

# The Authority of Jesus Questioned

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 18 January 2026

Preacher: Colin Dow

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Why should we listen to and believe in Jesus Christ? He lived 2,000 years ago in far-off Palestine, and although since then his life and teaching have influenced the world for good, why should we take him seriously?

After all, the immediate needs of our lives are important. The need to provide for ourselves and our families, the need for personal comfort and space, the need for relationships and love.

Our society tells us that these are the needs which are of first importance, but in the Bible, Jesus tells us different, that we should put the kingdom of God first and that all these other needs will be given to us.

So to whom then should we listen? Let's put the question another way. What right does Jesus have to tell us what to believe and what to do?

From where does he get his authority to say these things to us, to tell us to change our belief systems and the way we live our lives to fit in with his agenda, rather than leaving us to get on with living our own lives the way we always have?

[ 1 : 1 9 ]     Well, these are the kind of questions the chief priests and the scribes, together with the elders, came to ask Jesus in Luke chapter 20 verse 1. Tell us by what authority you do these things or who it is that gave you this authority.

What right does Jesus have to say the things he says and to do the things he does? I want us to consider this passage together in Luke 20 verses 1 through 8 under two headings.

The question for us is this, whose authority do we trust?

And by whose authority do we live? That of Jesus or that of the world around us? So first of all then, while he was preaching, they were plotting.

While he was preaching, they were plotting, verses 1 and 2. There's no doubt that the chief priests and the scribes and the elders were put up to asking this question by even higher authorities than they.

[ 2 : 2 9 ]     This isn't just a spontaneous question that came out of nowhere. The Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, had heard of what Jesus had done by cleansing the temple and they knew that he was daily teaching in the temple.

So they sent these chief priests, these scribes, and these elders to ask this awkward question. What's happening here is that the Jewish rulers are engaging in a plot to get rid of Jesus.

A couple of verses before we saw this last week in verse 47, we read, the chief priests and the chief priests and the scribes and the principal men, the elders of the people were seeking to destroy him, Jesus.

And now they're putting their plan to destroy Jesus into practice. It smells of a secret plot devised at the highest levels to get rid of Jesus.

What has before, opposition to Jesus had been disordered. Now it's beginning to organize itself. Jesus' enemies are closing in upon him from every side. And they've got him exactly where they want him, in Jerusalem, the seat of their power.

[ 3 : 38 ] All they've got to do now is to set a trap and wait for him to walk straight into it. They've talked in secret places and decided among themselves, the best way to trap Jesus is to ask him this question.

Tell us by what authority you do these things or who gave you that authority. Between them, they chose the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders to put their plan into operation.

The these things to which they referred were what Jesus was doing, what he was saying, and when it was all taking place. The temple in Jerusalem was the seat of their history and culture, the heart of what it meant to be Jewish.

And here we have a radical rabbi from uncultured Galilee messing things up for them. He's threatening the whole foundation and definition of Jewishness.

Well, Jesus' first action on arriving at the temple was to forcibly rearrange its furniture. He drove out the traders and the money changers.

[ 4 : 40 ] These men charged way over the odds for their services. And the money they brought in was taxed by the religious elite, which provided a healthy income for them. Because of what Jesus had done, their prophets were threatened.

Then there was what Jesus was teaching. We've already seen, we saw this last week, Luke 20 and 21 records the contents of Jesus' teaching in the temple. And as far as the religious elite were concerned, it didn't reflect well on them.

Beware the scribes and the Pharisees, he will go on to say. They will receive the greater condemnation. Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, something which was unthinkable to the religious elite.

And perhaps worst of all was that the ordinary people were hanging on every word Jesus said. He, not them, had the people's ear.

Jesus was more popular than they were. Make no mistake, Jesus and his legacy had to be destroyed. So they plotted and devised a trap. Meanwhile, away from the smoke-filled rooms of the conspirators, Jesus was teaching in the temple.

[ 5 : 55 ] Luke 20 verse 1 puts it this way. One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel. While they were plotting, Jesus was preaching.

While they were conspiring, Jesus was teaching. And the content of his teaching in the gospel were this. The good news. The evangel. While the Jewish rulers were conspiring and plotting evil, Jesus was preaching good.

While they were conspiring to kill him, he was preaching a message which brings life. In the starkest of contrasts, Jesus shows himself to be the opposite of all the Jewish religious elite stood for.

He is speaking truth to power, we would talk about, we would say. And the power doesn't like it. What he's preaching is not political. It's not cultural.

It is the kingdom of God the way it was meant to be. The good news of God's salvation. This was always what the temple had been designed for. Not as a seat of political power, but as the earthly presence of God who from his throne announces good news to the nations.

[ 7 : 14 ] So why would we listen to Jesus? Well, even if this passage ended at the end of verse 2, it would be enough. He is the preacher of truth and life.

Through him we live in the truth of God and experience for ourselves a life only God can give us. He puts right what was wrong. He fixes that which was broken.

He finds that which was lost. Who else does what Jesus does? Who else announces such good news to a lost, broken and wrong world?

