

# A Question of Authority (21:23-32)

Good morning everyone. Go ahead and turn to Matthew chapter 21. If you're just joining us or you need a refresher, we've recently hopped back into the book of Matthew. We've been teaching all the way through the book on and off for several years and we're getting close to the end. And by "close" what I mean is we'll wrap up some time next calendar year. We're at the point in the book where Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and is in the last week of his life before going to the cross.

Last week we talked about a pretty memorable aspect of Jesus' life. Even people who aren't super familiar with the life and ministry of Jesus tend to know at least rough details about it. Jesus went to the temple and flipped over tables and ran people off and generally made quite the scene. And Kent also talked some about the response of the religious leaders and how they weren't all that excited about what he was doing and saying. And that's really important context to remember for today. We're jumping right back to the very same temple the following day with the very same religious leaders.

Remember, in the passage last week, Jesus was pointing out corruption in the temple, he was flipping tables and driving people out who were involved in the corruption, and was bringing *in* and healing people who normally weren't welcome there. And now he's back *the next day* and he's teaching. The other gospel accounts actually point out that he has been teaching in the temple with some frequency at this point. That's really important because it really helps us understand just how tense the situation is getting.

In Luke's account of this same interaction, he actually opens this situation up at the end of chapter 19 by saying, **47 Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. 48 Yet they could not find any way to do it.** He's been here *repeatedly* during the week. He's been teaching, he's been amassing a crowd that's growing in number and in interest in what he's saying. And the chief priests are getting more and more angry every day because they do *not* like what he's doing. Then the day prior to this, he was driving out people involved in temple corruption. That's where we're picking up. So let's jump right in to Matthew's account starting in verse 23:

**23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"**

The "things" they're asking about here would include everything we've talked about up until this point. The teaching, the healing, the table flipping, the whip cracking, all of it.

They come up to him and basically demand that he explain himself. They ask “by whose authority are you able to do this?” So, think about this for a second. Recall a time you were playing around as a kid and either a sibling or a peer came over and interrupted what you were doing. They start trying to boss you around. They’re telling you what to do, what not to do, just handing out unsolicited instructions to everyone. Odds are pretty good you had a similar response to the religious leaders right here. Jesus is coming in and telling them what they can and cannot do, and they give a response along the lines of “you’re not the boss of me.” This is essentially the ancient equivalent of asking “says who?”.

Who gave you whatever authority you think you have? They are asking him to show his credentials essentially. “Tell us where your authority comes from so we can decide if we have to listen to you or not.” But the interesting thing about this question is they really have no desire whatsoever to listen to Jesus. They don’t really care **what** he says about his authority because they’ve already made up their minds that they want him gone. We actually see in the book of Mark that at this point, they’ve already started plotting *how*, not *if*, they are going to kill him<sup>1</sup>. This isn’t a question about *real* authority, this is an attempt to catch Jesus in a situation where they feel like they have a legal or spiritual cover in bringing him to an end.

In their minds, Jesus can answer this in one of two ways. He can either respond in a way that makes them feel good about publicly convicting him of blasphemy and stoning him to death, or he can respond in a way that would make the Romans convict him of insurrection and sedition, and then kill him. So the religious leaders have already decided they want Jesus dead, and they are attempting to lay this trap for him with what they think is a lose-lose scenario for him. But we know Jesus is not so easily hoodwinked. Let’s keep reading:

**24 Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.**

Jesus flips the script. And this isn’t just Jesus avoiding their question, this is actually a very common practice in what was known as “rabbinic debate.” When different teachers were going back and forth with each other, the practice of asking a question in response to a question was a standard tactic of debate. They seem to want to debate, and Jesus obliges. Keep reading, we’re at verse 25:

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 11:18

**25** *John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

So Jesus has just asked them a variation of their own question. They asked where *his* authority comes from. Jesus asks them where *John's* authority came from. The reason that's a genius move is because of who is watching this whole interaction go down: the crowds. The inner dialogue of the chief priests and the elders in this passage says it all: if they say John's authority came from God, they get exposed as frauds, because they rejected John's whole ministry. But if they publicly say John's authority is from *man*, the crowds will turn and attack them, because the crowds largely believed John was a prophet sent by God. Now *they're* the ones on the hot seat, instead of Jesus.

