

Authority

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

“Look at this driver coming up behind us. Can you believe that?” I was a passenger in the car with my good friend, Richard, a detective in the local police department. He was driving one of the city’s unmarked police cars. Richard and I had been friends for several years. He and his family were members of the church where I served as pastor. He sang in the choir and taught the youth Sunday School class.

Because of our friendship, I spent a lot of time with him and eventually with other officers as well. We would regularly meet for coffee, or a group of us would go to lunch together. As relationships deepened, I ended up serving as a volunteer chaplain for the local police department.

This particular day, Richard and I were traveling northbound on the interstate, headed toward Atlanta after lunch. Richard had been watching a driver in his rearview mirror. After hearing what he said, I pulled down my visor to see in the mirror what was happening behind us. A driver was flying our way, darting between lanes, and driving recklessly.

Richard was trained to handle this. The driver came up behind us and started to change lanes. Richard changed lanes, too. Every time the driver wanted to change, Richard changed right in front of the driver. And Richard started to slow down.

Furious—that would be the word. The driver started flashing his headlights. He honked the horn. He made obscene gestures. And we could see he was hollering. He got right up behind our car, honking and gesturing. Richard reached down, flipped a switch, and turned on his flashing blue lights.

Suddenly, this HUGE space came between us and the car behind us. The man slowed dramatically. No more aggressive driving. No honking. No gestures. The man had become a law-abiding citizen. Evidently, he wasn’t in as big a hurry as he thought he was.

I asked, “Richard, why didn’t you just wait until he got in front of you and pull him over?” He explained that we were outside our local city limits and therefore out of his jurisdiction. “I had no authority to pull him over here,” he said.

Matthew 21:1-46

Matthew 21 records three distinctive actions; with each, Jesus conveyed a message about His being the Messiah. The first was Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vv. 1-11). Rather than enter the city on the back of a massive white horse, as political victors of the day often did, Jesus rode on the back of a lowly donkey. Although the people lauded Him and gave Him a royal procession, Jesus was not going to be a Messiah like the people hoped and expected He would be. He had not come to overthrow the yoke of Roman rule and oppression. No, He had come to conquer an even greater enemy, the one who had opposed humanity since the garden of Eden.

Jesus conveyed His second messianic message as He overturned the sellers' tables in the temple (vv. 12-13). He did not put an end to the practice; He merely disrupted it for the day. These buyers and sellers set up their tables in the court of the Gentiles, the outermost court of the Jerusalem temple complex. Doing so meant the Gentiles had no place to worship in the temple. As He turned over the tables, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:3-8. The prophet had foretold a day when both eunuchs and Gentiles would be welcome to worship in the house of God. The sellers had turned the temple into a place of commerce rather than a place for consecration, a place for profit rather than a place of prayer. Jesus had come to be the Messiah for all peoples, even the Gentiles.

Jesus's third action occurred as He and the disciples approached Jerusalem early one morning; He cursed a barren fig tree (Matt. 21:18-22). As my college religion professor said, "Jesus and His disciples pulled up to this fig tree for breakfast, and they found out it was not open for business." Having leaves meant the tree should have been producing fruit—but it was not. The scene pointed to the barrenness of Judaism, which may have looked like it would be producing great fruit, but it was not. The people's hearts were barren and not producing the fruit of righteousness (Phil. 1:9-11). Cursing the fig tree showed that God would soon be bringing judgment on the Jews. Fruit would be produced in Christ's followers rather than in the rituals of first-century Judaism.

To put this in a timeline, the triumphal entry occurred on the Sunday before Jesus's crucifixion on Friday. He cursed the fig tree and overturned the tables in the temple on Monday. His encounter with the religious leaders in today's study occurred the next day, on Tuesday.

Authority Challenged (Matt. 21:23-27)

Entering Jerusalem, Jesus had caused quite a stir; “the whole city was in an uproar” (v. 10). The locals did not know who He was. The crowds visiting Jerusalem, though, did (v. 11). By the time He arrived at the temple on Tuesday, His identity was well known.

VERSE 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?”

When Jesus first told His disciples at Caesarea Philippi that He was going to Jerusalem where He would die, He explained that He would suffer at the hands of “the elders, chief priests, and scribes” (16:21). These were the temple authorities. Men from two of the three groups confronted Jesus as He entered the temple: the **chief priests** and **elders**. The *chief priests* were members of the Sanhedrin, which functioned essentially as the religious ruling body or Jewish supreme court of the day; they heard cases and rendered decisions. The chief priests also assisted the high priest in leading temple worship and overseeing the temple activities and treasury. Like the chief priests, the *elders* were also members of the Sanhedrin. Elders were either Pharisees or Sadducees but not chief priests. The Pharisees and Sadducees differed in their theology and practice; they were often adversaries.

The chief priests and elders approached Jesus while He was **teaching** in the temple. Jesus’s action would have been expected. Rabbis regularly taught their disciples within the temple complex. The temple authorities asked Jesus about the source of His **authority** for doing **these things**. Scripture does not say what *these things* were. Were they referring to His overturning the sellers’ tables (21:12-13) or accepting the people’s words of praise about His being the Son of David (vv. 8-9)? Maybe they were concerned about this itinerant preacher teaching within the temple complex. Were they referring to His healing the blind and lame? Had they caught wind of His healing the blind men in Jericho or raising Lazarus from the dead? The Bible does not say.

