

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

by Ray C. Stedman

In our study of our Lord's visit to Jerusalem -- that last, climactic and fatal week of his life -- we see the Lord in confrontation with various authorities of the area. He is dealing with the central issue of all time, the basic question of everyone's life: What is the final authority of life? Should I obey the state, or should I obey my conscience? Which is higher, the church, or the secular government? Should I walk by reason or by faith? Should I follow science or religion? These are questions every one of us must face, and we are helped greatly by the words of our Lord in this account.

Last week, as we looked at this together, we saw our Lord in the midst of his second cleansing of the temple. He overturned the tables of the money-changers, and swept out all the commercialized traffic. Then he did a very arresting thing, which only Mark records: He stopped the offerings and sacrifices of the Mosaic system. Mark says, "He would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple." This meant that he stopped the traffic of the priests, as they were carrying out their normal duties connected with the sacrifices, and he would not allow them to continue.

That was a very dangerous and daring thing for Jesus to do, and everyone was shocked and stunned by his action. These sacrifices belonged to the Levitical system that God had commanded Moses to set into operation. They were the heart and center of the life of the nation. Yet here was Jesus, on his own authority, bringing this priestly traffic to a halt. This would be equivalent to Billy Graham walking up to the pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, and ripping apart the King James Version of the Bible. Blasphemy! Everyone would be stunned by such an action.

Now Mark records the reaction that follows, Chapter 11, Verse 27:

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" {Mark 11:27-28 RSV}

You can sense the bluntness and the sternness in their voices. Now the fat's in the fire, for sure. There will be no more fun and games, the issues are right down to bare bedrock. They know it, and Jesus knows it. So they come to him with the ultimate question, "Who gave you the authority to do this? Who told you that you could act like this?" That question is behind all human behavior. When you refine any issue down to its essentials, what you have left is the whole issue of authority in life. Why do you act the way you do? How do you justify what you say and do? No man ever is his own ultimate authority. We all refer to something other than ourselves -- something that compels us, or something we feel is important -- that governs our decisions. When we deal with this question of authority, therefore, we are dealing with what is absolutely basic and fundamental to all human behavior.

Now these were no second-rate individuals who came to Jesus. This was a very imposing delegation made up of Caiaphas, the high priest, and Annas, his father-in-law, who was regarded as virtual high priest; and the scribes, the body of men who interpreted the Law of Moses; and the elders, those who were officially appointed to serve in the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the nation. This was an imposing, august council -- the Jewish heads of state, under the overarching rule of Rome -- who came to Jesus with this question.

Now, in the answer Jesus gave to these men, we have one of the most amazing accounts in Scripture. What our Lord does under that moment of pressure is very revealing. The first thing he does, coolly, and with utter calmness, is to examine their credentials. Then, he predicts their ultimate downfall. In Verse 29 of Chapter 11, we see him examining their credentials:

Jesus said to them, "I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me." {Mark 11:29-30 RSV}

Notice the directness of that word; he puts them right on the spot.

And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From men?'" -- they were afraid of the people, for all held that John was a real prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." {Mark 11:31-33 RSV}

I love that answer! But notice that the Lord seized upon a most remarkable test. He asked about the baptism of John, not the ministry of John. Nor did he ask about John himself. He asked, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" You see, the baptism of John was something different, something new and startling, that had never occurred before. The priests, of course, had many washings, connected with their duties under the Levitical system, but this was always done in the temple according to a prescribed ritual. But John was different. John was not a priest, yet he baptized. And he did it in the rivers and streams -- wherever he could find enough water. Because it was something quite new, John's baptism would immediately arouse the question, "By what authority do you give us a new ritual in Israel?" So Jesus seizes upon that, and says to these men, "What do you think of this innovation of John's? Was it from God or from men?" Notice again how he simplifies the issue, clearing away all nonessentials. All authority is either of God or men; there are no other authorities. We are either trying to please God and obey him, being responsive to truth that he reveals, and responsible to his power; or we are trying to please men, to manipulate them and use them, or to gain something from them.

Now it is clear from their answer that they knew he had them in a dilemma. In chess you call this a "fork," where, no matter what you do, you are going to lose a piece. These men knew that whatever they said, they were trapped. If they said, "It was from God," the Lord had them. He would say, "Why then didn't you accept him?" And if they said, "It was from men," they knew the multitude standing around them would be very displeased, and they dared not say that either. So they copped out, and said, "We don't know." And Jesus said, "All right; I won't tell you either." But he did not leave them there; he went on to expose their utter dishonesty. By their answer they revealed that they really did not care whether John's baptism was from God or not. They were not interested in the truth, nor were they willing to answer that question at all; they only cared about serving their own interests. Thus they revealed themselves as being opposed to God's authority, acting only out of the intrigues and craftiness of men.