But then to drive his point home, he tells them a parable. Keep reading in verse 28:

**28** *"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 29 "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered.*

Jesus hits them with a parable about authority. I just want to say, throughout Jesus' ministry, he tells a lot of parables that are honestly pretty confusing. To the point where his own disciples quite often needed him to go back and explain them because they were stumped. But this has to be one of the most straightforward parables he has ever told. Not much Old Testament context or riddle-solving experience needed on this one.

There's a man with two sons. One says they'll do what their father says and doesn't. One says they won't do what their father says and then does. Jesus' question is "which one of them did what the Father said?" So I'll ask you: which son did what the father wanted him to do? The one that said he would, or the one who actually did? See—very, very simple parable. You all passed with flying colors. The religious leaders in this passage also answer correctly. Unfortunately for them. Their answer prompts Jesus to show them what the parable was actually about. Let's finish the passage picking up with the last half of verse 31:

**31b** Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. **32** For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Jesus had strong words for the religious leaders throughout his ministry, but final week Jesus is on a different level. Jesus comes right out with some *hard* truth. He says, “the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God **ahead of you**.” In Jewish culture at this time, the two categories of people that are about as horrible as one could imagine were the tax collectors and prostitutes. This is the modern equivalent of when people try to justify themselves or make themselves look better by saying things like, “it’s not like I’m a murderer or anything,” or probably even more extreme like, “it’s not like I’m *Hitler* or anything. Could be way worse.” The worst of the worst. Religious people at the time would actually say things like, “at least I’m not like a tax collector.” In fact, Jesus used that exact phrase in a parable about a Pharisee trying to justify himself in Luke 18:11.

So Jesus looks at the religious *elite* of his day and tells them, “the *worst possible* person you could imagine is in a better position than you are. Because they *repented* and followed me.” To continue the illustration from a second ago, it’s like saying, “you might not be a murderer, but murderers are getting into heaven instead of you because *they’re repenting and you’re not*.” And he connects it all together for them. Jesus says that John came to tell them what they needed to do, repent of their sin and obey God, and they rejected him. *Then* they stood by and watched as the worst of the worst in their minds *did* repent and *did* obey God, and these religious leaders still did not believe. They *still* didn’t listen. It was all happening right in front of their faces, and they still chose to reject it.

Okay, let’s take a breath and zoom out a little bit to see the whole picture. Our passage today started off with the religious elite asking Jesus a question about his authority. But in reality, they had no *actual* interest in whatever he said about his authority. They just wanted to frame him and get rid of him. They didn’t want anything to do with whatever authority he was claiming; they had plenty of authority in their minds. They had the social and political clout, they had the image, they were putting on a show about how great they were and how close to God they were, how everyone should want to be more like them. They don’t care about *actual* authority, they’re only interested in theoretical authority. They just want to talk about the *idea* of authority.

But here was Jesus right in front of them turning things around and asking about *practical* authority, and they have no interest in it. They're only interested in preserving their own image and in destroying Jesus' image. **And in direct contrast to them, Jesus has no interest at all in theoretical authority.** That's exactly what his parable is about. The second son "theoretically" submitted to his father's authority. He *claimed* he would do what the father said. "Of course I'll do what you asked father." He's putting on a front to make himself look a certain way. But he didn't really do what the father asked. But the first son *actually* submitted to his father's authority and did what he asked of him, even though he initially said he wouldn't. Jesus is saying it doesn't matter what the second son said, it matters what he *did*. It matters that the second son ultimately didn't obey the father and the first son turned from his rejection and *did* obey.

Jesus' response is *intense* to say the least. He's not pulling any punches, he's not mincing any words. **He has no interest in the idea of theoretical authority because his kingdom isn't a theoretical one.** Yes, he responds strongly, but it's for a great reason.

Jesus is not being spiteful or mean; Jesus responds as strongly as he does because of how important this is to him. Jesus cares so much about people's repentance and people following him that he is willing to do and say whatever it takes to convince people to believe. Jesus cares so much about these people waking up to the reality of their situation and need for him that he is willing to provoke them to anger to the point that they want to *murder him*.

He knows that is what's coming, and he still thinks it's worth it to say anything he can to convince people of the truth. Jesus' response here isn't just judgement, it's *also* mercy. He's showing us he will do literally *whatever* it takes to help people see the truth about where their life is and the truth about him.

Why does all this matter though? What significance does any of this have today? I'll be honest, I think this passage actually has some pretty massive implications for all of us. Jesus' parable about the two sons and their father is just as relevant today as it was back then. Remember, God is represented as the father in the story, and the two sons represent everyone else. That includes the listeners at the temple and all of us.

