

Part 70: Authority Problems

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A general contractor in Massachusetts was hired by a homeowner to oversee a large home renovation. But after the homeowners essentially fired him, the contractor took his clients to court alleging a breach of contract. However, not only did the contractor lose the suit, but homeowners filed a countersuit wherein the court found that it was the contractor who violated their agreement and was ordered to pay over \$350,000 of damages to the family he tried discredit.

As we've been working through the book of Luke, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem and for the next three weeks we are going to see the four different groups of people attempt to discredit and trap Jesus only to find themselves the ones discredited and in trouble.

Their attempts to take Jesus to court end even more miserably than that Massachusetts contractor. But their loss is our gain. In these weeks we get to see not only their challenges answered, but their hearts exposed. My prayer as we work through this is that we might hear the words of Jesus and respond in a heart of humble repentance and sincere faith instead of obstinate and arrogant rebellion.

While we will learn many things in these three weeks, one main thing we learn is that there is nothing more natural in our hearts to challenge the claims of Jesus. If you're not a Christian in here today, I imagine you wrestle with your own questions and challenges of Jesus. Christians, many of us wrestle to obey his commands to share his gospel, disciple others and place our lives in continual submission to him because we ourselves may feel a desire to push back on Jesus' authority.

Authority, in fact, is the central issue of our passage today. In verse two Jesus is called to answer the question we've often asked others, and all of us have asked God at one point, "What gives you the right?"

The religious officials want to know by what or by whom Jesus has authority—what makes him the boss? But by the end of this text Jesus shows us that it is not himself who must justify his authority—but it is us who must justify ourselves based off our response to him who is the authority.

Our main point today is this: **Jesus is the universal authority and the single cornerstone.** Jesus' authority is like gravity—you don't need to acknowledge it in order to be under its weight. Luke's writing will show us this by first revealing, **The Problem of Authority, The Problem with Authority,** and lastly what it means to be **People Under Authority.**

You may have heard the legend that surrounds Bishop Nicholas of Myra, or otherwise known to the modern as Saint Nicholas. Yes, the man whose generosity gave way to the universal legend of Santa Clause was a Christian bishop who is less universally known for another legend. In 325 AD, at the Council of Nicaea, local pastors and theologians gathered for the trial of a heretic named Arius who actively taught against the divinity of Jesus. But while Arius was defending his unbiblical views, it's reported that Nicholas stood up, walked up to him, and smacked him square in the face.

While no fists were thrown in today's passage, the way in which these religious officials approached the Son of God himself was far more scandalous than the way St. Nick punched a heretic.

Luke tells us Jesus was in the middle of preaching the gospel in the temple, when the chief priests and scribes and elders came up to him and interrupted him. What offended Nicholas was perversion of the gospel, but what offended the religious leaders was the preaching of that same gospel.

And their question betrays their disgust, **(Luke 20:2)**, "Tell us but what authority you do these things, or who is it that gave you this authority." And here is our first point this morning: **The Problem of Authority.**

You may remember the movement surrounding President Trump's election where we saw bumper stickers and hashtags online saying: "Not My President." The idea was that there were people who saw the President as either illegitimate or unfit for his authority and therefore they could disavow his authority and not listen to him.

These men are doing the exact same thing to Jesus Christ in asking this question. They might as well have tweeted out on tablets of stone: "Not My Rabbi."

Now, if you are a curious Christian, a new-Christian, or a non-Christian know that this question is not an illegitimate question. In fact, one can only have true Christian peace if they ask this question! Imagine if you had a terminal disease and I walked up to you and said, "You're healed!" a proper answer would be, "According to what evidence?" For those who are burdened with sin, or who are aware that something in their heart is not right—if someone—even Jesus himself—were to come up to you and say, "Your sins are forgiven," the right response if we truly do want peace is, "By who's authority!? How do I know this is true?"

The gospel is a word of authority. It does not boast more than it can fulfill. Jesus is able, with authority to not only preach good news but to provide it. John in his account of Jesus' life is constantly showing us the answer to Jesus' authority. Jesus says in **John 10:30**, "I and the Father are one." In himself, Jesus shares in the same divinity of the Father. Jesus is true God of true God—but even in terms of his purpose on earth he was given specific authority. **John 14:10**, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but that Father who dwells in me does his work."

