

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 44

Mark 11:27-33

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Mark 11, Mark chapter 11.

Authority is a strange thing. Everyone wants it and everyone abuses it. This is the greatest bane of authority. It seduces us into thinking that we have more authority than we actually do. When someone is given authority it is really only a matter of time until they will abuse it by extending it further than it actually goes. So, there have been several very volatile situations that have captured the national headlines relating to supposed police brutality. At issue – whether it is in Ferguson, MO, or NYC, or Baltimore or McKinney, TX – at issue is authority. Do the police have the authority to act as they did, or did they overreach? The reactions to this by so many have been pride-fueled rants which dump more fuel on the fire, but regardless of what people do in response to these things – the heart of the issue is authority. Every person in authority needs oversight because everyone in authority, left to themselves will take their authority too far. Whether it is the police officer in the heat of the moment, or the boss demanding employees to break the law in order to increase the bottom line, or the investor who uses insider knowledge to make millions illegally, or simply the parent responding to the disobedience of their child with uncontrolled anger. All of these are overreaches of authority. This is the beauty of the Constitution of the United States. It wisely set up three branches of authority that were dependent upon the checks and balances of the other to ensure each one’s authority stayed within its proper bounds. Not that we have followed it all that well recently, but it is the best form of human government in the world when it is followed.

In our passage in Mark 11, the scribes, Pharisees, and elders of Israel view it as their job to be the authority check on Jesus. In their minds He has clearly gone beyond his boundary and he has crossed over into theirs, and they must deal with it. As we come to Mark 11 you must remember that we are just days away from the crucifixion of Jesus. He prophesied of these days back in chapter 8 when he told his disciples he was headed to Jerusalem where he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and killed and on the third day rise again. On Sunday of this Passion Week Jesus entered into Jerusalem to the shouts of “Hosanna” from Jewish pilgrims. Sunday was a day of Messianic presentation. Jesus accepted the acclaims of the people which made clear that to everyone in Jerusalem that He thought of himself as the Messiah. Then on Monday as Jesus entered the Temple and purged it and took possession of it we saw that it was a day of Messianic authority. Now on Tuesday morning, as Jesus enters the Temple again for the third day in a row we see that it will turn out to be a day of Messianic Controversy. In our text in Mark 11 the religious leaders confront Jesus and question his authority to be doing what he is.

And then this will be followed by a whole day of controversy where Jesus faces one question after another challenging his messianic claims. So as we begin this day of controversy on Tuesday of Christ's final week let's read Mark 11:27-33.

The issue in this text is the authority of Jesus. Does he have the authority or not? Is he under the authority of the political and spiritual leaders of Israel? Is he simply bucking their authority by rebelling against their plastic religion? Or does he truly have the authority to possess and command the Temple? This is the question at stake – by what authority? We'll break our study of the text down into three categories this morning – Jesus' authority challenged, Jesus' authority display, and Jesus' authority rejected.

I. Jesus' Authority Challenged – vs. 27-28

- a. In verses 27-28 we see Jesus' authority challenged. The chief priests were those who had authority over the Temple complex. This was the acting chief priest and anyone of his family who had ruled in that position before or who was in line to do so. This is a topic for another time, but the position of High Priest during Jesus' day was a position filled with corruption and political drama. Their authority was dependent upon the Roman Governor of the land who bestowed on them certain privileges to oversee the religious life of the people of Israel. These chief priests were not usually well-liked by the common folk.
- b. The scribes were part of the larger group of Pharisees and they were all in charge of protecting the Law. These scribes were probably the top scribes in the land – those who had some kind of authority within the Pharisaical party. They viewed their role in Jewish religious life kind of like the Lion views jungle life – they were spiritual kings. They were the most fervent to keep the Law. They knew the Law best. They were zealous to enforce the Law on others. They were the most ceremonially clean and they were experts in the Law. They had built a fence around the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament by creating all kinds of additional laws. They believed these extra laws had been passed down from the time of Moses – that they had literally been given to Moses on the Mount, but he had never written them down. So, their interpretations of the Law and their additions to the written Law were impenetrable in their minds because they assumed they came from Moses himself. Their sphere of influence was among the common people of Israel. They taught in the synagogues and the people respected their zeal for and expertise in the Law. Their authority was a contrived authority based on a false assumption about this oral law.
- c. The elders were heads of families and clans and those of prominence in the justice and political affairs of the people of Israel. They often were associated with the Pharisees, and it was from the Pharisees and Sadducees and elders that the body of the Sanhedrin were formed. The Sanhedrin was a group of 71 prominent men who ruled as a body over the nation of Israel. Their authority was dependent

upon Rome. It was given to them by Rome and it could be taken from them by Rome. So, most likely, this group of men who approach Jesus in verse 27 is a group of men sent on an official investigation by the Sanhedrin. They represent the Jewish ruling or governing body in Jerusalem. In other words, these guys have the authority.

