



Matthew 21:23–27

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” 24 Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John’s baptism—where did it

come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’”
26 But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”
27 So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Reflection

It’s Tuesday. Jesus will die on Friday but it’s the events of this day that will seal Jesus’ fate. More precisely it’s his words that will seal his fate. From today’s passage right

through until the end of chapter 23, from sunup to sunset on Tuesday, Jesus will publically denounce the Jewish religious leadership. He'll judge them and find them wanting. They'll come at him with everything they have and he'll shame them and ultimately completely silence them with his wisdom against which no-one will be able to speak a word. And all of this will be done publically, in the very heart of their territory, in the temple courts in Jerusalem, in front of huge, Passover crowds who will delight in the exchange. Today Jesus' words will seal his fate.

Late Sunday Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem like an all-conquering king. On Monday he entered the temple courts and drove out merchants as if he owned the place. He caused a huge stir which only

continued when he began healing all the blind and lame who were brought to him. Witnessing miracle after miracle the little children picked up the victory song that had greeted Jesus at the city gates 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. Their little voices rang out in the temple courts as the building crowds witnessed first-hand the wonderful things Jesus was doing. The little children could see it, the crowds could see it, but the Jewish religious leaders were blind too it. Jealous, indignant and blind.

On Tuesday morning Jesus again comes to the Temple. Today he's here to teach. He sets up underneath one of the towering colonnades that surrounded the large, rectangular Court of the Gentiles. You'll remember that the Court of Gentiles was

huge. It was around 13.5 hectares in size, sitting on an upraised platform that dominated the city scape over Jerusalem. It surrounded the Temple building and the two tiny courtyards attached to it, which were for Jews only. But it dwarfed them in size. Around the edge of the Court of the Gentiles on three of its four sides ran colonnades, rows of evenly spaced columns supporting a roof that provided shade around the outer edges of the courtyard. This huge courtyard was the meeting place for all of the religious pilgrims who were flooding into Jerusalem for the Passover. Each next hour their numbers were growing. By Friday the city and surrounds will have grown from 30,000 people to 180,000 people. All come to worship their God in the holiest place on earth, to celebrate one of the holiest weeks of the year,

and to hear some of the greatest preachers of their religion. Today, many of them come expectantly to hear Jesus.

As Jesus is teaching the crowds the chief priests and the elders of the people come and interrupt him. It's an official delegation. They represent the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, those in charge of the Temple and the whole of the Jewish religion. Our passage names them as the chief priests (who were high level temple functionaries who reported directly to the High Priest) and the elders of the people, the heads of the most influential Jewish ruling families. The crowds part to admit this official delegation, the most powerful men in Judaism. There are no pleasant-ries:

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

You can imagine the crowds leaning forward in hushed excitement to witness this exchange. Are they here to officially pronounce Jesus as the Messiah? Or, going by the look on their faces, are they here to arrest him?

The truth is, these men are deeply outraged. How dare this prophet from Galilee ride into Jerusalem like a king and risk bringing the Romans down on top of our heads? Who appointed him king? And what's more how dare he drive out the merchants and money changers from our temple markets? How dare he refer to the markets that we've put in place, that we've

nurtured, that are filling our temple's coffers as 'a den of robbers'?

In doing so, Jesus has publically humiliated them. He's called them thieves. He's called into question their authority as the leaders of the Jewish faith in Jerusalem. He's challenged their authority and so they challenge his:

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

One man against a delegation of some of the brightest minds in Judaism, against the most powerful figures in Jewish religious politics. But not just any man. Jesus replies,

“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

It's game on. Jesus replies after the fashion of rabbinic debates of the day. He answers their question with a question which signals to the crowds that they're about to have front row seats to a theological debate. These zealous pilgrims are no doubt delighted by this showdown. The fiery prophet from Galilee up against the religious establishment. Jesus has challenged their authority as the leaders of God's people and so they demand of him: 'What gives you the right to ride into Jerusalem like a king? To walk around the Temple like you own the place? To teach in the Temple courts as if you were a trained Rabbi? And if you have no authority to

do so then why shouldn't these temple guards arrest you and put you on trial for the uproar that you have caused?'

Jesus replies masterfully. With just a couple of words they're completely undone; turning on their heels, tails between their legs, publically embarrassed and slinking back into the shadows to regroup. How does Jesus do it? He asks them one simple question:

John's baptism—where did it come from?

Jesus is being reasonable enough. 'Answer my question and in it you'll find the answer to yours. John the Baptist, who baptised so many of the very people standing in this crowd, the people's prophet

who fearlessly proclaimed the kingdom of heaven and had his head cut off for his trouble by our Roman oppressors – where did John’s Baptism come from?’

Checkmate in one move. The answer of course is heaven. John’s authority came from heaven. But they could never say that because Jesus would simply follow on with ‘and that is where my authority comes from because John came to prepare the way for me.’ But they couldn’t say a word against John either, because the crowds loved him. And so after huddling together and pooling all their wisdom, the crowd waiting for some ingenious rejoindre, to their great public embarrassment all that they could manage in this debate with a truly great teacher was the very lame reply,

“We don’t know.”

Then redfaced and confounded they turned on their heels and left. Jesus simply continued on with his preaching. They had nothing. It was over in moments. And yet the story of this encounter would be told for thousands of years.

Think & Pray

As you take in this scene today from Matthew 21 for yourself, and as you consider again the great wisdom in the words of Jesus, don’t miss the point he’s making in this impressive display. You might well be asking the same question of Jesus. What right do you have Jesus to tell me how to live my life? Where does your

authority come from to make claims over my life? What right do you have to tell me how to live my life? Jesus has every right. He could have commanded you; instead died for you. He could have commanded the right, but instead he earned the right. He deserves it. He proved that he has your best interests at heart when in love he gave up his life for yours. And in his great wisdom he knows what's best for you. So it's time to stop following yourself and to start wholeheartedly following Jesus.

What part of your life do you need to give over to Jesus? What are you holding back from him? Is it your pride that is blinding you like it was for these religious leaders in our passage? Or do you think you're somehow going to miss out? It's completely the opposite. You're missing out by not

giving everything over to him. Think about these questions. Think about this passage of Scripture. Think about the God-given, cross-proven, love-driven authority of Jesus. And pray to him to close.