

A question of authority

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[0 : 00] Chapter 20 from verse 1. One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and the teachers of the law together with the elders came up to him.

Tell us by what authority you are doing these things, they said. Who gave you this authority? He replied, I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism, was it from heaven or of human origin?

They discussed it among themselves and said, if we say from heaven, he will ask, why didn't you believe him? But if we say of human origin, all the people will stone us because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.

So they answered, we don't know where it was from. Jesus said, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. He went on to tell the people this parable.

A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

[1 : 05] He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third and they wounded him and threw him out.

Then the owner of the vineyard said, what shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over.

This is the heir, they said. Let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours. So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?

He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. When the people heard this, they said, God forbid. Jesus looked directly at them and asked, Then what is the meaning of that which is written?

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces. Anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.

[2 : 07] The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies who pretended to be sincere.

They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him. Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? He saw through their duplicity and said to them, Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?

Caesar's, they replied. He said to them, Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public, and astonished by his answer, they became silent.

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

[3 : 19] Now, there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her. And in the same way, the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too.

Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? And Jesus replied, The people of this age marry and are given in marriage.

But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come, and in the resurrection from the dead, will neither marry nor be given in marriage. And they can no longer die, for they are like the angels.

They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive. Some of the teachers of the law responded, A well said, teacher!

[4 : 17] And no one dared to ask him any more questions. Then Jesus said to them, Why is it said that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself declares in the book of Psalms, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

David calls him Lord. How then can he be his son? While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, Beware of the teachers of the law.

They like to walk around in flowing robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues, and places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses, and for a show make lengthy prayers.

These men will be punished most severely. As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.

Truly I tell you, he said, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.

[5 : 29] Amen. Who died and made you king? What gives you the right to act like that? These are the sorts of accusations that the religious leaders are coming to Jesus with in the opening verses of chapter 20.

The question here is about authority. What right does Jesus have to behave as he does? Perhaps they're especially thinking about him cleansing the temple, we call it, driving out those who were selling in the temple courts.

That's recorded in the closing verses of chapter 19. Perhaps they're especially thinking about that, but it's not limited to that particular incident. Rather, you know, earlier on in Jesus' ministry, they went and asked him, who has authority to forgive sins but God alone?

Jesus has been exerting his authority. Excuse me, sorry. Exerting his authority throughout his ministry. And he's being questioned about it.

Jesus here in verse 1 is busy teaching the people. But who appointed him to do that? There's a system here in the temple. There's an authority structure. The high priest at the top, the priests, the scribes, it's all laid down.

[6 : 48] There's a system and Jesus is ignoring it. So as we return to Luke's gospel, the focus in this section of the narrative is on controversy.

So we read right through to the start of chapter 21, because this section that we're focused on today, the first 19 verses of chapter 20, this is the beginning of the record of the mounting tension between Jesus and the religious authorities.

That tension which will, of course, reach its climax in his crucifixion. So the opening interaction here between Jesus and the religious leaders, and then the following parable that runs from verse 9 through to 19.

In these sections, we're going to focus on three things this morning. First, we see here a willful ignorance. Willful ignorance.

There you go. Second, culpable rejection. And then thirdly and finally, certain consequences. Willful ignorance, culpable rejection, and certain consequences.

[7 : 51] So, willful ignorance. Consider, if you will, consider why these religious leaders ask the question that they do here in verse 2. Why do they come and ask him, by what authority are you doing these things?

Well, to a certain extent, it's a very natural question to ask, isn't it? Because, well, Jesus doesn't fit into their neat structure. He hasn't been authorised as a priest.

He isn't an official scribe. He's just kind of come in here and started throwing his weight around.

He's messing up their nicely organised systems. They're conveniently profitable processes.

These people have their secure authority. They know where they stand. They like the respect that they receive from all the people. And here Jesus is messing it up.

Claiming that respect for himself. No wonder they ask, who gave you the authority to do this? It's understandable, isn't it? And maybe, maybe at first read, Jesus' response to that question seems a little bit evasive, even slightly childish, just kind of keeping his secrets, being inscrutable.

[9 : 01] I won't answer your question unless you answer mine, and I know you won't want to do that. But when we look below the surface of that response slightly, well, firstly, answering a question with a question is actually a normal part of how the religious leaders of the day interact with one another.

This is part of normal rabbinic discourse. The Jewish teachers, this is how they carry out their debates. How they teach the people. They ask questions of one another. They interact together. So it's not out of place for Jesus to respond to a question with a question. That's part of what they do. But more importantly, the question that Jesus asks implicitly suggests that the answer to his question will show the answer to their question.

The answer to their question is going to be built upon the answer to his question. And it's not hard to see how that would be, because John testified that Jesus is the Messiah.

So how you react to John informs how you react to Jesus. If they acknowledge John, well, you're a long way to figuring out the source of Jesus' authority, aren't you?

