



## **By What Authority Do You Do These Things?**

*Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*

Matthew 21:23-32

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

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This last week of Jesus' life that we are looking at is filled with scene after scene identifying who He is, with declarations that He is the long-awaited Messiah and rightful king of Israel, that He has the authority to render righteous judgment, and the right to rule over the spiritual life of the nation of Israel. And it is filled with very pointed teaching and instruction. Now, in this text that we are looking at today, we see the response of the chief priests and the elders to all that Jesus is doing and they are not happy at all. In fact, they in essence come and ask Him:

Who Do You Think You Are? (v.23) Pick it up again in verse 23: "And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23, ESV) Jesus has returned to the Temple in order to teach and to preach and the chief priests and elders are clearly troubled by this, but really by all that He has done. The events of the last few days have really gotten under their skin – the triumphal entry in which Jesus presented Himself as Messiah, according to the prophecies of Zechariah, and received the acclaim and the honor of the people; His cleansing of the Temple in accordance with the prophecy of Malachi, presenting Himself as the authority over the spiritual life of Israel and the worship of the Temple; His receiving of the blind and the lame into the outer courts of the Temple and healing them, causing the children who were around Him to break forth into spontaneous praise like that described of the worship which God receives in Psalm 8. Jesus is taking over the Temple area, acting openly as the one who is the ultimate authority and the chief priests and the elders are really upset with all that is going on. He is acting like He owns the place. So obviously and unmistakably bothered by what Jesus is doing, rather disrespectfully and rudely, they interrupt Jesus while He is teaching.

I don't know if they listened in or not, but if they listened for any amount of time, no doubt, Christ's teaching would have bothered them too because He taught as one who had authority,

and not as their scribes. ” (Matthew 7:29, ESV) What was Jesus teaching about? We don't have His manuscript here but we know His favorite themes -- the Kingdom of Heaven, the wretchedness of sin, the worthlessness of works righteousness, spiritual hypocrisy, true righteousness, the kindness and severity of God, taking up the cross and following Him, the love and covenant grace of God, the cost of discipleship, spiritual pride and true humility and brokenness, faith and hope. Jesus purpose in His preaching and teaching was never only to impart truth, but to move the hearts, to exhort men and women to submit themselves to Him, to embrace the gospel, to embrace His rule in their lives, to repent of sin and trust in him. It called for a response – a personal response to Him.

It certainly stirred up the chief priests and the elders, and so they ask -- “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? They could not oppose his teaching successfully or stand against the reality of His miracles so they decide to attack His credentials, His rightful authority to do what he was doing. Can I tell you that this is probably one of the most foolish questions that they could have asked. You know that old saying that there is no such thing as a dumb question? Wrong! This is a dumb question.

By what authority? By His authority as the Messiah of God, as He had repeatedly presented Himself over and over again. The triumphal entry and the cleansing of the Temple were just the latest demonstrations of His Messiahship. There had been numerous other evidences of His authority already. A voice from heaven at his baptism declared Him to be the Son of God. He had gone all throughout Galilee teaching the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom and healing every sort of affliction and disease. He declared that He came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them and then proceeded to declare the proper interpretation of the Law of God, the principles of the Kingdom and the character of His people. He cleansed lepers; he stilled storms, cast out demons, gave sight to the blind and raised the dead. He healed on the Sabbath because He declared Himself the Lord of the Sabbath, condemned unbelief, commended faith in Him, feed multitudes, and did it all because He is the Son of God, the True Messiah. He did it all because of the authority of His person and the authority of His word.

Who gave Him that authority? Jesus had already answered that question repeatedly and openly. Earlier in Matthew He said: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matthew 11:27, ESV) John records in John 5,

these words of Jesus on the Sabbath to the Jews who opposed Him: “So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.” (John 5:19–27, ESV) The authority of Jesus came from His heavenly Father. He did not need the approval of men, did not need the approval of the Sanhedrin, did not need to quote rabbis or men of learning – He spoke and acted in accordance with the will of God the Father. Jesus was not vague, or unclear or coy about the source of His authority. When the scribes and the chief priests ask this question, it is not because they do not know the answer, it is because they do not want to believe it. They refuse to see it. Sin makes you so blind – insane really – to think that you can actually withstand the authority of the Son of God.

I mean, listen, they are asking a question that had already been answered. This is not a question that is asked out of ignorance, but out of opposition. It is asked out of determined unbelief, out of a rejecting heart that does not want to be held responsible for Christ’s words. The real issue is not lost on Jesus. So He asks them a question, a question that is designed to expose their hearts and the motivating factor of their lives.