However, a careful reading reveals that the religious leaders were not curious about Jesus’s acts but about His *authority* to perform them.

Those who were threatened by Jesus’s display of authority wanted to catch Him in an error so they could threaten Him. They were not looking for an answer as much as they were looking for a way to trap Jesus.

VERSE 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.”

Traditions of Jewish rhetoric often called for answering a question with a question rather than a statement. Jesus would have been very familiar with this communication style and technique. He regularly replied to a question with a question. For instance, we read in Mark’s Gospel, “Some Pharisees came to test him, asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He replied to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’” (Mark 10:2-3). This interaction led to a teaching moment.

From His youth, Jesus was comfortable with a question-and-answer situation. When He was twelve, Mary and Joseph took Him to Jerusalem for the Passover. As they headed home, they could not find Him among their fellow travelers. They returned to Jerusalem and found Him “in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and *asking them questions*” (Luke 2:46, emphasis added).

Historically, rabbinic debates have followed a four-fold pattern. The first step is a question that is typically hostile. Even if presented politely, the intent is often to antagonize. The second is a counter-question, which may come directly or at the end of a story or illustration. The third is an admission, a logical response to the second question. The final step is a sharp reply, which may come at the end of a story or illustration. Jesus was setting forth this pattern of debate with this request. He promised to answer their question if they would answer His.¹

VERSES 25-26

“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?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.”

Jesus countered the chief priests’ and elders’ questions with a question of His own. It, too, addressed authority. In essence, He asked, “By what authority did John baptize—human or divine?”

John the Baptist had earlier challenged the religious leaders of his day. While baptizing in the Jordan River, he declared the Pharisees and Sadducees to be a “brood of vipers” and said they would face God’s wrath (3:7-12). One can imagine the smug satisfaction these religious leaders felt when Herod the tetrarch had John arrested, thrown in prison, and later beheaded (Matt. 14:1-12; Luke 3:19-20).

Instantly, these religious leaders recognized the dilemma this question posed. Jesus presented a comparison by analogy. The question implied a parallel answer—that Jesus derived His authority from the same source that John had. They, who could be adversarial to one another, found themselves unified in the same trap. Either answer, from heaven or humans, would get them in trouble.

If they said John’s authority came **from heaven**, meaning from God, that would validate John’s ministry and message. John would have been speaking a message from God when He proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (John 1:15-36). If that were true, why did they not believe?

If they claimed that John’s baptism was of human origin and authority, the people—who saw John as **a prophet**—would rise in protest because they believed John had been sent from God. Antagonizing the crowds could be a threat to these religious leaders’ safety. Adding insult to injury, if John had been a prophet this would indicate that the masses recognized the message and messenger from God, and they, the so-called religious experts, did not. Thus, whether John’s baptism was from a divine or human source, either way, they had responded wrongly to his message and ministry.

The crowd referred to the many who had come to listen to Jesus “as he was teaching” (Matt. 21:23). A very large crowd hailed Him at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vv. 8-9). The crowd identified Him as being from Galilee (v. 11). Likely, some people in those earlier crowds now listened to Him teach in the temple.

VERSE 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.”

The religious leaders could not admit publicly that John’s ministry and message were from God, even if they believed it. Jesus’s highly visible entrance into the city had raised the Jews’ messianic zeal. To give any credibility to John, and thus, by extension, to Jesus, would have only intensified Jewish fervor. Having painted themselves into a

corner, these chief priests and elders gave the only answer they could, **“We don’t know.”**

Their reply gave Jesus a socially acceptable way to not answer their question. And although He did not answer their question, His implication was clear: John’s authority and His had both come from God. But Jesus was not finished with them yet. He did not give them a reply, but He was about to tell them a parable.

Explore Further

Consider the connection between Jesus’s authority and this week’s memory verse (Phil. 2:9). Look at how Matthew talked about Jesus’s authority in his Gospel: His authority in His teaching (Matt. 7:28-29), His authority to forgive sin (9:1-8), how He gave His disciples authority over unclean spirits (10:1), and ultimately, all authority in heaven and earth (28:18-20). How do you think this authority is related to God’s exalting

- Jesus and giving Him a name above every name?

Authority Recognized (Matt. 21:28-32)

Jesus told a parable about a man who asked his two sons to go work in his vineyard. The first son refused but later changed his mind and went. The second son agreed to go but then didn’t. The religious leaders recognized that it was the first son who did his father’s will. Jesus then explained to them that tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom of God before them.

VERSE 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.’”

This is the first of three related parables Jesus told in this context (vv. 28-32). Collectively, they spotlight the Jewish leaders and their unfaithfulness to God. In legal terms, this first parable, which is unique to Matthew’s Gospel, presents the charges against these religious leaders. The second (vv. 33-44) describes the fate they deserved. The third (22:1-14) describes how God intends to carry out their sentence.