[10 : 14] And on the other hand, if they don't believe John's prophecy of the coming kingdom, well, then there's not much hope of them seeing the presence of the kingdom in Jesus, is there?

So far, so good. Reasonable question, sensible counter question. But it's in what follows in verses five and six that we see this willful ignorance of these religious leaders.

They discussed it among themselves and said, if we say John's ministry is from heaven, he will ask, why didn't you believe him? But if we say of human origin, all the people will stone us because they're persuaded that John was a prophet.

In other words, here we see, as Leon Morris puts it, they don't seem to have been concerned with the facts. They concentrate on the effects, not the truth of the possible answers.

What they're discussing isn't actually whether John was a genuine prophet. What they're discussing is not the nature of John's baptism, the source of it, human or heavenly origin.

[11 : 16] No, they're not really interested in the facts. They care about what they can get away with saying. So if it is true in verse seven that they don't know, well, their ignorance is willful, isn't it?

They haven't honestly tried to figure it out. They're not interested in whether or not John's a prophet. What they're interested in is securing their own authority, maintaining their comfortable positions.

And of course, recognising a prophet or not, well, that's part of what they're supposed to do. If they claim to be religious leaders, they should have a very clear opinion on who John the Baptist really is.

But like Herod at Jesus' birth, that we thought about a couple of weeks ago, like Herod, these authority figures here in the temple, they're threatened by a potential challenge.

And they respond to that challenge by lashing out, by trying to get rid of the threat. The question for us today is, how will we respond to Jesus' authority?

[12 : 23] Because Jesus' authority may be a threat to us too. Because if we accept that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, well, to accept that is inherently to acknowledge that it has not been given to me.

I don't have authority, even in my own life. It's sometimes easy, isn't it? It's easy to think that we've surrendered authority to Jesus, to tell ourselves that he is Lord of our lives, that we recognise his authority.

And maybe in many areas of your life, you have surrendered authority to him. But what's worth considering is in which areas you have not. To ask yourself, am I clinging to the right to make financial decisions that suit me, rather than according to his priorities, his authority?

Does he have authority in the big decisions of my life? Where I'm going to live? Who I'm going to marry? How I'll spend the bulk of my time at work or otherwise?

Does Jesus have the authority to make those big decisions for you in your life? Or maybe, maybe more trickily, does he have authority in the smaller things, in the everyday, in the moment by moment decisions that you make?

[13 : 52] The time that you consider your own, my free time. Does he have authority there? Authority to affect what I watch, and read, and listen to, to affect who I spend time with?

Does he have the authority to expect me to spend time with people who I don't actually find very interesting, who don't encourage me, who are difficult to be with?

Does Jesus have the authority to call me to use my time in that way? Does Jesus have the authority in your life? Maybe like those religious leaders, we're refusing to answer that question, because we don't like what the consequences will be.

Or maybe, maybe we're giving an answer, but that answer to Jesus' authority is, is on our lips, but not actually backed up by our behavior.

Does Jesus have the authority in your life? In the parable that follows, Jesus continues with this theme of authority, and here we see a culpable rejection.

[15:05] The narrative of the parable is fairly straightforward and entirely plausible at the time that Jesus taught this way. The man who plants the vineyard and then lets it out in his absence, absolutely.

Sending servants to collect rent in kind, yeah, that's what you do. And similarly, actually for the tenants to think that they can profit by refusing to pay up, yeah, that's plausible too.

People did that. People thought, well, the owner's far away, and if I can get away with not paying rent for a couple of years, well, actually, this field will be acknowledged as mine.

The potential distances, they make it hard for the owner to exert his authority. It's plausible that people behave this way. You might wonder why the owner's willing to risk his son, but remember, up to this point, the tenants haven't gone to the length of murder.

They haven't treated the servants well. Of course they haven't. But it is plausible to suppose that the greater authority of a son rather than a servant, that that will carry the day, that it will show that the owner takes this seriously, that he will have the clout, if you like, to enforce the owner's will.

[16:15] So this narrative is, in every respect, very plausible. But as ever, the point Jesus makes in his parable isn't particularly about, you know, the actual details of the farming circumstances.

He's not teaching us how owners and tenants should relate to one another. Now, to understand this parable, it's helpful to be aware of some well-established imagery within the Judaism of Jesus' day.

So turn with me to Isaiah 5. It's here on the screen, or you can look it up if you prefer. Isaiah chapter 5 from verse 1. I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. Now, you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?

[17:19] When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I'm going to do to my vineyard. I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed.

I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed, for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

So it's very clear here in Isaiah chapter 5 that the vineyard is God's people Israel. God is the owner of the vineyard. He's planted it.

He's cultivated it. He's done everything possible for it. And the vineyard has produced nothing. So this identity of the vineyard as God's people, this is really well established.

