

Authority and obedience

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Good evening everyone. Welcome to our evening service on Sunday the 26th of April! We are gathered here to declare the glory of the risen Lord! So let's start our time together by singing song number 477, All Heaven Declares the Glory of the Risen Lord.

All Heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord, Who can come in with the beauty of the Lord. Forever He will be, the Lamb upon the throne. I gladly bow the knee, and worship Him alone. I will proclaim, the glory of the risen Lord, Who once was slain, to reconcile man to God. Forever He will be, the Lamb upon the throne. I gladly bow the knee, and worship Him alone.

[1 : 54] Now let's pray together. Father in heaven, as the whole world finds itself in the valley of the shadow of death, we cry out to you for strength of spirit and strength of mind.

We acknowledge you as the sovereign Lord, and confess that what has come upon us is only what a world in rebellion against you deserves. And yet we pray for mercy. We pray that your people everywhere might be strong in your spirit, and testify to the rock that is the words of Jesus, as the storm rages about us.

Father, we give you thanks for the medical staff, for the police, and all the other key workers in the front line of this battle. We pray that they may receive the equipment they need to keep them safe. But more than that, as they face challenges they must never have expected, we pray that they might seek the true security that's found in Christ Jesus. We pray for those businesses and livelihoods that are threatened by the measures put in place.

May they receive the help they need. We lift up to you those of your people and the missionaries in poorer countries that lack the resources to fight this scourge.

[3 : 06] May your people be enabled to bring both help and hope to those in desperate circumstances. And finally we pray again for ourselves. We lift up to you those suffering, ill health and isolation, and pray that you will be their help and strength.

Please bring them healing in body and spirit. Teach us new ways to support one another. Although we are separated physically and cannot meet together as we would love to do, we pray that we will be drawn together in love.

May we shine as lights in a dark world while this chaos remains, and into an uncertain future until the Lord returns. And Father, we pray now as we turn to study your word, we might find food for our souls in it, and that we might find our lives changed and encouraged through studying your word. We ask these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. Our reading today is from the book of Matthew, chapter 21.

We start reading at verse 23. Jesus entered the temple courts, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

[4 : 23] By what authority are you doing these things? They asked. And who gave you this authority? 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.

John's baptism. Where did it come from? Was it from heaven or of human origin? They discussed it among themselves and said, If we say from heaven, he will ask, Then why didn't you believe him? But if we say of human origin, we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Then he said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, Son, go and work today in the vineyard. I will not, he answered.

But later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, I will, sir. But he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?

[5 : 32] The first they answered. Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him.

But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. So let's turn to look at this passage of scripture.

Whose advice can you trust? That's a vital question in these uncertain times. There's no shortage of information, but is it reliable?

Even the experts seem to disagree. Can even official sources be trusted, or are they deliberately leaving us in the dark? Are the news media trustworthy, or are they reports slanted by some hidden agenda?

Should you trust the BBC, or are you safer relying on a rumour TikTok posted by your cousin's boyfriend? If slanted media, biased politicians, and contradictory expert opinions are confusing enough in any field of inquiry, when it comes to the question of religion, the issue is even more acute, because the teachers claim not just expert opinion, but divine authority.

[6 : 55] Jesus pinpoints the crux of this matter in verse 25. Divine authority or human opinion? How can anyone decide?

Matthew's original readers face this problem acutely. There were rabbis aplenty, all peddling their own teaching, but which ones were reliable? And so today there are religions and gurus everywhere.

Even within the bounds of so-called Christianity, there's a broad spectrum of opinion. As one humorist put it, no one from mousy-tongue to the Pope can be sure he isn't an Anglican.

As a general rule, it probably is a good idea to listen to the experts, but not always. Sometimes, as in our passage, the experts may have a hidden agenda. So Jesus appears to duck the question in verse 27, but actually he does not.

The issue cannot be ducked. Jesus now is actively provoking a confrontation with the religious leaders. He has entered the city on a donkey, claiming to be the king prophesied by Zechariah 9.9.