I Will Ask You One Question (v.24-27) Jesus turns the tables on them. We read starting in verse 24: “Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”” (Matthew 21:24–25a, ESV) Now I want you to understand that Jesus is not trying to be slippery here or trying to avoid the question. You would be wrong to think that. That is not what is going on. Asking them about the ministry of John was a masterstroke. John’s ministry and Jesus’ ministry were intertwined. Their ministries were fresh, from God and not from the dead Judaism that they proclaimed. John and Jesus had not studied in rabbinic schools, were not endorsed by the Jerusalem authorities. The people

accepted both of them. But above all, John had testified to Jesus being the Son of God and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In being forced to answer this question about the legitimacy of John's ministry, they were forced to answer their own question about Christ's authority. If they answered the question honestly, they would have an answer to the question that they asked Jesus. But honesty never crossed their minds.

"And they discussed it among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.'" (Matthew 21:25b–26, ESV)

When Jesus asks this question they are caught completely off guard. You can almost envision one of them looking at Jesus, holding up their finger and being like –"Hold on a second. We'll get right back to you on that." Feverishly they start talking amongst themselves about how they can get out of the mess they had just made for themselves. If they admit that John's authority and ministry came from God, Jesus will want to know why they didn't believe him, why they didn't bear fruit in keeping with repentance, why they had not been baptized, why they did not hear him when he pointed to Jesus as the one who would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire", why they did not believe His testimony when he said: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." Or "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." He would ask why they had not responded to Jesus Himself.

If they said that his ministry was of his own invention, something he dreamed up, they would have offended multitudes in Israel. There had been no prophet in Israel in centuries and John had come like a prophet of old, the greatest of the prophets, calling people to repentance and many had responded. Even those who didn't hold John in high regard. To speak of this martyred prophet as if he were illegitimate would cause a riot.

When Jesus asks about the origin of John's ministry, the discussion that ensues reveals the principle upon which they had built their lives. The fundamental issue around which they

organized their lives was not truth, not eternal truth, but expediency. They organized their lives around whatever was convenient, practical, whatever was most advantageous for them remaining in power, whatever seemed to be in their own best interests and whatever magnified them, fitting their agenda and allowing them to maintain their reputation and self-rule. What moved them was whatever was most beneficial to their prestige and glory. Truth was not a consideration. It never was.

“So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Matthew 21:27, ESV) To reply “we don’t know” is to expose their lack of integrity and willful ignorance. If they cannot be honest about John, they cannot be honest about Jesus. Because of their inability or unwillingness to assess John, they confess their incompetence to judge Jesus. Because the truth was staring them in the face and they were obviously too corrupt to admit it, Jesus will not answer them. But He does tell them a parable illustrating the dangerous position they are in.

The Parable of Two Sons (v. 28-32) While He will not get into a fruitless debate regarding His authority, Jesus does tell them a parable designed to expose their hearts even further. Verse 28 says: ““What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21:28–32, ESV)

This is a great story. It is great in its simplicity and in its straightforwardness. In this parable, Jesus is telling us: It is not what one claims or promises that counts but what you actually do. It is not words but action that matters.

The parable is straightforward enough. A father has two sons whom he commands to go out into the family vineyard and work that day. Both would have been expected to obey their father and to do what they were commanded to do by him. One of them refuses to go, and

says so, but then later changes his mind and does what his father has asked. The second says that he will go, but did not. The answer to the question -- Which of the two did the will of his father? -- is so simple that even the priests and elders get it right. Despite his original rejection, the first son does the will of his father while the second son is disobedient despite his promise to obey.

What is the significance? The first son, the one who is openly rebellious to the authority of the Father, the obvious sinner without any façade of righteousness or spirituality. He is a picture of the openly sinful and rebellious coming to repentance and submitting to and obeying God. Jesus compared them to the tax collectors and the prostitutes, proverbial for being the most hated sinners in Israel. They responded to the ministry of John and were baptized unto repentance, looking for the Messiah to come -- Jesus. Once openly sinful, now repentant.

The second son pictures the chief priests and elders, those with an appearance of righteousness that was all talk, all show, that was simply empty posturing. They represent those with a veneer of righteousness who had deluded themselves into thinking that words without action, without substance, somehow placed them in good standing with God and who refused to see the reality of their sinfulness, their failure to be faithful.

How insulting it would have been to hear Jesus say to them: Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. The meaning was not simply that the prostitutes and tax collectors would get into the Kingdom first -- the point is that the chief priests and elders would not get in at all because unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes, they did not repent and believe the truth.

