

"The Baptism of John, Was it from Heaven, or of Men?"

Our country's elections are fast approaching. If you turn on the radio or TV, you hear more and more advertisements. You probably are receiving spirited pleas from various people about why you should vote for one candidate or another. The passion and rhetoric is picking up. Things are getting heated. Why? Why does everyone get so excited about the elections? Because we are picking who will lead our government. And our government is our nation's authority. We recognize that the people in authority have a very powerful role over our life. And since we live in a nation that allows us to have a role in picking the leaders in our government, we take that responsibility seriously. And so we pick the people we want to submit to. We recognize that the government is in a position of authority, and so we want to pick the leaders who we want in that position of authority over us.

You see, that's what I want us to think about today - authority. That's the question that is raised in our passage for today. There is a question of authority in our passage. This question has to do with Jesus. Simply put, by what authority is Jesus acting? Jesus is obviously acting from a position of authority, but whose authority is it? Let's take a look at this passage and find out.

In chapter 11, verse 27, we find Jesus back in the temple in Jerusalem. He is walking around, probably teaching different groups. It's at that point when three groups of people come up to Jesus: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. These would have been the three groups representative of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the local council of religious leaders for Israel. We don't know if they came to Jesus in an official capacity, but they probably were. They were probably a delegate of the Sanhedrin to find out more about Jesus. Specifically, they come up to him and ask him two pointed questions about his authority. Essentially, the questions are the same. They want an explanation for his actions. They want to know how he got off doing the things that he was doing. They probably had in mind his entire ministry that he had been doing throughout Israel, but especially his actions in the last few days. That included his triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple.

These religious leaders don't tell Jesus why they are asking. They just come to him as the local authority and demand an answer. Obviously they were concerned with Jesus. When Jesus had cleansed the temple, Mark tells us that these religious leaders sought a way to destroy him. Even as early as chapter 3, we saw some of the Pharisees looking to destroy Jesus. Maybe these religious leaders were concerned that Jesus would cause them to lose their authority - or at least the authority that they thought they had. Maybe they thought that Jesus might cause a political uproar trying to be the Messiah that would make the Romans come down on all the Jews with a heavy hand. Or maybe they were just jealous of the authority the Jesus obviously had. Back in chapter 1, Mark said the Jesus' teaching stood out because it was a teaching that came with authority, something Mark tells us was lacking among the scribes. Jesus even had authority over the demons. And Jesus declared authority to be able to forgive sins. Maybe in comparison with Jesus, the religious leaders felt threatened.

You see, in reality, they didn't have true authority. Their authority was manmade and they rejected the true authority that was before them. We know their authority rested on pins and needles, because we constantly see them scared of the people - twice in our passage for today even, chapter 11, verse 32, and chapter 12, verse

12. Jesus' authority was being recognized by the masses, whereas the scribes were scared to offend the people lest they lose their authority. And so the religious leaders are on a mission to find a way to get rid of this threat of Jesus. And so their questions in today's passage represent a fact-finding mission by the Sanhedrin. They are trying to find some way to condemn him, and so they start by coming to him and demanding an explanation. They ask him, "What authority do you have to do the things you are doing?"

So how does Jesus answer them? He answers them at first with a question that implies that he came with the same authority as John the Baptist. In verse 30 Jesus asks them, "The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men." Jesus says he will answer their question only if they answer this question of his. Jesus demands these religious leaders to weigh in on John the Baptist. Where did his authority come from, God or man? Of course, as we see in verses 31-32, they don't like this question. They know that either way they answer will be bad for them. If they say that John's authority was from God, then Jesus would ask why they didn't believe him. And if they say that John's authority was man-made, then the people might create an uproar.

Notice that the religious leaders aren't concerned with answering Jesus honestly, as in what they actually believed. They obviously didn't think John's authority was of God. But since they feared the people more than God, they, *the religious leaders*, didn't mind lying, I guess. They say, "We don't know." Jesus in turn refuses to answer their question as well.

But in the silence, the question is answered, isn't it? Jesus' question implies solidarity with John the Baptist. And if John came with divine authority, then that would mean Jesus did too. We know that John's ministry looked forward to Jesus. John declared Jesus as the Messiah. John was the forerunner to Jesus. They obviously were both in agreement. That meant that if John came with divine authority, then so did Jesus. That's why Jesus doesn't answer their question. If they are not willing to acknowledge that John the Baptist was sent by God, then they won't believe that Jesus' was sent by God either. If they don't believe John, they won't believe Jesus.

Jesus goes on to make this abundantly clear through the parable that he tells in chapter 12. Though chapter 11 ends with Jesus not directly answering their question, the parable clearly has an answer for them. And it's the same answer implied by his question about John the Baptist.

