

Authority & Vulnerability

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 20. If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, it's page 826. This winter we are going through the end of the Gospel of Luke, which we will get to around Easter time. And today we are looking at chapter 20, verses 1. I'm going to read verses 1 through 19. So feel free to follow along with me as we read together. Luke chapter 20, beginning at verse 1. One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the Gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, tell us, by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority?

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. And Jesus said to them, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And he began to tell the people this parable. A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard.

But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant, but they also beat and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, what shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, this is the heir, let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours. And 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 destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. When they heard this, they said, surely not.

But he looked directly at them and said, what then is this that is written? The stone that 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. 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. Good leaders exercise authority and embrace vulnerability. That's what Andy Crouch argues in his book, Strong and Weak. He says that good leaders have a high capacity for meaningful action.

[3 : 0 4] That's authority. But they also expose themselves to high levels of meaningful risk. Vulnerability, out of love for the people whom they serve. And he says, without both of these things, we won't flourish as leaders or as human beings. You know, think about the alternatives for a moment.

One alternative would be to have a high amount of vulnerability, but very little authority. But if you're in that position, you can easily be unwillingly exploited. People in that situation are powerless. But being unwillingly exploited is dehumanizing. It's a condition we should resist.

The opposite alternative would be to have high authority and low vulnerability. And that's what many leaders or people who want to become leaders aspire to, to get more and more power and skill and privilege, but less and less accountability and transparency and exposure to pain and loss.

But such leaders often end up exploiting others even without intending to. A third alternative would be to low authority and low vulnerability. We don't want to exercise authority or embrace authority because we fear exploiting others. We don't want to be vulnerable because we fear being exploited by others. But if we refuse both meaningful action and meaningful risk, we've just withdrawn. None of those alternatives really lead to human flourishing. The path to human flourishing and the path to good leadership involves embracing both authority and vulnerability together and growing in those over time, growing in our capacity for meaningful action, but also willingly embracing meaningful risk for the sake of those around us and those whom we love.

And leaders who do that ultimately inspire trust. Now, I think this is a helpful paradigm. Andy Crouch gives lots of examples in his book. You can apply it to workplaces. You can apply it to families. You can apply it to neighborhoods, churches, sports teams, and almost anywhere where human beings interact.

[5 : 14] So, but what I want to focus on this morning is in the passage that we read in the Gospel of Luke, we see that Jesus embraces both authority and vulnerability. And so, I want us to consider these two themes. First, Jesus claims to authority. And second, Jesus' embrace of vulnerability.

So, first, Jesus claims to authority. We see this especially in the first eight verses of this chapter. Now, we're looking at the Gospel of Luke. So, before we jump into this section, let me give a 60-second background. The Gospel of Luke focuses on the person of Jesus. And Pastor Nick pointed this out two weeks ago. It's divided into three main parts. Chapters 1 through 9 are set in Galilee, and they focus on the question, who is Jesus? And the answer those chapters give is that He's the promised Messiah and the Savior of the world. But then the next section, chapters 9 through 19, is a long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and that focuses on the question, what does it mean to follow Jesus? And the answer those chapters give is to give ourselves fully to Him without holding anything back. And the third and final section, which we're in this morning, is chapters 19 through 24, they're set in Jerusalem, and they focus on the question, what did Jesus come to do?

And the answer these chapters will give is, He came to give His life as a sacrifice for others. So, who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow Him? And what did He come to do? That's what the Gospel of Luke is all about. We're in the final section this morning, and we're in chapter 20. Now, chapter 20 is a whole long series of controversies between Jesus and the leaders of the temple in Jerusalem.

Now, if you went to Jerusalem back in the day, the temple was smack in the middle of the city. It was on top of a hill. It was a huge complex of buildings, 500 yards wide, 325 yards long, right? Imagine five football fields in a row one way and three football fields in a row the other way.

Pretty big. And everything happened there. So, there was a market area where goods were sold. There were meeting places where deals were made, banks where money was exchanged, lawyers' offices where documents were kept, and an altar where hundreds, if not thousands, of animals were slaughtered in sacrifice and either burnt up or eaten on a daily basis. The temple was the center of religious worship and scholarly discourse, and the buildings were constantly being renovated and improved. It was impressive and imposing. And it was run by the chief priests who were chosen because of their family connections, who they were descended from, the scribes who were distinguished by their education, sort of their degrees, and the elders who were wealthy and politically well-connected.

