

“BY WHAT AUTHORITY?”
Psalm 66:8-12, 16-20, I Corinthians 15:20-28, Luke 20:1-8
May 16 & 17, 2020

We're in our third week of this series entitled “Are You the Christ.” We are learning who Jesus is through some of the questions asked of or to Jesus. We started with the question ‘What Manner of Man Is This?’ based upon the observation of the disciples seeing that Jesus had control over the wind and the waves of the Sea of Galilee when He said to them, “Peace, be still!”

Then we looked at the question ‘Where Did He Get His Wisdom?’ based upon those at the Temple at Nazareth as Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2 and stated that it was now fulfilled in their hearing. The people were so offended that they were ready to throw Jesus off the cliff of Nazareth.

Today, we look at the third question asked to Jesus, ‘By What Authority Are You Doing These Things?’ I invite you to listen to how it develops as it is found in Luke 20:1-8. (READ Luke 20:1-8)

Now we are surrounded by the same question, “By what authority.” Police ask us, “May I see your driver’s license?” Or folks at the store will ask for our identification when we pay by a check. Or a teacher will question, “Was this an excused absence?” The polling places will ask you how old you are or where you live when you go to vote. I’ve been asked, “Who ordained you?” And every time I go to Russia I am asked, “What business do you have in Russia?” It’s a question of authority!

So naturally, Jesus was also asked, ‘By What Authority Do You Do These Things?’ Or to state it in common language, “Where do You get off doing all of this?” So as we investigate further the authority of Jesus, we must remember that this is by far the most important question asked of Jesus, because if we can accept His answer about the authority given to Him to do the great things He did, then everything else falls into place; what manner of man He is, where He gets His wisdom from, what His teaching is all about, is He the Promised Christ, and how we are to treat our neighbor. The question about His authority provides answers to all of the other questions. So let’s look at what’s going on.

This question comes to Jesus in his final pre-crucifixion days of life. He has come to Jerusalem knowing what was going to happen to Him in the next few days to come. So He attempts to give a last

diligent push at reaching the people and the leaders to come to understand who He is and what His purpose is. He has already made a grand entrance into the city with a parade taking place around Him with palm branches and cheering children. And He is spending as much time as possible teaching at the Temple. He is there at the very place where He first claimed His purpose of knowing and doing His Father's business (Luke 2:41-52). And He is bold enough to begin teaching the people as if He were one of the religious leaders. He is teaching and preaching HIS gospel, the fulfillment of God's prophecy in the Scriptures. And as He puts God's word to life, the chief priests and Pharisees become offended that someone else is taking their place, so they question Jesus' authority for doing these things: "By what authority are you doing these things?"

Well, we can see that this is a very **natural question**. When anyone with some authority is joined by another "unknown" in the same status as they are, there are questions about who's in charge, whose authority has given them the right to be there, and **what credentials** they have to even be with them. We ask about the credentials of teachers and professors in our schools, who usually have a wall dedicated to diplomas and certificates. People want to know what kind of training their pastors' and bishops' have that gives them ability to lead the church. When we take our cars into the shop, we want to know what training the mechanics have had for working on our vehicles. When we go to the doctor's office, we want to make sure that the ones working on our bodies or our minds have the credentials to accurately work on us to bring health and healing to us. When we vote for the leaders of our city, state and country, we want to make sure that those who are in office have the skill and experience to lead us as they set laws and guidelines for our everyday lives. When we invest our money in the stock market or even in the bank, we want to make sure that those working with our finances have the training and knowledge and skill to invest wisely so that our accounts grow.

So the chief priests and Pharisees wanted to check up on Jesus to see what His credentials were that supported His teaching and preaching and actions. These were Chief Priests – not just priests, but high priests. They were of the family of Levi that had been entrusted with the care and operations of the

Temple way back from the time of Moses. They had standards to obtain and guidelines to follow to have these positions. And they came by it according to the Law. THEY were the ones who were supposed to oversee the holy duties of the Temple (Ezra 3:8). THEY announced people clean from diseases (Mark 1:44). THEY were the ones to offer the sacrifices (Jeremiah 33:18). THEY were the ones who were to teach the people and bring them into a right relationship with the Lord (Ezra 8:16).

But **Jesus shows up** teaching and preaching and doing miracles and How Dare He Challenge Their Authority by chasing out the merchants doing business for the sake of the church? What right did He have to upset the operations of the church? Who gave Him permission to make any changes in the way things were going without their consent? By what authority was He doing these things? And then to be sitting in the Temple teaching and preaching to the people? Who gave Him the right to do this?

Jesus was making some terrific claims for God and upon God's people. He was inviting the people to tell Caesar where to go (Matthew 22:15-22). *"Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."* He was telling them to give generously to help the poor (Mark 10:21). *"One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."* He was teaching them when to speak and when to keep quiet (Matthew 12:36). *"But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment."* He was teaching them that being a good neighbor costs you (Luke 10:30-37). *"On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'"* Jesus' teaching was in truth and right, but the chief priests were focusing on documents and descent as their authority. So as Jesus gives out the Word of God, the chief priests and Pharisees don't quite know what to do with Him.

"What bothered the bureaucracy [of the Temple] was not so much that Jesus prayed and preached but that some of those among His hearers might be moved into action...Writing of the church in Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn lamented: 'No one stops them from ringing their bells; they can bake their Communion bread the way they please; they have their processions with the Cross – but they

should not have anything to do with civic affairs.’ Sound familiar?”¹ America might not be too far behind what the Soviet Union was at in 1978. Today we are being told, “Its ok to preach and teach about Biblical truths, but by no means let the people become moved so that they take it beyond the church walls.”

So when Jesus begins to move people into action based upon His truth and His Gospel, the Temple leaders are offended and demand proper credentials from Jesus. They come up with this **trick question that is meant to trap Jesus**. If in answering the question, “By What Authority Do You Do These Things?” Jesus would answer, “God has authorized Me to do this,” then they would have charged Him with blasphemy, daring to speak for God. But on the other hand, if Jesus were to answer that His authority did not come from God but upon His own authority, they would have charged Him with impertinence and presumption. So realistically there was no way to have any conversation about this. One way or the other, it was a trap for Jesus so that any way that He answered, He would be labeled a law-breaker.

But **Jesus doesn’t answer their question** because the question of ultimate authority is unanswerable. You see, ultimate authority is ultimate authority, and cannot be defined any more than we can try to define God, Himself. For us to try to define God in our limited wisdom and knowledge is futile because God is so much higher than any of our wisdom or our knowledge. It would be like an ant trying to describe the immensity of a skyscraper in downtown Chicago. We have to accept God’s rules and God’s guidelines and work around them. And even though Jesus was the best One to describe the fullness of God, how would we even begin to understand Him. After all, most of His parables are way beyond our understanding, so how could we expect to understand the fullness of God.

So there was no way to answer the question of the chief priests on their terms. They wanted a specific answer that could not be given on terms which they would be willing to accept. The question, ‘By What Authority?’ given to Jesus was merely a trap. To compare their assumed authority with the

¹ (R. Benjamin Garrison, *Are You the Christ?* [Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1978] pg. 41)

authority of Jesus was way beyond them and completely unexplainable. They either had to accept that Jesus had the authority of God, or they had to reject it. But to explain it would have been counter-productive and even fruitless for Jesus to have tried. They didn't want to hear the real answer.

So instead of answering the question straight out, Jesus uses the rabbinic technique of answering a question by asking another question. So Jesus asks about the authority of John to baptize and teach, did it come from God or from man (Luke 20:4)? The chief priests and Pharisees get caught in the same kind of trap that they had laid out for Jesus. If they answered "*From God,*" then Jesus could easily ask "*Then why did you not believe John.*" But if they answered, "*From man*" then the people would "*stone them, because they are convinced that John was a prophet*" (Lk 20:5-6). So they chose not to answer just as Jesus had. So Jesus then refuses to answer their question on the same grounds that they refused to answer His question.

But that leaves us with the question of Jesus' authority to do these things. So looking at the word *authority* we see the word *author*. I like the way that Benjamin Garrison puts it: "An author is one who has written or produced something, combined elements in a new, never-before, way. That is what God has done in Christ. God has taken the elements of humanity, used and abused and broken in a million creations before; combined them with elements of divinity that humans have often sought but [never] found; and brought them together in the man Christ Jesus in a new never-before [or ever-after] way. Whatever authority Jesus possessed came from the Author, that is, from God. This illustration is far from perfect, but it may begin to suggest what Jesus meant and why His hearers did not understand. The elders were talking about the punctuation marks that make a poem readable. Jesus was talking about the poem – and about the poet."²

So by virtue that Jesus' authority comes from the Author, it is right, then, that He has the **authority of the familiar**. He brings the true nature of God to us in such a way that we immediately associate ourselves with it as if to say, "I've been there before, or I've heard that before." Jesus being

² (Garrison, *Are You the Christ?* pg. 44)

just like us in every way except for sin, represents God and discloses God to us so that we have an immediate recognition that He is here with us.

And then, since Jesus' authority comes from the Author, God, His is the **authority of the reasonable**. He uses questions like, "*Have you not read?*" (Matthew 12:3) to get people to remember the Scriptures. He asks, "*What do you think?*" (Matthew 18:12) to get the people to begin to think about and begin to apply the Scriptures in their own lives. He urged, "*Judge for yourselves*" (Luke 12:57) to get people to rationalize the truth of the Scriptures. Jesus invited the responses of others, He called them to make judgments about the truths they knew, He proposed new possibilities for the meanings of those truths, He encouraged the people to begin to use reasoning to guide and direct their lives, and Jesus even demanded the people make changes based upon the answers the people were coming up with. But Jesus never pushed anyone to something that they did not agree with or come to understand.

