

Authority

Matthew 21:23-27

Our subject this afternoon is authority, specifically Jesus' authority, and I want to begin with a clear explanation and understanding of what authority is all about. It has to do with power, but not simply the raw exercise of power. In other words, authority does not simply refer to the person who has the most power or who exercises the most power. The appropriate word for such a person, often well-used today, is the word bully. A bully is someone who exercises power, typically to his own profit and advantage. And I can't ever imagine using the word "bully" in a positive context.

But we see it everywhere. We certainly see it in the exercise of our government, politicians and, for that matter, judges, flexing their power and exerting their influence just as much as they possibly can. We see it in churches, where pastors, or even elders, maybe even other powerful men and women in a congregation, exert an influence based upon their own position of strength. We can see the same thing in families, or businesses or companies in the workplace, where the exercise of authority is reduced to control. Control by the exertion of power. That might sometimes be good and effective, but often, it would more accurately be labelled bullying.

So what is the difference between the proper exercise of authority and mere power? What is the difference between a proper use of power and that which is accomplished by a bully? That's our subject this afternoon.

The word authority comes from the verb with the meaning of "it is lawful." It refers, then, to the exercise of power that is lawful, that is proper or appropriate, legitimate. In other words, authority

has reference to the right to exercise power, the well-established legitimacy of exercising power. A bully exercises power because he can, because he is the biggest or the strongest. One who rightly exercises power has the proper authority to do so, whether in the government, in the family, in a business, or in a church. Authority is invested in the one who exercises it. One who has authority has been granted that right, which, as I preach to you, means that God is ultimately the one who entrusts people with that authority, it is God himself who grants the right to exercise power.

I still remember my early days as a minister of the gospel, especially when it came to preaching. I had learned how to construct a sermon, and after a couple years of doing that twice each week, I had figured out what typical sermon preparation looked like, and, honestly, I haven't changed that too much over the past 37 years. I was very young when I began preaching to God's people, not quite 27, and though I had already been a Christian for 13 years, and though I had a unwavering sense of God's calling upon my life to be a pastor, I did not have the confidence of an internal sense within me that I had the right to preach to a congregation of people most of whom were much older than I was, many of whom had more of an externally parental or even grandparent relationship to me. I knew God called me to preach and that my ordination was a life-changing definition of what I was, but I still had that internal thought, "What right do I have to stand in the pulpit and preach?" What authority do I have?

Actually, I always knew the answer to the second question, the authority was from God. And I am forever thankful that the people to whom I ministered received my ministry with that same conviction. But it took me about five years until I had the equivalent subjective confidence within my own heart. It took

those years for me to know within my own experience that I had the right to preach to God's people because God had put me in that position. And I have never forgotten that I am but an instrument for him to use, and the authority that I exercise as a minister of the gospel is what I had learned so well in seminary—it is ministerial and declarative. In other words, I have no inherent authority to exercise my own power. Rather, I am to minister in God's name and in his power and I am to declare his authority in everything that I might do as a minister of the gospel.

That's the context for our text this afternoon. Specifically, Jesus' authority. And we begin with a question, but not an innocent question. It was, rather,

I. A CHALLENGE TO JESUS' AUTHORITY.

v.23

Note there the reference to "these things." The meaning is obvious. They are talking about the public ministry of Jesus, especially the performance of his miracles. And they have been numerous. Remember the two blind men from chapter 20, whom Jesus healed, such that they could see. Or the epileptic boy in chapter 17, whom Jesus healed by rebuking a demon that had possessed him. We also saw the transfiguration in chapter 17, the physical appearance of both Moses and Elijah along with Jesus. Then, of course, the feeding of the four thousand with seven loaves of bread and a few little fish, and the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. They had seen Jesus walk on water, calming the waves of the sea by the power of his own word. I could go on and on, even to the account of Lazarus in John 11, who was raised from the dead after being in the grave for four days.

The chief priests and elders of the people had seen all those

miracles, with their own eyes. And what do we read that they did? They confronted Jesus as he was teaching, v.23. Could be translated "they came up to him," but the idea of confrontation is clearly obvious by the context. They came up to him to challenge him! They came up to challenge his teaching, because, for them, his teaching was a challenge to their exercise of power. They were the bullies. They were the ones exercising power wrongly. They were the ones whose authority was illegitimate. So what do they do? Rather than acknowledge the obvious power of Jesus to perform those signs, wonders and miracles, rather than honor and worship him who obviously demonstrated the power that God alone possesses, rather than to glorify God and believe in Jesus, they decided to challenge his authority—his right to perform those miracles. It was,

A. A challenge to Jesus' obvious display of divine power.

Again, let me state the obvious. The signs and miracles were a testimony of God's power, they were the proof and evidence of God's power and God's own authority. For Jesus, the miracles were themselves the obvious demonstration of the authority which he had as the son of God. Do you remember the paralytic whom he healed?

Mat. 9:1 "So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. 2 Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." 3 And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." 7 And he arose and departed to his house. 8 Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who

had given such power to men.”

He healed that paralyzed man “that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins.” He performed the miracle to prove his divine power, his divine authority. Jesus claimed the right to speak as God in the forgiveness of sins. That was his authority, it was God’s own authority. And it was obvious. He raised Lazarus from the grave as the proof and evidence of his authority to say of himself, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

Later, in the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, we read this,

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know.”