Jesus said, John came to you in the way of righteousness. He was no uncommon man, a man far greater than they were. He came to you in the way of righteousness -- set apart unto God from birth; and filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb of his mother. And it was his God-appointed call to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. In essence, Jesus is saying: "John came to you as a faithful man, preaching a faithful word, a righteous man, preaching a righteous word and you would not believe it." But even more than that, not only did they refuse to hear John when he called them out for their hypocrisy and chose instead to ignore him and refuse to hear his message,

but even when his message proved true and the hearts of those like the tax collectors and prostitutes truly repented and prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah; even when the Messiah – Jesus – came and He identified Him and Jesus did the things the Messiah was supposed to do; despite the fact that they saw with their own eyes the lives of sinners of every stripe truly changed by their encounter with John and then Jesus, they still refused to believe. They had an appearance of submitting to God the Father’s authority, but they refused to submit to the One to whom the Father had given all authority to speak and rule in His name. And as Jesus said: “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” (John 5:23, ESV)

Even now, as they saw all the evidence that pointed to Christ as Messiah, all that validated John’s ministry, they refused to repent and believe and submit to Jesus’ authority.

They continued to promote themselves as spiritually alive, faithful, holy men and in reality they were hypocrites. And here is the reason why Jesus deals with their hypocrisy so strongly. Hypocrisy inoculates you from grace. It desensitizes you to your desperate need for grace. Why were the tax collectors and the prostitutes streaming to Christ? Because they knew their sinfulness. They knew their need but hypocrisy insulates you from the need for grace. Hypocrites want to pretend that all is fine, that they are righteous in themselves, that they have no need of repentance, that they are in a right relationship to God even when they are not. In that way, they inoculate themselves against the grace and mercy that God delights to shower upon all who confess their sin and desire Christ as Savior and Lord. If you do not think that you are a sinner, why would you need a Savior? If you think yourself righteous, why would you need forgiveness? Hypocrisy is a soul killing sin. Religion does not get you into the kingdom and sin repented of and forgiven by Christ’s blood does not keep anyone out.

How Should We Receive These Words?

We may ask ourselves why it is that the Holy Spirit directs Matthew to spend so much time recording for us the interactions of Jesus with those who opposed Him. We need to understand the value of what Matthew is doing. With the chief priests and scribes, what Jesus said usually fell on deaf ears, on hard hearts. When they were confronted with Jesus’ diagnostic question and heard the parable of the two sons, they did not have a moment of lucidity when

they saw how corrupt they had become. Actually the opposite happened. They hated Him and determined to kill Him. While they responded with anger and rejection, we are given this text; we have these words preserved for us for the sake of our souls' well-being. Beloved, let's be honest. We know how often, to use the words of the parable, we have said 'I go, sir,' but did not go. We know how often our lives have not been the consistent working out of our loyalty to Jesus Christ, our reverence for his Word, and our commitment to his Name and his cause. And how subtle it can be. How easily we find ourselves slipping into this habit of minimizing Christ's authority "just this once" even though "I know the Bible says I shouldn't." This text is given to us to protect our hearts from straying.

One of the clearest lessons of this text is that our response to Jesus' rightful authority is a revealer of the condition of our hearts. Look, the issue with the chief priests and elders was not that they did not have enough information – it's that they had a heart that was in rebellion to God. That was the source of their questioning of Jesus' authority.

What that means is this. If we confess to follow Christ, if we have a profession of faith in Christ but reject His Lordship, lessen His authority, know what Scripture says and yet deliberately or habitually choose to ignore His authority, our profession of faith must be called into question. The undeniable truth is this – You do what you really believe. What you truly believe will be evidenced by how you live. For the professing believer, their rejection of the authority of Christ is a blatant and presumptuous sin. To reduce or minimize the authority of Christ and to presume that everything will be alright is utter foolishness and rebellion. John Bunyan called Christian hypocrisy -- the pretense without the reality, the promise without the following – "the back way to hell."

When you boil it all down, the ultimate issue is one of authority. Who has ultimate authority in my life? Who commands me? Here is the bottom line truth. Whether anyone acknowledges it or not, Christ has ultimate authority over everyone who has ever lived and will ever live. The destiny of every life will be determined by their response to the words of Christ. Only those who hear the words of the Lord and who embrace His word and respond to His word and act on His word in obedient faith are truly His disciples. They do not simply hear Christ's words; they do them. Beloved, hear me when I say to you, It is not enough to hear Christ's words and admire them, to hear Christ's words and memorize them, to hear Christ's words and repeat them, to hear Christ's words and have them on a T-shirt, to hear Christ's words and talk about them, to hear Christ's words and fight over them, or even to hear them and share them with



someone else – we must hear them and do them. There may be no more applicable text for the professing church to hear and respond to than this one. We must take care that we are more than sermon tasters and theology debaters, church attendees and appearance creators rather than those who submit to the authority of Christ.

