

October 1, 2017

Matthew 21:23-27: ***“From Heaven or from Man?”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson revolves around the term "authority." To have "authority" is both the right and the power that goes with this right to say and do what you are saying and doing. Before our lesson, Jesus had entered into Jerusalem so that people were crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Children were glorifying him. Furthermore, he went to the temple and cleansed it, "driving out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons (v.12)." The apostle Matthew tells us in verse 14 that "the blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them."

The reaction among the people was "praise (v.16)," but when the chief priests and scribes saw all of the marvels that Jesus was doing, they were "indignant (v.15)" - they were angry, annoyed, resentful, full of envy. I like the colorful way in which the *Incomplete Commentary On Matthew* puts it, [the chief priests and scribes thought to themselves]:

"We were the pillars of the temple, and behold, the whole church rests on him, and we have been found to have been upright for no good reason because we have lost our ministry and possess an empty title. We were the visible tongue of the silent Scriptures, and behold, he echoes in the middle of the temple, and we have become despised and kept silent like a broken lyre. We were the fathers of the people and yet he daily produces children while we have been found sterile."

And so, the next day, because of all the "wonderful things (v.15)" that Jesus had been saying and doing, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority (v. 23)?" The truth is that the answer was right before their very eyes. The glorifying praise of the people was uttered because they felt themselves in the very presence of God as this presence was made manifest by everything good that Jesus was saying and doing. It was clear that this was divine authority. The chief priests and elders of the people were going against what was right in front of them; against better knowledge. This is the Messiah, the Son of God, equal with the Father, authorized to say and do it all. In John, chapter five, on another occasion, Jesus says these words that help us to understand what is going on in our lesson:

"My Father is working until now, and I am working' . . . This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because . . . he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise (John 5:17-19).'"

Or, consider these words of Jesus in John 10, "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have *authority* to lay it down, and I have *authority* to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father (verses 17b-18)." All of this takes us to the undeniable truth that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is in charge to the consternation of

every person or institution that thinks its "all that." And when the chief priests and elders of the people gazed at the humanity of Jesus, they were blown away. They could not stand the idea that someone else, this scum from Nazareth being in charge. In their minds, "It can't be so! We are the religious elite and we are in control." They are not asking an innocent question when they say, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Rather, they are asking the question with the hope that he will confess what is obvious to all so they might find a way to accuse him of blasphemy and finally get rid of him, put him to death; which is what they inevitably do, only by the will of him that they do it to.

What you are seeing in this text is what happens when the unbelieving religious elite finally face the one who is greater than them, and then face the truth about themselves. Really, this is across the board for any one or any institution that would set itself up in the place of God, whether it be any government throughout world history or the pope in Rome. To the consternation of all who do not bend the knee and do right before Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man and only Savior of the world, there are the words of the Psalmist, "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"

Yes, for those who think that they are going to play a tune for Jesus with the expectation that he will dance, for those who despise and hate the one who died and rose from the dead and who claims "no one comes to the Father except through me," for those who despise and hate his followers who hold to Biblical truth, there will be a rude awakening. We see proof of this in our lesson: "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. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?'" Bottom line is that no one can outwit the Son of God. If they say "from heaven," they will be exposed as unbelievers. If they say "from man," they will be still exposed as unbelievers because the people have seen and felt the presence of God. They are impaled by either answer, so they say, "we do not know." In that way, they are "moved out of the way" of Jesus who is from heaven. Unbelieving, religious elite "know nothings" cannot wrestle with Jesus and win. He is in charge. He is the boss. All will acknowledge this to be the case.

I am not a promoter of all that Max Lucado says, but *In the Eye of the Storm* he gives a fantastic illustration that I would like to share with you this morning. He writes:

In U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, the magazine of the Naval Institute, Frank Koch illustrates the importance of obeying the Laws of the Lighthouse. Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."  
"Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out.

The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees."

The captain said, "Send: 'I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees.'"

"I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees."

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send: 'I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.

Jesus Christ is the lighthouse. There are a lot of captains and battleships that would tell him this, that, and whatever. But, all of these captains and battleships that do not submit to Christ are essentially from man. Jesus is the one who is from heaven who died and rose victoriously for us. Who's the boss? The answer: he who is considered nothing but a seaman second-class. The light house! He cannot be moved, and he will vindicate all those who believe in him, because he is in charge. As Paul writes: "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11)."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott