

May 26, 2019

“A Question of Authority”
Matthew 21:23-27

FCF: Self-ruling impulse

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus has revealed himself as the rightful King.
(magnet) We must yield our lives to him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“Don’t tell me what to do!” That can be said for different reasons but with equal fervor. First case, a marriage. One party wants understanding. The other gives solutions. Both end up frustrated. “You don’t value my help!” says one. “Don’t tell me what to do!” says the other.

The second case is most anywhere, anytime. One peer to another, advice, instruction, or direction is given. Or an order, edict, or command is passed by a superior on to a subordinate. But then something rises within the recipient and erupts. “Don’t tell me what to do!” they cry.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Could we be saying this to God? It’s worth considering.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 21:23-27](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“Question authority” was coined by Timothy Leary in the 1960’s. With the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the traction for this slogan grew. “Question authority before they question you.” “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.” “Oh well, I wasn’t using my civil liberties anyway.” But all is not well under this banner. Many are seeing how this makes too much of individual rights and weakens our ability to work with others. It’s not hard to see why.

Which brings us to our text. This incident is one in a series of events. It’s in the midst of Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the king into his city. On Monday, that same king came into his temple. In the course of that, he pronounced a curse upon a fig tree, visually demonstrating the rot, the fruitlessness of the worship and devotion in the temple. Now it’s Tuesday. The people are waiting to see what will happen next. And the religious officials confront Jesus in the temple courts, pressing him hard with questions about his authority.

“Authority” is what is at issue here. The word comes up four times in this text. It is not merely power. Authority has to do with the rightful exercise of power. And what Matthew wants us to see here is that Jesus has revealed himself to us as the rightful king - with all power and authority. Jesus has revealed himself to us as the rightful king. We must yield our lives to him.

There are three things to consider at this point. First, our struggle with authority. Second, the roots of our struggle with authority. And then, third, the cure for our struggle.

I. OUR STRUGGLE WITH AUTHORITY

First, our struggle with authority. We all do in some way ([READ Matthew 21:23](#)).

A) His Promise

Think for a moment about the contrast here between Jesus’ promise and their perception.

1. Reclaim and renew

The people had cried, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” A confession truer than their conviction. Jesus had indeed come to reclaim what was rightfully his. He’d come to reclaim and renew it.

2. Redeem and reconcile

He had come to redeem his people, to bring them out of bondage at the cost of his very life. He’d come to redeem his people and to reconcile them to God, to bring peace and shalom.

B) Their Perception

That was the promise, his purpose. But how was that perceived by the Jewish leaders?

1. A threat

They saw him as a threat. In their minds, he was a false teacher, a heretic. He had to go.

2. A trap

And so they conspired together and set a trap for him. You hear it in this question. If he says he received his authority from men, then they will charge him with insubordination. But if he says he received his authority from heaven, then they will charge him with blasphemy. It’s a trap.

They want to be rid of him. And this gives us a glimpse into our struggle with authority.

Illustration:

We have a couple of old chickens in a coop at home. I was letting them out one morning last week and was surprised to find a good sized black rat snake caught in some netting around the coop. I’m not sure how long he’d been there but if he didn’t get loose, he was going to die. So I got to work with a knife to cut him free. From his hissing, I’d say he didn’t like that much. Which, knowing my intent, made no sense. But I thought, “That’s me.” That’s me when I shout at Jesus, “What do you think you’re doing? Who gave you the authority?” I’m like that snake.

Application:

(**READ Psalm 97:1**) That’s how Jesus’ reign should be received. It’s not something to be endured or tolerated. It’s something to be celebrated! Yet, how we are filled with distrust - not so much in his power but his intent. “What if to cut the netting you have to nick my scales?” That’s our distrust. Then there is our disobedience. “I’m going to go my own way. Even if it brings me more harm. I don’t care. At least it’s my way.” Again, we can be so foolish here.

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II. THE ROOTS OF OUR STRUGGLE

That takes us to the second point, the roots of our struggle. Why this resistance? Where is this coming from? Why this hostile instinctive visceral response to Jesus’ authority?

A) Layers of Fear

Part of what’s driving this would have to be layers of fear, down deep within.

1. Possibilities

Think of the intimidation these men felt. They’d never heard or seen anything like Jesus. Never. Then their experience. Every other authority they knew had been tainted with corruption.