[8 : 11] And into the temple walks Jesus. Now, Jesus wasn't from a priestly family, and He hadn't been educated through the official channels, and He wasn't especially wealthy or politically well-connected, so He didn't fit among the priests and the scribes and the elders, but He was popular among the people. If you look at the last verse or two of chapter 19, verse 47 says, Jesus was teaching daily in the temple. But end of verse 48 says, all the people were hanging on His words. Jesus had a following.

And Jesus didn't just teach in the temple. On one occasion, He staged a protest. Chapter 19, verse 45 says, He began to drive out those who were selling goods, and He quoted from the ancient prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, saying that the house of God had become a den of thieves. Not surprisingly, the temple leaders weren't happy with Him.

And so, they come to Him in verses 1 and 2, and they say, and it seems like they sort of come up suddenly, maybe interrupt Him while He's teaching. By what authority are you doing these things?

Who gave you the right to stage a protest and then stand here every day teaching crowds of people? Now, Jesus could have responded in all kinds of ways. If He wanted to sort of diffuse the conflict, He could have offered to leave the temple area and go somewhere else in the city.

He could have appealed to some mutually recognized authority, maybe another religious leader who was more sympathetic to Him that they still would have respected. Or He could have downplayed what He was doing and promised to abide by their regulations going forward. But He doesn't do any of those things.

[10 : 03] He doesn't back down. He doesn't walk away. He doesn't try to avoid a conflict. He comes right back with a question of His own. You tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or of human origin?

Now, first you might hear that question, and you might think, is that just a distraction tactic? Right? Is Jesus just trying to avoid answering their question by raising some irrelevant topic like people sometimes do in news interviews? Nope. That's not what He's doing. Now, for one thing, it was a common sort of common practice among rabbis to answer a question with another question. But even more, if the temple leaders would answer Jesus' question, they would immediately have an answer to their own question.

Let me explain. So, Jesus is talking in verse 4 about John the Baptist. And back then, everybody knew who John was. He was a well-known figure. He preached in the desert. He called everyone to turn away... He was confrontational and in your face. He called everyone to turn away from their sins and get dunked in the Jordan River. And many of the people went out to him and recognized him as a prophet that was sent by God. But the temple leaders didn't like him because he threatened their institutional monopoly. Right? The temple leaders said, come to the temple. That's where you get right with God. That's where you learn about God. You come here.

And John operated completely independently. And John said, everybody, including the current religious establishment, needed to turn away from their evil ways. And so, the temple leaders were not exactly John's biggest fans. The other thing about John is that John had introduced and endorsed Jesus.

So, you can read that. Luke chapter 3 tells about the ministry of John the Baptist and John sort of officially endorsing Jesus. John baptized Jesus and said, he's the one who's to come.

[12 : 05] So, here's the thing. If the temple leaders agreed that John was sent by God, sent from heaven, then they'd have to agree that Jesus was also divinely authorized to do what he was doing.

But if they said that John's thing was just his own idea, merely human origin, then they could conclude that Jesus also probably had no more authority than any other human being. So, if they would just answer Jesus' question, they would immediately have an answer to their own question. But they don't.

They refuse to answer. Why do they refuse to answer? Well, they don't want to embrace the logical consequences of accepting that John was a prophet. And they don't want to embrace the practical consequences of denying that John was a prophet. Because so many of the people liked him. And so, they say, we don't know. Now, Jesus' question has just exposed the character of the temple leaders.

They weren't actually asking an honest question. They weren't motivated by love for the truth or reverence for God. They just wanted to hold on to their monopoly on power.

That's why they were threatened by Jesus in the first place. And that's why they pretended to be neutral about John, even though they were really not neutral. They wanted authority without vulnerability. They didn't want to lose anything. They wanted to stay in power. And they felt like they had a lot at stake. Our jobs, our incomes, our reputation, maybe even their lives, though they're probably exaggerating in verse 6. People tend to exaggerate the possible negative consequences of something that they've already decided not to do.

[14 : 04] They don't want to put any of those things on the line. So, they're willing to sacrifice truth or what's right instead. So, Jesus says to them in verse 8, you won't answer my question, I won't answer your question either.

Now, before we go on to the second half of this passage, let me say two things. First, there's a warning here that all of us who have been entrusted with spiritual authority need to take to heart.

Jesus confronted the religious leaders of his day who exercised authority without embracing vulnerability. And those of us who are church leaders face the same temptation today. Now, many of us can think of church leaders who have flagrantly abused their authority. But it's not just scandals, scandalous misconduct that Jesus is concerned about. Corruption begins with small compromises, double standards, impure motives, hidden pride, unchecked self-deception. And so, those of us who are in some kind of spiritual leadership ought to ask ourselves and each other some probing questions. Are we motivated by reverence for God and love for truth and a hunger for righteousness? Or are we more motivated by the desire to be admired and the fear of being criticized? Do we avoid hard conversations and uncomfortable topics for that very reason? Do we allow our pragmatic calculations to override our principled commitments?