Now our Lord proceeds to make that fact visible to everybody by telling a story. He takes the attack, and predicts their ultimate downfall:

And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country." {Mark 12:1 RSV}

Now the scribes and Pharisees and chief priests would immediately recognize that story. Jesus is borrowing almost the exact words of Isaiah Chapter 5, where the nation is described as a vineyard brought out of Egypt, and planted in a choice land. God had dug a pit and built a tower to protect his vineyard, and had come looking for fruit. These Jewish leaders would immediately recognize that this was about them. Jesus goes on,

"When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard." {Mark 12:2-8 RSV}

Can you imagine the boldness and daring of our Lord who, in this veiled and yet very clear way threw this parable right into their teeth! He is describing to them who they are, and what they are doing. And, indirectly, he is answering their question, "By what authority do you do these things?" He says, "Here is my authority: I am the owner of the vineyard. I am the rightful heir to it. I am the beloved Son whom the Father has sent. You've killed the prophets, stoned and beat those who came from God; now here I am, the Son." And he told these men what they would do: They would beat him, kill him, and cast him out of the vineyard. Jesus is under no delusions as to what is going to happen to him. But then he goes on to predict what would ultimately happen, that God has the final answer. He asks,

"What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others." {Mark 12:9 RSV}

In Mark's account it looks as though Jesus answers his own question, but Matthew makes it clear that Jesus asks the question, and it is the scribes and the chief priests who give the answer. Jesus tells the story, and says, "Now, in that story, what would the owner of the vineyard do?" Matthew records that the scribes and chief priests said, "Why, he'll come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to someone else." Jesus says, "You are right. You have judged yourselves:

**"Have you never read the scripture:
'The very stone which the builders rejected
has become the head of the corner;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"**

And they tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them; so they left him and went away. {Mark 12:10-12 RSV}

Theirs is a false religious authority that presumes to dictate, and to usurp power and authority that was never rightfully theirs. Jesus makes this crystal clear. But he says, "That is not the end. When human authorities act that way, you can remember that God is not yet through." And what he said here actually took place. On the day of resurrection, the one whom the builders rejected indeed became the foundation of the corner. As the resurrected Lord he stood with his disciples and said, "All power, all power in heaven and on earth has been given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18b}. He is the Lord of everything, in control of history, the ultimate determiner of all that happens in human affairs.

Forty years later, Roman armies came in, surrounded the city of Jerusalem and captured it, and the chief priests, the scribes and the elders were led away in chains into captivity, to be dispersed among the nations. God did exactly what he said he would do in this parable.

This is a lesson to us, and to all who read this account, that man's authority is always limited, and can never be equated with God's rule and authority in the affairs of men. Men's authority is always limited as to duration. Men can sit on the seat of unrighteous, unjust power for just so long, and then something happens to sweep them out of office.

In the Sunday school class this morning, Bob Smith was quoting J. B. Phillips, who said, "Remember that the powers-that-be will soon be the powers-that-have-been." The prophet Ezekiel had said that God's process throughout history is declared in these words, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn, till he shall come whose right it is to reign." No evil power can remain in control very long. God's hand is at work in history to overthrow and to replace one power with another. Man's power therefore is always limited in duration.

In the next account we have our Lord's encounter with another form of human authority, Verse 13:

And they [the chief priests and scribes got together and sent another delegation] sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to entrap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the way of God." {Mark 12:13-14a RSV}

What oily scoundrels these were, coming with such pious sounding words! And yet they were made up of two parties who hated each others' guts. The Pharisees and the Herodians were political enemies who got together only because they were both confronted with the threat of Jesus to their vested interests. They came to Jesus with a question all worked out:

**"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"
{Mark 12:14b RSV}**

Did you wrestle with that a couple of months ago? Yes, we still ask ourselves this question. Should you pay taxes to a power that uses them wrongly? Is it right to pay your good, hard-earned money to a government that wastes it, or puts it to a purpose that you adamantly oppose? Should you, or should you not? That is a great moral question.

