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Sermon Notes

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The Authority of Jesus

Matthew 21:23-27

Perhaps no city in America is as concerned about credentials as Washington, DC. I remember well the experience of watching the Inaugural of George W. Bush to the Presidency, and there were levels of access to the event based on your ticket

If you were the Ambassador from a major European nation, you would sit on special seating set up on the Capital Steps

If you were a Member of the House of Representatives, you would sit closer on the Capital Steps, but further than a Senator

If you were a Supreme Court Justice, but not the Chief Justice, you would sit on the Platform but in a further row

If you were the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, you would sit in the front row, center stage

If you were, like I was, a relative nobody who had somehow gotten a ticket to enter the cordoned off area at the Mall near the US Capitol, you would stand out in the rain on the muddy ground three hundred yards away and squint at the only live look at a President you've ever had in your life

It was all about credentials... the authority to stand in proximity to the President as he was being sworn in

There were security people swarming over the grounds, and there was no way you were getting further than your credentials permitted you to go

Authority is everywhere... we face it in everyday life. If you go to the local branch of a bank, there is a door opening into the back areas behind bulletproof glass where the tellers can walk and you can't

If you go to a Durham Bulls baseball game and your daughter is playing the National Anthem on her violin with some other students, you are allowed to walk onto the field before the game. But if you try to do it during the game, you may be arrested.

I have the great privilege of preaching from this pulpit week after week, and it is a privilege I take very seriously. But the authority to preach here was granted me by a vote of this particular church over ten years ago. It does not extend to other pulpits in this city. If I show up at another Baptist church next week and at the sermon time go up to preach, I would be committing a major sin... the authority would not have been granted to me

Some time ago, I served as a juror in a court trial. For one afternoon, I had the authority to walk into the juror's box and sit in a particular chair. That authority was granted me by the judge and it extended to the end of the trial. When the trial was over, the judge dismissed me and my fellow jurors with his gracious thanks. My right to walk into that part of the courtroom was now OVER.

In our passage today, Jesus' enemies question him about His authority... His right to do the things He had been doing

What's amazing to me is how oblivious they were to the irony of such questioning

Two basic facts about Christ and authority:

- 1) No one in history so perfectly submitted to authority as Jesus Christ
- 2) No one in history had as much authority as Jesus Christ

We will wrestle with those two concepts as we look at this passage

I. The Authority of Jesus Questioned

A. The Jews Confront Jesus

1. The chief priests and the elders of the people are the leaders of the Jewish nation
2. They are also Jesus' most determined opposition
3. They are constantly challenging him, opposing him, debating him, laying traps for him, scheming against him, plotting to take his life
4. Here they try the frontal assault method... and this time, the topic is authority

vs. 23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

5. Certainly they have in mind here Jesus' shocking recent actions
 - a. The Triumphal Entry, riding on a donkey, entering as a King to rule

- b. The Cleansing of the Temple: driving out the animals, overturning the benches of the money changers; saying things like

Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a marketplace? A den of thieves?"

- c. His acceptance of adoration by the children

- 6. Immediately the chief priests and elders had one question in mind:

AUTHORITY... who gives you the right to do these shocking things???

- 7. The Jews were a people under authority and who sought to respect authority

- 8. Here the chief priests and elders assumed they were operating from a position of strength

- a. In their way of thinking, all actions should be done under authority... done by the will of someone with the right to act; no one acted as a free agent—there had to be some superior human or institution that gave anyone the authority to act in the ways Jesus acted

- b. As they believed, they were the religious authorities in Jerusalem... there was no higher religious authority than them

- c. So if Jesus claimed to be acting under human authority, there was no human authority higher than them when it came to the temple

- i) By the way, even the Romans acknowledged this...

- ii) Because of some mistakes Pontius Pilate had made early in his tenure, he'd been put on a short leash by Caesar concerning the Jews and their temple in particular

- iii) Any Roman soldier who violated the temple would be executed

- iv) So the chief priests and the elders RAN the temple

- v) Now Jesus had cleansed the temple without their permission

- vi) They were saying SHOW US YOUR CREDENTIALS

- d. Acts speaks of the authority Saul of Tarsus received from the chief priests concerning his persecution of the church

Acts 9:14 [Saul] has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.

