

A Question of Authority

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 1st of February 1998.

The preacher is Phil Merlman. His sermon is entitled A Question of Authority and is from Matthew chapter 22 verses 23 to 32.

I'd just like to say again it's been a really wonderful welcome here to Holy Trinity. It was fantastic to arrive last Friday week and to come into a really wonderfully clean house and to have a brand new clothes basket.

The last thing that we did before we left was throw out the old clothes basket because it had been destroyed and there was a clothes basket full of goodies and food for the kids and food for a couple of days to dinners and breakfasts and lunches.

Meat pies was great. So thank you to one and all for your kind welcome and your thoughts as well. Well let's bow our heads for a word of prayer.

[1 : 15] Our gracious God, we thank you that you feed us with your word and we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds this morning as we look at Matthew chapter 21 and the question of authority.

And Father, may we live it out in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well in the family that I grew up in, I was the youngest of four children.

Now I know that everyone says the youngest is always the spoilt one in the family and to just a tiny little bit of an extent this is truth.

However, when it came to making decisions in the family, it always seemed that my opinion, if ever there was one, never had any authority about it.

For example, as a family we used to race sailing boats and whenever asked about what the next tactical manoeuvre would be, it always seemed that Dad's decision or my brother's decision was the one that was final.

[2 : 20] My opinion never seemed to have any authority. Or perhaps it was because I lacked some sort of wisdom in my decision or whatever.

But I reckon that we lost a lot of races because they didn't listen to me. However, I think that if my father or my brothers were here, they would not admit to that. Well in my final year of high school, there was a turnaround.

I was blessed with the role of being school captain and I was rummaging around in my drawer this morning looking for my captain badge because I really did have one. I found it last week. But in the move, it must have got lost.

Well being school captain was great. It was marked with an induction ceremony just like we had a little bit this morning. Except they didn't pray for me. There was an induction ceremony and it was held in front of the whole school and as well as this induction ceremony, they gave me the badge which proved my title.

Well suddenly I had a newfound power and authority. People used to say hello to me. The younger kids in the school sometimes paid respect to me. And what's more, they used to listen to me.

[3 : 30] It was great. You'd say, pick up a piece of paper and they'd do it. And when you're the number four child, to have this newfound authority thrown on you, it really is a wonderful thing.

It was really exciting. Well there were a variety of ways that I could have used the power and authority that was entrusted to me. I could have abused my title and made people do what I wanted them to do without any respect or any regard for them.

Or I could have been very casual and not cared for anything at all and just ignored the responsibility and authority entrusted to me by my peers. Or I could have taken my responsibility seriously and I could have taken seriously the title placed upon me as school captain.

Fortunately for some, I chose to take seriously, mostly, the role that came with my title and I used as well as I could the authority given to me by my peers and the teachers and so on. Well, those are both illustrations, firstly, of authority denied to me because of my place in the family pecking order.

[4 : 49] And secondly, an authority that was passed on to me in a formal way. Well, how do we view authority in this day and age?

Do we only respect someone as an authority if they have the appropriate qualifications handed out by society? Or do we look beyond the piece of paper and look at the person for who they really are? Well, the reading from Matthew this morning, and I encourage you if you have a Bible there to open to Matthew chapter 21, the reading from Matthew this morning raises the question of authority. And more importantly, it raises the question of Jesus' authority by the authorities of his time. And this morning I want to look at this passage and see how Jesus deals with those who would challenge his authority.

And secondly, I want to look at the authority Jesus has and then finally look at what authority we as Christians have in this culture.

[5 : 54] Well, when we look at this scene from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 21, verses 23 to 32, we see that Jesus is teaching in the temple when he is interrupted by the authorities of the temple.

And they are, as we read here in verse 23, the chief priests and the elders. Now these were people, the chief priests and elders, were people who were responsible for maintaining order in civil and religious affairs in Israel.

And their authority was rarely, if ever, questioned by anyone in Israel. And they ask Jesus, in verse 23, by what authority is he doing these things?

And secondly, who gave him this authority? Well, it's quite clear that Jesus' authority then is not from the religious authorities. Otherwise, they would not have asked the question, would they? And these things, in verse 23, refers not only to Jesus' teaching in the temple, but also the other events that have been witnessed by the authorities since Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem.

[7 : 01] If you go back to the beginning of chapter 21, we see the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And the religious authorities probably witnessed that. They probably witnessed the crowds of people shouting out, Hosanna to the Son of David, in verse 9.