Who else proclaims the forgiveness of sins, hope in God, and the promise of eternal life in him? Who else? You won't find this news anywhere else other than in Jesus.

All you'll find are the secret conspiracies of power-hungry men to control the way we think and act. To deny us our humanity and freedom.

[ 8 : 12 ] Rather than the Jesus who came to raise our humanity beyond anything we could ever think possible. Blaise Pascal, you may have heard of his name, was a French philosopher.

He set the question in these terms. If the atheist is right that Jesus Christ was self-deluded and that he was preaching an elaborate fantasy, then the Christian who has staked her life on trusting him loses nothing upon her death.

It was all a fantasy anyway. But if the atheist is wrong that Jesus Christ is the saviour and that he was preaching the truth, then the Christian who has staked his life by trusting in him gains everything.

And the atheist loses everything. It's called Pascal's Wager. What have you got today to lose by joining with the people in the temple, hanging on Jesus' every word, and the many millions of people around our world today who believe and trust in Jesus as saviour?

You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain. What have you got to lose by making Jesus the king of your heart and turning all authority in your life over to him?

[ 9 : 42 ] Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. You've only gained. What you'll get from Jesus is the freedom of the good news. What you'll get from society around us is that they control the way we think and act.

While he was preaching, they were plotting. On what side of the divide are you? Then from verses 3 to 8, While he was challenging them, they were hesitating.

While he was challenging them, they were hesitating. Jesus was very familiar with the way in which Jewish rabbis taught. They often answered a question by asking another question.

So Jesus, using the rabbinic method of getting to the truth, says to them in verse 3, Tell me this. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?

Jesus and John, of course, were closely associated with one another. Not only were they cousins, but their message was remarkably similar in theme and tone. But more than that, John the Baptist preached that after him would come the Jewish Messiah.

[ 10 : 55 ] Immediately after him would come the Jewish Messiah. Just as Peter read to us, Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. He was self-consciously preparing the way for the Lord.

He was playing the role of Elijah. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he cried out, Behold the Lamb of God! Though he went through many difficulties, there was little doubt in John's mind that Jesus was the Messiah, promised by God to Israel to bring freedom and liberty.

John and his message were incredibly popular with the common people. So this sets the chief priests and the scribes and the elders a problem.

Read in verse 5 that they huddled away to talk about it amongst themselves. Perhaps they went and withdrew into a Celtic huddle. They weren't so interested in answering the question truthfully as they were in what the answer would mean for them.

So they said to each other, If we say from heaven, Jesus will say, Why didn't you believe him? But if we say from men, all the people will stone us because they're convinced that John was a prophet.

[ 12 : 08 ] So far from catching Jesus out, He had trapped them in the horns of a dilemma. Jesus asked them a straight question, but to that question they could not possibly give a straight answer.

Notice, they're not interested in answering the question truthfully. They're not interested. They want to answer in a way which will save face and preserve their power base.

If they had answered from God, that John's baptism was from God, they'd have had to acknowledge also that Jesus was the Messiah and that He had every right to do what He did and every right to say what He said.

After all, the coming of the Messiah and John's baptism were closely linked with each other. One can't accept one without accepting the other. If they said from God, they were by extension legitimizing Jesus' authority, which would rob them of their control and power over the temple, over the people, and over all of Israel.

Their power and control were far more important to them than the truth, so they could not answer from God. But if they answered from men, the net result was no better.

[ 13 : 23 ] Those people who hung on every word Jesus was speaking held that John the Baptist was a prophet sent from God. They believed his message was from God and that his baptism was divinely inspired.

If the religious leaders had said from men, they'd have fallen foul of the masses and they judged that they'd have been stoned to death. And you can't have control and power if you're dead.

They stand to lose everything, whichever way they answer. Who knows what they really thought the truth was? The bigger question for them is, what answer will best preserve our wealth, control, and status?

Who knows whether they cared what the truth was? For them, the truth was very much a secondary issue. The whole balance of power in Israel hung by a thread, and based on their answer to Jesus' question, it could all go terribly wrong for them.

So they replied that they did not know where John's baptism came from. Perhaps they would stall the problem for a while until they came up with a better plan to rid themselves of Jesus.

[ 14 : 35 ] But by the same token, it didn't show them up very well in the face of the people. If the religious leaders of Israel don't know the answer to that question, then who are they to be trusted?

It doesn't bode well for the future of Israel if its leaders are more ignorant than its people. They've ducked the question because they're not interested in the truth, only in their power.

We shouldn't be surprised that in our society, most people aren't really interested in the truth. They're only interested in what makes them feel good and what will bring them health and security.

I remember clearly the late elder of Partick Free Church, Colin Campbell, praying these words in a prayer meeting about those to whom he had shared the gospel with on the street outside.

He prayed, Lord, you can tell them a lie and they'll believe you. But they'll never believe the truth. Never a truer word said in jest.

[ 15 : 38 ] The famous G.K. Chesterton once wrote, When men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything.

Truth plays no part in the religious thinking of most people in our society. If at all they want to speak about truth, they'll say to you, Well, that's the truth for you.