d. Because Authority must be given

- i. And so as they approach Jesus they come to him with this question “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” Do you see what they are asking? They are on an inquisition because they don’t like what Jesus has done and therefore they don’t like Jesus, and they want to know by whose authority He is doing these things. They are asking this of Jesus because they presume that he has been given authority. That is how authority works in our human world. No one has authority just because they want to have it. They are given authority, or they take authority from another. These religious leaders are convinced that Jesus is usurping their authority and so they want to know who he thinks he is.
- ii. Since they each had their particular sphere of authority given to them by another – the scribes and Pharisees from the Oral Law and the Elders from the people and the chief priests from Rome – they had all been given authority so they presumed that Jesus was acting on authority given to Him. This speaks to their view of Jesus. They viewed him as a man who needed authority given to him rather than God who had authority inherent in him as God of all. This puts them in a position of challenging Jesus’ authority.
- iii. This is the heart of unbelief on display here. All unbelief has as one of its core tenets a disbelief in Jesus’ authority. All unbelief says of Jesus – “by what authority does he presume to command my life and demand my obedience?” What we see in these religious leaders is a clear expression of one of the core tenets of unbelief – a challenge to Jesus’ authority.

e. Because the Crisis reached a boiling point

- i. It was challenged by these religious leaders at this moment because the stew of circumstances had reached a boiling point. All throughout Jesus’ public ministry the authority he has displayed over different things has created small crises along the way. All of these smaller crises combine and culminate in the events of this final week. So, in their challenge to Jesus they ask him by what authority he is doing “these things.” Most certainly these things refers to the immediate circumstances of this week, but there were so many things along the way that led to this challenge in Mark 11.
 - I. So, in chapter 2 he makes it clear to them that he is able to forgive sins and to accept those sinners once they are forgiven. At the end

of chapter 2 he rebuffs the complaint of the Pharisees against his disciples picking and eating grain on the Sabbath and declares that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. In chapter 7 the scribes and Pharisees complain to Jesus that his disciples eat with unclean hands and Jesus proceeds to lay an ax to the tree of their Oral tradition. In chapter 8 the Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus and he refuses to give them one. In chapter 10 the Pharisees pose a question to Jesus about divorce to try and trap him in his own words and he proceeds to authoritatively teach them truth. All of these things and many more we aren't told about have been brewing the hatred and opposition of the religious leaders for a long time. They are now at a boiling point. Jesus' actions in just the last two days have galvanized the opposition of the Sanhedrin. On Sunday the Pharisees were in an uproar because he actually received the praise of men calling him the Messiah. On Monday the Chief Priests and the Elders were outraged by his purging of and possession of the Temple, not even letting anything pass through the Court of the Gentiles. So, now on Tuesday morning the whole council of the Sanhedrin are red hot against Jesus looking for a way to destroy him. This challenge to his authority is the flashpoint of a long brewing conflict.

II. Jesus' Authority Displayed – vs. 29-30

- a. So in response to Jesus' authority being challenged he displays that very authority in verses 29-30. He responds to their questions with a question of his own. This was typical rabbinical practice – to answer a question with a question. But is this just some divisionary tactic? Is Jesus like a raccoon jumping into a river to shake off the dogs trailing his scent? Or is Jesus doing more here? Is this simply a question intended to mentally trap them or is this question intent on binding them in a moral dilemma?
- b. **By a demanding question**
 - i. Most certainly Jesus' question actually answers the very question they are asking while putting these religious leaders in a moral dilemma. Notice that in his answer to their question about his authority he doesn't refer to the great rabbinical schools of Hillel or Shammai. He doesn't reference the oral tradition or the power vested in him by Rome. He puts the conversation in categories extending far beyond authority structures in the human realm. He puts the challenge to his authority into the category of from God or from man. He does this by asking them about John's baptism – whether it was from man or from Heaven. If they will answer the question about John's baptism being from man or from Heaven then Jesus will tell them by what authority he is doing these things. In other

words, he is raising the bar of their question to him. They are simply asking what human authority has given him the right to do what he is doing. He takes it to the ultimate level and through his counter-question he is putting his authority in one of two categories – either from men or from Heaven.

ii. By doing this he is proving to them his own authority. He does not look to Hillel or Shammai or the oral tradition for his authority. He does not need another man to approve his authority. He has all authority and it has been given to him by God the Father. These men presume to have authority over Jesus because He is on their turf and he has seized control of their religious machinations. But little do they know that Jesus has authority over them. They want him to answer to them, but in reality they answer to Him. And this question brings that to the forefront. They are put in a moral dilemma by the question. It is an amazingly wise response of our Lord.

