

Who's the Boss?

Matthew 21:23-27

Introduction

Philly Driving: Driving in Philly, *an experience* (one I've quite come to like). Traffic laws = traffic suggestions. Moxy can get away with a lot. Besides the potholes that'll change your radio station, it's kind of fun because you really have to trust God. **Introduction the Philly driving** came early in my time here (one way street; "mind your business"). If I had been the police, she might have listened. I didn't have the authority (at least, in her eyes), or she was unwilling to listen to my authority.

Authority in Matthew: One fun thing about preaching through an entire book of the Bible is I get a sense of overall scope, movement, and themes (surprising theme of **authority** shows up more than one would think). For example (sampling):

- When Jesus sends out his disciples in Matthew 10: he "gave them **authority** over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction" (Matt 10:1). This is a delegated authority that the church has as ambassadors of God.
- When Jesus was teaching at the SM, the crowds were amazed because he taught "them as one who had **authority**" (Matt 7:29); as opposed to their scribes who did not teach with such authority.
- When the disciples were caught in a storm and Jesus commanded the wind to stop and the seas to be still, he was demonstrating his divine **authority** over creation as its creator (cf. Matt 8:26).
- He demonstrated his **authority** over disease and demons and, ultimately, over sin itself: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has **authority** on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home" (Matt 9:6).
- In his final marching orders (i.e., The Great Commission) at the end of Matthew, he tells his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey his commands, but he prefaces it *first* by saying: "All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18).¹

Anti-Authoritarian Age: This becomes challenging because we live in what many have called an "anti-authoritarian" age. We have seen too much abuse of power and authority, so we're skeptical of anyone who claims to have authority over us. So we've gone the only direction we can, into ourselves. We've said we're our own boss. We decide what we want to do. "Live your truth." Our society tells us from the youngest ages that "there is no such thing as truth... Believe what seems right to you. There are as many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feels comfortable" (Novak). "Nothing weakens the tremendous power of the word 'truth' more than putting the word 'your' in front of it" (Miller).

¹ There are more examples of ἐξουσία in the Gospel of Matthew. These are just a sampling.

- The solution to our problems with abusive authority is not individualism, it is godly authority. No matter how righteous, upstanding, intelligent, and wise you are, you are not a sufficient Savior from the problems that confront you from without or within.
- This is the story of all sinful humanity (Gen 3).
- You cannot save yourself and any ideology that tells you that hope, joy, and happiness are commodities you conjure by your own willpower is lying to you and setting you up for despair. These things are gifts that come from a gracious God when we submit to his loving leadership in our lives and hearts.

Because Jesus has all authority we should surrender completely to him.

- To use the language of this series, he is the true, rightful, **and good** King of all creation (including you!).

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this **authority**?” ²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what **authority** I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what **authority** I do these things.”²

1. A Challenge to Authority (v. 23)

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Setting the Scene: Jesus is teaching in the outer court of the Temple in Jerusalem (i.e., Court of the Gentiles). If his ministry is any indication, crowds enthusiastically welcome him and gather around to witness potential miracles and hear powerful teaching (remember he not only “wows” them with miracles but with **authoritative** teaching). As is the case in the rest of Matthew, the religious and political leaders are threatened by Jesus’ popularity, power, and message.

- In this case, it mentions the chief priests and the elders of the people which appears to be shorthand for the Sanhedrin (cf. Mark and Luke), a sort-of Jewish Supreme Court made up of priests (Sadducees) and scribes (Pharisees) and led by the current High Priest. They adjudicated violations of the Jewish law (though had to defer to Rome in

^{2 23} Καὶ ἐλθόντος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν προσήλθον αὐτῷ διδάσκοντι οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τοῦ λαοῦ λέγοντες, Ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς; καὶ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην; ²⁴ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Ἐρωπήσω ὑμᾶς κἀγὼ λόγον ἓνα, ὃν ἂν εἴπητέ μοι κἀγὼ ὑμῖν ἐρῶ ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ. ²⁵ τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ Ἰωάννου πόθεν ἦν; ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἢ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων; οἱ δὲ διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λέγοντες, Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν, Ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, ἐρεῖ ἡμῖν, Διὰ τί οὖν οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε αὐτῷ; ²⁶ ἂν δὲ εἴπωμεν, Ἐξ ἀνθρώπων, φοβούμεθα τὸν ὄχλον, πάντες γὰρ ὡς προφήτην ἔχουσιν τὸν Ἰωάννην. ²⁷ καὶ ἀποκριθέντες τῷ Ἰησοῦ εἶπαν, Οὐκ οἶδαμεν. ἔφη αὐτοῖς καὶ αὐτός, Οὐδὲ ἐγὼ λέγω ὑμῖν ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ.

various instances, including capital cases; e.g., Jesus' crucifixion). For Matthew, this is shorthand for the Jewish power-brokers, rulers, elite, political leaders (theology and politics are commingled).