The authority of Jesus is of serious significance to those who wish to be saved. But these men ask a legitimate question in an illegitimate way. They don't want to know the answer. This is what Jesus' reply exposes, listen to their hardness of heart and willful unbelief here: **(Luke 20:3-7)** "He answered them, 'I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from.'"

The challenge of Jesus' question was simple and it regarded John the Baptist. Back in Luke 1, we saw that John the Baptist came as a forerunner to Jesus' ministry, he was to prepare the way of the Lord. Like headlights tell us a car is coming, John alerted us that the messiah was coming. John's message was that because a car was coming, you should get out of the road—that is to say, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." Come to Jesus. And the people marveled at John and his message.

So now the problem of John's authority is forced into the hearts of the religious leaders. If they say John was a legitimate prophet from heaven then they have a problem. They would have to admit that they ought to obey Jesus as Heaven's messiah. But if they said John was merely a man and not a prophet they would also be in trouble. The crowds of people who believed John and his message would rightfully get rid of any religious officials who refused to believe the prophet of God.

To boil it down their decision was this: Admit you should obey God and believe in Jesus, or die. The amount of consideration they put into this shows us the stubbornness of sin doesn't it? For many of us there are times in our lives where it's hard for us to distinguish against the two. But that's because to come to Jesus in faith is to die to yourself. It's a decision to live for him and a decision to die to one's self.

That's what causes these men to huddle up and deliberate, and it's often what causes us to do the same. But the reality doesn't change does it? You may not want to acknowledge that Jesus is the authority of God. You may wish that you can establish yourself as the authority but you're still under an authority. Even while these men want to buck the rule of Jesus, they are still ruled by something—the fear of man.

These men show the battle each of us have in our hearts we will either fear God's authority or we will fear man's authority. We cannot escape authority, we just get to choose which authority we are under. You will be ruled by Jesus, or you will be ruled by man and what does the rule of man produce? Fear.

Why? Because man isn't a good authority. You know why none of you are wearing bell-bottoms in here today? Because the authority of man would laugh at you. You know why people wore bell-bottoms in the 70's? Because the authority of man would laugh at you if you didn't. Man is a terrible ruler. You know why? Because we can only have peace when we hear of peace, "on good authority." Meaning, we know the person is good for the peace they promised. But man can never say anything on good authority. We can never be sure that we ok when man is left in charge.

Consider even how the leaders respond at the close of our passage today: **Luke 20:19**, "The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people."

Brothers and sisters, you will either fear man or you will fear God. You will either find man as your authority and the result is fear, or you will find God as your authority and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The problem of authority is this: we cannot escape it. We will always be ruled and governed by a fear of man or a fear of God and the cycle will never stop unless something happens. For those who often feel this, Jesus words in verse 8 probably add to that fear. It seems Jesus tries to heap on that reality when he says in verse 8, "neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

But look at what happens next: **Luke 20:9** "And he began to tell the people this parable."

Jesus says, "You refuse to wrestle with the problem of authority and I'm not going to tell you anything," but then he turns to those hungry seekers hanging on his preaching of the gospel and he begins to tell them a parable. What do we make of this? The parable is the answer!

And what does the parable show us? It shows us there's no middle ground. The religious leaders tried to find the third way: they tried to play dumb. They didn't want to admit they needed to submit to God, they didn't want to be killed by the crowds, so they acted innocent through ignorance. But Jesus' parable shows us our second point this morning: **The Problem with Authority**.

The problem *of* authority is that we can't escape it. The problem *with* authority is that we have made ourselves enemies with it. In other words we are all under authority—but more than that we have all made ourselves enemies of that authority.

The parable opens with Jesus saying, **(Luke 20:9)**, "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to the tenants and went into another country for a long while."

This parable continues a big theme in the book of Luke. One commentator calls these kind of parables, "Parables of Absence." Jesus is constantly calling us to pay attention to how people live and respond when the boss is absent. In other words Jesus supremely concerned with how we as the church are to live between his first coming and his second coming.