This parable in chapter 12 in our pew bibles is titled the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers. Now the bad guys in this parable are the vinedressers, that's how our translation refers to them - vinedressers. But I'm going to refer to them as "tenants" which is how most of the recent English translations describe them. That's what these guys were - they were tenants. Specifically tenant farmers. The owner of the vineyard had put in all the work to establish a working vineyard, and then leased the operation of it out to these tenants. This was as actually quite a normal thing at the time. Foreign absentee land owners would rent out their property to tenants. They would agree on a certain percentage of the harvest as the rental fee. Then at the right time, they come to collect. That's what's described in this parable. Chapter 12, verse 2 - at the vintage time, the owner sent a servant to go and collect. But of course, as we read in the parable, the evil tenants beat him and sent him away empty handed. The parable then goes on to describe how the owner kept sending more and more servants. Some the tenants beat, others they even killed. But at the end of the day, the tenants would not give the owner his share of the fruit of the vineyard.

Finally, Jesus describes in the parable that the owner sent his only son. His only beloved son. The owner thought, "Surely they will listen to my son." But that's when the wickedness, and the foolishness of the tenants is really seen. They kill the son. They seem to have made a big mistake. They think that by killing the son, they could have the vineyard for themselves. They probably incorrectly assumed that the owner had died and the son was coming to claim the vineyard as his inheritance. That's what would have been the normal proceedings at that time if the father had died. And so the logic in verse 7 would have been right by the tenants, if the owner had indeed died. If the owner had died, and the only son was then dead, then the tenants could legally make a claim for this ownerless property.

But of course, the owner wasn't dead. And the son had been sent by the owner with the same task - to demand the tenants to give the owner the fair share of the fruit of the vineyard.

I hope you are beginning to see how this parable answers the question that the religious leaders had asked Jesus about his authority. And that's why Jesus asked about John the Baptist's authority. You see God had continually sent prophets to Israel over the years. These prophets called the people to bear the fruit of godliness to God. The prophets called the people to be faithful to the covenant God had made with them. But how did Israel respond? They beat and killed the prophets. John the Baptist stands in a long line of prophets sent by God, and the same thing happened to him. He died because he called the people to repent. The religious leaders rejected John the Baptist, just like Israel had rejected the many prophets before. This is just like in the parable. The parable described the many messengers and servants the owner had sent to the wicked tenants. These servants came with the authority of the owner to collect what was due. But the wicked tenants rejected these authorized messengers, and by doing so they rejected the authority of the owner himself.

And just like in the parable how the owner sent his son with the same task to the evil tenants, so God sent Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God sent by God the Father. Jesus came just like all the prophets before him with the same message of repentance. And yet, just like how Israel rejected all the prophets before Jesus, they rejected even him as well. Do you see now why Jesus would not answer the religious leaders? If the religious leaders wouldn't acknowledge that John's authority was from God, then they wouldn't acknowledge that Jesus' authority was from God. If Israel had rejected the prophets of old, including John the Baptist in that list, then they would do the same even with Jesus, God's son. And so in this parable, Jesus very clearly interprets his question to the religious leaders about John the Baptist. In terms of authority, Jesus was standing alongside with John and all the prophets. Jesus was answering the question of authority by saying that he came with the same authority entrusted to all the prophets that had come to Israel.

And yet, even though Jesus came with the same authority as that of the prophets, we recognize that it was also an even greater authority. The prophets were endowed with the authority of God as *servants*, but Jesus was endowed with the authority of God as a *son*. As the only begotten Son of God. And so, yes, Jesus was another prophet, but not *just* another prophet. Jesus is likened to the only beloved son in the parable.

And yet what makes Jesus especially stand out is his death. The parable doesn't go into that of course. Parables are not allegories; they don't tell us everything about God. They use a real world situation to describe a specific point. Here that point is about how God's people broke their covenant with God and then rejected all his messengers that came with his divine authority, lastly even

rejecting his own Son! But what especially stands out to me about how Jesus is likened to the son in this parable, is that he is the final and last messenger. There is none to come after him. Why? Because of the significance of his death. Jesus' death marked the final rejection. Many messengers died in the parable before, but that didn't mark the final straw for the owner. The same with God. Many of his prophets were killed, but God's patience went on. Until his Son.

Of course the parable doesn't describe the atonement. But we know the significance of Jesus' death. His death would be infinitely different than the death of the previous prophets. It would be a death to atone for the very wickedness of God's people. His death turned everything around. Christ's death, the death the people execute, gave the people the real opportunity to become right with God. Through the irony of the death of the son, the rebellious Israelites, likened to these wicked tenants, could have complete forgiveness of their debt. No other messenger before Jesus would secure that, not by themselves being beaten, or even by their death.

