

Authority

JESUS HOLDS ALL AUTHORITY, AND THOSE WHO REJECT HIM WILL BE CONDEMNED.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 21:23-32 Memory Verse: Philippians 2:9

Tuesday of Passion Week was marked by controversy between Jesus and religious leaders in Jerusalem. Matthew recorded five of the specific conflicts. The first related to Jesus's authority (Matt. 21:23-27), while the second involved paying tribute money to Caesar (22:15-22). The third revolved around the topic of the resurrection (22:23-33), and the fourth focused on the greatest commandment (22:34-40). The final dispute dealt with the identity of the Messiah (22:41-46). This session focuses on the first controversy.

Questions about Jesus's authority (21:23) are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. Each person must face similar questions and decide how they will respond to Jesus and His authority over their lives. Unless one accepts Jesus's authority as divine, one cannot accept who Jesus truly is. As you prepare to lead this session on Jesus's authority, spend time examining your life and your response to Him. Confess areas where you are prone to usurp His authority. Identify creative ways to challenge the adults in your Bible study to better understand and embrace Jesus's authority for themselves.



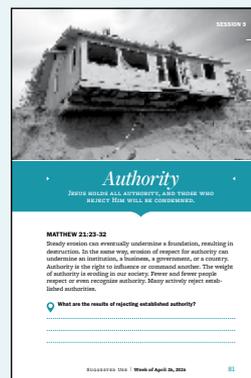
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Steady erosion can eventually undermine a foundation, resulting in destruction. In the same way, erosion of respect for authority can undermine an institution, a business, a government, or a country. Authority is the right to influence or command another. The weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many even actively reject established authorities. (PSG, p. 81)

What are the results of rejecting established authority?



Understand the Context (Matthew 21:1-46)

In Matthew 19–20, Jesus completed His Perea ministry and moved into Judea as Passover approached. During this time, He made His third great prediction regarding His coming death and resurrection (Matt. 20:17-19). He also addressed an issue of selfish ambition after the mother of James and John asked Him to grant her sons positions of honor in the kingdom (20:20-28). Jesus and His followers then crossed the Jordan River at the city of Jericho, where He healed two blind men (20:29-34; see Mark 10:46-52).

In Jericho He also met a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Despite the social stigma associated with publicans, Jesus visited Zacchaeus's house and shared a meal with him. As a result, Zacchaeus became a Christ follower and promised to make restitution for his past dishonesty (Luke 19:1-10). From Jericho, Jesus traveled up the steep road to Jerusalem to begin His final public ministry and face the coming cross.

Since Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims for the festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread, Jesus first went to Bethany to stay with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 12:1). The next day, a Sunday, Jesus borrowed a donkey and rode into Jerusalem as great crowds gathered to witness His arrival (Matt. 21:1-11). Some spread their coats on the road, while others covered the path with palm branches. The multitude praised God, while Matthew associated this “triumphal entry” with fulfilled prophecy (vv. 4-5).

Jesus then stopped at the temple where He healed some blind and lame persons before He returned to Bethany for the night (21:14-17). Monday morning, Jesus returned to Jerusalem. On His way into the city, He cursed a barren fig tree that represented Israel (21:18-19). In the temple complex, Jesus overturned the tables of merchants and moneychangers who had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles (21:12).

Later, some God-fearing Greeks came to see Jesus, and He again predicted His coming death (John 12:20-50). After spending the night in Bethany again, Jesus and His disciples returned to Jerusalem on Tuesday. On this day, Jesus dealt with five different controversies posed by various religious leaders (Matt. 21:23-27; 22:15-22; 22:23-33; 22:34-40; 22:41-46). On each occasion, the leaders were trying to discredit Jesus; and, each time, He turned the tables on them.

The first dispute related to Jesus's authority. Between the first and second debates, Jesus told three parables (21:28–22:14). The first of these parables is part of today's focal passage (21:28-32). It underscores the validity of Jesus's authority and identifies the consequences of rejecting that authority (21:23-27).

