

Title: Who's the Boss?
Date: 07/14/24
Subject: Christ is to be the ruling authority in our lives.
Scripture: Matthew 21:23 - 32

Do you walk to school or carry your lunch? What's the difference between a cow? Those were some of the trick questions asked by fellow students to see if they could catch a person off guard.

Jesus frequently was confronted by people who asked him trick questions, though maybe not as absurd as the one I gave...but maybe just as absurd.

READ Matthew 21:23-27

Jesus went into the temple each day of his last week on earth. His purpose was to teach and proclaim the good news. He walked as he taught resulting in many people gathering to listen to him. He was an inescapable force that forced the religious authorities to make a decision.

The entire religious community went on the offensive and joined in questioning Jesus. There were chief priests which included current high priest, those who had been high priests, those who were qualified to be selected as high priest and upper levels of priesthood. They were in charge of the work of the temple and were mostly from the Sadducee group.

There were elders of the people. They were the respected leaders coming from the prominent families.

Mark and Luke state there was another group. They were the teachers of the law. They were the religious experts, the scribes, Pharisees. Today we might call people like that Bible scholars or theologians.

The question of authority behind Jesus' teaching was really a good question at its heart. It was their responsibility of the religious authorities to check the credentials of teachers. Only certain people should teach. The way a person became a teacher was to be trained by a great teacher and then recognized by the other teachers as one who had the knowledge, proper interpretation and ability to teach. They were given a key as a symbol of having the right to interpret scripture and teach it. They couldn't just let any Shem, Boaz Or Gideon teach. They knew Jesus didn't have the pedigree. Who said he could teach? They wanted Jesus to give them the name of the rabbi who trained him and authorized him to teach in the temple, or anywhere for that matter. They knew the ruling council hadn't granted him permission. He wasn't supervised by and answerable to a rabbi or religious entity. He didn't have them check his theology to see if he dotted his i's and crossed his t's.

The religious leaders had their agenda. They certainly weren't begging Jesus to tell them if he was the Christ from God and that if he was the Christ, they would turn to him. They would fall down on their faces before him and worship him. They would follow him to the ends of the earth. They were oh so ready to do what he said...if he was the Christ.

However, as was usual, considering the suspects, they had more in mind. They'd already made up their minds. They were searching for hard evidence they could use to support their predetermined judgment.

The question of authority went beyond teaching. They knew about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the accompanying worship given to him. The entry was something that should be reserved for important people. Who approved him coming in that manner? They knew about the healings he performed. The healings were nice, but where did he get his power? They knew he cleansed the temple a few days earlier. Who gave him the right to clear the temple of people who were buying and selling things, especially since the system was set up with permission from and maybe instigated by the religious authorities who were making money from the enterprise? He was messing with their lives and the way they managed. He didn't ask their permission. Who'd he think he was to do official acts? They wanted to know who gave him authority to do those things?

They were trying to push him into a corner, put him on the hot seat, place him in an embarrassing situation. If Jesus said his authority came from a human teacher or an earthly ruler, they could discredit his claim of being God. If he said he was doing this on his own, he could be labeled as a cheap fake. If he said it was God, they'd accuse him of blasphemy. They may have been trying to insinuate he was aligned with the devil as they accused him of casting out demons by the power of the devil.

“So, Jesus of Nazareth, you've said some pretty outrageous things, made some pretty outrageous claims and done some pretty outrageous things. You can't go around teaching and acting the way you want. It's upsetting to us and how we feel things should be. Tell us, we who are the rulers of the temple, protectors of the truth and guardians of religious teaching and expression, by what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority? Give us a name, any name.” The trap was set with no way for Jesus to escape it.

It was kind of like the question people at college wanted to ask of those who acted in a high, mighty and super righteous fashion: “Who died and made you a part of the Trinity?”

Jesus knew the motives and heart of the religious aristocracy. He knew they were trying to protect their turf.