Test: They are just "asking a question" but they aren't just asking a question (when a question isn't a question; asking my child to make their bed). They are "questioning" (i.e., **challenging**) his authority.

- **First, this isn't surprising.** The religious leaders in the various towns of Jesus' ministry did the same thing. They would come to him asking for a sign or asking him a question to *test* him. Questions are not bad. Signs are not bad. Proof is not bad. But **demanding** answers, signs, and proof is not a healthy posture.
- **Second, this isn't sincere.** Jesus' enemies are not interested in the answers, signs, and proofs (Jesus has given ample of all them), they are looking for a way to discredit Jesus and trip him up on some technicality. They don't want legitimate answers to serious questions (e.g., Twitter; putting the anti-social in Social Media). They are questioning from a place of skepticism and criticism (not trust). The crowds had come to listen, the religio-political leaders had come to argue.
 - "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt" (Matt 21:21). The word³ "doubt" here certainly can have that meaning in many contexts but, more frequently floats in the realm of "distinction, discernment, judgment, etc." Pastor James explained how this word is not really the same as when we use "doubt" today. The picture here is of a group of people not interested in believing or following Jesus (with whatever *honest doubts* they might have) but a group of people coming to judge Jesus.
 - You can't trust Jesus if you're busy judging him.

How Dare You: They come to Jesus in a passive-aggressive way really saying "how dare you." We're in charge around here. What gives you the right, the **authority**, to do what you've done (e.g., drive out money-changers; triumphal entry; heal the sick) or say what you say. He enters the city openly proclaimed as the Messiah. He miraculously heals people, continuing to confirm his messianic identity. He cleanses the temple of wickedness, showing the temple belongs to him (not vice versa). He prophesies judgment on the people of God. The leaders want to know "who let him do these things."

- Jesus really is an outsider to the Jerusalem establishment. He was from Nazareth (a backwoods village of about 500 people). He ministered in the region of Galilee, scorned because of its location and proximity to the enemies of Israel. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is full of impressive buildings, the Temple (central to Jewish worship), and the national leadership of Israel. It boasts a population of 40,000 people that swells 10x during certain festivals. The powerful leaders feel threatened, helpless, and confused by this itinerant prophet who is welcomed as a King and who crowds flock to see.
- It's one thing for him to be popular in the village synagogues of the surrounding regions, but to command a crowd in the very courts of the Temple!

³ διακρίνω

- We know this power struggle will eventually lead to the false arrest, sham trial, and unjust crucifixion of Jesus by these very same “questioners.” That is the end of judging Jesus: your control and his cannot co-exist.

Throne: One of the genius inventions of the American experiment, our way of governing, is the division of power. We separate our executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This system of checks and balances prevents a dictator from making, interpreting, and enforcing the laws themselves. And, for the most part, it works. But that’s not how it is in all places and all times. Historically, a King (or Queen) was a sovereign ruler. Meaning they had freedom and ultimate authority. They made the laws and, from their throne, they judged those who break them.⁴ When I was in college, I heard someone describe me as having a throne, a control center, of my life. What is in control of it all? **They asked me simply, am I on the throne of my life or is Christ?**

*Think about the title of this series (i.e., return of the king).

- Am I the arbiter of all things? Do my desires determine my direction? Is my will in the driver seat?
- Or, is Jesus the true and rightful King? Do his goals determine my steps?

Andrew Wilson described this well in his book about Scripture (and it applies generally to this topic being that Scripture is the Word of God): Most objections about Scripture are not technical, textual problems but the areas where Scripture “challenges my deeply held beliefs... The biggest challenges for most people are not over issues where the Bible is unclear, but over issues where the Bible is very clear, and **people don’t like it** (e.g., miracles, judgement, sex)... “Whenever Scripture challenges some of our deeply held beliefs, as it often does, we have a choice. **We can challenge the Bible, or we can let the Bible challenge us.**”

2. A Clarifying Question (v. 24-25a)

²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”

Response: Responding with a counter-question was a typical tactic in Rabbinic debate and one of Jesus’ favorite methods. But he still subtly outmaneuvers his opponents, undermining their intellectual and rhetorical prowess.

- There’s a simple wager, you answer this simple question, and I’ll answer your question.
 - Where was John the baptist’s “baptism” (i.e., ministry, authority) from? Is it from heaven or just another human invention? Did he come with divine power or merely human popularity?