So the display of divine power was obvious. But the Jewish leaders turned the situation around backwards, and rather than recognizing and submitting to Jesus’ authority because of these miracles, they point to those same miracle and demand Jesus answer their question: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” With that question, the sinful rebellion of their heart is obvious, for this is,

B. A challenge to Jesus’ true identify as God.

The gist of their challenge was really, “We didn’t give you the right to perform those miracles!” They are asserting their authority, their false claim to authority, by demanding that Jesus answer to them. Rather than honoring the obvious presence of God’s power at work among them in Jesus, they sought to put Jesus under their authority so that he had to answer to them. And

that really is the root of all sin, going all the way back to the garden of Eden. The sin of rebelling against the authority of God by challenging his word, especially obvious in this challenge to Jesus who has shown himself to be God in the flesh.

Only God could do things Jesus did. Only God has that power and that authority. And by challenging Jesus’ authority, they are challenging is very identity as God, wanting him to submit to them. How, then, does Jesus respond? You might be tempted to think there is a little sarcasm in his response, or something of a bitter taunt, but I think more accurately it is,

II. AN INDIRECT DECLARATION OF JESUS’ AUTHORITY.

In other words, he’s not just being something of a smart aleck with them, he’s not just dismissing them in a pretentious or know-it-all way. Rather, he is actually answering their question in way that is a condemnation of their rebellion.

v.24-25a

And they aren’t stupid. They understood the position Jesus put them in.

v.25b “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 people; for they all regard John as a prophet.”

A couple things about that explanation. First, again, they weren’t stupid. They knew how John was regarded by the people, that “they all regard John as a prophet.” And they knew what that meant. A prophet spoke for God. God himself spoke through his prophets “mouth to mouth.” I expect they would have remembered,

Deut. 18:18 “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He

shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19 And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.”

When the prophet speaks, God speaks. And they knew that John was regarded as a prophet. No doubt they knew what Jesus had taught in,

Mat. 11:7 “As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. 9 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he of whom it is written: Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’ 11 “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

So with Jesus’ reference to John in verse 25, he is actually answering their question and challenge. Jesus uses John to answer their question. For

A. The testimony of John regarding Jesus is definitive.

This is what John the prophet of God says of Jesus,

John 1:29 “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ 31 I did not

know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” 32 And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. 33 I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

Jesus is clearly responding to those chief priests and elders of the people by referring them to the testimony of John, whose testimony is so plain and clear: “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.” And the chief priests and elders ought to believe John, rather than question the divine authority of Jesus. Thus, this response by Jesus, an indirect declaration of his authority, is a challenge to those Jewish leaders. They are daring to question Jesus’ identity and authority, but in Jesus’ response,

B. The question regarding John is a challenge to Jesus’ accusers.

He is challenging them in the most fundamental of ways. He is compelling them to answer the tough question, compelling them to give an answer that would thus reveal the true nature of their heart. They do understand the situation correctly at this point.

v.25b “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 people; for they all regard John as a prophet.”

Jesus has forced them to consider that most ultimate of all questions. If Jesus’ authority is from God, and it is, then believe him! He is the son of God. And if you are unwilling to submit to God’s revelation through the prophet John, if you are unwilling to

recognize Jesus' divine authority, insisting that all that he does is only from men, if Jesus' authority in ministry is only a matter of man and not from God, then the words of John himself will condemn you.

And that is the challenge we must give to all men today, all those who seek to deny the power and authority of Jesus as the son of God. You must believe, you must believe in Jesus, you must believe in Jesus as the son of God and the savior of the world. Let me go back to Lazarus' death, when Jesus declares to Lazarus' sister Martha,

John 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

The whole of John's gospel gives this conclusion to the purpose of Jesus' ministry,

John 20:30 "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

Let me tie this together by putting all of this in a positive framework, a positive declaration. With regard to the exercise of authority, the point is,

III. THE SUPERIORITY OF JESUS' AUTHORITY.

That's what this encounter is all about. That's Jesus' own declaration in response to this challenge to his authority. His authority is superior because,

A. Jesus' authority originates with God himself.

John is a prophet through whom God has spoken, and John says this about Jesus: "This is the Son of God." In that same encounter, John says,

John 1:29. "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"

Thus referring to "these things" as we read in verse 23 and 24 of our text this afternoon, Jesus has acted with the authority he rightly possesses as the son of God. He is a "Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know."

Thus,

B. Jesus' authority requires that we believe him.

And that is what faith really is. That's the definition of faith, not so much an experience or an emotion, but rather the willingness to believe what God has revealed about himself. Faith is the willingness to believe that Jesus is God! And Jesus performed those miracles, all the miracles, so that we who observe them might recognize his power and authority. And respond not by challenging that authority, but by believing in him. Again,

John 20:30 "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

I hope you enjoyed the blessing of hearing those membership vows this morning, and for you who have expressed those same vows yourself, I hope you renewed that commitment in your own heart, with the commitment of faith to believe in Jesus' name.

“Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?”

“Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?”

“Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?”

This is the gospel I preach to you, with the authority of God himself demonstrated by the laying on of hands by the elders of Jesus’ church, this is the gospel which I preach you with the fullness of God’s own authority,

Rom. 10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

This is that gospel, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John 11:25 “[Jesus is] the resurrection and the life. He who believes in [Him], though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in [Him] shall never die. Do you believe this?”