Read Matthew 21:23-32 in your Bible. Note the frequency of the use of the word “authority” and jot down how the word is used in these verses. (PSG, p. 82)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus’s Ministry Beyond Galilee*) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) and **Pack item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*).

ASK:

What are the results of rejecting established authority? (PSG, p. 81) Discuss responses.

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 81 of the PSG. Encourage adults to identify authority figures in their lives. Draw their attention back to the opening question. Allow them to share how rejecting authority carries different consequences depending on the authority being rejected.

SHARE:

Of course, as followers of Christ, we believe He holds ultimate authority in our lives. But even the best of us still might be tempted to question that authority at times. We can be like the religious leaders in the verses leading up to our focal passage for this session.

CONTEXT:

Summarize this information from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 82) to set the stage for today’s focal passage:

“Matthew 21 moves into the final week of Jesus’s ministry before His crucifixion. Much of the action recorded by Matthew in chapters 21–22 occurred in the temple. The week began with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the shouts of praise from the crowd of pilgrims entering the city for the Feast of Passover. Once inside Jerusalem, Jesus moved into the temple precinct. Here began a series of confrontations with the religious leaders who opposed Jesus.”

TRANSITION:

As we study today’s verses, let’s examine our hearts. Let’s determine how we tend to respond to Jesus’s authority in our lives and surrender areas we’ve been holding back from Him.



Group Activity Option

Music

Play the song “Honored, Glorified, Exalted” (Semsen Music, 2025) as a prayerful introduction to the session. If your group is not familiar with the song, consider also providing lyrics so they can reflect as they listen. Discuss why Jesus deserves honor and glory. Share that today’s session focuses on the authority of Jesus and the dangers of rejecting His authority over our lives.

Authority Challenged (Matt. 21:23-27)

23 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? Who gave you this authority?” **24** Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. **25** Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ **26** But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.” **27** So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

(v. 23) Jesus again *entered the temple* on Tuesday of Passion Week. The area where Jesus *was teaching* was not the temple sanctuary (*naos*). Instead, he ministered in the temple’s large courtyard (*hieron*), known as the Court of the Gentiles. This area was open to everyone and was surrounded by porticoes that provided shade for people to gather in groups.

In this courtyard, *the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him*. The chief priests were the leading priests charged with protecting the temple and its worship. The elders were important laymen from aristocratic families. Mark 11:27 and Luke 20:1 add “the scribes,” who were probably Pharisees. This indicates that all three groups of the Sanhedrin were present.

Interrupting a rabbi was not considered rude. It was a common method of instruction. This delegation had two questions—*By what authority are you doing these things?* and *Who gave you this authority?* *These things* seems to refer specifically to Jesus’s messianic actions more than His teachings. But the real question concerned the nature and the source of His authority (*exousia*).

The second question implies that a school or eminent person granted Jesus’s authority. Their questions were designed to put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If He said His authority came from God, He would be charged with blasphemy (see Matt. 9:3; 26:59-66). If He responded that His authority was from another source, they would argue endlessly about its legitimacy.

(v. 24) Jesus responded in typical rabbinic fashion with a counter question: *I will also ask you one question*. He added that their willingness to respond would determine Jesus’s response to them. Jesus was not being evasive; but, in a sense, He was defining the rules, exerting the very authority they questioned.

Key Doctrine

God

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. (See 1 Peter 1:15-17; Hebrews 12:28-29.)

(vv. 25-26) Jesus shifted the focus from Himself to John the Baptist: *Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?* John’s baptism represented all of John’s prophetic ministry. Jesus set up a contrast between divine mission and human origin.

The leaders *discussed it among themselves*, suggesting a dramatic deliberation. Of course, the proper response (*from heaven*) would have affirmed Jesus’s own authority and led to another uncomfortable question: *Why didn’t you believe him?* The second option (*human origin*) risked the crowd’s anger since the people saw John as *a prophet*. Ironically, the leaders were *afraid of the crowd* they supposedly represented. Indeed, Luke 20:6 states that they were afraid the people might stone them.