Jesus says he'd answer their question...but first, he wants them to answer his question. Perfectly reasonable. Just a simple question about John: his baptism - from heaven, by which Jesus meant God, or from men?

V. 5 tells us the chief priests and teachers of the law and elders discussed Jesus question among themselves. Wouldn't you like to have been able to eavesdrop on that conversation? Picture them gathered in a circle animatedly discussing the matter while trying to speak in hushed tones. They're stroking their beards and nervously pulling on their robes. The tables had been turned. They're the ones who've been placed in a corner. They understand the serious nature of what's happened as these guys are nothing if not logical.

“If we say John was sent by God, he'll ask why we didn't believe him. If we say John was commissioned and bankrolled by men...the people, the people, they love John and they'll stone us.” That little tidbit is from Luke's account.” The weasels, I mean, the religious authorities, reached an answer: “We don't know.”

Jesus didn't try to start a debate and offer 15 convincing proofs that John was from God. He simply stated, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

He didn't tell them directly...but told them through a parable. Read Matthew 21:28 - 32.

The two sons represent two kinds of people. The son who said he'd do what the father wanted, but winds up not going represents the religious authorities and people who have appearance of religion. They're all talk, no The son who said he wouldn't go but changed his mind and went to work represents people who turn from their lives of sin and trusting in themselves for salvation. They turn to God. Jesus pointed out that the religious had seen the amazing things of tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners having lives dramatically changed by him and they couldn't see the evidence for what it was. They refused to repent and chose not to believe in him.

Jesus hadn't dropped the issue of his authority. He wasn't hoping the religious authorities would clarify things for him. He knew where his authority came from. He wasn't like the Jewish teachers who cited their sources and were careful to base their teaching on what other people said. Jesus quoted no rabbi, except himself, as the one who heard directly from God the Father, who was indeed God himself. He in effect said, "As God says...and that's me." He needed no other authority.

One of the insights we gain from Jesus' encounter with the religious authorities is how to handle those who are antagonistic to the truth. Our Lord refused to answer their test probe. He had sufficient previous encounters with them to be able to gauge their attitude. He knew they weren't sincere seekers. He knew they wouldn't listen. They weren't like the Greeks that we saw last week in John 12 who wanted to see Jesus. These religious guys were only interested in nailing Jesus to the cross figuratively and literally.

We're to help those who are searching for life's answers. We're to err on the side of sharing truth. Dwayne Gish, Henry Morris and Josh McDowell have gone to college campuses to speak in hostile environments. They'd debate with an evolutionist. They knew it was highly unlikely they were going to change the mind of their debating opponent. Their interest was people in the audience who might be seeking. They might be able to plant a seed as well as strengthened in the Christian's faith in Christ.

We shouldn't argue for the sake of arguing but desire to present truth. We don't need to seek out those evil doers who oppose us. Closer to home, it may come to the place where we've previously shared and shared voluminously about our faith, but the person constantly attacks. We may then say, "You know what I believe and if you have sincere questions, I'll be happy to answer them, but it's probably not in our best interest to keep being argumentative."

The main insight is about how do we respond to the authority of Jesus. If it seems like Jesus is stuck on this subject, it's because he is. From day one with the disciples he presented them with the choice to follow him or not. It's his theme. How people respond clarifies who is with him and who is against him.

The question confronting people is: "Who is your authority?" There are many voices clamoring for that position and people have arrived at all sorts of different conclusions. Let's look at a couple that infect not just those who don't know Christ as Savior but also those who claim Christ as Savior.

Some are ruled by their glands. Whatever feels good, whatever produces adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, oxytocin and other feel-good hormones. They organize their lives around whatever provides happiness, fun, thrills, pleasure.

For Christ followers this may be deciding to give in to sin rather than fight against sin. "To sin or not to sin, that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer, The slings and arrows of temptation, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them." My apologies to Shakespeare. Often the choice is just give in to the temptation. It comes down to choices of websites we visit, following those tempting side ads on the computer, TV viewing????