[8 : 06] He has cleansed the temple in fulfillment of Malachi 3.1-5 and other prophecies. The rabbis were actually asking a fair question. Jesus would have answered it directly if they were really prepared for a fair answer, but they were not.

The Jewish leaders' question is a sham because they've already made up their mind. So with his usual genius for debate, Jesus at once gets to the heart of the issue and he makes here essentially three points.

First of all, he introduces the issue of how such questions are to be decided. And then he points out that to arrive at the truth requires integrity and an open mind.

And thirdly, that submission to the kingdom of God involves new life choices. So let us trace the stages of this argument. First of all, how are such questions of divine authority to be decided?

The reason that Jesus does not give a straight answer here is because the teachers and priests were not really interested in what Jesus had to say. They just wanted a political fix.

[9 : 16] So Jesus moves the debate to a different focus. Not a hypothetical one, but one that was already history. Who was John the Baptist? John's credentials as a prophet were impeccable.

Matthew has been careful to make this point in his account in chapter 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.

Furthermore, John's lifestyle backed up what he claimed to believe. He was not interested in money or political power. He was not really interested in fame, although he certainly achieved that.

Even when arrested by Herod, he did not tone down his message. In the end, John was faithful to the death. And what was John's own assessment of the Jewish religious experts?

We find it in Matthew 3, verses 7 to 8. When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them, You brood of vipers!

[10 : 20] Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And so the Jewish leaders were caught. They were simply incapable of considering Jesus' question on its merits.

They did not address the real issue of whether John was indeed the forerunner prophesied by Isaiah. It seems they didn't even try. They claimed to be experts in the law, in the prophetic writing, in the messianic hope.

But instead of carrying out a proper theological analysis, they answer an honest spiritual question by a dishonest political reply. They were even afraid to express their own opinion.

They were only interested in maintaining their status in the eyes of the public. What is the best spin we can put on these events? So, in verse 27, Jesus refuses to give them a direct answer because they were not really interested in one.

Questions of divine authority cannot be settled by public opinion, although people often try. A few years ago, there was a debate held in Brighton as to whether a homosexual lifestyle was compatible with Christianity.

[11 : 29] While I certainly had my own opinion on the matter, I went along with a reasonably open mind. I was prepared to be persuaded I was wrong. But those advocating gay Christianity appealed only to personal experience and public opinion.

Any attempt by evangelicals to move the debate onto theology or scripture was slapped down by the chair of the meeting. And so the discussion was futile. No evangelical was convinced and the discussion was just a waste of time.

If you want to convince people, you have to argue fairly. And so Jesus moves on to the second point. To arrive at the truth requires integrity and an open mind.

If the alleged expert is shaky on integrity, that's a good reason for not taking their opinion seriously. John the Baptist practiced what he preached.

The Jewish leaders did not. And so Jesus develops this point with the parable of the two sons, verses 28 to 31. The meaning can hardly be clearer.

[12 : 34] It is not what you say that matters so much as what you are. And yet the Jewish leaders were in a vastly privileged position. They, of all the religious leaders and philosophers and teachers in the world, had the best access to God's revelation in the Old Testament.

They had all the advantages of scholarship and academic debate. It seemed they gave the right answers to all the standard theological questions. And yet when they are presented with Jesus' question in verse 29, they fluff it.

Why? Because in spite of what they claimed, they were not actually prepared to do what God had said. The authentic spiritual leader is obedient to God's revelation and prepared to put that into practice.

John the Baptist described the Jewish leaders as a generation of vipers. Vipers look sleepy and inert and apparently are not dangerous until they decide to strike and then they are lethal.

A sensible person avoids vipers. A little later, Jesus would go on to the offensive against his critics and say this, The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

[13 : 45] So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do if they do not practice what they preach. And then after that, Jesus went on to spell out their hypocrisy in detail.

If you are not prepared to submit to that authority to repent, there is no point in asking the question. The Jews themselves could see the trap. John's baptism, where did it come from?

Was it from heaven or from men? They discussed it among themselves and said, If we said from heaven, he will ask them, Why didn't you believe him? And yet they couldn't find their way out of the trap.