2. Implications

Then there were the implications. If Jesus was who he said he was, then they were desperately wrong about a whole lot of things. And they would have to give up their positions and power.

B) Twisting of Pride

These layers of fear can be powerful motivators. As can be the twisting of pride.

1. Assumptions

Starting with their assumptions. Their view of the situation was that Jesus was a blasphemer. And their role as members of the Sanhedrin, Israel's supreme court, was to guard against such.

2. Arrogance

And they saw themselves as up to the task. A tragic irony caused by the twisting of pride. But the real roots of this can be traced to the Fall. Mankind was called to stewardship of this world. But we have taken it upon ourselves to take ownership instead, to run things as we see fit.

Fear and pride - those lie at the root of our struggle with Jesus' authority.

Application:

How do we see those things playing out in our lives? Let's say we've been wounded and hurt by someone. Our confidence betrayed. A promise broken. Harsh words spoken. "I know Jesus commands forgiveness. But I refuse to even entertain it. For I know better." That's pride.

Then there's fear. "I know that following Jesus demands a generous lifestyle, to give as I've been given to. A commitment to tithing, to open-handed giving. But life is uncertain. I don't know what tomorrow may bring. I need to play it safe, to hold back." That's fear.

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III. THE CURE FOR OUR STRUGGLE

What then is the cure for our struggle? We see it in Jesus' response (**READ Matthew 21:24-27**). For such a deep-seated disease, we need a powerful cure. That comes through Jesus.

A) Listen Carefully

Listen carefully to what Jesus is saying, to how he responds to this inquisition.

1. Rabbinic technique

He answers their question with his own question. This was a common technique for rabbis of the day. And so he creates a dilemma for them. If they say John's authority came from men, they'll lose the support of the people. But if they say it was from heaven, that will beg a question.

2. The reasoning

Jesus isn't dodging them. He's redirecting them. He's trying to help them grapple with who he is. "If you get my question right, you have the answer for yours." Such wisdom. And mercy.

B) Look Closely

So we start by listening carefully. And then looking closely, asking a couple of questions.

1. At who is making the claim

Who is it with whom these men are disputing in the temple courts? Who is it that is making this claim? As we look back over the record, as we think back over what Matthew has already shown us, what do we see? The wisdom of his teaching. The power of his miracles. The beauty of his character. Who is this? We're getting a pretty good idea. Which then sets up the claim itself.

2. At the claim itself

Yes, Jesus does have the authority to do all these things. He does have the right to rule us, to tell us how to live and to assess how we're doing. But what else? He has the right to name us. As the King, he alone can tell us who we really are. His opinion is the only one that matters - even more than our own. "You're not an orphan on the street. You're a blood bought child of the King." Which then makes him worth hearing and trusting, worth turning towards and telling of.

That's the cure for our struggle - listening carefully to and looking closely at Jesus.

Illustration:

Just a few weeks ago, astronomers posted an image using 16 years' worth of data from the Hubble Space Telescope. This picture of space, made with 7,500 photos, shows a patch just smaller than the size of the moon in the sky. And it's estimated that this image alone includes 265,000 galaxies. Think of that. It's what we can see with a focused gaze into the heavens.

Application:

What do we see as we stop and gaze at the One who created the heavens? (**READ Psalm 97:1**) Think with me here. The revelation of Jesus' authority is a call to obedience. We must say that and be razor sharp on that point. But it is also a cause for celebration. For Jesus is the King. He's the One from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things. That's the cure for our struggle, the counter answer to all our fear and pride. That's good news. It's the best news.

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CONCLUSION:

Some of you know that there is film in the theaters, *Tolkien*, something of a bio on the creator of *The Lord of the Rings*. J. R. R. Tolkien was a friend of C. S. Lewis. Lewis is well known for *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the first of those, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we learn of the adventures of four children in Narnia. The story is fun, but it's also an allegory of Jesus and salvation, with Jesus represented by the lion, Aslan. There in Narnia, the children finally meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who describe the lion to them (**READ quote**):

"Is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion - *the* Lion, the great lion."

"ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake" said Mrs Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

It's good news. Jesus has revealed himself as the rightful King. We must yield our lives to him.

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