Some people's authority is money. They go by the revised golden rule - "He who has the most gold makes the rules." If it's not made of gold or can't be bought with gold or doesn't lead to more gold, it's not worth it.

Self-governance. It's the idea each person knows what is best, knows what is right for themselves. It's the "I don't need, I don't want someone to tell me what to do. I'm perfectly capable of deciding for myself."

These competing voices sound intriguing, and certainly make bold promises. How do they pan out?

One man tried these and others. Wealth? He gave himself to it. He was so rich that he made silver as common as stones (1 Kings 4:29-34, 10:27). Wisdom? He applied himself "to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly" (Ecclesiastes 1:17). He spoke 3000 proverbs, composed 1005 songs, and everybody sought out his wisdom (1 Kings 4:32-34). Pleasures, work, accomplishments? "I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly...I undertook great projects, built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks...I amassed silver and gold for myself...I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well - the delights of the heart of man...I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:3-11).

He had anything and everything he wanted and anyone could ever want. What did he conclude? "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." This was King Solomon. He used meaningless 35 times in Ecclesiastes. Maybe the book should have been named "Meaningless." Probably fewer people would read it than Leviticus. He also viewed them as chasing after the wind (used nine times the first half of the book).

Almost makes one think his servants had to keep a close eye on him and keep sharp objects away from him.

Solomon came to his senses. His ultimate conclusion was to "stand in awe of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:7), "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1), and in the last words of the book: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the

whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

To bring it into current times, with what are we left if wealth, pleasure, wisdom, self-governance and a host of other things fall short of delivering on their promises of fulfillment and satisfaction? Jesus? What does he have to offer? What gives him the right to mess with my life? Why should we, anyone, cede authority over our lives to him?

If he's merely a wiser guy, a step above the norm, okay, maybe a genius even, shouldn't people be free to pick and choose if his principles would be appropriate to follow? Wouldn't it be like Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanacs' witty sayings and proverbs? Decide if they're keepers or not. What if he's an improved Bill Gates, Abraham Lincoln or Alexander the Great, or someone others have willingly followed, even to their deaths? What if he's just that? Why shouldn't the person have veto power?

But what if Jesus is who he says he is... if he's one who created everything, who not only started things, setting universe in motion, but continues to be operative. If he's the Word, the full embodiment of what God desires to communicate about who he is and what he can do for people. If he left heaven for you, made himself nothing for you, took the very nature of a servant for you, was made in human likeness for you, humbled himself for you and became obedient to death on the cross for you (Philippians 2:6-8). If he loves you completely.... If he's all that and infinitely more, what authority should he have and over what should that authority extend?

So who's our authority? Wealth? Pleasure? Sin? The devil? Jesus? You may need to begin a journey with Jesus by admitting you are a sinner who has wanted to maintain authority over your life. Admit need help, can't get to heaven by yourself. Believe Jesus took your place on the cross, took your punishment. Receive the gift of eternal life he offers.

If we're honest with ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, there are times when we don't want Jesus to have authority in our lives. We fall back on the other stuff – wealth, pleasure, self-governance, etc.—to jump back in control of our lives. We sometimes want Jesus to ask our permission if it's okay for him to interfere in areas of our lives. We don't want him messing with our lives. We try to protect our turf.

If we say God is our authority, what does that mean? How does that impact our relationship with him? What will we do and not do? We should admit when we take control and give it back to God. We should dedicate ourselves to learn what he wants us to be and do. We should believe Christ is in us through the Holy Spirit to guide us.

The battle over our wills and who has authority continues until this life is over. That's because God is interested in building a palace in our lives for him to live in and not just a tiny home where we feel comfortable.

Pastor Tim Keller says, “If your God never disagrees with you, you might just be worshiping an idealized version of yourself.”