Do we cling tightly to our power? Or do we see it as a resource to protect people under our care who have little authority and much vulnerability? There's a warning here that all of us who are church leaders should take to heart.

But the second thing we see is that throughout this entire interaction, Jesus doesn't back down one bit from his claims to authority. And if you read the entire Gospel of Luke, if you read the other accounts of Jesus' life, this is a consistent pattern throughout Jesus' life.

[16 : 47] People listen to Jesus' teaching and they said, wow, he teaches with authority. He talks like he wrote the book himself.

Now, most rabbis, when they taught back then, they would constantly quote other rabbis. They would justify their conclusions on the basis of centuries of tradition. But Jesus never quoted any other rabbis.

He only quoted the Scriptures and then gave his interpretation. And he didn't say, well, it could sort of mean this, it could sort of mean that, it could sort of mean that.

You sort of have three options. You can sort of choose what you think is right. He gave authoritative interpretations. And people noticed that. They said he always teaches with such authority.

Where does he get that authority? At other times, Jesus was talking with somebody and he told them point blank, all your sins are forgiven.

[17 : 51] And people would look at him and be like, what did he just say? Only God knows all your sins.

Only God can judge you ultimately. Only God can forgive you ultimately. You know, if you do something to somebody else, I can't walk up to you and say, oh, you're forgiven.

Whatever you did to him doesn't matter. I forgive you. That's all that matters. People say, where does he get this authority?

Who does he think he is? And then here he comes to the temple. The temple was the house of God. And Jesus acts like he owns the place. Even though he was neither a priest nor a scribe nor an elder.

Jesus said and did all kinds of things throughout his life that everybody knew. Only God has the authority to do and say things like that. Many people say Jesus was a great moral teacher.

[18 : 56] But he wasn't God's son. But C.S. Lewis wrote many years ago, that is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely human and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.

He would either be a lunatic completely out of his mind or else he would be a dangerous deceiver. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God or else a madman or something worse.

So let me challenge you. Have you grappled with Jesus' claims to authority? And do you notice that Jesus only presents two options? From heaven, of human origin.

He doesn't present some third halfway option. Someone said either Jesus is Lord of all or he is not Lord at all. Jesus claims to have authority.

And that's a challenge for us. That's the first point. But the second thing we see in this passage is that Jesus embraces vulnerability. And we see this in the story that Jesus tells in verses 9 to 16.

[20 : 13] Jesus tells a story about the owner of a vineyard who leased it out to tenants. Now this was a common scenario back in the day. Some of the temple leaders might have been vineyard owners themselves, right?

Many of them were wealthy. Wealth was concentrated in land back then. They all had to work and live in the city. So where's their property? They can't all own property in the city. They probably own property in their ancestral towns or out in the countryside.

But travel takes a long time. You own the vineyard 200 miles away. You work in the city. You've got to lease it out. They would have sympathized with the landowner.

The problem is the tenants in the story are a landlord's worst nightmare. They not only refuse to pay the rent. On three successive occasions, they beat up the owner's servants who come to collect the rent.

And it gets worse and worse each time. The first time, they beat him up and send him away empty-handed. The second time, they do that. Plus, it says they treated him shamefully.

[21 : 20] The third time, it says they wounded him and cast him out. Now that word wounded is the Greek word traumatizo. It's where we get the word traumatize. It's the same word that's used in the parable of the Good Samaritan about the guy who was walking down the road and got beat up and left half dead by the side of the road.

They wounded him and cast him out. It's not even clear whether he can get up again. And then, verse 13, we come to the climax of the parable.

The vineyard owner deliberates. What shall I do? Think about it for a moment. What would you do if you were the landlord?

You rented out your property. And three times, you send your agents to collect the rent. And three times, your agents were physically assaulted with increasingly severe injuries. I don't know any landlord in New Haven that would ever let it get that far.

Most landlords would immediately call the police if that happened, even once. No second chances. No second thoughts. Get the tenants arrested for assault, evicted for nonpayment of rent.

[22 : 28] Get some better tenants in there fast. Because otherwise, the money's going out the door every month. Now, back in the day, the Roman police might not have helped.

But if you were a wealthy man, you could certainly hire a private security force to forcibly seize the vineyard and punish the terrible tenants. That option was certainly on the table.

But what does this landowner do? I will send my beloved son. Perhaps they will respect him. Now, it's possible that there was some logic to this owner's decision.

Because if the owner wanted to formally press charges in court, he had to either show up himself or send someone with greater authority than a servant to give the tenants the ancient equivalent of a notice to quit.