Remember John: This might seem like an odd way to go about this debate (bringing up John the Baptist) but it’s very clever.

- (1) By making this about John, he’s making this about himself but without being direct about it. (What they believe about John is going to tell him all he needs to know about what they believe about him; asking for a friend). E.g., Venn Diagram is a circle of

⁴ cf. Prov 20.8

making fun of jeans with holes in them (why buy jeans with holes) and bad dad jokes (“hi, hungry”).

- Avoids pride.
- Gives them an out.
- (2) John the Baptist is the most significant figure in the Gospels outside of Jesus. He was a popular preacher, drawing crowds into the wilderness and calling them to repent.
- (3) But also, John made it undeniable that his ministry was meant to set the stage for the Messiah, Jesus. He was a forerunner. Whatever heights he achieved, Jesus would surpass. Whatever baptism he performed, Jesus would exceed.
 - John (and those who heard him) undoubtedly knew and believed that Jesus was greater than John). And these chief priests and elders know the same thing (that’s why they hesitate to answer). **They know if they admit that John’s baptism was from heaven, then they are admitting that Jesus’ authority is divine.**

Dividing Line: Jesus’ question has subtly but surely drawn a line in the sand. The priests and elders understand the point. Jesus has been clear. He’s not just a good teacher, a nice guy, or a miracle worker. He is God become flesh.

- You and I must deal with this claim. We can’t feign ignorance.
- Many of us want miracles without the messiah. We want the comfort without discipleship. We want good behavior and a good example without submitting to the demands of Jesus’ complete authority and lordship in our lives.
- But that kind of half-hearted Jesus as comforter but not as King, Jesus as therapist but not Lord, Jesus as inspirational teacher but not author of all things is a figment of our modern imaginations.
- The Bible helps us see Jesus for who he really is so we don’t fall for the trap of trying to make him into what we want him to be. If we are to be committed to Jesus then we must be committed to **who he really is** and he is saying that he is the author, creator, and sustainer of all that is. He is God and, therefore, has complete authority over everything that **exists—including you**. So, either he was a lying, a fraud who should be relegated to ancient history -OR- he is God who deserves your complete love, trust, fear, worship, and obedience.
- “I would like to buy about three dollars worth of gospel, please. Not too much – just enough to make me happy, but not so much that I get addicted. I don’t want so much gospel that I learn to really hate jealousy and lust. I certainly don’t want so much that I start to love my enemies, cherish self-denial, and contemplate missionary service in some foreign culture. I want ecstasy, not repentance; I want transcendence, not transformation. I would like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people, but I myself don’t want to love those [different than me] – especially if they have messy lives. I would like enough gospel to make my family secure and my children well behaved, but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected or my giving too greatly enlarged. I would like about three dollars worth of gospel, please” (D. A. Carson). That, unfortunately, is often the American way. **We want Jesus to bless us, not direct us. We want Jesus to co-sign on our desires, not have authority over our lives.**

3. The Coward's Dilemma (vv. 25b-27)

And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'²⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet."²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Weigh Options: They have 2 options so they go to the Family Feud huddle to come up with their final answer.

- (1) Admit that God had sent John with power and authority.
 - But then they will have to admit that they didn't follow him (notice how the word "believe" is used here; it's not *intellectual*, it's *volitional*).
- (2) If they say John's authority was just a function of his charisma and human ability then they will anger the crowds (the people could tell John was sent from God).

Fear of Man: Look at the terrible way they make this decision. **They are not concerned with truth; they are only concerned with the consequences.**

- This is not an **intellectual dilemma**. They had no real doubt that John and Jesus had divine authority. The question was whether they would admit the truth and act accordingly.
- Their dilemma is a tactical one. If they admit the truth, they have to admit they failed to submit to God's authority (admit lost before can be found). If they maintain the charade, they will lose face among the crowd, they will no longer have popularity, influence, and power.
- They *know* he is from heaven, but they don't follow him; but they also know the people, whom they purport to lead and represent *are* following him.

Dilemma: What is true of John is *even more true of Jesus*. If he really does have divine authority, then they should (must!) submit to him.

