

Matthew 21:23-32
"By What Authority?"
Pentecost 18 (Proper 21 A)

October 1, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As Jesus was teaching on the temple grounds, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to Jesus and asked Him: "***By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave You this authority?***" (Matthew 21:23)

To give some context to this question on authority, it may be best to know the situation. This is Tuesday of Holy Week. With the Palm Sunday praises of "***Hosanna to the Son of David***" (Matthew 21:9) still echoing in His ears, Jesus had again entered Jerusalem. Since that Palm Sunday procession, He cleansed the temple as He tossed the tables of the money changers and tossed the seats of those who sold pigeons (Matthew 21:12). Jesus had driven out those buying and selling in the temple. Since then, He has taught in the temple with great power and authority. In this context, the chief priests and the elders come and interrogate Jesus saying, "***By what authority are you doing these things?***" (Matthew 21:23).

For these chief priests and elders, they had the right to challenge the authority of Jesus. For they were the body to which the spiritual care and welfare of the people were entrusted. So, their question was a good question. After all, they had seen and heard of Christ's miracles and the striking authoritative manner that Jesus taught. But even if their question was a proper question, they weren't asking it in a manner to fully understand. They were, in fact, insincere and treacherous in asking this question as they were asking it with hardened hearts. Again and again, they had a chance to hear the truth of Scripture, and just as often, they kept bringing up their same old and tired arguments against Jesus.

And in a way that may seem surprising, Jesus actually answers these Jewish leaders on the question of authority in a way that is most surprising. Again, "***by what authority are you doing these things?***" This is a question put to Jesus that is also a frequent question in Christ's Church today. I have heard this question on occasion -- especially from non-Lutherans about Confession and Absolution: "***By what authority does a pastor pronounce forgiveness?***" Well, it's not my forgiveness, but God's forgiveness.

You, see, Jesus works through Means and the pastor is one of those means by which He gives forgiveness through what's known as the Office of the Keys.

The Office of the Keys is the special authority that Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. For Christ says, ***“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”*** (John 20:22-23). So, even as keys lock and unlock, so the authority to forgive sins and retain sins opens and closes heaven.

Another question on authority is often: ***“Who is in charge in the Church?”*** When we ask a question like that, it is always a heart issue. It’s a matter of pride. If Jesus isn’t in charge, then this fellowship here is no longer the Church, but is more like a club -- a group of likeminded people who choose what is right and what is wrong.

Questions such as these can reveal the pride that lurks in our sinful hearts. So, we must be on guard against the assaults of the devil and our flesh in questions on authority. Martin Luther once wrote, *“The subtle poison of ambition is just under the surface. This sin has often tripped even those who have grasped God’s Word purely. From this sin, all heresies have arisen; ambition is the mother of all heresies and sects. Against this secret villain we must pray to God daily to suppress our self-esteem”* (LW 12:188).

So, we must learn that we do not need self-esteem, but humility before Christ, who tries our hearts and knows how full they are with ambition, pride, and selfishness.

A case in point on authority is the question on John’s authority and his Baptism. Is Baptism by divine authority or simply by man’s authority? The Baptism of John, was it ***“from heaven or from man?”*** (Matthew 21:25) Now, Jesus’ question here to the chief priests and elders is no simple debating tactic. The point of our text is not the skillful use of language by Jesus. Although Jesus is certainly skillful at debating. The real point gets to the heart of the issue: the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah.

John the Baptist is the one who proclaimed Jesus to be the very Lamb of God, who has come to take away the sins of the world. So, if John’s Baptism was from heaven, his words would be authoritative too, and Jesus must be the Christ.

So, like the Baptism instituted by Jesus, John’s Baptism was a Baptism into the remission of sins. John’s Baptism worked regeneration and renounced the works-righteousness of the Pharisees. So, the Baptism of John was not merely “from man,” but “from heaven.” It was a Means of Grace with the power to give the forgiveness of sins. It was from heaven!

But what about our Baptism? What about the other Means of Grace? Are they by heavenly authority or merely by human authority? These questions are great issues in the Church today.

So, are the Sacraments from heaven or from man? Well, what does Jesus say? ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”*** (Matthew 28:19). In Holy Baptism, God works the forgiveness of sins, He rescues the baptized from eternal death and the devil, and He gives eternal salvation.

But what about the Lord’s Supper? Is that of heaven or of man? Well, who instituted the Lord’s Supper? As the disciples were eating on Maundy Thursday, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, He gave it to His disciples and said, ***“Take, eat; this is My body.”*** And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, ***“Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”*** (Matthew 26:26-28). So, it is only our Lord Jesus Christ’s words that establish the Sacrament of the Altar -- and Christ means what He says. We receive His Body and Blood under the bread and the wine for our forgiveness and strength for our weak faith.

Now, what about the Bible? Is it from heaven or from man? Is the Bible inspired by God or is it just ethical teachings from man? If the Bible is just ethical teachings from man, we might as well turn off the lights right now and go home, because if the Bible is from man, what’s the point of being here? If the Bible were of man, there would be no hope, no salvation, no resurrection. But in fact, the Bible is of God, because the Bible is the very Word of God. The Apostle Peter writes, ***“For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”*** (2 Peter 1:21). And the Apostle Paul wrote, ***“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work”*** (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Now, did Jesus ever say that the Bible was from heaven? Well, one day Jesus came to Nazareth and as it was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. He unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me...”*** Then He rolled up the scroll and sat down. As all the eyes of the men and women were fixed upon Jesus, He began to say to them, ***“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”*** (Luke 4:21). The Bible is from heaven, since every Word is God breathed!

Like all the Means of Grace - *Word and Sacraments* - they can only be understood through the eyes of faith. Our trust in their blessings is only dependent on the authority of the One who gave them, Jesus Christ.

But getting back to the question of the chief priests and the elders, “***By what authority are you doing these things?***”, Jesus answers their question by *not actually* answering the question.

In refusing the answer, Jesus is actually asserting His authority by refusing to submit to His interrogators. He is above them because He is from above. He is the Man who is from heaven.

So, by the chief priests and the elders asking the question on authority, they are rejecting the authority of the One who has come down from heaven and are demonstrating that they reject the One who is from heaven. You see, their thinking is shown to be from men, from below.

Ultimately, Jesus would demonstrate His authority over death and the devil by suffering and dying on the cross and bodily rising from the dead. Therefore, the Means of Grace He instituted are also authoritative! So, His Word, every Word of Holy Scripture, is reliable and certain! The forgiveness He spoke was authoritative, so the sins He forgives are forgiven! The Sacraments He gave His Church truly deliver forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation!

Now, Jesus’ authority is not just of times’ past. His authority is still at work today in the Office of the Holy Ministry -- the pastoral office. So, when Jesus’ under shepherds preach His Word, you hear Jesus. As Jesus said, “***The one who hears you hears Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me***” (Luke 10:16). So, through Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, Jesus’ under shepherds forgive sins by His authority.

On this LWML Sunday, we recall the mission work of God’s people. We recall that Christ’s Church is to proclaim the good news of salvation to all people. We do this, not by our authority, but by Christ’s authority: “***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age***” (Matthew 28:18-20).

So, through a little thing such as the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4), those offerings that go above and beyond just our congregation's offerings, these mites support the Church's mission of making disciples of all nations, both here and abroad.

The Church rejoices in the authority of Jesus! For by His authority, we hear His Word, we tell others of His Word, and through His very Word, we are absolved of our sins. Amen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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