And they certainly witnessed Jesus cleansing out the temple as well as the healings and so on that he performed within the temple area in verses 14 and 15.

So how does Jesus deal with those who would challenge his authority? Well, it's quite simple, really. He doesn't answer their question in the way that they were perhaps hoping.

I'm sure they were looking for a straightforward answer and a way to convict Jesus. But Jesus promises to answer their question of his authority if they are willing to answer one question for him. Now, he's not being rude to the chief priests or the elders, but rather he is entering into, as one commentator says, an approved rabbinic method of debate by counter-question.

[8 : 07] So, in other words, Jesus answers their question with a question. Now, any of us who have listened to debates in Parliament or even on current affairs shows, on TVs and so on, will have seen politicians using this same tactic, answering a question with a question.

And some politicians answer their questions more masterfully than others when faced by their critics. Some politicians seem to know how to make the interviewer squirm and turn the table so that the interviewer is suddenly having to defend themselves.

And friends, this takes some skill. I haven't mastered it yet. I'm looking forward to the day when I might. Well, maybe, maybe Jesus' authority is beginning to be seen by the chief priests and elders in the way that he approaches their question, maybe.

Well, Jesus' question to them is seen in verse 25. And he says, his question is this, Did the baptism of John, talking about John the Baptist, did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?

His question to them is just as challenging as the question posed by them to him. And the question he asks is also connected to theirs and is in fact trying to help them find an answer for themselves to Jesus' authority.

[9 : 48] Well, the question posed by Jesus about the ministry of John the Baptist gives the religious authorities the opportunity to make up their own minds about John the Baptist and subsequently about Jesus as well.

However, we discover, as we read on, that they are unwilling to come to a decision about the origin of John the Baptist's ministry. That is, whether his ministry is from heaven or of human origin. And it's interesting to note that as these religious authorities are huddled in their little group discussing among themselves the options before them, they are discussing the consequences of the answer they give.

It's not that they don't know the answer. And as individuals, they all have their own ideas, no doubt. But as a group, they are not able to or they are not willing to give an answer to Jesus' question. So why is it so hard for the religious authorities to answer Jesus' question about the ministry of John the Baptist? Well, I think it's partly because they are an authority unto themselves and they only want to honour God in a way which suits them.

[11 : 09] And the ministry of John the Baptist didn't fit their framework of living. Nor did the ministry of Jesus. Both of their ministries were radical to say the least.

However, both their ministries were popular among the people because they could see God at work in people's lives and through them. Now, if the religious authorities answered that John the Baptist's ministry was from heaven as they discuss in verse 25 and they argued with one another, if we say from heaven, he will say, then why did you not believe him?

If they answered that question that John the Baptist's ministry is from heaven, not only would they have answered correctly, but they would also be morally bound to believe John.

And we know from reading the scriptures that John's ministry points to Jesus. Let me read to you from Matthew chapter 11, a couple of little passages.

And here, John's disciples have just come and asked Jesus a question and the disciples have left to go back to John. And Jesus now turns to the crowd and he addresses the crowd and he says that John the Baptist, he tells the crowd that John the Baptist is a prophet.

[12 : 33] Matthew chapter 11 verses 7 to 10. As the disciples went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John. What did you go out in the wilderness to look at?

A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written.

See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you. So here, Jesus is talking and telling the crowd that John the Baptist is a prophet.

Now if we flip over to John chapter 3, we see that John the Baptist here is talking about the nature of his ministry and what must happen to his ministry now that Jesus has come onto the scene.

[13 : 39] And he says in a nutshell that his ministry, John's ministry must decrease so that Jesus' ministry can increase. Let me read to you from chapter 3 verses 25 through to 30.

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, Rabbi, the one who is with you across the Jordan to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and all are going to him.

John answered, No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled.

He must increase, but I must decrease. So John the Baptist's ministry must decrease so that Jesus' ministry can increase.

[14 : 55] So if the religious authorities answer that John the Baptist's ministry is from heaven, they would be morally bound to follow John the Baptist and believe him and by implication, Jesus as well.

On the other hand though, if they were to answer that John the Baptist's ministry is of human origin, not only do they offer the wrong answer, but they would not dare say it out loud for fear of the people.

The religious authorities of Jesus' day share Herod's timidity in this area. In Matthew chapter 14, verse 5, we learn about Herod's timidity.

And this is what it says. It says, Though Herod wanted him, talking about John the Baptist, though Herod wanted John the Baptist put to death, he feared the crowd because they regarded him as a prophet.

