as a prophet.” **27** And they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.”

The phrase “they began reasoning among themselves” implies that **this conversation took a little time**. They tried to work out **the safest possible answer**. **Was it safe to say** that John *was* a prophet of God? No, of course not; Jesus would want to know why they didn’t believe Him. **Was it safe to say** that John was *not* a prophet of God? No, of course not; the people they depended upon for their power believed that John was a prophet of God. These men were politicians at heart; they needed those votes. So they decided that the most idiotic answer possible was the safe one: “We do not know.”

So to recap the passage so far, these men thought they had everything under control, demanded that Jesus bow to their authority, and within moments were **stuttering, mumbling fools**, unable to answer a simple question.

Let’s pause for a moment to shake our heads at them. But, before you do, think for a moment.

There are simple questions that cause churches and Christians enormous difficulty today. For instance, **homosexuality**. There are many who understand that the Bible has not changed and that, yes, **homosexuality**, and **all sexual perversion**, and in fact, **all sexual activity outside of marriage**, is sinful. We know that mainline denominations have all capitulated to the spirit of the age and affirmed homosexuality and homosexual marriage and all sorts of perversions. But I tell you with grief and frustration that many Christians and churches are not sure. There is a massive Southern Baptist Church in Orlando, Florida, that is

about as friendly to homosexuality and transgenderism as the culture wants it to be. Saddleback Church, founded by Rick Warren, has ministries that are aimed at welcoming homosexuals and transgenders.

Some of these pastors, at least, got caught in the very same trap that the chief priests and elders got caught in. “What should we say? If we say what the Bible says, that homosexuality is absolutely sinful, an abomination before God, then the culture will get mad! And some people in our church will get mad! They might leave!” **Their doctrine is not ultimately driven by Scripture but by cowardice and convenience.**

Let’s not shake our heads at the chief priests and elders if we let ourselves get caught in the same trap.

JESUS MAKES IT SIMPLE

Matthew 21:27-32

He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. **28** 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.’ **29** And he answered and said, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. **30** And the man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered and said, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go. **31** Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. **32** For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him [**There’s the answer, by the way: they denied that John’s authority came from heaven.**]; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this [**That is, seeing that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed and repented and demonstrated repentance by forsaking their sin**], did not even regret afterward so as

to believe him [That is, they didn't believe John's claims, and they didn't believe when they saw the godly fruit of John's ministry.]. (Matthew 21:23–32, 2022 LSB)

Since they are unwilling to honestly answer simple questions, Jesus tells them a parable that forces them to state the truth. It was not **the son who said yes**, but **the son who actually obeyed**, who did his father's will. **Promises** are *nothing*; **obedience** is *everything*.

Now, we are not saved by obeying the Law; we are saved by faith. But that faith has to be **actual faith, genuine faith, true faith**. Actual, genuine, true faith is a gift of God that is always accompanied by a softened heart, recognition of and hatred of sin, repentance, and a desire to obey Christ.

Let's think about fig trees again.

The chief priests and elders (we could add the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Levites, synagogue leaders, and so many others) had **said they loved God**. They **said they would obey Him**. They *said* that His righteousness mattered. **But they didn't actually obey Him**, as Jesus is going to point out in Matthew 23. **They didn't believe** Jesus, and they didn't believe *in* Jesus. They met Him with **unbelief, hostility, opposition, antagonism, and jealousy**. All their claims of righteousness were like the leaves on that barren fig tree. Of all the people in Israel, they should have been the first in line to welcome the Savior and worship Him as the Son of God. Instead, they behaved in utterly wicked ways. **They were fruitless fig trees** under the judgment of God.

On the other hand, **the tax collectors and prostitutes believed in Jesus and His Gospel, repented of their sins, and set their sights on Him**. The **fruit of faith** began to grow in their hearts first, and **then came the leaves** of softened hearts, repentance from sin, and the desire to obey Jesus. They didn't worry about the leaves, to be honest. Their faith, their gratitude, their joy at forgiveness, and their love of Jesus, caused them to live differently.

BRINGING IT HOME

It's all a matter of authority.

Have you ever known someone who **claimed to be a Christian** by their words **but lacked the fruit** of a Christian life? They were fruitless fig trees, nothing but leaves. I've met quite a few. I challenged some over their empty claims. Few were willing to listen. **Most insisted that they were true Christians though they lived godless lives.** They had convinced themselves that the point of a fig tree is to bear leaves, not fruit. A few listened and took the challenge seriously, and shifted their attention to true faith in Christ and not just empty words.

We know how the chief priests and elders answered Jesus' question about John's authority. But what would Jesus have done if one of those men, or a woman standing nearby, said, "**I knew the whole time** that John's authority was from God, but I was proud of myself and afraid of being a failure and of what others would think, so I denied it. Lord, I need to be saved from my sin and my pride - have mercy on me!"

What do you think Jesus would have done? **The devil wants us to think that Jesus would have rejected that man or woman.** "Well, it's too late now! You had your chance, and you blew it."

But we know – because we know the Scriptures, and we know the Lord Jesus – that **He would have welcomed them** and assured them of forgiveness. They would have been born again that very moment. They would have been forgiven much and would have trusted and loved Jesus greatly.

If you don't know Christ today, then **you remain under the judgment of God.** It's all a matter of authority. Whether you acknowledge Him as God or not, He is God and Lord. He is reigning over His creation, including you. If you come to Jesus Christ in faith and call upon

Him for mercy, you will receive it; He is faithful. Now, perhaps you've never heard the Gospel and the grace of God before – maybe you've only heard religious dogma – but as of today, you remain under His judgment needlessly. You have heard of the love and grace of Christ; nothing prevents you from trusting in Him except your own stubborn pride. I urge you to reach for Him and call upon Him.

Some might feel that your faith in Christ is weak and that you are prone to drift away from Him. It's a matter of authority, isn't it? The world you have been saved from can never satisfy you again. You can commit the old sins, but they won't gratify you as they once did. There are really only two teachers in the world: wisdom and experience. Wisdom is learning from the mistakes of others; experience is learning from your own mistakes. You would be wise to learn from my mistakes; take my word for it, the world has nothing to offer you. Turn your heart back to Christ. Shut off the worldly music and tv and news, and immerse yourself in the Word of God and prayer and fellowship.

And **some of us carry the spiritual scars of dueling with the Lord Jesus over who is really in charge.** It's a matter of authority, isn't it? Who is Lord? It's not me, and it's not you. Jesus is Lord. His Word is true. Oh, **we kick against the goads** and try to argue our way before Him. **But He graciously and kindly and mercifully refuses to let us win.** If we take a close look at our hearts and souls, and perhaps even our bodies, we would say with Paul that we bear the marks of Jesus, the scars that come from submitting to Christ and following Him as Lord. "Oh," we say, "I have that scar because I am so stupid and rebellious." No, that's not true. We bear those scars because Jesus is so kind and gracious. We gained them in the battles we fought and the thorns that we endured. We gained them when we stood faithfully for Him against the avalanche of the world's opinions. We gained them as we struggled against our own sinful nature and the devil's temptations.