(v. 27) *We don’t know* was not a truthful answer. They had an opinion; they just wouldn’t express it. But their refusal to answer Jesus’s one question allowed Jesus to avoid answering their questions directly: *Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things*. Once again Jesus used the very words of their inquiry—*these things* (vv. 23,24,27).

Implicitly, Jesus’s opponents had answered their own questions. The Source of Jesus’s authority was linked to the Source of His forerunner’s authority (“heaven,” pointing to God). And the people who considered John a prophet held the same view of Jesus (v. 46).

EXPLORE Matthew 21:23-27



APPLICATION POINT: We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus’s authority.

BACKGROUND: Show adults **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Jesus’s Ministry Beyond Galilee*). Point out that Jesus had moved out of Galilee and had arrived in Jerusalem to the south.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 21:23-27** aloud as the group counts how many times the word “authority” is used.

ASK: What were the chief priests and elders trying to accomplish by interrogating Jesus?

EXPLAIN: Point out that Jesus had created a stir during the “triumphal entry” and when He had cleansed the temple. Note that He represented a threat to the religious leaders’ power, so they questioned His authority:

The chief priests and elders were confronted with the possibility of losing face before the crowds surrounding Jesus. They could say how they truly felt about John’s ministry, but then they would suffer the wrath of the crowd for that opinion. Or they could admit that John was a prophet with divine authority, and by association, admit that Jesus had the authority of God on His own ministry. Either way, they would come out the loser. (PSG, p. 84)

ASK: For what reasons do people not accept Jesus’s authority? (PSG, p. 85)

EXPLAIN: The leaders ended up affirming Jesus’s authority through their silence. Since Jesus and John shared the same Source of authority (God), the prophetic authority of both was valid. The leaders fell into the very trap they had hoped to set for Jesus.



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Using a Bible dictionary, collect information on the following topics: the chief priests, the elders, tax collectors, and prostitutes in first-century Israel. Reflect on the role each played in Jesus’s ministry. **How did each one impact Jesus’s message and ministry?** Spend time in prayer asking God to help you understand Jesus’s work more clearly and to relate to people in a way that reflects His character.

Authority Recognized (Matt. 21:28-32)

28 “What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘My son, go work in the vineyard today.’ **29** He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. **30** Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go. **31** Which of the two did his father’s will?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. **32** For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn’t believe him. Tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; but you, when you saw it, didn’t even change your minds then and believe him.”

(vv. 28-31) After the confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus told three parables (Matt. 21:28-32; 21:33-46; 22:1-14). The first of these, the two sons, appears only in Matthew. **What do you think?** is a question Jesus used to call people’s attention to what He was about to say.

A father told his son **work in the vineyard today**. Initially, the young man refused, but **later he changed his mind and went**. The word for *changed his mind* (*metamelomai*) indicates “regret” and a change of heart. Jesus later used the same word in a negative way to describe stubborn religious leaders (v. 32).

The father then gave the same instruction to his other son, whose response was the exact opposite: **I will, sir**. The word *sir* (*kyrie*) can mean “lord.” However, this son **didn’t go** to the vineyard and didn’t obey his father’s command.

(v. 31) Jesus then asked the religious leaders another question: **Which of the two did his father’s will?** The answer was obvious—the **first**. And with that answer they were caught by their own verdict since Jesus already had made it clear that only those who do the will of the Father will enter His kingdom (7:21).

As shocking as that might have seemed, Jesus’s next statement went even farther. At least twenty-six times in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus used **truly, I tell you** to introduce important sayings. Here, He shared that **tax collectors and prostitutes** would enter the kingdom ahead of the religious elite. Jews hated tax collectors. They were seen as collaborators with Rome and known for overcharging people to enhance their own wealth. They also were not opposed to taking bribes or extracting payments with threats of violence.

