

Authority

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

Matthew 21:23-32

23 When he entered the temple, the **chief priests and the elders** **A** of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing **these things**? **B** Who gave you this **authority**?” **C** **24** Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one **question**, **D** and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. **25** Did **John’s baptism** **E** 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**, **F** 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** **G** by what authority I do these things. **28** What do you think? **A man had two sons**. **H** 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** **I** 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**?” **J** They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God **before you**. **K** **32** For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and **you didn’t believe him**. **L** Tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; but you, when you saw it, didn’t even change your minds then and believe him.”

Exploring Key Words

- A** Members of the Sanhedrin. These leaders held a great deal of authority over temple activities.
- B** Possibly Jesus’s teaching, but more likely the cleansing of the temple in Matthew 21:12-13.
- C** To the religious leaders, Jesus lacked the credentials and rabbinical training to teach this way, especially in the temple.
- D** The rabbinic method included debate built around questions. Religious leaders used it to try to trap Jesus. Here, He used it to respond to them.
- E** John’s ministry was popular with the people but despised by the religious elite. Jesus challenged them to identify the “origin” of John’s work.
- F** A fundamental weakness of the religious leaders was that they cared more about human opinion than God’s opinion.
- G** Jesus knew the answer to their question—just as they knew the answer to His question. But He felt no obligation to respond directly since they refused to deal with Him sincerely.
- H** While He refused to respond directly, Jesus would use this parable to answer the leaders’ question and affirm His authority.
- I** “Repented” (KJV). The Greek implies regret. A changed heart led to changed behavior.
- J** Obedience is the primary indication of one’s genuine relationship with God (John 14:15).
- K** Another way to affirm that the last will be first (Matt. 19:30; 20:16). God honors those who obey Him, not those going through the motions.
- L** Jesus answered His own question by calling out the leaders’ disdain for John and his message. Their lack of belief would keep them out of the kingdom.



Authority Challenged (Matt. 21:23-27)

- The day after Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, the religious leaders confronted Him. They demanded to know by what authority He did these things.
- Jesus responded by asking them to identify where John the Baptist obtained his authority. He wanted them to say if the origin of John's ministry was divine or human in nature.
- When they said that they didn't know, Jesus refused to answer their question about His authority.

Authority Recognized (Matt. 21:28-32)

- Jesus told a parable about a man who directed his two sons to work in his vineyard. The first son refused at first before changing his mind and obeying. The second son agreed to go, but he never went.
- The religious leaders recognized that it was the first son who did his father's will. Then, Jesus explained that they were more like the second son. They appeared to honor God's words, but they rejected Him in their hearts.
- Jesus noted that tax collectors and prostitutes—those who initially disobeyed God, but repented—would enter the kingdom of God before (or "instead of") the religious leaders.

Summary Statements

Jesus holds all authority, and those who reject Him will be condemned.

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

Memory Verse

Philippians 2:9

Key Doctrine

God

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



For additional commentary, see the Leader Guide or Adult Commentary, available for purchase at [goExploreTheBible.com](https://www.explorethebible.com).

ENGAGE

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

- Steady erosion can eventually undermine a building's 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 includes the right to influence or command another, but the weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many actively reject established authorities.

Bonus: What characteristics make an authority figure worthy of respect and allegiance? Why are these qualities so important?

EXPLORE

AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (MATT. 21:23-27)

Bonus: What has to be true for you to challenge authority? How does that compare to the religious leaders challenging Jesus here?

- After driving money changers out of the temple the previous day, Jesus was confronted by “the chief priests and the elders.” The “chief priests” would have included the most powerful leaders in the temple, including the high priest. The “elders” referred to influential Pharisees and Sadducees. They all would have been members of the ruling body known as the Sanhedrin.
- In the leaders' minds, Jesus did not carry the proper credentials to be a teacher or leader. He had not gone through the training and ordination to be recognized as a rabbi. So, they demanded to know what right He had to do what He was doing and to say what He was saying.
- Jesus recognized that the leaders were setting a trap for Him. This was not the first time they had questioned His authority since they had accused him of blasphemy in the past and attributed His miracles to Satan. So, in response, He asked them a question: *Was John the Baptist's ministry from God or of human origin?*
- The leaders faced a dilemma. They could admit to how they truly felt about John's ministry, but that would expose them to the wrath of the people, who respected John greatly. Or they could admit that John was a prophet with divine authority—and, by association, admit that Jesus also carried God's authority.
- Faced with a no-win situation, they simply said, “We don't know.” It wasn't that they didn't know, but that they refused to admit the truth. Because they refused to answer His question, Jesus refused to answer them. He was not going to fall into their trap.