Because the Jews had rejected Christ, the cornerstone (21:42), God would deal with His family not based on their genealogical link to Abraham but because of their faith in His Son, Jesus. Let's focus first, though, on the offense of these so-called religious experts.

After telling the chief priests and elders that He would not reveal His source of authority, Jesus seamlessly transitioned into this parable. Jesus began with a signal that this was going to be a teaching moment: **“What do you think?”** The phrase was not uncommon in rabbinic instruction.

The parable would follow a familiar structure: one authority figure and two less powerful persons or groups. The two persons or groups were typically presented in contrast, with the first doing the right thing and the second making a wrong choice. The father represented God. The first son represented the irreligious of Jesus's day; the second represented the religious leaders and their followers.

The father (God) had called his two sons to work in his vineyard. As a son (or daughter) was expected to obey their father, so the Jews were expected to obey God. **My son** was a term of affection rather than ownership. The father gave his son two imperatives, **go** and **work**. He was to work in **the vineyard**, which would have been part of the small family farm. These were common throughout the land. Vineyards produced one of the most common and important crops in the biblical world. Some prophets used vineyards as an analogy for Israel (Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1). The word **today** conveyed a sense of urgency for the task.

VERSES 29-30

“He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go.”

Here, Jesus contrasted the two sons and, by implication, the irreligious and the observant Jews. Initially, the first son gave no pretense of intending to obey his father. He simply didn't **want to** do what his father had told him to do. This type of response would be unheard of in first-century Judaism. The phrase indicates the son's rebellion and lack of respect for his father and his father's authority.

The Greek word translated **changed his mind** is associated with the words “regretted” and “repented.” Some translations, such as KJV, say the son repented. This fits since repentance involves a change in both one's attitude and action. So-called “repentance” without a change in behavior is not repentance; it's a conviction—which may be accompanied

by guilt and remorse. The fact that the first son **went** into the vineyard gave evidence of the transformation in his thinking. This parable is a reminder that God values repentance, a turn from self-serving and sinful behaviors to God-honoring lives.

In His parable, Jesus described the father's interaction with his second son. The father **said the same thing**, echoing his imperatives to the first son: *go* and *work*. This son agreed to go do the work but never went to the vineyard.

In the parable, Jesus described two things about the sons: what they said and what they did. In both instances, the sons did the exact opposite of what they had told their father they would do. The first said "No" but eventually obeyed; the second said "Yes" but didn't. The first son's response was disrespectful. The second son, however, responded respectfully, calling his father "**sir.**" The response may have given the father the impression that this son intended to obey; this son wanted his father to believe he would work in the vineyard. So succinctly, Jesus described the second son's behavior—"**but he didn't go.**"

VERSE 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."

This short parable began with Jesus asking the religious leaders, "What do you think?" (v. 28). Jesus concluded it with this second question, "**Which of the two did his father's will?**" The terminology is similar to what He had used in His Sermon on the Mount regarding those who would enter the kingdom: "only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21; see also 12:50).

The religious leaders conceded that the first son had obeyed his father, the one who had the wrong words but the right behavior. This forced these chief priests and elders to admit that actions rather than words—practices rather than promises—determined acceptable behavior.

When they gave this answer, "**The first,**" the religious leaders may not have yet realized that Jesus's parable was about them. They had given a self-condemning answer, possibly without yet recognizing it.

The phrase "**Truly I tell you**" was Jesus's normal way of alerting His listeners that He was about to make His point (see Matt. 18:3; Mark 12:43). In Scripture, these words are exclusively on the lips of Jesus.

These chief priests and elders had to be shocked when Jesus compared them to **tax collectors** and **prostitutes**—and even more shocked

that in that comparison, they, the religious elite, were the unrighteous ones! Both prostitutes and tax collectors were generally despised in Jesus’s day. Jesus was not saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes were good, only that the religious leaders were so much worse!

VERSE 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.”

Jesus continued with His sharp reply, making three statements. First, **“John came to you.”** Although John’s message was a call to repentance (3:1-12), these religiously elite men probably thought it did not apply to them. He challenged them to “Produce fruit consistent with repentance” (v. 8). The phrase **“the way of righteousness”** was a Hebrew way of referring to God’s will or His directed path (see Prov. 12:28). The chief priests and elders **didn’t believe** John’s message. Second, **tax collectors and prostitutes did believe** John’s message. They recognized that John was the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah.

Third, **“you,”** the religious leaders, failed to see how John’s message was drawing even the socially outcast to believe and repent. In their pride and self-righteousness, the religious elite didn’t **change** their minds and **believe** in John. They failed to follow the example of the first son, who recognized his father’s authority and allowed his mind to be changed. Instead, like the second son, they knew what was expected and said all the right things; but they failed to do what the father had asked.

By what authority had Jesus been doing these things? What was the authority behind John’s ministry and message? It came from God the Father. Such a truth called for nothing short of radical obedience.

Explore Further

- Read the article “Authority, Divine Authority” on pages 148–149 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to your understanding of Jesus’s authority?

1. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 506.