Likewise, prostitution was forbidden in Israel (Deut. 23:17-18) and considered detestable. The existence of prostitutes in Israel often stemmed

from economic necessity and involved collaboration with Roman soldiers at inns or low class bars that served as brothels. Along with Gentiles and lepers, most Jews saw tax collectors and prostitutes as the worst society had to offer.

Yet, Jesus told the religious leaders these despised groups would enter God’s kingdom **before you**. The word **entering** indicates these sinners had left behind their former lifestyles. Bible students debate the implication of **before you**. Some think the tax collectors will enter first, followed by the religious leaders. Others believe it is the equivalent of “instead of.” In context, the latter seems most likely.

(v. 32) Extending His explanation, Jesus returned to John the Baptist who revealed **the way of righteousness** (Luke 7:29). But the religious leaders **didn’t believe him**. In contrast, the **tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him** (Matt. 9:10-13; Luke 3:12-13), and it changed their lives. When the leaders saw such a transformation, it should have had an effect on them. Still, they **didn’t even change** their **minds**.

Praying Scripture

Philippians 2:9

Spend time praying Scripture using this session’s memory verse, Philippians 2:9. Read the verse, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in this verse?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Acknowledge Jesus’s authority in every area of your life. Seek forgiveness for times you act like the second son in Matthew 21:28-32 and refuse to obey Him.



APPLICATION POINT: We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus’s authority by our obedience to Him.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 21:28-32** aloud as the group notes the responses of the sons.

DISCUSS:

Distribute copies of **Pack item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*) and remind adults of the basic principles of explaining parables. Lead a brief discussion on the characters in this parable and what they represent. Highlight the role of obedience—not just in words, but in actions.

EXPLAIN:

Affirm the role of submission to Jesus’s authority in entering the kingdom of God:

When the religious leaders answered by saying “the first” carried out his father’s will, they indicted themselves for their response to John’s message and subsequently to Jesus’s ministry. Jesus compared the response of the religious leaders to His ministry with that of tax collectors and prostitutes. . . . Jesus told [the leaders] that these outcasts would enter God’s kingdom “before you.” This does not necessarily imply that these leaders would eventually make it into God’s kingdom. The phrase “before you” could be translated “take the place of.” Simply stated, unless the priests and elders changed their thinking about the Messiah, they would be left behind. (PSG, pp. 86-87)

ASK:

Practically speaking, what does it look like to recognize Jesus’s authority? (PSG, p. 87)

REFLECT:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew’s Gospel*) and invite adults to pray this session’s memory verse, Philippians 2:9, back to God as noted on page 102 of the Leader Guide.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Referee’s Jersey

Bring a referee’s striped jersey to the Bible study. As you show adults the shirt, encourage them to share what it stands for during a game. Emphasize that referees are considered the authority during a game. They identify rule violations and enforce the punishment for those violations. Ask: **How did Jesus demonstrate His authority on earth?** Stress that Jesus revealed His authority by doing the Father’s will (v. 31). Note that we also submit to His authority through obedience.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 88 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus's authority.*
- *We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus's authority by our obedience to Him.*

DISCUSS:

Lead a brief discussion about where adults see people rejecting Jesus's authority in our culture. Remind them of the responses to the question on page 87 of the PSG. Challenge them to find ways to demonstrate the authority of Jesus as they go through their days.

DISCUSS:

Enlist a volunteer to read the first set of questions on page 88 of the PSG aloud. Encourage adults to take time this week to assess Jesus's authority in their own lives and to remember that their example will serve to guide others to do the same. Suggest they read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 88 of the PSG during the week ahead.

PRAY:

Allow the group a time of silent confession, inviting adults to speak with God about how they embrace His authority and any changes that need to be made. Close the session in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to let each person see where and how He would guide them as they take steps into deeper obedience and surrender to Jesus's authority.

AFTER THE SESSION

During the week, text or email the adults in your Bible study. Remind them of Jesus's question from Matthew 21:31: "Which of the two did his father's will?" Encourage them to consider their own willingness to yield their focus and authority to God. Suggest they continue using **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) to reflect on God's truth as they dig into His Word each day.

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