And I think in order for us to really grapple with what it means for our life, we need to really zero in on what exactly Jesus is saying with this parable. Like I said just a second ago, I think **Jesus has no interest in theoretical authority, but he is absolutely pointing out just how common it is for people to think about his authority as theoretical.** Jesus isn't

saying there's no such thing as theoretical authority, he's saying there's no place for it in his very *real* kingdom.

You see, just like the father in the parable, Jesus isn't actually all that interested in what you say about him. He's far more interested in what you *do* with what you say about him. He's much more concerned with whether or not you are taking what he's said and making your life reflect it. Through this parable, Jesus shows us that it is very possible to "theoretically" claim allegiance to God and everything the Bible has to say without ever knowing God and obeying him. It is possible to claim to follow God without actually following God. I think Jesus' own brother, **James**, says this most eloquently in chapter 2 of his book. He says:

***18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.***

This is exactly what Jesus was pointing out to the religious leaders who were trying to confront him, and it's the same thing we all have to consider in our own lives today. I really think this is the reality for many people in our world today. And it's so scary to me to see how this situation doesn't just exist out in the world, but we've actually created categories for this within the Church to make ourselves feel like it's okay. We've created categories of "following Jesus" that actually don't exist in Scripture. If you pay attention to the way Jesus talks in the passage, he draws a straight line between entering the kingdom of God, believing, and repenting, or submitting to God's authority. They're all included together, but we've created separate categories for them.

We say things like, "I got saved when I was 7, but I started really *living* for Jesus when I was 25." Or we say things like, "I grew up in Christian household, so I would say I've always *been* a Christian, but I really made it my own when I had kids." Or sometimes we project it forward by saying things like, "I just want to have my fun now, but I'll get on the straight and narrow when I start to settle down or when I graduate or when I have a family."

I've said some of those things in my life. I was absolutely in the place of feeling like I checked the box of "getting saved" and locking in my fire insurance. I was good to go. And eventually I got to a place in my late teens when I had to really wrestle with the idea of what it means to follow Jesus. Because in reality, I wasn't actually following him. I knew about him, I knew what he did, I knew about my need for someone outside of myself, but I wasn't *following* him. I was very Christian-adjacent. But that was about it. It



wasn't until I was surrounded by people who *also* claimed to follow Jesus whose lives couldn't be further from what Scripture commands that I realized just *claiming allegiance* to Jesus wasn't the same as following him.

Because when we say we follow Jesus, but our lives don't look anything like what he calls his followers to in Scripture, that puts us in the exact same situation as the first son in the story. The reality is there are people who would openly say they follow Jesus, but what they actually mean is, "I don't like the idea of hell and separation from God, so I said what I think I needed to say, and I moved on with my life."

And I think it's fair to say that sometimes people aren't aware this is the reality. Like I said, that was me for a long time. I didn't understand what it meant to be a *follower*. Being a Christian means *actually* submitting your life to Christ. Being Christian-adjacent just means you're around people who are living that way or you're just very aware of what it looks like.

And I truly think, unlike the religious leaders in this passage, there are people who think they are followers of Jesus because they've been told that they are. And when they see what truly following him looks like, they realize they haven't actually been following him and they eagerly change course and pursue him. There are people that if they were shown what following Jesus really looks like they would be willing to follow him.

And I know there are people who have recently started following Jesus who are learning what it means to submit to his authority. That is fantastic. I am not saying and Jesus is not saying you have to have your whole life sorted out. Jesus does not ask for perfection, he's asking for faithfulness. He's asking for you to move in the direction of shaping your life to look more and more like him by submitting to him and his authority. And I think that's happening in many people here every day, and I thank God for it.

But truth be told, I think there are plenty of people in this situation who are actually much more like the religious leaders Jesus is talking to. There are people who do in fact know what Jesus calls his followers to, who do know what it means to submit to his authority, and they refuse to let him change their hearts. There are probably people in this room who, just like the chief priests in this passage, have seen with their own eyes people's lives transformed by Jesus, who have seen with their own eyes what true confession and repentance looks like, who have *still* refused to let it transform their own hearts. People who know *exactly* what it looks like to follow Jesus but still aren't actually doing it.