And Jesus went to his death willingly. He came to earth, knowing that he'd be rejected and die. He knew that his death would be an atonement for sin. In the parable, the owner is portrayed as hopeful when he sends his son, maybe even a bit naively hopeful. In verse 6, the owner says, "they will respect my son." But you see, that's where the parable is a parable, and not an allegory - an important distinction. If this was an allegory, you'd have to impute this naïve motivation to God the Father. But God didn't send his Son hopeful that Israel would listen to Jesus, and then become surprised and disappointed when they didn't. No, God knew when he sent his son, it would mean his death. Jesus knew it too. That's why Jesus even told this parable here - it predicted his rejection and death. That's why Jesus didn't answer the religious leaders' question when they wouldn't define John's authority. Jesus was on a mission that he knew would end in his rejection and death by his own people. He's predicted that three times already in Mark.

So what lesson do we learn then from the parable about how the owner had hoped the tenants would listen to his son? What does that teach us? It shows us how wicked the tenants were. It shows how horrendous and despicable their action is here. It shows how patient the owner was. How the owner kept giving them the benefit of the doubt. How the owner made every effort for reconciliation. The owner could not be faulted in any way for not trying to reach out to them. And so when the tenants greedily kill his only begotten son, that makes their actions all the more condemnable.

You see that is the final point of this parable, isn't it? The tenants were under judgment. Israel was under judgment, starting with their religious leaders. Just as the evil tenants had rejected the authority of the owner, despite his repeated attempts, so Israel had repeatedly rejected God's authority. Jesus asks in verse 9 about the owner, "Therefore, what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others." This is judgment. The owner would have legal recourse to bring the government and take back the vineyard by force. Justice would be served.

Israel had rejected the prophets, they had rejected the Baptist, and now they were rejecting Jesus. The quote from Psalm 118 in verse 10 about the stone that the builders rejected drove home the same point (Jesus was the rejected stone and the builders were the religious leaders). But justice indeed would be served. Jesus actually gives a pretty direct application of this parable right from the start in verse 1. The description of the owner planting the vineyard is a reference back to Isaiah 5:2. Through the prophet Isaiah God described himself as the owner of a fruitless vineyard. Israel in that passage from Isaiah was the fruitless vineyard.

And in Isaiah, God concluded that he would destroy his vineyard because it was worthless; unfruitful. In Isaiah, God promised judgment on Israel as the unfruitful vineyard. And here Jesus promises judgment upon Israel who continues to be rebellious. Of course by this parable taking notice against the tenants who were supposed to take care of the vineyard, this parable of judgment is especially focused against the religious leaders of Israel. They were supposed to take care of the vineyard of Israel and cultivate fruit for God. But they were not looking to serve God as the highest authority. They were looking to make themselves the authority.

And so Jesus announces judgment on them with this parable. Verse 9 talks about how the tenants would be destroyed. That is the same judgment that is upon the religious leaders of Israel and all who do not accept Jesus' divine authority. They would be destroyed. They would face eternal damnation for their rejection of the true authority of God. That's what happened in Israel's history. When they repeatedly rejected God's prophets, he judged them and sent them to exile. But exile was just a foreshadowing of the real judgment to come. Whoever refuses Jesus Christ will face eternal destruction.

Ironically, this will come through the destruction of Jesus. Jesus is the rejected stone that God has made as the beautiful cornerstone! We've seen the religious leaders in Mark looking to literally "destroy" Jesus. Here Jesus talks about how the evil tenants will be literally "destroyed," foreshadowing God's divine judgment. Both would happen. Jesus would be destroyed on the cross, but it would ultimately bring about the destruction of all those who reject Jesus. For Jesus would rise again. He would have victory over death and destruction. All who belong to him share in that victory. But all who do not belong to him will face the unending wrath of God. That wrath will come upon all who have persisted in rejecting God's authority. Those who have attempted to destroy the son, either literally at that time by sending Jesus to the cross, or spiritually now through their rejection of him today, they will all face eternal destruction in hell. That is scary. That may not sound very politically correct or very tolerant. But it is what God's word tells us. It's not my words. It's another way God warns rebellious humanity. Judgment is coming.

And yet this judgment that Jesus predicted in Mark chapter 12 is also good news for us. Yes, judgment is coming. But in verse 9 Jesus says that the owner will give the vineyard to others. In terms of the parable, that makes sense. If the owners' existing tenants are evicted, then he'll find new tenants. But concerning the church, we see this to be true as well. Israel was God's chosen people. They were supposed to be a vehicle for bringing godliness and grace to the nations. Through Israel, the nations could be ingrafted into the church. And to an extent that is true. The New Testament church is ingrafted into the true Israel. But in this passage, we see that in a very real way the New Testament church is built on the ruins of ethnic Israel. As Israel is judged for its rebellion, the New Testament church is brought in. God's kingdom is extended to the world. God's kingdom is extended to all who would receive Christ and his authority.

