

“WHO GAVE YOU THIS AUTHORITY?”**MARK 11:27-33**

What do you think about authority? Is it something good or bad? It all depends on who is wielding authority and how it's being done. In recent months, we've heard almost daily reports of high profile, successful men being accused of sexually harassing women. Researchers have found that the more people get close to the top of the social ladder, the more likely they are to act like beasts. One business professor made this statement, "It's an incredibly consistent effect. When you give people power, they basically start acting like fools. They flirt inappropriately, tease in a hostile fashion, and become totally impulsive." Some researchers claim that some people with lots of authority or power can start to exhibit behavior that indicates damage to the parts of the brain that control empathy and decision-making. The old saying might well be true, "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Authority can be bad.

On the other hand, an example of good, legitimate, and positive authority is a professional orchestra with a professional conductor. If the orchestra is to perform coherently and if the musicians want to perform music rather than just make noise, somebody has to have authority to decide what's going to be played and how. Otherwise, you'd have complete chaos. By submitting to the authority of a conductor, individual musicians get to a level of musical expression they could never realize individually. The result is something enjoyed by both the musicians and the audience. Authority can be good. It all depends who has authority and how it's used.

This Sunday begins the church season of Lent. Lent is a period of time several weeks long preceding Easter Day each year. The word "lent" is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning "spring" or "springtime." Lent is a time when many followers of Jesus all over the world focus on the meaning and significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. This year I'd like us to focus on several questions different people asked Jesus during what we now call Holy Week – those seven days between Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) and His resurrection (Easter Sunday) that changed history and our eternal destiny forever. You can see a list of those questions on the back of the message notes in your worship folder today. Jesus' answers to those questions give us wonderful insight into who He is and what He accomplished for us at the cross and the empty tomb. The question today is "Who gave you (Jesus) this authority?" Let's read the story of who asked Jesus this question and how He answered it. One way to get at the meaning of this story and how it might apply to our lives today is to ask three questions. Here's the first one.

WHAT IS JESUS' AUTHORITY?

Authority is just the right and the power to do something. For example, parents have the authority (the right or the power) to take care of their children. The police have the authority (the right or the power) to enforce laws and arrest people who break them. The government has the authority (the right or the power) to establish a military force and to tax your income. You have the authority (the right or the power) to use your possessions – like your car or your home - in ways you desire and think appropriate.

It was the Jewish religious leaders who asked Jesus, “By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right to do them?” (Mk. 11:28 NLT) Why did they even ask Jesus those questions? Earlier in Mark 11, Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Only conquering kings had done that in Israel’s past. Many people cheered for Jesus and greeted Him like a king. Jesus did nothing to stop them. Then He went to the Jewish place of worship – the great temple – and caused a real scene. Jewish worship involved animal sacrifice. Since many Jews didn’t live in Jerusalem, it was just easier to buy an animal to sacrifice at the temple rather than bringing one all the way from home. The cost for these animals was often exorbitant. Jews from other countries had to exchange their own currency for Jewish currency so they could buy animals to sacrifice. Unfair exchange rates abounded. People were just being taken advantage of every day. Jesus was offended and angry by what He saw. He went through the temple grounds turning tables over, throwing out these dishonest merchants, and preventing people from turning His Father’s house into a mini Easton shopping center! So, the Jewish leaders wanted to know why Jesus thought He had the right, the power, or the authority to do these things. Acting like a king. Accepting people’s shouts of praise. Causing a near riot at the temple which was like their personal office building. In a sense, they asked, “Who do you think You are, Jesus?”

Jesus had answered that question by demonstrating His authority throughout His earthly ministry. When He told everyone that the Kingdom of God had arrived in Him and His ministry, He backed it up in a variety of ways. His teaching and preaching was uniquely authoritative. He also cast demonic spirits out of people. Crowds of people asked each other, “What sort of new teaching is this? It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!” (Mk. 1:27 NLT) He said His ability both to forgive sins and perform miracles of healing were signs of His authority. “So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins.’ Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ‘Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!’” (Mt. 9:6 NLT) Jesus’ death on the cross was certainly a travesty of justice, but He never claimed to be a victim. Instead, He claimed to have authority even over His own death and resurrection. “No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again.” (Jo. 10:18 NLT)

Jesus also claimed His authority has eternal impact today and forever. For example, Jesus said He’s the only One who provides salvation to human beings. Before the cross, He said to His Father about Himself, “For you have given him authority over everyone. He gives eternal life to each one you have given him.” (Jo. 17:2 NLT) After His resurrection, Jesus said, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 28:18-19 NLT) Jesus also knew His Father would give Him the role of permanent Chief Justice of the universe. He said His Father, “... has given him authority to judge everyone.” (Jo. 5:27 NLT)

All of that leads to one clear, inescapable conclusion: Jesus’ authority was and is the authority of God Himself. If a person believes in a God – any God, even a generic, all-

purpose God – he or she usually acknowledges the absolute, supreme authority of that God. But many people struggle with Jesus' authority and power because they struggle with His identity. When He claimed to have the kind of authority He said He possessed – make no mistake about it - He claimed to be God. And the rest of the Bible backs up that claim. It says, "Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things." (Eph. 1:21-22 NLT) Jesus possesses absolute power and authority; therefore, He was and is God.

