

By What Authority

Proper 21

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Matt. 21:23-27(28-32)

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

There were those in Jesus' days who challenged the authority of God's teachers. You might recall that when John the Baptist was baptizing and preparing the way for the Messiah, earlier in Matthew it told us that John was approached by "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees." "But when he saw (them) coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

In our Gospel text this morning, we'll hear that many Temple leaders did not believe that John the Baptist's authority was from heaven—that is, that his work was what God wanted done.

Verse 1

"(W)hen (Jesus) entered the temple, the chief priests and 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?'"

Here these leaders demonstrate that they didn't believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. They ask Him—waiting until between teachings for fear of the people (Lenski, p.826)—they ask Him by what authority He was doing the things He was doing. These leaders had already made up their mind that they wanted to arrest Jesus and in this passage they try to catch Him in His words.

"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?'"

It sounds odd to us to have Jesus respond to a question with a question—especially when it was a question demanding to know by what authority He was doing things. But Jesus was not under the authority of these leaders that He had to obey them. Jesus was—and is—God in human flesh. So Jesus asks them about the baptism of John the Baptist—whether it came from heaven or from man.

Jesus doesn't give these leaders a chance to catch Him up in His Words. He already knows their intentions. That's why He asks them about John the Baptist. He already knew that they would not answer directly. He had given them two possible answers to His question, neither one of which would have gone well for them since they did not have faith.

Verse 2

"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.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.'"

Again, these leaders did not believe that either Jesus or John the Baptist had been acting according to God's authority. They show that they don't when they are more afraid of the crowd's response than admitting that they didn't believe John's baptism had heavenly authority by answering non-committally the way that they do.

Jesus knew that their response was one of insincerity and cowardice, so He refused to answer their question. Instead, Jesus told them a parable.

“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.’”

Just like John the Baptist, Jesus talked about repentance—turning from disbelief to belief. On the Last Day, there will be many surprises. For those who do not repent, one of those surprises will be those who enter the kingdom of heaven before them. There will be those who were notorious for their sinful ways in their early lives but who hear the Gospel and believe it, turn from their ways, and will enter heaven on that Day.

Commentator Lenski wrote of it this way: The word for “child” is used, rather than that for “son,” relating the expression of the father to his care for his beloved child, not just as his heir. “The reply of this first child comes as a shock; it is blunt, rude, without a trace of respect: ‘I will not!’ ‘He has dismissed even the hypocrisies with which others cloak their sins’...But what happened? Later on this wicked child ‘regretted’ his refusal...Everything he knew about his ‘father,’ about his own relation as a ‘child’ of his father, and about his obligation toward that father, and about his unnatural and wicked action in treating his father as he had done, led him to regret his shameful course. The same power of grace is today effective in all who know anything about their heavenly Father. So, a changed man, this child ‘went away’ to the vineyard; now he was indeed a true child (Lenski, pp.830-831).”

The second child, while saying he would go, did not. This is why Jesus said, “‘John came to you in the way of righteousness’”—by calling him John the Baptist, people would refer to John's whole ministry by his baptism, a baptism of repentance. And repentance is a change of heart and of direction. Like the first child, one always begins as a sinner, but when that person comes to faith, recognizing that he or she has sinned against the heavenly Father, the person regrets it and turns from the sin or sins that previously had been so precious.

This is the way to which both John and Jesus pointed—to Jesus Himself, He Himself being the Way, the truth, and the life. And Jesus' way is the way of repentance. John the Baptist had a baptism of repentance; Jesus told the woman caught in adultery to “‘(G)o, and from now on sin no more’” in John chapter eight; and as John wrote in the first of his letters, “‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).’”

Our lives, then, are to be ones of repentance. As sinners, we would never desire to turn away from our sins. But we have been made saints by Jesus. Shortly after our text Jesus would go to the cross of Calvary. There He would pay for the sins of all people, including yours. And as ones who have been brought to faith, we see plainly that our sins have been against our heavenly Father; and we feel sorry for them. We desire to do better. We desire to turn away from them. We want to do our Father's will.

John the Baptist said it well before Jesus' ministry, and it is fitting to repeat it now as well: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." The world hardens its heart at this teaching—the world, but not you who have been called by God's Spirit to faith. In the Spirit, you rejoice in bearing fruit in repentance. You acknowledge with Paul that God's Law is good—it is the sin in you that is evil. And you repent of it. You repent every day. The leaders who questioned Jesus didn't believe in Him or John. You do. You know where their ministry came from, and where it was going. To the cross and beyond, for your salvation. God has called you to this way of life, and He will keep you in it for the sake of His Son, Jesus, who taught by God's authority. In Jesus' Name. Amen.