- They end up in the limbo of not saying anything. They refuse to admit that Jesus is who he says he is because they are **unwilling** to relinquish power and control. They are too afraid to anger the crowd and stand on their convictions (this proves these guys are **politicians more than spiritual leaders**).
 - BTW, this is the delusion of much that passes as "leadership" today. Who's really in power here? The people! If these "chief priests and elders" really had leadership, they could convince the people to follow them. **E.g., Social Media influencers are just trying to be cool and popular, too often they're adjusting their thoughts to follow the crowd rather than actually influencing the crowd.**
 - A real leader *cares* about people but does what is right even when it is unpopular (not just because it's unpopular).
- Since they won't answer, then Jesus doesn't have to answer. And, in that, **without saying anything, he is saying everything.**

Missed Opportunity: These leaders are missing a wonderful opportunity for life and freedom.

- At this point, they think they have power but they are enslaved to their own quest for control. They can't admit the truth because they'd have to give up control of their own lives and they can stand for their own convictions because then they'd lose power over the people.
- They have misplaced their fear and, as a result, they have no freedom. They fear the crowd more than God. And they fear losing control more than following the truth. They are enslaved by their fear. The quest for control feeds our fear. They're afraid of the crowd but no desire to yield authority. **Don't want to upset your family, friends, crowd, and don't want to give in to the rightful rule of Jesus.**
- But what did Jesus promise to those who believe in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

When we try to control our lives or please people, we are not free, we are trapped!

- If they would be bold enough to admit the truth of Jesus' identity and authority and respond accordingly then they can have real freedom. (1) Freedom from the pressure of the crowd. (2) Freedom from the pressure of having to control everything. (3) Access to the power and presence of the Almighty God become flesh!

Control and Surrender: To have God's help we have to release control. But many of us are afraid because if he really has all authority (which he does) then he can ask anything of us and we must do it!

- And that would be scary if he was a harsh and capricious King, but he is not only a just and powerful ruler, he is our loving and good Father. Everything he asks of us (even the hard things) are for our good. Everywhere he sends us, he has gone before to prepare the way. Every step of faith he calls us to, he will empower us to walk.

In-Between Truth and Obedience: The truth demands more than they're willing to pay; yet the crowd is too powerful for them to stand in their convictions, so they're stuck with nothing, The in-between These folks are living in **dissonance** (disharmony; out of tune). You know what is better than any crowd following you or any freedom you think you need to be happy? Having harmony and peace in your soul with God (e.g., non-anxious presence in an anxious world).

- Edwin Friedman (rabbi, organisational consultant, family therapist) wrote a book called: *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (2007). His main thesis was that leaders fail not because they lack information, skill, or technique, but because they lack the nerve and presence to stand firm in the midst of other people's emotional anxiety and reactivity. (Friedman isn't referring to clinical anxiety but people's instinctive responses when they feel threatened). Developing a calm, non-anxious presence begins with being clear on: who I am, where I'm going, and why I'm here. This kind of person, for example, doesn't just go along with what everyone else thinks.
- Jesus moves on without answering their original question because they are unwilling to answer him. Jesus doesn't answer. **How sad**. Because they can't face up to the truth, they miss the voice of the Savior. **How can he work in you if you can't even be honest with yourself?**

Never Good Enough: Earlier in a section discussing John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt 11), Jesus used a little nursery rhyme (stuck in head like Kids Week songs?). from village life to explain the problem with these opponents. ¹⁷ “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

- Think of John and Jesus. John was too serious, too somber, too “fire and brimstone” for them to follow. They would say he’s crazy. Jesus was too much fun, hanging out with sinners. He wasn’t holy enough for them.
- John was too somber and Jesus was too joyful. John was too far one way and Jesus was too far the other (which isn’t accurate, just a caricature). They wanted the “Goldilocks religious leader” (not too hot or too cold but *just* right). But there is no such thing. **Jesus hasn’t come to fit into your preconceived comfort zone but to transform you according to his Kingdom priorities.** If you find a faith system that fits “just right” into what you want and what you’re comfortable with then, rest assured, you are worshipping yourself. You are on the throne of your life, a position you were never meant to occupy and that will most certainly come crashing down.
- These leaders know the truth of Jesus, they just don’t want to surrender to him.

Conclusion:

Because Jesus has all authority we should surrender completely to him. **Surrender.** It’s not enough to *know*, now you have to do (e.g., take the medicine).

- Two types people in this room, the believer and the unbeliever.
 - (1) You hear “believer” and you think “that’s me” because you think Jesus is the son of God. But belief isn’t *just* intellectual, it’s volitional. You might **know** the gospel (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) but until you **actually surrender your life to Christ, you do not believe (trust) him.**
 - If you agree with him but are unwilling to stand with him, then you are not his. If you think he’s the son of God, but are still doing what you want to do, rather than what he wants you to do, then you are not his. Surrender control to him.
 - (2) If you have surrendered, then take heart, be encouraged, you can trust him wherever he leads. Marvel at his grace and goodness and authority.