That's how the legal system worked back then. But even if that was the above-board legal way to go, such a decision would have exposed his beloved son, his only son, the heir, to great risk.

[23 : 29] This would be a very surprising way for the owner to deal with such terrible tenants. He doesn't even send a security force with his son to protect his son from being harmed. And in verse 14 and 15, the greedy tenants behave just like we expect them to.

They want the vineyard for themselves, and they will even kill the owner's son in hopes of securing it. So the owner of the vineyard, after having exhausted all other possibilities, will finally come in judgment, get rid of those tenants, and replace them with others.

Now, what was Jesus' point in telling this story? Well, back then, everybody understood the point very clearly. Because throughout the Old Testament, which people would have been familiar with, the people in the land of Israel were described as God's vine or God's vineyard.

And in fact, surrounding the entrance to the temple where Jesus was teaching, in Jerusalem, there was a golden, a huge golden grapevine with clusters of grapes, representing Israel as God's fruit-bearing vine.

The symbolism is very clear. God's the owner. Israel's the vineyard. The tenants are Israel's leaders. The servants are Israel's prophets. So the whole story is about God's patient and merciful dealings over the centuries with his rebellious and ungrateful people.

[25 : 02] Many of Israel's prophets had told similar stories. We read one earlier from Isaiah, using very similar imagery to make a similar point. And in verse 19, the temple leaders got it.

They perceived he had told the parable against them. They realized that even though they would naturally sympathize with the landowner, Jesus is saying that they're acting like the tenants. Now, what might we take away from this provocative and disturbing story?

I'm going to give two concluding thoughts. First, this story is a vivid description of our basic human problem. It's not just corrupt religious leaders in ancient Israel who are like these tenants.

The Bible says that from the very beginning, human beings have attempted to be our own gods. We want to do whatever we want with our bodies, with our money, with our technology, with our lives.

We'll take God's gifts, sure. But we want to sideline the giver. We want to be accountable, ultimately, only to ourselves.

[26 : 26] That's sort of the default mode of the human heart. Oh, yes, we might do things for God because we hope He'll give us what we want. But if we know that we can get what we want, then God's not essential to the picture.

And every so often, God sends us messengers that say things like, God made us. We didn't make ourselves. We're accountable to Him.

And we're not right with Him. But often, we close our ears or we send them away or even worse. The Bible says this is our basic human condition.

It's not a good one. But the second thing we see in this story is what God did to rescue us from our bad condition.

You see, all of Jesus' parables are stories about ordinary situations that have a surprising twist. What's the surprising twist in this story?

[27 : 38] It's not that the tenants mistreat the owner, right? All of us can come up with stories of bad landlords and bad tenants. That happens all the time in this world, on both sides. It's not that the owner ultimately gets rid of the tenants.

Of course the owner is going to ultimately get rid of tenants like these. That's not the surprising twist. The surprising twist is that after the tenants have repeatedly mistreated the owner's servants, that the owner chooses to send his one and only beloved son, who willingly goes on his father's behalf.

That's the part of the story that nobody, then or now, would ever expect. No landlord, then or now, would take such a costly risk to sow such incredible mercy to such horrible tenants.

But that's what God did in sending his son, Jesus, who willingly came into this corrupt and broken world as his father's representative with his father's authority to his father's property to claim his father's due.

Jesus claimed to have divine authority. And he didn't back down from his claims one bit. But Luke also wants us to see that Jesus willingly embraced complete vulnerability.

[29 : 17] He took a costly risk. He held nothing back. And here we see Jesus had finally come to the end of his earthly journey. He had come to Jerusalem.

And what would happen to him there? He would endure rejection and betrayal. He would be humiliated and tortured, slandered and condemned, and finally executed on a Roman cross.

And when he hung on that cross, he prayed, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.

Why would one with such authority willingly embrace such vulnerability? Why would the Son of God, who can command us with a word, choose to lay down his life for people who hated and despised him, God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

1 John 4.10 says, This is love. Not that we love God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins in love.

[30 : 49] Jesus endured the punishment that rebellious humans like us deserved, so that anyone who turns to him would find forgiveness and life forevermore.

Leaders who exercise authority while embracing vulnerability inspire trust. Is there anyone else more worthy of your trust than Jesus?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your great mercy in sending your Son.

And Jesus, we thank you that you willingly came. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Not for people who are already loyal to you, but for people like us who rejected and despised you and didn't want to deal with you.

[32 : 14] Amen. We pray that we would grapple with your authority, we pray that as we see your love that we might be led to trust you more and more in Jesus name we pray, amen