But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin, and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at him. {Maek 12:15-17 RSV}

I remember reading some time ago of a brilliant young lawyer, who had been raised a pagan and had no use for Christianity. Someone had given him the New Testament, and he was reading it through. When he came to this account in Mark, he read this question with great interest, for he himself had recently been involved with just such a dilemma. He said he could hardly read fast enough to see what Jesus would have to say. When the full impact of the actions of Jesus hit this man, he was utterly astonished. He dropped the Bible, and said to himself, "That's the most amazing wisdom!" For our Lord did not try to answer the question directly. In that wonderful way he had, he called for a coin -- he had to borrow one, for he had none of his own -- and held it up. "Whose picture is on this coin?" he asked. They said, "Caesar's." He said, "All right, then it must be Caesar's money. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But God has got his stamp upon you, so render to God the things that are God's."

He shows us clearly that human authority is not only limited in duration; it is limited in its scope. It deals with only a part of man. The secular government is ordained of God. The Apostle Paul tells us that plainly, and Peter says the same thing; "Honor the emperor as supreme, and all the governors who are sent by him," {cf, 1 Pet 2:13-14, 2:17}. Jesus himself acknowledges, as does all of Scripture, that God is behind secular government -- even bad government. For the emperor that Peter referred to was none other than Nero, wretched moral degenerate that he was. Yet Peter says, "Honor the emperor as supreme," {1 Pet 2:13, 2:17 RSV}. But human government, Jesus says, has only limited control over men. It has certain powers over the bodies and minds of men. It can regulate our conduct to some degree, and has the right to influence and regulate our attitudes and actions and what we say, and how we say it. But there is one area in human life over which secular power has no control, and that is the human spirit. Secular power cannot legislate as to whom we worship, who governs our conscience, and who constitutes the ultimate authority of life. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Certain things do properly belong to Caesar; give them to him. But other things about you belong only to God, so give those to God.

The Bay Area has just had a visit from a very honored man, the Russian author Solzhenytsin, who has been studying at Stanford this last week. We have been privileged indeed to have a man of this caliber and stature among us. He stands as a living example of the wrong that is done by secular might, when it tries to govern and control the worship of men. Almost single-handedly, he has defied one of the mightiest powers of earth, and revealed the viciousness and the exploitation that always results when secular might seeks to invade that proscribed area of human existence, the human spirit. That is what the American Revolution was all about. The record of history is filled with the resistance of men to any invasion from secular sources of that area of life. Jesus is saying that the ultimate issues of life belong to God, not to man, and human authority is therefore limited in its scope.

Now, in the last incident in this passage, he is confronted with still another form of human authority, what we call "rationalism," or the scientific mind, the authority or power of the thinking of men -- and this is very much

with us yet. Verse 18:

And Sadducees came to him, who say there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the wife, and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no children; and the second took her, and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; and the seven left no children. Last of all the woman also died [worn out]. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." {Mark 12:18-24 RSV}

Now this is an utterly ridiculous, mocking question. Mark makes this very clear, for he tells us right at the beginning that these Sadducees were rationalists, materialists -- humanists, we would call them. They did not believe in the supernatural. They did not believe in angels or spirits, or that anything invisible had reality. They did not believe in a life after death, nor in a resurrection, as Mark clearly states. And yet they come with the question, "What's going to happen in the resurrection?"

You can see the sneering contempt that is behind this question. It is an absurd, contrived story, concocted just to try to trap Jesus. It never really happened, and I doubt if it could happen. It is simply a ridiculous story that they made up. I am sure Jesus must have been tempted to treat it as such. He could have asked them why they did not investigate her cooking, for example. When a woman has seven husbands one after the other, all of whom die off, something is suspicious in the kitchen! But he does not. Notice how he answers them:

Jesus said to them, "Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong." {Mark 12:24-28 RSV}

Now he is very blunt, and minces no words. "You are wrong," he says. "Your whole view of life has made you wrong. You're so sure you're right. You have narrowed life down to a very limited view, and you say that's all there is. And looking at life from that narrow perspective, you cannot see the reality that lies beyond. You're wrong because you fail to recognize two great facts: One, God has knowledge that man does not have. God's knowledge is greater than man's. That is why we have the Scriptures. You don't know the Scriptures, obviously, for that is where God's knowledge, far greater than man's, is made known to us." Things that only God knows are made known to us in only one place, the Scriptures. The folly of men who reject the Scriptures is that they thus lock themselves into a narrow slice of life, bounded only by that which can be seen and felt and weighed and measured and verified by the senses of man. Man himself then becomes the boundary of life.

