



Matthew 21:23-32

Trinity 18, October 4, 2026
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*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?"*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.*²⁵ *The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'*²⁶ *But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet."*²⁷ *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."*²⁸ *"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.'*²⁹ *And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went.*³⁰ *And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.*³¹ *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."*³² *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.*

When I was a child, if my father ever told me to "jump," I was not to ask, "Why?" I was to ask, "How high?" That's how it is I suppose when your dad is a Marine. My brothers and I were taught obedience through what I sometimes thought to be cruel and unusual punishment, but it was drilled into us that the authorities that exist are appointed by God, (cf. Romans 13:1) and so *our* duty was to *obey* those authorities. That's not to say that I *never* questioned authority, I just wasn't *taught* to do so.

I've noticed a trend in recent years, I guess since I've become a parent, that the *opposite* is now a popular parenting strategy. *Teach* your kids to *question* authority, and to *always* question authority—that really seems to be the popular trend today.

And I suppose that *always* obeying authority isn't as simple as that, since there are times when, **"We must obey God rather than men."** (Acts 5:29) But... I can *also* think of some real downsides to *always* *questioning* authority. I'm not going to get into all of that today. It struck me, though, the idea of *teaching* your kids to question authority—is that something that we really need to *teach* our kids at all? Ever since Adam and Eve questioned *God's* authority over them, it's been the same way for each successive generation. We *question* authority, and none of us needs to be *taught* to do this—that's just part of our inherited sinful nature.

In our text this morning, the chief priests and the elders were questioning Jesus' authority. And while Jesus didn't give them a direct answer about where He got His authority, He does give *us* a direct answer to the question, and even more importantly, He shows us how He *uses* His authority. May the Lord help us this morning not to question, but simply to rejoice that Jesus uses His authority for us.

They were just doing their job. The chief priests and the elders, they were the representatives of the Sanhedrin, doing their investigative work, and they were just doing their job. The previous day, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey—that had stirred up quite a great fervor in the overflowing city. From there, Jesus had gone into the temple. And then things got stirred up even more—Jesus

started overturning tables, driving out those who sold and bought there. And now, today, He's back there teaching. This is not the type of thing the Sanhedrin could just allow to go on unchecked!

And so, they came to question Him: **"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"** They're doing their job; can't let just anyone take over the town as Jesus had. The problem is that by *this* point in time, four days before Jesus' crucifixion, their question is very much out-of-date. Jesus had spent the previous three *years* doing so many stupendous works, that this question about His authority had already been answered hundreds of times. Why, only very recently Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead—right in the nearby suburb of Bethany—and even these Jewish leaders knew about it! (cf. John 11:43-47) The question about Jesus' authority—everyone who wanted to know could find out. And those who *still* did not know despite the clear evidence—they were a hopeless case. And "hopeless case" describes these chief priests and elders.

And so, they question. They question *God*. They question the source of *Jesus'* authority. In response, Jesus confounds them by answering their question with a question of His own. And when they are unable or unwilling to answer *His* question, He declines to answer theirs.

Now, I suspect that if we were truthful, we would admit that there are times when we are all tempted to sympathize with the chief priests and the elders. Who among us has not had a hard question for God? I'll give you an example. Here's one that we hear and ask variations of all the time: "Given the existence of an all-powerful and loving God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?"

Haven't *you* questioned God's authority in just such a way? Sometimes, that question sounds like, "Why is this happening to *me*? What did *I* do to deserve this?" Or maybe, even more of the time, we're asking that question about people that we love, questioning God on their behalf. Well, if you are inclined to question God, you're not alone.

When Moses encountered God in the blaze of that burning bush, Moses wanted to know the answer to a question before he would go down to Egypt. It was a simple question: "What is your name?" And God answered that simple question with what we might rate as a non-answer: **"I AM WHO I AM."** (Exodus 3:14) And that should teach us: there are some things about God that He will not answer.

Moses wasn't going to give up, though. Later on, he asks another question—or makes a request anyway. **"Show me your glory."** (Exodus 33:18) God responds that He will do so, and through it He will even define His "I AM WHO I AM" name for Moses. But then He adds one cautionary note: **"And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."** (Exodus 33:19) And I think the point is that *even* when God agrees to answer our questions, He intends us to understand that *He* remains God, and He is free to do as He will.

And this frustrates us. That there are certain things that we are just not going to understand about God this side of heaven—that frustrates us. Like the chief priests and the elders in our text today, like Moses before them, we are often unwilling to accept our not-knowing. But that *is* where Jesus left His inquisitors. They answered Jesus' question, **"We do not know,"** and He said to them, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

And if our Gospel account ended at this point, we would be left with nothing but the opportunity to ponder the elusiveness of God and our lack of knowing. But the account continues. Jesus turns the

conversation in a *new* direction by asking a *different* question. He tells the story of a man with two sons and then asks, ***“Which of the two did the will of his father?”*** At first glance, this story and the follow-up question seem to be unrelated to the situation at hand. What does any of this have to do with the discussion about Jesus’ authority? But it is connected.

Sometimes, when God declines to reveal the answers to the questions that we ask, it *may be* because there are certain things about God that we are just not to approach.

Other times, it may be that we could not comprehend the answer *even* if He were to give it to us. Our perspective is so miniscule, so personal, the answer likely would just *still* not make any sense.

But *sometimes*, God does not answer our questions, because He wants to tell us something that’s far more important. And I really think that’s the case here in our text.

The story of the man with two sons leads the chief priests and the elders to admit that the son who *repents* of his disobedience did the will of his father *more faithfully* than the son who *said* all the right things but did the opposite. From this Jesus concludes, ***“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.”***

In other words, Jesus declined to answer their question about authority because entering into a debate about authority would detract from the very message that the chief priests and the elders—and *we* also—*really* need to hear: “Repent and believe and live.”

The chief priests and the elders came challenging Jesus’ authority, and they were put at an immediate disadvantage. But if they had come to Jesus *truly* asking Him to teach them, humbling themselves as pupils—do you think His approach might have been different? Absolutely it would have! Because the tax collectors and prostitutes who believed in Him and came to Him in humble repentance, what was His approach with *them*? Jesus humbled *Himself* to gather them together, to dine with them, and then finally, to die for them on account of all their sins.

And for the chief priests and the elders, by telling the story of the man with two sons, Jesus tries to lead them *away* from their preoccupation with the question of authority to humble themselves and to repent and to receive the grace of a loving and forgiving God. He does this because it is *only* in repentance and faith that they can *truly* understand the answer to the question that they ask.

They don’t get that answer. We do. By faith, we do. Because Jesus *does* answer their question about His authority. He just doesn’t answer it in front of them. Rather, He answers it in a prayer that He prays for His disciples and that we can read in John chapter 17:

“When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”
(John 17:1-3)

You see, Jesus knew something more than just the answer to the question of the chief priests and the elders about His authority. He knew not only the *source* of His authority; He knew also the *purpose* for which His authority was given—not to just answer every question we have about God and the world, but rather to bring *us* to eternal life.

If you have questions for God, *hard* questions that you'd like God to answer, I would encourage you to go back to His Word. And by His grace, I pray that He grants you the ability to hear His Word rightly, and to receive in faith the One whom the Father sent with authority to give you eternal life. And if you're struggling with not knowing the answers, ***"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."*** (1 Peter 5:6-7) May God help us, in Jesus' saving name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.