[18:16] So that's already there in people's minds as they come to this parable. God is the owner, the farmers to whom the vineyard is rented. Well, then in this parable, they have to be the leaders of the nation.

And that's why Jesus is telling this parable at this point. And by the end, by verse 19, these religious leaders have understood what's going on. The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.

But they were afraid of the people. So what's the point here? Well, the leaders and all too many of the people following after them, they've acted just like these tenant farmers in the parable.

Time after time after time, God has sent his messengers. He sent the prophets. He sent people to tell them what he expects of them, to remind them to behave as they already know they ought, to call them back to his word, to instruct them to do what they really knew was expected of them.

I mean, the farmers knew they were tenants. They knew they owed rent. God's people knew what was expected of them. Folks, this is human nature in all of its corruption, isn't it?

[19 : 29] Since the days of Adam, this is how we're inclined to treat God and to treat his creation. Not asking what's right, what's owed as tenants, as stewards.

Not asking what we ought to do, but rather, like these greedy tenants, we ask, what can I grab? What can I claim? How can I be in charge? How can I call the authority?

How can I claim it and hold on to it, that authority for myself? And Jesus shows them their guilt in this parable. And he shows us. He shows them they fail to do what is expected of them.

They're culpable for their failure. No one else is to blame. They can't say they didn't know. The owner sent servant after servant. God, in his long-suffering patience, sent prophet after prophet after prophet.

And from Moses through to John, the prophets were ignored time after time after time. And even after the servants have been rejected, time after time, even after that, the owner sends his son.

[20 : 35] A last chance, a final opportunity to do as they ought, to do what is expected of them. They've rejected his servants, the prophets.

But he's not exacting punishment for their past poor behaviour. Rather, he extends once again the opportunity for them to do as they ought. It's readily apparent to the scribes and to the priests, isn't it, that Jesus accuses them of failing to listen when God speaks.

It's a culpable rejection of God, of Jesus' authority. But the parable isn't over with the sending of the son. When the tenants choose to kill the son, they think that they're going to thereby profit.

Maybe they're supposing that the arrival of the son means the father is dead. Maybe they think, therefore, that if we remove the son, well, there'll no longer be anyone to trouble us. We can have this vineyard as our own.

But that is not to be. The owner is very much alive. And Jesus is clear. His rejection is obvious. Sorry, his reaction. His reaction is obvious.

[21 : 46] The owner's response to the death of his son is obvious. He will come and deal with those who killed his son. Of course he will. Whether this is vengeance at his own hands, or this is kind of a judicial charge of murder, which of these is envisaged, we don't really know, but it's neither here nor there.

This behaviour will not be tolerated. The consequences are serious. He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. The reaction of the listening crowd, verse 16, makes it clear they understand just how serious is the point that Jesus is making.

This is not just a rather bloody story, is it? This is about God's own people. May God forbid that such a thing should happen.

I see what Jesus is saying. Those who fail to respond to God's call upon them will suffer this fate.

Those who choose to reject God's messengers will find themselves rejected by him.

Those who do not recognise the authority of the son to declare the owner's will will find the owner's will to be painful in the extreme. Those who ultimately will kill the son, they themselves will be killed.

[23 : 01] And Jesus says, Jesus says all of this, all of it is according to plan. This is what was intended. Verse 17, he looked at them and asked, then what is the meaning of that which is written?

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is what has to happen. Because otherwise this prophecy wouldn't be fulfilled. It's recorded in Psalm 118.

It has to happen. The stone has to be rejected and then has to become the cornerstone. It has to be the case that there is a rejection of God's plan followed by an ultimate vindication of that plan.

And that vindication is indeed glorious. Psalm 118 continues, the Lord has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes.

The Lord has done it this very day. Let us rejoice today and be glad. And so again, the warning of these verses is very clear, isn't it?

[24 : 04] The challenge to each and every person today, just as the challenge to the listening leaders back then. The question is, which path are you going to go down? Behind which leader will you line up?

Will you follow the path of those farmers, grasping onto authority out for whatever you can get, rejecting the true authority? Or will you instead align yourself behind the sun?

Pay what is owed. Give God his due. The coming of the sun represents the last chance to do that. So to reject him is to invite the absolutely certain consequences of that choice.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, as we consider your authority, as we see it displayed in how you taught in the miracles that you accomplished, and finally in your choice to lay down your life, only to take it up again.

As we see your authority, we recognise the failings in our own lives, the ways that we have sought to cling on to authority, whether in grand ways or in small, the ways that we have not given you your due.

[25 : 29] We have not lived as you have called us to. Lord Jesus, we are sorry. We ask for your forgiveness. And we ask for the power of your Holy Spirit within us to enable us to surrender, to follow your will and not our own, in the big things, and every single day.

Amen.