Well, we see that they don't know, the religious authorities don't know how to answer Jesus' question. And for the Jewish reader, it exposes an even broader issue as to the authority of the religious leaders.

[16:14] They are unwilling to consider the truth of who Jesus is in order to preserve their position and tradition. And it also shows that they are not seeking the truth but only looking for ways to trap Jesus and to get rid of him.

So unable to give an answer to Jesus' question leads to Jesus not answering their question about the nature of his authority. But he does, however, go on to tell three parables which I think need to be seen in the light of chapter 21 verses 23 to 27.

Now I think that as you read this passage more and more, you begin to see a certain authority that Jesus has. From a human level, Jesus is a masterful speaker.

And we see that he knows the scriptures exceptionally well and that he knows just how to respond to whatever situation he is placed in. And just as we see at the beginning of this passage that he is teaching in the temple, we again here see him teaching and telling parables to those who dare to question his authority so that they too might perhaps have a chance to respond to Jesus' authority. Well, the parable of the two sons, the point of it is quite clear and we sung it in that song. And that is to say that our actions must match our words.

[17:47] And Jesus, of course, is directing this parable to the religious authorities who, as we discover throughout the gospels, do not have actions which match their words.

Well, as you read the gospel of Matthew, you discover that Jesus does have the authority to say these things because of who he is by nature.

and that is he is the son of God. And it is the ministry of John the Baptist that points the way to Jesus and prepares people for the coming Messiah.

And we see in the gospels Jesus' authority stamped by God at his baptism with the endowment and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit. And we read of his ministry where signs and wonders are performed. And despite all the authority that he has, despite all this authority that Jesus has, we also see the purpose in the gospels of the coming of Jesus.

[18:59] Matthew chapter 20 verse 28. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

And this is the great difference between the type of authority figure that the religious authorities expected and the true authority that Jesus had. Jesus wasn't interested in political takeovers, but he came to serve ordinary people and ultimately humble himself to die a terrible death on the cross.

Well, over the coming weeks, we will be looking at the stories which lead up to the death of Jesus. And it's after the death of Jesus that many of us really see the true nature of the authority that Jesus has.

And it is at his death and resurrection that we see the true saving work and the authoritative nature of Jesus. And unless we look at the death of Jesus on the cross, we too can be like the religious authorities of Jesus' day and not see the significance of Jesus' life.

But because Jesus overcame death and rose again on the third day, I believe is overwhelming evidence for him to have authority over you and over me and indeed over the whole world.

[20:31] And friends, I've got to tell you that I'm pretty keen to follow someone who loved me enough to die for me. And I'm pretty keen to follow someone who also is able to show that he loved me and cared for me and offer me life by rising again from the dead.

And Jesus is the guy who's done that, God's son. Well, how does Jesus' view of authority challenge us as Christians as we approach the 21st century?

Well, it seems today in order to be an authority on something, in order to be an authority on something, you need to have a piece of paper to prove it, or a string of letters at the end of your name.

And it's then and only then that people will stop and listen to your opinion. Well, sadly, many people's gifts are overlooked.

And their contribution that they can make to society is undervalued because they lack the right piece of paper or the endorsement.

[21:47] Let me illustrate this for you. I have a friend who's been in Australia for some time now. And he's unable to get work. It's not because he's incompetent.

Where he's come from, he was headmaster of a private school. It's not because he's incompetent at all. It's because he doesn't have the suitable qualifications in Australia to work.

He doesn't have the qualifications here to work in Australia in the area that he has been very successful in for the past 20 years. Well, don't get me wrong.

I don't, sorry, I think that being professional about what we do is important. And study is a really great thing. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't studied at Ridley College for four years.

But let's not be like the religious leaders of Jesus' day who could not see Jesus for who he was because he had not been authorised by anyone that they knew.

[22 : 51] Let's take Jesus' view who saw past the qualifications that people did and didn't have and he loved them just the same and he showed them the value that their lives had in God's eyes.

Well, let me conclude this morning by saying that we as Christians who have committed ourselves to Jesus' Lordship in our life, we have a partnership with Jesus and we have been given an authority by him to go into the world and tell about God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit and to teach everything that has been commanded to us by Jesus himself.

We may not be able to afford a theological degree or we may not even be able to afford a private education but as Christians we have the authority to tell the truth about him from the Bible.

We don't need a piece of paper. And the challenge for each of us here is to be hearers and doers of God's word and not to be like the religious authorities of Jesus' day who only heard but did not do.

Amen. Amen.