What I believe is somewhat different. They'd never dream of applying this in another area of their lives. When the petrol gauge on their cars reaches zero, they find the nearest garage to fill up because the truth is they've got no petrol.

When the doctor tells them they've got a tumor, they immediately accept the invitation to receive treatment. When they see the sum two plus two equals, they immediately answer four.

But when it comes to God, and especially to Jesus, they simply will not accept the truth. Even if that truth is manifested before their very eyes, as it was the chief priests, elders, and scribes here in Luke 20, they'll adopt the same attitude.

[ 16 : 47 ] We don't want to know the truth because it means we have to change the way we think and the way we behave. Some of us will have seen the famous courtroom film, A Few Good Men, and the courtroom climax when Jack Nicholson famously shouts, You can't handle the truth.

You can't handle the truth. At the end of the day, that's why most people will not listen to us when we share the gospel with them. It's not an intellectual barrier we face. It's a moral one.

They cannot allow themselves to accept the truth of the gospel because it renders them accountable for the way they think and the way they behave. The only way in which this barrier can be overcome is by the Holy Spirit's powerful work of enlightenment, opening blind eyes to see the truth of Christ for what it is, the truth.

It's not as if people don't know the truth. It's that they're so blinded that they don't want to know the truth. To use Jack Nicholson's words, you can't handle the truth. Be confident of this.

People's rejection of what we tell them about Jesus doesn't make what we believe any the less true. Rather, it reflects their own inner bias against the truth.

[ 18 : 07 ] Earnest prayer to the sovereign God to open their eyes to the truth is the greatest weapon against the society's ignorance. While Jesus was challenging them.

They were vacillating. They were hesitating. As we close, the reaction of the chief priests, scribes, and elders is surprising, as has Jesus questioned to them.

But what I find most surprising and requires explanation is Jesus' final statement. Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Why did Jesus respond in this way? Does it reflect peevishness? Irritation on this part? If his opponents aren't willing to give a plain answer, why should he?

He'd be justified in silence. But I don't think that's why Jesus said what he did. Put yourself in the context of all that's happening. You've got a small group of religious leaders attacking Jesus.

[ 19 : 12 ] However, you've also got a very large group of common people who are hanging on every word Jesus says. They think he's the Jewish Messiah. Come like some modern Moses or Joshua to set the Jews free from the tyranny of the Romans.

That was their view of what it meant to be the Messiah. Not the proclamation of a kingdom of grace, but the enforcement of a kingdom of Jewish glory. That's the way Jesus' disciples even thought.

No matter how many times Jesus disabused them of the notion that he'd come to be an earthly king, they still held to Jesus beginning a rebellion in Jerusalem that would spread to the whole of Israel and from there would lead to the birth of a new Jewish empire in the world.

What Jesus had in mind was very different. His road would not lead to being lifted up on a golden throne but to a wooden cross.

His intention from the very beginning of his life was to give himself as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world, as the sacrifice for his people, to liberate them not from their worldly oppressors but from far more cruel and malicious enemies, the power of sin and death.

[ 20 : 28 ] Consider then in this context what would have happened had Jesus answered his own question honestly. He'd be lying of course if he said the baptism of John came from men and nor do we find Jesus lying.

By extension he'd be denying that he was the Messiah, something he'd insisted upon from the very beginning. What if he'd said however, yes, yes, it was from God.

Yes, it was from God. Bear in mind you have a large group of common people hanging on every word Jesus says. In an instant the atmosphere in the temple would have turned violent.

The people would have turned on the religious leaders. Blood may have been shed. A rebellion would have begun and they would have made Jesus king by force.

Jesus all too aware of the sinful tendencies of the human heart and sensitive to what was going to happen didn't want any of this. The last thing on his mind was to become an earthly king.

[ 21 : 32 ] He had come not to sit on a golden throne but to be crucified on a wooden cross for us. He had come to be a servant not a king. His answer then as well as condemning the chief priests and the scribes and the elders served to diffuse what could have turned into a violent rebellion and by extension prevented him from going to the cross.

What we see here is a Jesus determined to love his people to the uttermost by giving himself as a sacrifice for their sin and guilt. He was fully resolved not to be enthroned by the people but to die for his people.

The chief priests! The elders and the scribes were interested only in themselves but Jesus was only interested in others. Let's go back to the beginning right to the beginning.

What right does Jesus in the Bible have to tell us what to believe and what to do from where does he get his authority to change our belief systems the way we live our lives to fit in with his agenda rather than leaving us to get on with living our lives the way we want to?

Here then is the final answer because nobody else loves you like he does. Nobody else loves you like he does.

[ 22 : 58 ] So sacrificially so selflessly so determinedly no one else has died for you like he has to take away your sin to fill you with hope to give you eternal life and that's why today you should listen to Jesus and accept him as the ultimate source of authority in your life.

All that's left for us is to transfer our faith from the power structures of this world and particularly from ourselves and to place it upon Jesus instead.

all we need to do to receive the blessings of Jesus life, death and resurrection is to put our faith in him to say I am no longer my own master Jesus is now my master will you do that today?

Will you do that now? Will you believe the gospel Jesus preaches? Jesus preaches?