

## The Authority of Jesus Questioned

<sup>23</sup>When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" <sup>24</sup>Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' <sup>26</sup>But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

## The Parable of the Two Sons

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father<sup>[e]</sup> went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

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**Matthew 21:23-32**

**By Whose Authority?**

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Jesus enters the temple, and the chief priests and elders gather around him as he's teaching, and they ask him two questions: By what authority are you doing these things? And, Who gave you this authority?

Those are interesting questions – the kind of questions only the established, organized, and institutionalized religious body can ask. Who asks? The Chief Priests. The Elders. The ones with presumed authority. The questions are not meant to have a safe answer. Jesus can't answer honestly. He can't tell them that he's teaching in the temple because he is the Son of God. They would call him crazy – or do worse, like maybe collude with the state to have him put to death on a cross. Those readings will come later in Matthew's gospel. He also can't tell them about his own teachers. He's been listening to John the Baptist, a sketchy character at best. Jesus wasn't, at least as far as we know, a priest or elder in training. He didn't have his Master of Divinity degree, and he hadn't passed his ordination exams. He wasn't a Candidate in his Presbytery. And his family was not the usual kind where preachers come from. He was the son of a carpenter and his mother was practically a teenager when she had him. He did not have the desirable pedigree of being the son of a preacher man to the 4<sup>th</sup> generation.

Wait a minute. I guess I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself here. When I read about how Jesus has to deal with the condescension of the Chief Priests and Elders, my mind goes to our OWN established, organized, institutionalized religious body in the Presbyterian Church, USA. I think about Presbytery Executives, Stated Clerks, Committees on Ministry, and the ways

in which the presumed authority of the church can become a means for haranguing pastors about their skills or credentials for ministry. We have so many hoops to jump through for ordination in our denomination that you'd think we were training circus dogs, not pastors. Sorry to break that news to you Andrew – but by now you probably know what it is you're getting into.

At earlier stages of my ministry – I would have been far less likely to say any of those kinds of things louder than a whisper for fear of my own employment. The established church has power, the power to show favor, and the power to put those voices they don't want to hear in a place where they might be quieted down. But since we are dealing with Jesus here, and no actual Presbyterian pastors are being harmed in this exercise, it's important to say that we're dealing with the same kind of situation that can be observed over time. Little has changed. Those who have religious authority and power tend to exercise it. And those who claim spiritual authority, the kind that comes more from God than from any institution, are likely to be questioned about their authority, and where it comes from if not from the establishment.

Good thing is, Jesus is crafty, and he seems to be able to come up with the kind of responses to impossible questions that I only think of long after whatever anxiety producing judgment ordeal I've had to face is over. Jesus doesn't waver under the scrutiny of such authority. Perhaps he even relishes the argument. I like to think so. It makes him my hero, or maybe an anti-hero when it comes to shaking up the establishment. He has little patience for the interrogations of the Chief Priests and Elders. If I tried one of his tricks, I know I couldn't pull it off, but he does, and then some.

Jesus' response to these questions about his authority is to turn the tables, to make them answer their own questions. I'll answer you, he says, if you answer me this first. Then his inquiry about John's rite of baptism makes them divide themselves. If they say it's from God, then Jesus

will ask them why they, as the direct ambassadors of God, didn't believe it when they first heard. And if they say that it's "only human," then the crowds listening to Jesus will shred them up because they are fervent believers - already convinced that John was a prophet. Jesus twists them up the same way they tried to twist him up. So score one point for Jesus. Or maybe not. Maybe instead it's just another nail in his coffin, another reason for the established, organized, institutionalized religious body to wish him dead.

We don't quite know if the priests and elders are capable of hearing what Jesus is saying to them or not. They at least take the easy way out answer of avoiding the question, saying, "We do not know." To which, Jesus refuses to answer their questions as well. Then he begins to teach, again, this time with his antagonists included in the audience.

And as he frequently does, he teaches with a story. This time it is a parable about a man with two sons. The first son is the one who is reluctant to do the work, the one who resists being obedient, just because. But even at that, he changes his mind and goes out and does as his father has asked him to do and works in the vineyard. The second son is the eager one, the first to say, of course, Dad, I will do whatever you ask, but then we find out he doesn't do any work after all. And Jesus asks his listeners, "Which one did the will of the Father?" The ones who can probably see themselves in the answer reluctantly say, "the first son." The first son is the one who does the work – but might not do so just because his father told him to. The second son is obedient in voice but not in action, says the right things, upholds the right things, but doesn't necessarily follow through with doing the right things.

Christianity is still dealing with both sons from the parable today. Some err on the side of right belief to the very fault Jesus mentions. They say the right things, promote the right doctrine, and respect God's ultimate authority. They are the cheerleaders of Christianity who think their

team can do no wrong, and is always on the winning side. And yet, they may do little or nothing which will open their eyes to see the plight of their neighbor or to change their mind if a prophet comes along who doesn't toe the same old party line. And then, some others slip down the slope of ignoring the words or just saying I'm not really going to do this religion thing, but then are moved by compassion to do the very work God calls them to do in the end. Jesus does a very interesting thing with these two characterizations. He doesn't say that the religious authorities are ultimately wrong, or going to hell. He doesn't say that those late to the party are the only ones who get to come in. What he does say, is that those who say they're doing God's work but then rest on the sidelines when it comes to getting it done might not enjoy the view they're going to have from the back of the line in the end. God is going to let the ones who have done the work go first, and that might include people they don't like, like tax collectors and prostitutes. The self-righteous religious authorities who thrive on the power of being "right" can be wounded by the idea that others whom they've criticized or demonized are loved just as much, and that they are maybe even given the first glimpse of the kingdom by God when they have to look over and through those folks to see it themselves.

Jesus deserves some credit here for rocking the boat. He's playing around in dangerous territory. But I do think he loves the Chief Priests and Elders – just like he has loved the tax collectors and prostitutes. All are God's children, and as such are heirs to the promise of God's kingdom. Now how he shows that love is to hold them accountable to the Tradition they are so proud to proclaim. That tradition is one of compassion and mercy, of justice and righteousness – which has been obscured by the desire for power made obvious by their digging line of questioning. Jesus reminds them that to seek the kingdom of God, they must be willing to let go of their own blindness, change their minds, open their hearts, and concede to letting others go

first, the others they might not have wanted to even see in the line. It's not that the established, organized, and institutional forms of religion will miss out on the Kingdom of God, it's that they may be surprised to find themselves standing in the back of the line, straining to see what lies ahead.

Christianity has this legacy within it, thanks to Jesus himself, that says we have to keep turning around in order to be transformed. We have to keep going out into the vineyard and doing the work, even if it seems like little is being accomplished. It also has this legacy of power that it has learned from the patterns as old as religion itself that get obsessed with the rules, that become fossilized over time, and make us more interested in maintaining power than honoring justice. There are still chief priests and elders within our own tradition, and throughout the many forms of today's Christianity. They show up where there is bureaucracy and hierarchy. They are maintained by bishops, executives, and administrators. They are codified in the rhetoric of rules of discipline and books of order. We never completely get away from it. Lord knows, we've tried, but the two sons of the parable remain, and they exemplify this ever-present tension between the spoken tradition and the beloved community.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last. Jesus says this to us in several different contexts. God willing, I just hope I end up somewhere in the middle, able to see the gift of the kingdom that lies ahead, and aware of the fallacies I have believed that put me squarely in touch with my own shortcomings as someone who has a role as a "keeper of the tradition." I just hope I am always able to remember when the work is promised to be hard, and I don't really want to get my hands dirty with community and messiness and problems, that I decide to go anyway. Amen.