And so the way God's kingdom was being visibly manifested on earth would be taken away from ethnic Israel, and given to the New Testament church, made up of all who would come in faith to the Son: Jew or Gentile. The visible church is made up of all who would submit in allegiance to him! Of course, that was always what made someone part of God's kingdom. Invisibly, God's kingdom is made up of all who place their trust and hope in God and in his Messiah. But visibly that was shown through the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. But with the coming of Jesus, God was taking away that visible marker from ethnic Israel as an act of judgment

upon them. Now, more than ever, he calls each of us to believe on him as your Lord and Savior.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, how do you answer the questions of the religious leaders? By what authority has Jesus come? If you answer that his authority is man-made, then you have rejected his authority and are under the judgment that follows. But you have seen how long suffering God is in this passage. You have seen how he has sent prophets time and time again calling the people to acknowledge him as their God. If you have rebelled against his authority, he calls to you again today to repent. Acknowledge Jesus as your savior, but also as your Lord. Be thankful for God's patience, but don't want any longer! Find life today!

And so if you answer the question of Jesus authority by saying that his authority is from God, then I urge you to live like that! If you know Jesus is the Lord of lords and King of kings, then let's live that like. Let us submit to him as our Lord and Savior!

And if we do, then realize, we have been made part of Christ's kingdom. His kingdom has been given to us. Jesus came in the full authority of God, because he is the only begotten Son of God. If Jesus is our Lord and Savior, then we belong to his heavenly kingdom and his holy family. That's why we as Christians join a church. We are visibly acknowledging that we belong to Christ. We are acknowledging that we are under his leadership. It's our way to submit to him.

So, let's indeed submit to the authority of Jesus! Let us look to bear Christian fruit in our lives. Let us look to be good stewards with the gifts he's given us. You see, I am talking about Christ being our Lord. We confess that Jesus is our Lord. That's a title of authority. We say he is our Lord, but do we live like that? It doesn't take away from the fact that he's also our savior, to acknowledge that he's our Lord. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, we can't earn our salvation. Yes, he's the one who even grows us in obedience. But we still call Jesus our Savior *and* Lord. If he is our Lord, let's live like that!

And as our Lord, he calls us to obedience and submission. He calls us to follow everything he has commanded us. And he promises to lead us in this area. That's what Jesus is doing as our Lord. He is leading us in godliness. He does that by reigning in his church through his Word and Spirit. His Word teaches us and trains us in submitting to his Lordship. His Spirit works inside us to make us delight in serving him and grow us in actually living out his Word. And as the Lord shepherds each of us by his Word and Spirit, we see that he also gives us undershepherds.

Back in Mark chapter 6, we saw Jesus send out the disciples with authority. At the Great Commission he again sent them out to build the church with his authority. As elders and deacons are ordained, they are ordained with Christ's authority to lead in his church. God calls his people to submit to Christ, through the church and its leaders. That's why the fourth OPC membership vow is, "Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?" Jesus takes authority very seriously. And he is continuing to act authoritatively in his church, even through the ordained officers.

And so may we each as Christians live as men and women under authority. This is true in the church, and it's true in every arena in life. One thing we see in Scripture time and time again, is that God has instituted various authorities in life. Yes, individual human leaders do often pervert that authority. But the structure of authority is God-given. And he calls us to submit to those authorities as submitting to him. There are all sorts of authorities in life: The

church, the work place, in your marriage, in your families, in the government, in organizations. Whether you are in a place of authority in those roles, or are under authority, or both, God calls you to rightly serve as unto him.

And in the church, that means submitting to his spiritual Lordship in your life, as he trains you in godliness. That means being good sheep that respond to the Great Shepherd, and even the undershepherds he has placed in your life. You know, God keeps calling to us in so many ways at times, doesn't he? Certainly there are areas in your life where you resist the Lordship of Christ. Those areas of sin and rebellion where you try to keep God out of. Maybe it's a sinful habit you won't let go of. Maybe it's withholding forgiveness and not seeking reconciliation. Maybe it's something else. But God keeps sending messengers to call you to obedience. He speaks to you by his Word on the issue. He convicts your heart by his Spirit. The pastors and elders in your life keep speaking to the issue, but you keep resisting. Well, I urge you. Let today be the day of repentance on that issue. May today be a day of submission to his authority in your life.

Don't feel oppressed when the Lord challenges you on an area of rebellion in your life. It's actually an expression of his love and grace for you. God knows what's best for you. Believe that he has your best interest in mind. He does. That's part of what faith is all about. Trust Jesus in faith. Repent in the areas that he's working on in your life, even today. Amen.

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