In the same way Jesus' authority from God was an **authority of love**. By that I mean that Jesus was willing to come here to earth and become like us to share our life and experience our hardships. In all that Jesus teaches and asks of us, He was willing to go through it just like we do. He told His disciples, "*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:14). And He did just that for us, giving Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus said, "*Love your enemies*" (Matt. 5:44) and He showed us how to do that by loving even the worst of sinners. He told us, "*Do not be anxious about tomorrow*" (Matt. 6:34) and He lived each day without worry or concern. You see Jesus has gone where we go, and has lived His life as an example of what we can be. He willingly shared His life with us out of love for us so that we could grow closer to Him. He shared our hazards in life to teach us how we can face all our own struggles.

But most importantly, Jesus authority was an **emptied authority**. We hear that best in the words of Paul in Philippians 2:7-8. "*...Of His own free will He gave up all He had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like man and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death – His death on the cross.*" Jesus emptied Himself of all position and

place at God's right hand, became like us in every way except sin, and emptied Himself of all glory and honor. It would be like the CEO of a huge corporation working on the assembly line, or the President riding a garbage truck picking up the refuse of the world. In submitting Himself to become a servant, Jesus gave up everything in heaven to become human like us, from glory to grunge. He taught us to become servants of God by modeling it Himself, being willing to give everything in order to win us back into God's good graces. And He even gave up His own life here on earth, so that we could become free from that bondage of sin that separates us from God. In His death, He removed all spot of filth and grime and refuse that we have heaped upon ourselves, washing us clean in the eyes of God by shedding His own blood as the cleansing agent. His blood is like divine Oxy-clean, removing any hint of evil or wickedness to those who claim Him as Savior.

But we see that after Jesus emptied Himself to become the servant, after His death and resurrection, He gained everything. Paul continues with Philippians 2:9-11, "*For this reason God raised Him to the highest place above and gave Him the Name that is greater than any other name. And so, in honor of the Name of Jesus all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below will fall on their knees, and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" That is the reward of His emptied authority, gaining everything in heaven and on earth as a gift from the Father, for becoming the Servant who loved us enough to give of Himself for us.

And we hear that in the final verses of Matthew's Gospel as Jesus tells the disciples, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has BEEN GIVEN TO ME*" (28:18 capitalized is mine). Jesus received ALL AUTHORITY because it was given Him by the Father. The universal authority of God is claimed by the rightful recipient, Jesus, as He demonstrates the fulfillment of His work for the sake of the people of the world. Here at the very end of his Gospel, Matthew proclaims this great truth, that Jesus is above all, He is over all, and His authority is beyond all other authorities. And with that we can see Jesus in three ways; either a lunatic out of His mind, a liar presenting the greatest deception of all time, or Lord of all.

And throughout the whole of the Christian Era, we have seen the value of claiming Jesus to be Lord of All. This title was given to Him because He lived in faith that all that the Father had said would come true. Jesus lived as if all of the Scriptures were true so He received the reward due to Him. His authority then came through His faith as Jesus lived with authenticity throughout His life's journey.

So as we humble ourselves before Jesus Christ, and submit to His authority, we become His servants. **Our faith as Christians lies in the trust we have in Jesus' authority.** Our faith is not found in documentation, in demonstration, and in certitude, proving that we have authority as followers of Christ Jesus. Our faith is not in a baptismal record, or a confirmation certificate, in a theological diploma, or even in an ordination document. **Our faith is in following Jesus**, who has already gone ahead of us as the ultimate example of servanthood, humbling Himself only to the Father. It is His authority that we base our lives upon. It is His authority that we pattern our own lives so that we might become a witness to those around us of the authority that we submit to. Our faith is submitting ourselves to Jesus, in whom we call Master.

And “that, in a profound way, is what we come as Christians to do: to serve [Jesus], to love Him, and to converse with Him. It may be a long time before you fully understand all that this means. Perhaps you never will. If, however, you are able to say, as countless others have, ‘You have that in your face which I would call Master,’ you are ready for this first step [in your journey of faith in Jesus], and able for every step to come.”³ Only then will the debate over Jesus' authority end, and your discipleship begin.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for giving Jesus to us as ALL authority in heaven and on earth. Give us the courage to trust in Him, love Him, and follow Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, for the rest of our life. Let it begin right here that we become or reaffirm our faith, as disciples of Jesus Christ. May we openly accept and proclaim the full authority of Jesus in all we do and say, to Your glory in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

³ (Garrison, *Are You the Christ?* pg. 49)