

# “Who Gave You the Right?”

*Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Matthew 21:23-27*

## “By what authority are you doing these things” Matthew 21:23

I want to begin this morning by calling upon each of you to consider that time when someone without clear authority or authorization told you what to do or barked an order at you. Perhaps a person other than your parent scolded you right in the presence of mom and dad. Maybe a coworker told you to do something for them even though they are not your boss. Was it confusing? Was it awkward? Did you want to know who put that person in charge? If you were the one given authority did you think, “I am the one in charge and didn’t issue any authority to you. Why do you think you are in charge? Who gave you the right?” We might be confused, upset, angry, or envious.

Who is this authority in our midst? Who gave him the right to speak and act this way? This is what the religious leaders in our Gospel reading were likely thinking. The reading takes place during the last week of Jesus’ life in Jerusalem. Jesus enters the Holy City, the religious domain of the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and he begins taking charge. The same authority he exercised throughout his Ministry in other locations, he now exercises in Jerusalem. It is a traveling show. He immediately cleanses the temple, upsetting the profitable activity taking place there (21:12-13). He continues to heal with authority—the blind and the lame come to him in the temple and he heals them (21:14). He even exercises authority to curse as he does with the fig tree while on his way one morning from Bethany to Jerusalem (21:18-22).

Now the religious authorities are mad. They are confused. They are upset and angry. They are envious. They want to know who this authority figure in their midst thinks he is. They want to know where he thinks he is getting his authority, if not from the religious leaders and officials of Judaism. And so they ask two very direct questions of Jesus concerning his authority. And he refuses to answer them. Instead he asks a question in return.

Has that ever happened to you? You ask someone a question and instead of responding with an answer they respond with another question? It likely irritates us. This kind of response is frustrating. We might be thinking that the person is trying to lead us into a trap.

In our Gospel reading we soon learn why Jesus doesn’t answer the question of the chief priests and scribes. He doesn’t answer the question because he wants them to answer their question for themselves.

The question Jesus asks actually has the same correct answer to it as the one that the religious leaders ask. Jesus asks them about the authority of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, the one announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God. The one that the prophet Isaiah prophesies about. The one that is recorded in the biblical Gospels as saying that the reign of God has broken the heavens and come down to take action to save his creation.

Jesus and John are part of the same “Reign of God” program. Their authority is tied to the same source. If the religious leaders answer the question concerning John’s authority correctly then they will have the answer concerning Jesus’ authority—“from heaven.” Because the religious leaders fear the crowds if they give the wrong answer, they do not answer Jesus’ question. They simply say, “I don’t know.” Because of their pride, they do not say, “from heaven.”

How do we respond when the authority of God comes in our midst in our lives? Do we let pride get in the way? On the surface we distinguish ourselves from the actions of the chief priests and the scribes. We do this because we have obviously received Jesus and his reign in our lives in a way they have not. We believe. We are baptized. We gather on Sundays to hear God’s Word and receive his sacraments. We are involved in Bible Studies.

But there is a religious leader in us all, isn’t there? Call it pride if you wish. But there are times in which all of us find ourselves questioning God, “Who gave you the right?” Yes, there is a part of us that struggles in sinful rebellion, not wishing God’s Word and Will to have full authority in our lives.

We may let his Word have an authority in our lives concerning certain issues, as long as it is convenient for us. Issues regarding the honor due to our parents and other authorities. Issues regarding stealing. Issues regarding killing another human being. But then we would rather become our own authorities in other matters. Issues concerning sexuality and lifestyle choices. Issues concerning gossip and honoring the reputation of others. We often compartmentalize our lives in this way. We kick God out of one area but allow him to have a say in another. We find all kinds of ways to justify doing it too.

The questions we want to ask ourselves though are along these lines: Is this kind of compartmentalization, rejection of his authority, and stubborn justification true repentant, godly living? Is this God’s ideal? Is this what God has in mind when he calls his disciples to “repent” and “follow him”?

Even we as Christians struggle to receive God’s authority in our lives. We struggle to allow his Word to have full authority over our thoughts, words, and actions. In the same position as those religious leaders in the first century, we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century desperately need Jesus to answer that question from our Gospel reading in a way that gives us hope: “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority” (21:23)?

The religious leaders’ question did get answered eventually. Jesus doesn’t answer the question directly in that moment in his Ministry for the religious leaders. Yet, for those that were truly paying attention, the answer was there. He answered it in his teaching, healing, driving out of demons to overcome the opposition to God and his kingdom, and showing might over creation and the seas. He showed he has authority that only God can give. At the end of the week in which Jesus had this confrontation with the chief priests and elders, God, the Father answers the question concerning authority directly, once and for all.

Jesus answered the question once and for all definitively at the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus subjected himself to the authority of his Father so that God’s greater Will could be done. So that our Sin could be sealed in the tomb where a stone once sealed our Lord’s body. Through those actions he made it possible for everything to be right with God once again.

Jesus also answered this question of authority on a mountain in Galilee when he gave his disciples the Great Commission. He claimed that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him and sent them to teach and baptize.

Now we receive those gifts from those that Jesus gave the authority to give. We receive his authority so that we might repent and believe more firmly. That we might repent of our misuse and abuse of authority in our lives. God gives authority that kills and makes alive. Authority that dies for our sins. Authority that forgives our sins. Authority that rises from the dead that we too might be raised. Through this authority "God gives you and me the right." He gives us his righteousness. He declares us to be right with him. He gives us the right to become children of God (Jn 1:12). Amen.