So Jesus moves to his conclusion in verse 32. Submission to the kingdom of God involves new life choices. If your religion does not change even yourself, what good is it?

The genuine message of the kingdom has life-changing power. It invites people to repent, to turn away from their destructive lifestyles and practices, and to start anew.

[14 : 50] And what is this self-destructive behaviour? Well, here we mean behaviour displeasing to God. Normally Jesus uses the term kingdom of heaven, but here he refers to the kingdom of God, emphasising that God is the source of its authority and law.

The lifestyles of this world are in the end self-destructive. And God condemns them as such. But it is easier to convince a corrupt official or a sex worker of that fact than it is to convince self-righteous people who believe they are okay.

Matthew himself had been a tax collector, as had Zacchaeus. Tradition, at least, holds that Mary Magdalene had lived a sexually immoral life. The woman at the well, we know, had five husbands and was now living with another man.

And yet they had all signed up for the kingdom. They had realised they were trapped and needed a way out. But the Jewish leaders had seen all that and instead of giving thanks to God, they were appalled.

Matthew 23, verse 1-3 says, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourself do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

[16:11] Those who truly hear the message will be changed. But those who refuse to change are not really listening. They're not interested.

Like these Jewish leaders, they only want to find a way out of the question. But all this happened 2,000 years ago.

What relevance does a 2,000-year-old theological argument have for us today? Well, contrary to what Professor Dawkins and his followers would tell us, faith is not believing in spite of the evidence.

Faith is certainly not credulity, believing six impossible things before breakfast. That's the devil's tactic to get us to believe things that are impossible. On the contrary, faith requires a cool head and a certain healthy scepticism about what it seems that everybody knows.

And COVID-19 has brought this discussion bang up to date. Things and people that we thought were trustworthy have been shaken. We tend to trust in science to solve all our problems, but now the scientists themselves admit they're unsure.

[17:21] Of course, the bioscientists may indeed in the end find a cure or vaccine for this virus. And of course, we should be praying that they do. But bioscience cannot provide a solution to the political and economic and mental and above all spiritual damage that this virus has caused.

In a time of confusion and anxiety, what can be trusted? Will your spiritual house fall because it is built on sand? That was what happened to these Jews 2,000 years ago.

That spiritual and moral uncertainty that Jesus put his finger on would 40 years later result in the destruction of the temple and the city. So let's take a final look at Jesus' argument here and apply it to ourselves.

If we want to know who Jesus is and where his authority comes from, are we asking the questions honestly? Are we aware of our own bias and propensity to turn away from God and do our own thing?

And if we do hear God's word, are we prepared to change direction, to repent as the Bible calls it? Finally, there's one aspect of the debate in this passage that we have not yet touched on.

[18:45] Jesus had performed miraculous signs to show his authority, but they failed to convince these Jewish leaders. Here he doesn't even mention them. Instead, he appeals to the testimony of a prophet, John, a prophet who, as far as we know, performed no miracles at all.

It's not miracles that convince people, but testimony. Ultimately, Jesus' authority came from God, but the authentication of it was via spirit-inspired human testimony, the testimony of the prophets and the testimony of the apostles.

Signs convinced nobody, at least not on their own. Jesus had earlier told a story in which Abraham had said, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, well, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.

And the truth of that would soon be demonstrated. Jesus would soon be put to death on the cross, but on the third day he would rise from the dead, as he himself had predicted, and as the apostles and other disciples were prepared to testify, even to the extent of giving up their own lives for this testimony.

It was that testimony that changed the world. It was that testimony, indeed, that built Western civilisation. And as the West moves away from that understanding, so it finds itself shaken, shaken now by this virus, and it desperately needs that testimony once again.

[20:14] Do you want to know where Jesus' authority comes from? Do you seek spiritual certainty? Then coolly consider the evidence, treat what the world says about him with a healthy scepticism, and then home in on the testimony of the apostles, those who were around at the time, and that testimony testifies to the words of God himself.

Matthew 17, verse 5. While Jesus was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped and a voice from the cloud said, This is my son whom I love.