Bill Klem was the father of baseball umpires: colorful, judicious, and dignified. He was beyond passionate about America's favorite pastime, declaring, "To me, baseball is not a game, but a religion." The first umpire to use arm signals while working behind home plate, Klem umped for 37 years, including 18 World Series. He became known as "the Old Arbitrator," a nod to his keen eye for calling balls and strikes. On one occasion, as he crouched and readied himself behind the plate, the pitcher threw the ball, the batter didn't swing, and, for just an instant, Klem said nothing. The batter turned and snorted, "Okay, so what was it, a ball or a strike?" To which Bill Klem responded, "Sonny, it ain't nothing 'till I call it." In this universe, it ain't nothing 'till God calls it. And in this universe, He's given all of His power and authority to Jesus.

"Who gave you this authority?" The question the Jewish leaders asked Jesus was far from innocent. By this time, they despised Jesus and were looking for any way to get Him into trouble. If He said He was acting on His own authority, they could arrest Him for acting like a megalomaniac. If he said He was acting under God's authority, they could arrest Him for blasphemy on the grounds that God would never give anyone authority to cause the kind of disturbance Jesus had caused in God's house – the temple. Now, Jesus' response tells us He knew exactly what these leaders were trying to do. He answered their question by asking a question which was kind of a typical way rabbis – Jewish teachers – debated with each other. "I'll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question. Did John's authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human? Answer me!" (Mk. 11:29-30 NLT)

Jesus was talking about the ministry of John the Baptist who had been recently beheaded by the Jewish king, Herod. Part of John's ministry had been baptizing people as a sign of their repentance and God's forgiveness of their sins. John had also pointed all of his followers to Jesus. He knew Jesus was the Messiah. He said of Jesus, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.... I testify that he is the Chosen One of God." (Jo 1:29, 34 NLT) Jesus knew full well John's ministry had been highly controversial. Common, ordinary Jews thought John had been a prophet and esteemed him highly. The Jewish religious leaders' opinion of John, however, was pretty much the same as their opinion of Jesus – he was an irritating troublemaker who scorned their kind of spirituality and considered them to be hypocrites. Jesus knew that His authority and John's authority had the same source - God Himself. That was something the Jewish religious leaders were not about to admit.

On the one hand, if they admitted John's baptism was sanctioned by God, Jesus would have asked them why they'd opposed John's ministry. More importantly, if they admitted John was sent from God and John said Jesus was the Messiah, why did they even need to ask Jesus about the source of His authority? On other hand, if they ever verbalized what they truly believed in their hearts – that John was just an irritating troublemaker not sent by God – they risked the anger and rejection of common, ordinary Jews who esteemed John. Jesus had just painted these leaders into a corner. They pretended to be ignorant. “Uh, we don't know!” “And Jesus responded, ‘Then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things.’” (Mk. 11:33 NLT) It was His way of saying, “If anyone should know if John was sent by God or not, it's you religious leaders. That's why you have the positions you have! If you're really that ignorant, guys, then there's no point in having a discussion about whether I'm sent from God or not. Good-bye now. Dismissed. Don't let the door hit you on the way out!” This interesting exchange between Jesus and these leaders raises another question for me.

WILL I ACCEPT JESUS' AUTHORITY?

These religious leaders hated Jesus. It's easy to dismiss them as hopeless hypocrites and fail to see some ways we can be just like them. When it comes right down to it, will I accept Jesus' authority in my life and over my life? What happens if I reject Jesus and His authority? These men left an example to avoid. By rejecting Jesus' authority, they revealed they weren't really interested in knowing the truth. There they were face to face with Truth personified but they refused to acknowledge Him. If I reject Jesus' authority, I reveal that – just like those leaders - I'm not really interested in knowing the truth. Probably the biggest example today are people – the vast majority of Americans, by the way - who like and admire Jesus, but aren't willing to accept the exclusivity of Jesus. When He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father, but by me,” they shake their heads and walk away. They prefer to believe there are many ways to God. They want their own way to God – whatever that may be – to be good enough or acceptable. There's a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the absolute authority of Jesus in their lives and bow in humble submission to His Lordship every day. If I reject Jesus' authority, I reveal I'm not interested in knowing the truth.

These men left an example to avoid. By rejecting Jesus' authority, they became irrelevant to God's plans and purposes in this world. God was about to use Jesus to provide salvation for all humanity, but those men missed out on what God was doing. By rejecting Jesus, they made themselves irrelevant to what God was doing. Yes, that can happen to you and me. If I reject Jesus' authority, I become irrelevant to God's plans and purposes in this world. Is Jesus gently nudging you or poking at you to do, or to stop doing, something? If we get all stiff-necked and stubborn, we will miss God's plans and purposes. It might be giving up an entrenched sin we love to indulge. It might be a broken relationship we refuse to mend or an offense we refuse to forgive. It might be a lost person with whom God wants us to build a relationship. We can miss out on God's will for our lives. We can miss out on divine opportunities to be used by God. God can say, in effect, “I can't use you. You won't accept the authority of My Son, Jesus, in your life.” How tragic! I don't want to become irrelevant to God, do you?