Second, Jesus said, "You don't know the power of God. Even if you do know the Scriptures, you don't believe them, because you don't believe that God has power to do what man cannot do. You've bounded your life by the knowledge of man and the power of man. You've exalted man to the place where you think he knows everything that can be known, and there is nothing beyond his power. So, you're wrong."

I remember reading this passage many years ago, as a young Christian, and I was intrigued by Jesus' words: "You are wrong for two reasons. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." And through all the years since I have been checking this out. No matter in what area it is found -- business, science, religion, politics, family life -- every error of life can be attributed to one of those two things. Either you do not know the Scriptures, or you do not know the power of God. You do not know what a living God can do, and what a living God knows, and that is why you are wrong. This is the fatal weakness of what we call the scientific mind.

Now, within the purview of its field, science is very helpful, and does some tremendously helpful things. I am not speaking against science, but we must always recognize what Blaise Pascal put so beautifully when he said,

"The ultimate purpose of reason is to bring us to the place where we see that there is a limit to reason."

That is what is wrong with the so-called scientific mind. These men were excluding all the supernatural from their thinking. Scientists often do this, saying, "In the scientific realm there is no room for speculation about life after death. Nobody can prove it, or verify it; nobody who has been there has ever come back. Therefore it is an irrelevant fact that has no meaning to life."

But Jesus says, "You're wrong. And the reason you are wrong is that you do not see reality." Though it is true that, as a scientist, such themes as life after death and the resurrection have nothing to do with your examination of the here and now, what you do not see is that you are more than a scientist; you're a person. And, as a person, you cannot escape that problem. You must some day confront the reality of your own death. If you shove that off into the background and never examine it, never look at it, you're going to find that, as a person -- because you're the way God made you -- you will be haunted with fears that you will never resolve, and troubled with guilt that you cannot handle. And because of these fears and guilts, your thinking and attitudes will become distorted, and you will make wrong decisions. Even your scientific judgment will be colored and distorted by these things. As a scientist you end up wrong, because, as a person, you refuse to recognize the facts about your life. That is what is wrong about science as an ultimate authority. So our Lord is clearly telling us that human authority is limited in its duration, limited in its scope -- for it deals with only a part of man -- and it is limited in its dimensions. It deals only with time and not with eternity.

In contrast to this, God's authority rings through this passage as being worthy of man's responsible obedience. For God's authority, in contrast with man's, encompasses all of time. It never changes. It is never one thing during one age, and something else in another. It is not subject to the laws of dynasty and rule; it is never overthrown. It is exactly today what it was in Abraham's day, and Isaac's day, and Moses' day. God's authority and power govern the whole of man. It touches our body, soul, and spirit, and all that we are is responsible before him. God's authority reaches beyond time through all the limitless ages of eternity, beyond the visible into the realm of the invisible. It touches the great realities that constantly bear upon our lives that cannot be seen by eyes or felt by hand or weighed by human instruments. As men, therefore, we stand in the presence of a God who is sovereign over every part of our lives.

This is why Jesus, on another occasion, said, "Don't fear men. Don't fear those who can kill the body and that's as far as they can go. But rather, fear him who is able to cast both body and soul into hell," {cf, Matt 10:28}. It is not that he wants us to see God as a terrible and severe judge; it is as a loving, sovereign Father that he wants to redeem us. He wants us to recognize that nothing men can do can overrule what God can do, for men cannot overthrow God. Human authority must always be ruled by and subject to the overarching authority of God. And when we live in terms of that reality, all else will ultimately find its place in the picture of life.

Next week we are going to see how our Lord takes the offensive, and drives home a truth that is one of the most startling and amazing truths about humanity found in all the Bible. But for now, he turns aside all the confrontations of his enemies, answers them with only a word -- but what a word! It strips them naked before the eyes of the watching multitude, shows them the utter sovereignty of God, and man's responsibility to him.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for this One who has come to speak such clarifying words to our ears, who helps us to see things rightly, who puts things in proper perspective and makes us understand who we are, and what we are, and to whom we are responsible. We thank you for the love that is within your sovereign heart, and for the fact that all this is not directed to our downfall but to our redemption, to our healing, to our restoration. I pray, Father, that we may submit ourselves to the authority of Jesus Christ, to Jesus as Lord, and none other. We ask in his name, Amen.

By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Ruler who Serves
Scripture: Mark 11:27 - 12:27
Message No: 9
Catalog No: 3323
Date: June 8, 1975

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