- e. So also the Sanhedrin asked the same question of Peter and James after they healed the lame man at the Temple gate

***Acts 4:7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them:
"By what power or what name did you do this?"***

9. The Jewish leaders figured they had Jesus either way
 - a. Either he had to acknowledge that he had NO AUTHORITY to do what He had done... in which case He would be discredited by the crowd
 - b. OR he would claim to be operating directly under God's authority, in which case they would have grounds to execute Him for blasphemy
10. Jesus seemed to them like a loose cannon, close to an anarchist, overturning not just tables in the temple but the authority of the rulers of the Jewish nation
11. Their unbelief clouded their minds from seeing the truth: no one in history has ever submitted to authority more perfectly than Jesus... and no one in history has had more authority than Jesus

B. What is Authority?

1. Webster's Dictionary

power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior

freedom granted by one in authority : RIGHT

position of authority: a person with the right to rule, to act powerfully

2. Theologically: authority all derives from God

Romans 13:1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

3. Hierarchical view of the universe: ever-ascending spheres of power, with God Almighty, sitting on His throne, ruling over it all
 - a. God is the ruler of all... the king of all kings, the lord of all lords; everything exists to serve and obey him
 - b. It was God's will, then, to create other beings—angels and men—and give them the right to rule over specific spheres of influence... kingdoms, if you will
 - c. So God created angels in a hierarchical array, with some angels having authority over others—they are called “archangels”... literally , ruler angels

d. So also God created man to rule over the physical world

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

e. AND God established Adam as head over Eve by creating him first

4. Earthly authority:

a. Authority in the home: the father is the head of the house, with the right to make authoritative pronouncements for his family

Joshua 24:15 as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

b. Authority in the nation: the king is the ruler of the nation, with the right to make authoritative decisions, to enact laws and rules which people have to follow, and to exact punishment if his laws are not obeyed; what really stuck in the craw of the Jews was that the rulership of the Promised Land had been given over to the Gentiles

c. Authority over spiritual matters: the chief priests, the elders, the Scribes, and the Pharisees were the spiritual leaders of the nation... and ordinarily they would have the right to rule

Matthew 23:2-3 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach

Jesus thus UPHHELD the authority of His enemies... just not their personal practice

Jesus upholds ALL authorities, since He created them and they are essential to His plan

Jesus proved this by being submissive to His own parents when He was a boy in their home

Jesus proved this by not resisting the authorities when they arrested, condemned and killed Him... He went meekly and quietly like a lamb to the slaughter

But Jesus especially submitted to the authority of God the Father at every moment of His life

AND Jesus wielded the authority God gave Him perfectly as well

C. What is the Authority of Jesus?

1. Displays of authority

a. Through his teachings

Jesus taught like no man they had ever heard

John 7:45-46 the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" ⁴⁶ "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards declared.

The Jews did not value originality in teaching... they valued submission to traditions that had been passed on by their elders; a young man training in the Law of Moses was considered to be making progress when he could quote at length the teachings, the traditions of the elders; "Rabbi so-and-so, in commenting on this passage, gave such-and-such instructions for us to follow"

Jesus quoted NO rabbis... none at all;

Matthew 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

Matthew 5:27-28 You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

You have heard... but I say to you...

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds marveled more than anything else at the absolute certainty of His teachings... of the tone of AUTHORITY in His words and manner

Matthew 7:28-29 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

b. Through his miracles

- i) Authority over demons
- ii) Authority over sickness
- iii) Authority over fish
- iv) Authority over weather
- v) Authority over life and death

c. Through his actions

- i) His decision to dispense with the traditions of the elders (handwashing)
- ii) His healings on the Sabbath

- iii) His granting authority to the apostles to preach and heal
- iv) The Triumphal entry
- v) The cleansing of the Temple

2. Claims of authority

a. Authority to forgive sins

Matthew 9:2 *When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."*

Matthew 9:6 *But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home."*

b. Authority over the Sabbath

Matthew 12:8 *the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*

c. Authority to judge the world

John 5:22-23 *the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.*

d. Authority to raise the dead

John 5:21 *For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.*

e. Authority to die and to rise again

John 10:18 *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.*

f. Authority over all peoples, to give life to whomever He chooses

John 17:2 *you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.*

3. He makes a stunning claim to Pontius Pilate concerning authority

John 19:10-11 *"Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.*

4. So... what IS the authority of Jesus? In the end, it is TOTAL and COMPLETE... the authority of Almighty God Himself

Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Ephesians 1:20-22 God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church

5. So... does Jesus have the authority to cleanse the temple? YES!!

- a. Jesus is God the Son
- b. Through Jesus God created all things

D. Who Gave Him this Authority?

1. The second question they asked:

"And who gave you this authority?"