A mythical story makes a great point. The captain of a ship looked into the dark, foggy night and saw faint lights way off in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north." The captain got angry because his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am the captain!" Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am seaman third class Jones." Immediately the captain sent a third message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am a battleship." Then the reply came: "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am a lighthouse." In the midst of our dark and foggy times, all sorts of voices shout orders telling us what to do and how to live our lives. There's just one voice – one power, one authority - you must never ignore. It's Jesus - the Light of the World - and we ignore Him at our peril.

These men left an example to avoid. By rejecting Jesus' authority, they rejected God. There's an awful irony in their example. These were the religious, supposedly spiritual people in that day and time. They thought they were living lives devoted to God, but they missed God in human flesh right in front of them. If I reject Jesus' authority, I reject God. It's one and the same. Don't think you're somehow immune to self-deception because you attend church. Let's keep our hearts open, sensitive, and humble before the Lord every day we live. Let's allow ourselves to be corrected either by the Holy Spirit Himself or by godly people who care enough to speak into our lives. Let's be quick to confess our sins and turn away from them. Let's learn how to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking into our lives and being led by Him in our decisions, in our relationships, and in our daily plans. Let's set our hearts on obeying the Lord and loving the Lord deeply which are one and the same. Here's a final question prompted by this story.

WILL I FOLLOW JESUS' EXAMPLE?

The religious leaders gave us an example to avoid. Jesus gave us an example to follow. Jesus knew exactly what He was going to face in Jerusalem long before He rode a donkey down its streets. Resistance. Hostility. Conflict. Confrontation. Betrayal. Desertion. Getting mocked. Being whipped. Death by crucifixion. The story we read today – the conflict and confrontation with the religious leaders – was just a foretaste of what was going to happen in the next few days. He said, "Listen, we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged with a whip, and crucified. But on the third day he will be raised from the dead." (Mt. 20:18-19 NLT) Why do it then? Jesus' willingness and commitment were based on two absolutely necessary truths. He was convinced it was God's will for Him to go to Jerusalem and He knew that His resurrection would triumph over His death. He loved His Father and He loved you and me that much. And so Jesus faced Jerusalem with courage and obedience to God's will knowing God would have the last word. His Father had all power and authority. God would have the ultimate victory. I suppose Jesus could have turned back to Nazareth, but He never would have been the Savior of the world if He did.

Here's the lesson for you and me. From time to time in our lives we, too, will have a Jerusalem we need to go up to. It's usually something unpleasant that God wants us to face in Jesus' power and authority - never our own. It will probably not mean death as it did for Jesus, but it might well involve things like conflict, fear, confrontation, hostility, apparent failure, or disappointment. It might be a person or a problem we would rather not face because it will be painful. It might be something in ourselves we need to confront. It might be a broken relationship that must be healed, or an offense that needs to be forgiven. It might be a task that has no guarantee of success. It might be an issue in this church, in your neighborhood, or out in the world God is calling you to address. We could refuse to face our Jerusalem, shrink back, and take the easy way out. But, like Jesus, we can also take courage. We can go up and move forward on the basis of His authority and power. The Bible says, "And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up." (Heb. 12:1-3 NLT)

Pastor and author, John Ortberg, was visiting a beach in Southern California with two friends. They walked past a bar where a fight had gotten started inside. It spilled out onto the street and several guys were beating the tar out of another guy. He was bleeding from the forehead. John knew he and his friends had to do something to break up the fight. Whatever they did or said at first didn't do much good. The beat down continued. Then all of a sudden those aggressors looked at John and his friends with fear in their eyes. They stopped and started to slink away. John turned and looked behind him. Then he understood. Out of the bar had come the biggest man he'd ever seen. He was maybe 6'7", 300 pounds, 2% body fat. Just huge. John called him "Bubba" (not to his face, but afterwards, when he talked about him). Bubba didn't say a word. He just stood there and flexed his muscles. You could tell he was hoping those men beating up the other man would try and have a go at him.

All of a sudden John Ortberg says his attitude was transformed. He said to those same guys, "Yeah and you better not let us catch you coming around here again!" He was a different person. Why? Because now he had great, big Bubba behind him. He was ready to confront with resolve and firmness. He was released from anxiety and fear. He was filled with boldness, courage, and confidence. He was ready to serve where serving was required. Why? Because he had a great, big Bubba backing him up.

How big is your God? The Bible reminds us often that Someone has come who is far greater than any Bubba. You don't have to wonder whether or not He'll show up. He's always there. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to live your life in hiding. His name is Jesus. All power and authority has been given to Him. That means you can approach any Jerusalem – any challenge, any unpleasant person or problem – in His strength, not your own.