There are people who have seen someone in their LifeGroup confess their battle with addiction and invite community in and invite the Holy Spirit into their lives. They've seen the transformative power of Jesus in that person's life, and they've kept silent about their own addiction. There are people who have seen others confess their struggles with pornography and model what it looks like to repent and lay down their desires and preferences because of Jesus' call on their life. They've seen the power of the Holy Spirit move and shape people to submit their finances, they're job or standard of living preferences, their desire for a romantic relationship, and they sit back and they watch, keeping all of their preferences and desires to themselves. They stand by watching the freedom people experience and the satisfaction and peace and security that floods those people's lives because of their submission to Jesus, and they still don't let it shape their own hearts.

Some of us here are really struggling to submit certain areas of our lives to Jesus. There are aspects of life that are so difficult to change and see growth. Some of us are struggling with some of Jesus' commands, some of us are struggling in our walk with Jesus. And there is so much room for that. Growth can be a long process and it can absolutely come with struggle. But some of us aren't struggling to follow Jesus at all because we aren't *actually following* Jesus.

Kent talked last week about the importance of *access* to God and barriers to a relationship with God being removed. And that is so important. But you also have to remember just because you have access to God doesn't mean you've accepted him. Going to church and spending all your time with Christians doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a parking lot and spending all your time with cars makes you a Camry.

Proximity doesn't mean you're submitting to Jesus' authority. Just saying some words doesn't mean you're submitting to Jesus' authority. Jesus just talked about that reality early on in the book of Luke in his account of the Sermon on the Mount. In [Luke 6](#) he says:

*46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"*

Jesus says some version of this over and over again throughout his time on earth. His followers are the ones who do the Father's will. His followers are the ones who recognize and submit to his authority as Lord and King. His followers are the ones who don't just put theoretical authority on display but still withhold aspects of their lives from Jesus' authority. It's incredibly strong language, and it might sound harsh, but it makes so much



sense. Think about how contradictory it sounds to say, “Jesus, I want to be part of your kingdom, but I don’t really want you to be king.” Do you see how that doesn’t make sense?

So Jesus is laying this out plainly for the religious leaders. And I want to reiterate as strongly as I can, he is not doing or saying any of this out of spite or coercion or to shame people. Jesus is willing to be as harsh or as gentle as it takes to bring us into life with him. And everything that I’m saying today is for the same reason. I’m not saying anything to be judgemental. I’m not saying anything to make anyone upset or feel ashamed. I’m not trying to make myself sound superior to anyone. I desperately want you to know Jesus and allow him to be the authority in your life. I desperately want you to experience life to the fullest resting in the beauty and security of his love for you.

Please hear me, Jesus does not *need* you to follow him, but he wants it for you so deeply. Jesus is not trying to coerce you into following him, he is inviting you to look at how he has removed every barrier that has ever been placed between you and him. He has torn down every obstacle that has come up to keep you from him. He has done everything, including going to the cross and dying, so that you can experience true freedom. *That* is what comes with submitting to Jesus’ authority.

Life under Jesus’ authority isn’t oppression, it’s freedom. Maybe you’ve felt stuck or trapped in your sin. Maybe you can’t see past your own brokenness or you feel like you can’t see a way out of the weight you’re living under. Maybe you’ve been living your life for yourself for so long that the thought of changing course and restructuring everything feels completely unattainable. But Jesus is right here, standing right in front of you on this path towards destruction inviting you into freedom.

He’s offering you the love and comfort and power that brings peace beyond all understanding. He’s offering a way of life that is better. He’s offering freedom from the pressure to achieve and earn something for ourselves in order for us to have significance. He’s offering something that is far too amazing and far too beautiful to be boiled down to a simple transaction. He’s offering us a life of freedom and satisfaction now, and life eternally, fully restored and made whole in his kingdom forever.

The question for all of us is, “is Jesus our theoretical authority, or is he our actual authority?” Do we say we love Jesus, obey Jesus, and follow Jesus? Or do we actually do those things? How are we going to respond to Jesus? I know today has been a lot. But I want to finish our time today by just reminding everyone of this. God of the universe, the Creator, the Lord of lords and King of kings rightfully has all authority, but

he also *loves you* so deeply. He has no qualms about calling out our rebellion towards him and he has no problem showing us the reality of our situation when we are separated by sin. But he also is standing before you with open arms in the midst of your rebellion towards him saying, "I love you and I am here for you and I am not going anywhere."

Communion intro