- 2. This is the key question... for Jesus constantly saw himself as a "man under authority"... namely, God's
 - a. All His authority came from God the Father

Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

- b. Over and over Jesus links His authority to God the Father

Matthew 11:27 "All things have been committed to me by my Father..."

John 5:26-27 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

John 10:18 No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

- c. As a matter of fact, Jesus did NOTHING apart from the command of His Father

John 5:19 Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

John 14:31 the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

3. So, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, cleansed the temple and healed and continued His teaching ministry on the authority of God the Father

This was the answer to their question:

“By what authority do you do all these things?” A: “By my own authority.”

Q: “Who gave you this authority?” A: “God the Father”

II. Jesus’ Counter-Question

A. Jesus Knew they Could Never Accept This Truth

1. They would consider His claim to be blasphemous
2. When He said to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven”, they thought He was blaspheming
3. When He defended His healing on the Sabbath by saying His Father was working and He too is working, they picked up stones to stone Him

John 5:18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

4. So He asks them a question instead

B. Jesus’ Brilliant Conditional Question

Matthew 21:24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

1. Jesus sets them a condition... if they meet it, He will answer their question
2. If they don’t, He won’t
3. See how wise Jesus is, and how much in control of every encounter
4. They are trying to trap Him before the crowd... they end up being trapped themselves
5. Jesus... the greatest thinker in the history of the world
 - a. Debating with Jesus was like playing chess with God... no matter what move you make, you lose

- b. And, when Jesus makes a move, you realize your predicament
- c. So Jesus asks a probing question that puts them in a terrible bind
- d. More than that, Jesus asks a question that exposes the heart of the problem

C. The Origin of John the Baptist's Authority

Matthew 21:25 John's baptism-- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"

1. This is not beside the point, nor is it a red herring to distract his opponents from the questions they asked
2. No, this question about John's baptism really goes to the heart of the matter... the authority of a heaven-sent spokesman for God
3. John the Baptist: an enigmatic, shocking and divisive figure
 - a. Appeared in the foreboding spirit of Elijah, dwelling in the desert, wearing camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey
 - b. Like Elijah, he was utterly devoid of love for worldly comforts and luxuries
 - c. Like Elijah, he was utterly fearless, a preacher of the truth no matter what
 - d. Like Elijah, his words were fiery, calling on all his hearers to repent
4. The baptism of John: a specific aspect of his ministry
 - a. Baptism had never been taught in the Old Testament... there were no commands for prophets to baptize, nor any examples that they ever did
 - b. Baptism had arisen in the intertestamental period as a ceremonial ritual by which Gentile converts to Judaism could be cleansed of their filthy past lives as Gentiles and be welcomed as pure Jews
 - c. BUT JOHN was baptizing JEWS who confessed their sins
 - d. UNHEARD of!! Where did he get this authority?
 - e. The Jewish leaders sent emissaries out into the desert to learn the answer on authority:

John 1:19-27 Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ ¶ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

D. The Trap of Jesus' Question

1. They say it very well themselves:

Matthew 21:25-27 They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'" ²⁶ But if we say, 'From men'-- we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

III. Jesus' Enemies: Unbelieving Dishonest Cowards

A. Unbelief

These Jewish leaders DID NOT believe John...

Jesus told us what they said about John:

Matthew 11:18 John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'

But WHY didn't they believe John? Believe WHAT?

1. Believe that John was a true prophet from God

Matthew 3:3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Luke 1:17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

2. Believe that they were a brood of vipers who needed to repent

Matthew 3:1-2 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Matthew 3:7-12 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ ¶ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

3. Believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, through which they could be saved

***John 1:29-34* The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."**

Jesus referred to John's witness to Him:

***John 5:33-35* "You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. ³⁵ John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light."**

But they did not believe John's testimony about Jesus

B. Cowardice

1. These Jewish leaders were constantly afraid of the crowd

***Matthew 21:26* if we say, 'From men'-- we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."**

2. They generally held the crowd in total contempt

***John 7:48-49* "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in [Jesus]? ⁴⁹ No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law-- there is a curse on them."**

When the man born blind tried to show the clear evidence that Jesus was from God, their overwhelming pride reared its ugly head again:

John 9:31-34 *We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.*

3. But they feared that they would riot if they arrested Jesus during the Feast

Matthew 26:4-5 *they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ⁵ "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."*

4. So these were not men of principle, but they were cowards... scheming off to the side, figuring out the most politically correct answer, FEARING THE PEOPLE but DESPISING THEM at the same time

C. Dishonesty

1. All of this led to their dishonesty

"We don't know"

2. That was a lie, from their perspective

3. They actually had made up their mind both about John the Baptist and Jesus

4. Their authority was false... John was demon-possessed, Jesus was Satan possessed, as far as they were concerned

5. BUT as we just said, they were afraid of the people, so they refused to say what they really thought

D. Jesus' Authority: Silence

Matthew 21:27 *So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."*

1. These Jewish leaders came demanding an answer from Jesus

2. Instead, they got a tricky question in response... one that put them in a challenging position

3. Jesus set the terms, with the authority that was His... they didn't meet His condition, He didn't answer their demands

4. Who is the real authority here?

5. Jesus wasn't being petulant... the real issue is that for Him to defend His true identity as the Son of God would not convince them; they had already set their minds against Him; why cast pearls before swine?

Later, as His trial, Jesus would say this to these same leaders. They asked him...

Luke 22:67-68 "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, ⁶⁸ and if I asked you, you would not answer.

IV. The Proudful Logic of Unbelief

So let's return to Jesus' implied question... the one the Jewish leaders feared

If John's authority was from heaven, why didn't you believe him?

This is how the proudful logic of unbelief goes.

These men were full-time religionists... they spent their whole time thinking about spiritual things. They felt they had addressed their sins completely by being more outwardly observant to the Law of Moses than any of their neighbors, as far as they could tell... they were more righteous than anybody... that was beyond question

They were in positions of spiritual authority in Israel; thus anyone who addressed spiritual things without their permission was by definition insubordinate and not from God.

Even more forcefully, any person who questioned their spirituality or righteousness was clearly wrong... and their message was to be rejected

John the Baptist came in the desert without their authority and preached; huge crowds of people went out to him, and those crowds could see his righteousness. The Jewish religious leaders were filled with jealousy. Even worse, John the Baptist preached directly to them that they were a brood of vipers who needed to repent. Their pride riled up like a hissing serpent. IMPOSSIBLE!!! We are righteous... you must have a demon

Then along comes Jesus... even worse than John, Jesus was doing miracles; huge crowds were thronging around him; He was flouting their religious traditions and healing on the Sabbath

He is teaching the Scriptures with incredible power and authority, and never once giving any credit to the Jewish spiritual leadership

He tells them they are sinners, needing to repent... just like John the Baptist said

THEREFORE, they rejected John and

THEREFORE, they rejected Jesus

Pride breeds unbelief

Jesus' answer: The miracles He did could only have been done by the power of God

John 3:1-2 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

John 5:36 the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.

John 14:11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

The man born blind summed it all up:

John 9:31-33 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

Prideful response:

John 9:34 To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

V. Application

A. Recognize the Heavenly Origin of Jesus' Authority

1. The Jews should have seen in Jesus' miracles clear evidence that God was with Him
2. Jesus also pointed to the way the Scriptures testified about Him
3. This should be enough for any of you to recognize Jesus' authority
4. What authority?
 - a. To enter as King
 - b. To cleanse the Temple
 - c. To speak the Word of God prophetically
 - d. To declare that our sins are forgiven
 - e. To raise the dead
 - f. To Judge the world

g. To rule the universe

B. Submit to Jesus' Authority: Take His Yoke Upon You

1. To the lost:

- a. Don't let pride stand in the way of your own salvation
- b. Don't boast of your own righteousness, or that you don't need a Savior
- c. Come to Christ and take His yoke upon you

2. To believers

- a. Some separate accepting Jesus as Savior and submitting to Him as Lord
- b. Christ has the right to rule everything in your life
- c. Submit to His authority
 - i) In how you spend your money
 - ii) In how you spend your time
 - iii) In the calling of your life
 - iv) In evangelism and missions
- d. Live each day as a bonds slave of Jesus Christ
 - i) We tend to live as autonomous beings
 - ii) We decide what is right, what we'll do with our days
 - iii) A bonds slave of Jesus Christ rises each day with a full understanding of Jesus' authority... and a deep desire to submit to it fully and joyfully