c. By an undeniable link

- i. His authority over them is ultimately displayed here by the question he asks. In asking them about John the Baptist he is presenting them with an undeniable link which displays the very authority they are challenging. By asking them about John the Baptist Jesus is drawing an unbreakable line between John's ministry and his own. Their answer about John will determine their answer about Jesus. If they say that John's baptism was from heaven then they must say that Jesus' authority is from heaven. This is true because Jesus had gone to John and been baptized by John. But Jesus' baptism by John was different than anyone else's. Remember that as he came up out of the water the heavens broke open and the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and the voice of God the Father publicly and authoritatively declared – "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."
- ii. So, Jesus not only identified with John's baptism, but Jesus was publicly declared as the beloved Son by a voice from Heaven at his baptism. John the Baptist declared himself to be a prophet sent from God. In fact, he declared himself to be the last prophet sent by God before the Messiah was to come. His message was a message of repentance which intended to get people ready for the coming of the Messiah. It was a popular message with everyone in Israel, except for the religious leaders. It was unpopular with them because it was simply a message of repentance that skirted the Temple worship. It was done in a remote place along the Jordan River and it was done completely outside of the authority of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had not ability whatsoever to control John the Baptist.

And he was popular with the people, so you know they viewed him as a rival to their power and sought for ways to control him.

- iii. So, by Jesus asking them this question in response to their challenge to his authority, he is not simply diverting their attention with some unrelated mental trap. Rather, he is asking them a question that is intended to pierce their consciences and bring them to a point of eternal decision. There are only two options as it relates to John the Baptist. Either he was sent from God – like he claimed to be – or his ministry was manmade. By asking this question Jesus is saying the very same thing about himself. Either my authority comes from God or it is manmade. Whichever is true about John is true about Jesus. This question of our Lord presents an undeniable link between John and Jesus. Both are from Heaven!

III. Jesus' Authority Rejected – vs. 31-33

- a. And so the religious leaders are left with this pressing mental trap and this perplexing moral dilemma. And in verses 31-33 we see their calculated response. They simply cannot submit to Jesus' authority. They simply cannot give the right answer, or even the wrong answer. They have been mentally handcuffed by Jesus' question and so the bottom line is they reject Jesus' authority. In verse 31 the Holy Spirit graciously pulls back the curtain of the religious leaders' inner workings and makes us privy to their private discussions. We only know these details because the God of Heaven knows every thought of man and every word that comes from his mouth. And so, we have been graciously given a glimpse of the human heart of unbelief.
- b. The word for “discussed” in the original language is a word that is used in Mark only in the context of those with a hardened heart toward Jesus. Those who simply cannot submit to his authority or believe his claims or trust in Him. Rather than believe they are found “discussing” or “debating” or “questioning.” In their hard-hearted questioning they come up with three options. They can say that John's baptism was from heaven. They can say it was from man. Or they can say they don't know. If they say it was from heaven then they perceive that they will be asked by Jesus why they didn't align themselves with John and believe in him. If they say it was from man they know that the crowd will be angry with them because all of them held that John was a prophet. If they say they don't know then they will not get their question answered. Their hard-heartedness is calculated. This discussion is motivated by protecting their assets and minimizing their loss. They had come to challenge Jesus and now he has turned the tables on them. They are now the ones whose authority is being challenged. In their minds they will lose some aspect of their authority if they say John's baptism was either from Heaven or from man. This is deemed unacceptable – they can't lose any authority – and so they opt for the least costly option – just say we don't know and therefore settle for not getting a direct answer from Jesus

about his authority. So, what compels them to settle here? What moves them to reject Jesus' authority over them? Quite simply stated – it is fear! They are fueled by fear in their rejection.

c. Fueled by fear

i. Fear of shame

1. In their consideration of the first option we see their fear of shame. So, they present the first hypothesis in verse 31. If we say that John's baptism was from heaven then he will say, why did you not believe him? Even if they were convinced in that moment that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and that he did indeed have authority over all things, their belief in Jesus was stymied by their fear of shame. The potential shame of having been previously against God in the ministry of John the Baptist kept them from going with God in the ministry of Jesus. What shame would come on them if in that moment they admit that they were wrong about John the Baptist all along? They couldn't believe in the Messiah unless they admitted that they had missed it before. They couldn't turn to the truth unless they confessed their error. They had been wrong about John. Everyone knew they didn't agree with John and they didn't identify with his simple message. How in the world could they suddenly make an about face in such a public context? And yet, they couldn't follow Jesus unless they did.
2. The fear of shame fueled their rejection of Jesus. And this is how unbelief works. It keeps us captured by the fear of shame that is inherent in conversion. If a person is going to come to Jesus and believe in His name for salvation, then they are going to have to admit that up to this point they had been wrong about some aspect of who He was or what He had done. True faith requires and admission that before this point I wasn't believing God's message or God's messenger and this was wrong. The Pharisees are unwilling to do this, and so they persist in unbelief.

ii. Fear of man

1. This fear that fuels their unbelief is also a fear of man. So, as they consider the second hypothesis of saying that John's baptism was from man they decide that concluding this is too risky because of the certain backlash of the crowd. All of the common folk regarded John as a prophet from God and so if these religious leaders state plainly their view of John as simply being a man with a humanly generated message then the crowd will be angry with these leaders. Luke tells us that they were afraid the crowd would stone them if they answered by saying John's baptism was from man.