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

AUTHORITY RECOGNIZED (MATT. 21:28-32)

Bonus: Is it possible to honor someone's authority without submitting to them? Why or why not?

- To further indict the leaders, Jesus told a parable about a man and his two sons. Jesus was equating both sons to the Jewish people. So, this was a parable about the response to Jesus by the people of Israel, including the religious leaders.
- Both sons received the father's instructions to work in the vineyard (which symbolized the nation of Israel). The men responded in different ways. The first refused to go initially, but he later changed his mind (literally, “repented”) and went to work. The second promised to work, but he never came to the vineyard.
- The chief priests and elders recognized that the first son ultimately honored his father's will. In doing so, they condemned themselves because they were more like the second son. So-called “sinners” who had rejected God's way were repenting and coming to Him. Meanwhile, the leaders looked good, but their empty religion did not support their claims of a special relationship with God.
- Jesus said the outcasts would enter the kingdom, while the leaders would be stuck on the outside looking in. Their rejection of John—and Jesus—left them standing condemned by God and under His judgment.

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

CHALLENGE

As a group, discuss the consequences of rejecting the authority of Jesus over your life.

What steps might each of your group members take to ensure they recognize and respect Jesus's authority? (PSG, p. 88)

Challenge individuals to consider how some human leaders derive their authority from God.

Based on this, why is obedience to Jesus absolutely essential? Who might be some delegated authorities in your life? (PSG, p. 88)

FURTHER DISCUSSION



Scan here for additional discussion questions for this week's study.

BIBLE SKILL (PSG, P. 87)

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about people in the Bible.

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.

Encourage adults to share what they know about chief priests and elders in Jesus's day. Ask: **How did they feel about tax collectors and prostitutes?** Direct the group to work in pairs to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 87 of the PSG. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what their teams discussed. Highlight the contrast Jesus drew between these two groups in today's focal verses.

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 they enforce the punishment for those violations.

Highlight how the religious leaders tried to question Jesus's authority in these verses. Point out that by refusing to answer Jesus, they actually were validating His authority. Note that the parable in verses 28-32 simply affirmed what they were fighting to discredit.

Ask: **How did Jesus demonstrate His authority on earth?** Stress that Jesus ultimately revealed His authority by accomplishing the Father's will (v. 31). Share that His death and resurrection validated His identity and His authority as God's Son. Note that our obedience also demonstrates Jesus's authority in our lives each day.

REPENTANCE

The primary Greek word that is rendered "repentance" in the New Testament is *metanoēō*, which means to "change one's mind." It involves more than just altering our thoughts, though. It demonstrates a "deeply seated and thorough turning from self to God."¹

The Old Testament background for repentance indicates there is no distinction between changing one's mind and changing one's actions. It refers to a turning away from sin and turning to God (see Jer. 3:22-4:2; Hos. 14:1-3). In the New Testament, repentance characterized both the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt. 3:8,11; Luke 5:32). It remains the ongoing message of the church until Jesus returns (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 20:21; 2 Pet. 3:9).

In Matthew 21:29, Jesus used a different, but related, word to describe the first son's response: *metamelomai*. This word often conveys the idea of regret or remorse. In 2 Corinthians 7:8-10, both terms are used. Paul shared that he didn't "regret" (*metamelomai*) sending a harsh letter because it ultimately produced "repentance" (*metanoēō*).

While *metamelomai* often focuses on emotions (such as regret), *metanoēō* emphasizes a holistic response—turning from sin and toward God. Still, true repentance includes both remorse and obedience.

This overlapping meaning is present in Matthew 21. The first son's regret (*metamelomai*) led to obedience. In contrast, the religious leaders' refusal to "change [their] minds" (Matt. 21:32) was evidence of disobedience and unbelief.

Jesus challenges us to see repentance as more than mere lip service. It is a change of heart that shows up in a changed life. It warns us that where there is no repentance, there will be judgment (21:33-46). However, it also encourages us that it is never too late to repent and trust in Jesus Christ.

1. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1376.