In your Community Groups this week it could be a good exercise to look back through some of Jesus parables in Luke and notice how often he is calling our attention to this time of waiting.

Why is Jesus doing this? Because he knows that the hardest time to be a Christian is always today. It's always right now—while we wait, while we try to be faithful to Jesus in a world that wants us to be faithful to present comforts, present pleasures and present immediacy. This age will test your faith.

There is a war for your soul today—a war of authority—and it does you well to pay attention to Jesus' words here if you wish to find peace at the end of it all.

As was custom this master let out his vineyard to workers who were tasked to keep the vineyard and the fruit in the place of the master. It was typical that when the grapes were ready, the owners of the vineyards were to receive a small sample of the wine so that they could discern the quality of the crop.

But as this happens things go very wrong: **Luke 20:10-18**.

Here the question of authority is answered. The problem is not that the tenants didn't know the authority of the servants, it's that they knew the authority and didn't respect it. It was an absolute scandal and a disgrace and as each servant came—their abuses and their arrogance increased.

And so when the owner sent his beloved son, gasoline was added to the fire. Jesus' inclusion of the title "beloved" is meant to show all the things you think it would. This was the cherished, treasured, and most trusted extension of the owner's authority. Certainly these men would not go so far as to kill *him*? But they did. And they did it because of what? Did you notice that? They wanted the inheritance. They wanted, in a literal sense, to be the heir (those two words are the same). So if they could kill the son, they would have the reward of the son. And so they executed their plan.

Exodus 21 and 22 have laws regarding the treatment of slaves, and the way in which one had to make restitution for even harming the ox of another man. When Jesus asks the crowd if it was right for the owner of the vineyard to come and destroy the tenants, the crowd responds, "Surely not!" Not because the actions of the owner would be wrong. But because they were saying that this whole situation was so

evil, so depraved, so vile and wretched that they couldn't fathom this ever happening: "May this situation never be," is the tone of their answer.

But Jesus looked into the eyes of the leaders and said: **(Luke 20:17-19)** "Why then do you reject me?" Quoting the prophet Isaiah he says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone it will crush him."

Then look at what happened next: **Luke 20:19**, "The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people."

These same men, the same ones who immediately discerned how terrible and vile it was for tenants to kill the beloved son—sought to kill the only beloved Son of God because they perceived the parable was about them.

The prophets had come to the leaders of Israel in the Old Testament, and they didn't listen, John came, but they didn't listen, and Jesus, the beloved Son of God had come by will of the Father—and what did they set out to do: to kill him.

Friends, this is why our silence on the question of authority will not hold up in court. There is no middle ground. Do you see the tragic ending of all of this? These men refuse to see their hostility towards God but what does it produce? Murderous thoughts and terrifying fear! They rejected Jesus and what did it get them? Refusing to submit to God's rule, they sold themselves to the rule of man! There will be no freedom, there will be no peace, there will be no relief for those who reject Jesus.

We are all destined for this dilemma of authority. We can reject God, and live in constant crushing fear of man's authority. Or we can accept God as our authority, but in so doing what do we realize? We have abused the authority.

When Peter preaches in **Acts 2:22** he says, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know--this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

In Eden, Adam rebelled against the good and loving authority of God and took the fruit. But when Adam took the fruit, every child throughout all history simultaneously took the life of the son. The juice that ran down Eve's mouth is the blood that is on our hands.

We, in our sinful unbelief, we have rejected the stone. But that stone is the cornerstone. He is the most significant authority, the point of division, the dividing line of all human history. And what will the Lord do when he comes back and sees what we have done? He will come and destroy those tenants. "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone it will crush him."

You might right now be stumbling over Jesus. But one day he's coming back. Though you may find him inconvenient in this life, the stumbling stone is coming back as a cornerstone and when he comes all whom he falls upon will be crushed.