2. And yet, that is exactly what they thought. They hadn't submitted themselves to John's ministry or message when he was around. Which speaks to their true answer. They thought John was from man. But they certainly can't be honest in front of the crowd because they fear man. Fear of man is the response of our heart when we value someone's opinion more than we value the truth. Fear of man places something of less value over something inherently more valuable. In other words, it is inherently foolish.

d. Guised as humble ignorance

- i. But these religious leaders simply can't be honest either with themselves or with Jesus. And so they give their answer – “we do not know.” Rather than courageously take a stand one way or another, they claim humble ignorance. But this is simply rejection of Jesus' authority guised as humble ignorance. They might not know the ins and outs of the answer about John's baptism, but they certainly know what they think to be true. They just refuse to answer because of what it will cost them. And so in calculated unbelief they mask their response with the cloak of ignorance.
- ii. This is prevalent in the church today as well. This response to the claims of Jesus and the authority of Jesus is not limited to the First Century. In every generation, and especially in our post-modern world, there have been those who tell us that humility demands an admission of ignorance. And so the Emergent Church of the mid-2000's told us that we shouldn't be so arrogant as to assume that we know what is true. They coined the term “Generous Orthodoxy” in which they told the church to be careful about forceful truth statements about Jesus and about the Bible. Clear preaching of what God had said was to be replaced by conversations about the different nuances of meaning that might be found in Jesus' words, or even in a painting about Jesus. The one thing to be avoided in this Generous Orthodoxy was a dogmatic statement about truth. Well, as you can imagine, the end game of this philosophy is that it was a whole lot of generous and not so much orthodoxy. This Emergent Church philosophy has led to a gain in conversation and cultural hipness at the expense of the truth. Thankfully this movement has started to lose traction in the church, but don't worry there will be another one to take its place any day now.
- iii. These religious leaders of Jesus' day were masking their calculated unbelief behind their statement of humble ignorance. So many in our world claim to be open minded when it comes to spiritual truth. Rather than land the plane at a destination they claim it is all about the journey. This New Age open minded philosophy is simply willful disbelief. Being open minded about who Jesus was and about what he said and

what he demanded from us is calculated unbelief. When we say “we do not know” when we are confronted with Jesus’ authority we are avoiding belief because we know it will require something. If we admit Jesus is who He says He is and proves himself to be then we know that we must answer to Him. That is simply what is happening with these religious leaders here in Mark 11. They know who Jesus is. They simply refuse to admit it because admitting it would require obedience to His authority.

- iv. Notice the mercy of Jesus to not answer their question in the face of their calculated unbelief. He is not simply being mean at the end of verse 33. He is not being like a little child saying “fine, since you won’t play my game then I won’t play yours. Rather, Jesus is mercifully protecting these men from hotter eternal fire. He is keeping them from having more to give account to him for on that Last Day. Their punishment is going to be intense enough.
 - 1. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. (Luke 12:48 ESV)
- v. Jesus doesn’t give them more to be required of them on that last day. They had rejected the light and they will pay an eternal reckoning for their rejection. Jesus mercifully keeps them from having to answer to more by refusing to directly answer their question. This will not be forever true though. In Mark 14 we read of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in the overnight hours between Thursday and Friday and the chief priest will ask Jesus “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Finally Jesus will directly answer their question because his hour for suffering will have come. He knows in that moment that the direct answer of “I am” will set in motion his own violent death as the Sacrificial Lamb slain for us.

Conclusion: As we close I want to point you to the reality of Jesus’ authority demanding a response. Whenever someone is truly confronted with the undeniable authority of Jesus, as we have been in this text this morning, we must respond. We will either respond with fear of shame and fear of man that fuels our rejection of Jesus. Or we will humbly submit to His authoritative command over all of life. Have you up to this point claimed humble ignorance about Jesus and said like the religious leaders “I don’t know”? May today be the day of your humble submission to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. How about you Christian? Have you been ignoring Christ’s authority in your life? Have you been fearing man and the shame they can cast on you? Don’t fear the one who can only kill the body, but rather fear Him who can kill the body and then cast the soul into eternal punishment. Let’s pray!