The truly Christian man or woman, is the one who having seen the depth of their sinfulness and having trusted in the Savior who is Christ pursues obedience to Christ from the heart, out of a very real sense of love and gratitude for all that Christ has done. He desires to walk in obedience to Christ because he loves Christ who loved Him first and though he fails to walk in perfect holiness, sometimes profoundly and though he sees his sin, he hates it and repents of it and seeks forgiveness, striving to follow after Christ, thanking God for the perfect obedience of Christ to the Law and to death on the cross by which he has received eternal life. He seeks to have his mind and his emotions and his desires renewed by the Word of God. He makes the decisions of His life rooted in submission to Christ and His Lordship. He's not perfect and he is not satisfied with his level of sanctification, but looking to Christ as the author and the finisher of his faith, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead he presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. He may not always "feel it" as strongly as he may like, but he pursues faithfulness to Christ.

Do you see how truly applicable these words are to all of us today? To children, students, young adults, young married men and women, middle agers, golden agers, everyone in this church today – these words are directly and particularly applicable to you today. We have the blessing of hearing the Word of Christ faithfully preached and taught in this church. We hear and partake of rich theology, sing songs that drenched in Scripture truth. We can speak rightly about many doctrines, have the appearance of doctrinal orthodoxy and spiritual maturity. We can "amen" about the right things...but the real issue is not the claims we make or the truth we know or the professions we make but what we do that defines the reality of our faith. How do we submit to the authority of Christ?

Is Christ the authority in your life? How does the word of Christ affect your life – how does it shape you as a father? As a husband? As a mother? As a wife? As a son or daughter? As a brother or sister? How does Christ's word shape and direct your affections? How does Christ's word affect what the things of which you approve or disapprove? How does Christ's word encourage and constrain you? How does it shape your virtues? How does it define your

character and thinking? What is your response to Christ's authority, because it is a revealer of your heart?

The second theme of this text is the theme of the entire gospel of Matthew. If we would respond in glad submission to the authority of Christ, we need a new nature. We need a new heart. We need a new power for living. We need someone to transform us and deliver us from our rebelliousness that deserves wrath and the judgment of God.

We are by nature rebels. By nature, we rebel against every form of authority no matter how good or gracious it may be. We are by nature rebels against the only good God... We have rebelled against God and against His glory. We were created to magnify and glorify and worship God the God who made us and has the right to command our submission to Him.

We deserve God's wrath, His judgment. We deserve death -- eternal separation from God and suffering in Hell. We all stand guilty. We are in desperate need. We need someone who will stand in our place and who will uphold the glory of God by living a perfect life that counts for ours AND we need someone who can fully pay our debt before God for trampling upon His glory so that we can go free. And that someone -- the only one who can do it -- is Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. This is why He became a man, to live a perfect life, a life that upheld in every way the law of God and the glory of God. He lived a completely righteous life, completely without sin -- something that we could and would never do. He lived a perfect life for sinners like you and me, upholding God's glory in the sinner's place.

And He came to die. He came to suffer, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. In order for God to forgive us, God had to deal with our sin, He had to judge our sin and remove it from us so that we could be made His children. The Holy God had to deal our sinfulness and rebellion that stood in the way of fellowship with Him and the only way to remove the infinite debt of our sins from us and remain holy was to judge our sins on a holy and sinless substitute and the only substitute whose sacrifice and blood could pay the infinite cost of our offense against God's holiness was His own dear Son -- the God-man Jesus Christ. On the cross God poured His fury and hatred of sin upon the head of His beloved Son, exhausting His wrath against the sins of those who would believe in Christ as the Saving One.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is the power of salvation to everyone who repents and believes – who turns away from sin to trust in Christ and follow Him as Savior and Lord. It calls all who will hear to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. We must repent of our sin, turn away from our rebellion against God and turn to the Lord, turn to Christ in faith and humility, throwing ourselves on Christ and trusting in Him alone for eternal life – surrendering to Him as Lord of Creation and Savior of sinners – forsaking our old lives and following Him and coming joyfully under His authority. This is the gospel by which we must live.

Who holds ultimate authority in your life?

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