This doesn't teach the doctrine of annihilation—that's the belief that if you don't believe in Jesus when he comes back you'll be punished and then you'll die and be no more. This crushing is consistent with the eternal conscious torment in hell where the suffering and pain of your punishment is as infinite as the severity of your crime. Right now, it does you well to consider and fear that reality.

Yes, it is shocking to read of Jesus saying he will come to destroy the wicked. But remember the heart of sinners in **Luke 19:47**, where these men were seeking to destroy Jesus. Jesus promises the destruction of the sinners because sinners desire the destruction of the savior. Judgement isn't a God problem. It's a man problem.

Jesus, the cornerstone is coming back, and we have caused him death.

It is as one old hymn says, "Twas I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree; I crucified the Christ of God, I joined the mockery."

Yet despite this, Christians can sing of the Owner coming back with an odd sense of confidence. Consider this hymn: "The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well with my soul!"

How can that be? How can it be that such rebels, such murderers, such abusers as us might see the cornerstone we have rejected and say, "It is well!?"

By making up our minds right now about Jesus. This is our final point of application this morning: **People Under Authority**.

Right now, though we have stumbled, the stone has not yet fallen. We must make up our minds about Jesus' authority. We make important decisions like this all the time.

A year from now you will be called to make up your minds about who you think to be worthy of the presidential office. At one point in their life, every spouse had to make up their minds about who they would marry. In 1776, the thirteen colonies had to make up their minds about Britain. In 1517, Martin Luther had to make up their mind about the Catholic Church. In 325 AD, St. Nick and the council of Nicaea had to make up his mind about Arius. In Acts 4, Peter and John had to make up their minds about the courts command to not preach the gospel. And in Luke 20:19 the scribes and religious leaders had to make up their minds about Jesus—and so to do you today.

The preaching and response of the gospel is not a trifling matter. What you believe about Jesus as the authority is not inconsequential! In Jesus' parable the tenant's view of the beloved son was the single most defining decision. But this life is no fictional parable. Jesus looks directly at these men and says, "Reject me at your own peril."

Who is he talking to? He's talking to the leaders, he's talking to the pastors, he's talking to the church members, and Sunday school teachers. He's talking to you and he's talking to me.

If what he's talking about doesn't give us a shiver in our own souls, then I don't think you really believe him.

But if we do believe him, and if we fear him, then the fear of the Lord can become the beginning of wisdom. Remember this whole challenge began as the preaching of the gospel was interrupted. But it is the preaching of the gospel which resolves all of our fear. The gospel says that Jesus not only died because of sinners—but he died for sinners. The cross condemns us all, but because Jesus is the authority to save, it also saves all who come to him in faith.

John Stott says it this way, **“Before we can begin to see the cross as something done for us (leading to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done by us (leading to repentance).**

In the book of 1 Samuel, the people of God realize that in asking for a king they have rejected God's authority and they rightly fear for their lives. But look at what Samuel says to them: **1 Samuel 12:20-22.**

When we are convicted of our sin, we will want to run from God. Why? Because if God is who he is, and if we have done what we have done, then we are justly and rightly fearful. But Samuel says, "Don't run from him." Why? Because God is going to make a people.

Or as Jesus says, the vineyard will be given to others. The inheritance lives. And to whom does it go? To the ones who fear the Lord! To the ones who come in humble confession of their wrongs.

And how are we made safe? This parable shows a father who sent his son not knowing he would die. But in Triune unity it so pleased the Son to be sent by the Father so that through his murder, the wretched sinners might be freed from the authority of sin.

We are condemned because the son has died. But we are also saved because the Son has died. Jesus took our punishment. So now we bring him our brokenness of heart, we ask that we be broken by his mercy in this life.

Jesus is the dividing line of all history. He is the authority whether you realize it or not. We have wronged him. But he is the cornerstone.

So how then do we live? How do we live as people who are under authority by grace? People who once stumbled, but who are now saved?

Look with me at **Ephesians 4:15-16.**

Because Christ is the cornerstone—we revisit the vineyard with a new outlook. We labor not for our own gain, but we labor, we love, we share the gospel, we do everything so that together the church might grow more and more into Christ who is our head. May Jesus rule in this church to such an end.