

# “Question of Authority”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 7/21/19  
Mark 11:27-33, at FBC of Newport, NH

*//27 They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. 28 “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”*

*29 Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 30 John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!”*

*31 They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ 32 But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)*

*33 So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”*

*Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”//*

—Mark 11:27-33 (NIV)

Can you imagine someone today asking a controversial, public figure, “By what authority are you doing [or saying] these things?” It could happen. But it’s not likely. Authority is so far down the totem poll in our society that its importance and influence is nearly invisible. About the only way we know how to confirm or undermine a person’s word or actions is to conduct a poll or to catch them in a scandal. And even scandals are getting harder and harder to be scandalous these days.

Such was not the case back in first century Israel. *Lacking* the proper authority for teaching and acting in the name of God, especially things not approved, was as scandalous as being caught in the very act of adultery. For the Jew, such an offense amounted to heresy, blasphemy and spiritual adultery against God himself.

This question put to Jesus was no mere formality. Nor was it a sincere attempt to find out if he was legitimately of God and worthy of careful attention and submission. No, it was an attempt to challenge and undermine him publicly so they would have grounds and support for arresting him and killing him.

And Jesus knew it.

That’s why he countered with the question he asked the questioners. He asked them to take a risk in answering about the authority of John the Baptist to baptize. Was it from heaven? Or was it just a human endeavor?

Jesus knew they didn’t accept John as a prophet with authority from heaven. For that would mean they’d have to repent of their sin and get baptized as a sign of their need for a Savior. Worse yet, it would mean they’d have to acknowledge Jesus as that Savior, for John pointed to Jesus. Which would actually point to the answer to the very question they were asking.

Jesus also knew John was still very popular among the crowds as they did see this baptizer as coming in the authority of the God of heaven.

But rather than these Jewish authorities stating their true beliefs regarding John, and risk angering the crowds, they simply refused to answer the question. They said they don't know the answer to Jesus' question. They were refusing to do what they were insisting Jesus must do. And Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of their game.

Jesus even magnified the hypocrisy of these Jewish authorities by having his question be about John the Baptist. John was completely outspoken when it came to stating unpopular truth. He was an equal-opportunity-whistle-blower against sin. It didn't matter who he confronted, as proven by his willingness to speak against King Herod and his ill-gotten wife. It didn't matter what kind of authority and position people held as far as John was concerned. Sin was sin. Ultimately John gave up his life for calling all Israel to baptism for the repentance of their sin.

Now, you might be thinking that Jesus himself is showing reluctance to speak boldly as to his own convictions about who he was and by what true authority he acted. But by pointing to John's baptism, Jesus is actually giving his questioners the key to the answer. It's not Jesus who is holding back here. It's these so called "authorities" themselves as their hypocritical fear keeps them from the truth. Not to mention, all one would have to do is wait three, four days to see that Jesus is fully willing and able to make his authority and identity known—knowing full well it would mean his death. Why else do you think he came to Jerusalem in the first place? His only reluctance would be to let the terms be set by these hypocritical questioners instead of by his heavenly Father. So he cleverly beat them at their own game.

As these Jewish leaders refused to answer Jesus' question on John's authority, they were forced to accept Jesus' silence regarding his own authority. But in just a few days Jesus would confess before the high priest and the Sanhedrin that he is indeed the Messiah, the "Son of the Blessed One," the Son of God, and that the high priest would be answering to him when he sees Jesus sitting at the right hand of God and coming in the glory cloud of God (Mark 14:61-62). After this, Jesus would hang on the cross before the world, for the crime of being the "King of the Jews."

It was for this very purpose Jesus came to live among us, called his disciples to follow him, and then led them to Jerusalem and Calvary. He came to pit his authority against all other authorities: Jewish, Gentile, ancient, modern. He was taking on sin and death in the name of God. But he was doing it not to puff himself up. He hardly needed to do that. If anything, Jesus was doing the opposite of puffing himself up. Unless you think letting oneself be lifted up on a cross is the same as being "puffed up." It's clear Jesus wasn't doing this for himself. He was doing it to save the world.

“For God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” That’s from the Gospel of John, chapter three, verse sixteen.

The Gospel of Mark has a “John 3:16” verse too. It’s verse 45 back in chapter ten. There, as Jesus teaches about authority he likens himself to a servant, even a slave for the purpose of God in saving the world. Listen to it again here in context:

*42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

—Mark 10:42-45

There are only two kinds of authority. Though according to other authorities in the political and business world there are *dozens* of kinds of authorities. And there are nuances which they point to. But in the end there are only two: there is positional authority and there is personal authority (articulated by TJ Addington - Leading From the Sandbox, but he’s not the sole authority on this. ;-)

Positional authority is just what it sounds like. It is authority that simply “goes with the territory” of being in a certain position. It is external. A president, policeman or king has an authority that comes not from any particular quality of the person, but a quality of the office, a power from on high.

Personal authority is that which comes very much from the qualities of the person. Their behavior, accomplishments, integrity, values, treatment of others, etc., can all lead to a respect and trust that allows them to lead others, not from sheer external power and authority, but from a willingness of the heart. [Mention the “Hollywood Halo Effect?”]

It’s possible, ... in fact it’s all too common, for leaders to have only the positional kind of authority and little or none of the personal. This makes for a forced and fragile kind of following. It’s also possible for a person to be a leader solely by way of his or her personal qualities and no actual position of authority. Martin Luther King Jr. is a good example. But Jim Jones would be a bad example.

The ideal, of course, is for a leader to have both types of authority. And Jesus indeed has both.

But you wouldn’t know he had positional authority to look at him. A king just doesn’t look like a peasant wanderer with no place to lay his head, followed only by other peasants. A messiah doesn’t look like a general with no army to command, especially one whose greatest accomplishment looks a lot like surrender. And a God in human flesh just doesn’t look possible to begin with.

So how does Jesus expect anyone to come to accept his authority?

Well, we can rule out his expecting the Jewish authorities to simply hear him point to the scriptures of Isaiah, Jeremiah and to John the Baptist and any other simple, straightforward measures for rational people. He did often point to his miracles, but now he's being asked to show by which authority he does his miracles!

Imagine the strangeness felt in Jesus' heart when, as God walking within his own creation, he is being asked by what authority he is operating.

What Jesus ultimately does is combine all his authority, positional, personal and any other nuance you can find, and reveal it through the cross. That is his answer to the question of authority. The cross is the **Position** from which he calls the world to bow down before him. It's a position where he is serving the sinner, forgiving our sins and making his righteousness available by bending the knee in humble, grateful faith. The cross reveals the **Person** of God's own heart, with a sacrificial love, an integrity of righteousness, and a power to bring goodness out of the worst of evils.

There is no place else and no one else bringing this kind of answer to the question of authority in our lives. Here we find the answer to who we answer to in life. We find the answer to God's question when he puts it to us:

*By what authority would you come before God  
and expect him to welcome you?*

The answer is found at the cross of Jesus, when you stand there, confessing your sin and your loving Savior, bending your knee before Him.