

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

The events of Mark 11 have really brought this issue of authority to the forefront. Mark Chapter 11 has gone from celebration on Sunday (the triumphal entry), to cursing the fig tree and clearing the temple on Monday. Now verse 27 begins a series of confrontations that Jesus has with the religious authorities in the temple as the religious leaders begin a massive assault to discredit Jesus and find any excuse to put Him to death.

Let's read the text from Mark 11:27-33

- 27 Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him.**
- 28 And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?"**
- 29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things:**
- 30 The baptism of John--was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me."**
- 31 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'**
- 32 But if we say, 'From men' "--they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed.**
- 33 So they answered and said to Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."**

The confrontation begins here in Mark 11:27, but it really goes all the way through Mark 12:40. And what we're going to see in chapter 12 when we get there is a series of stories and events that focus on these religious leaders and in each of these stories and events Jesus pronounces judgment on their unbelief.

Obviously the key word here is authority. Authority is the word that gives meaning to this confrontation. The Greek word is *exousia*, it really means power to act, liberty to act. To have authority is essentially to have the right to exercise your will, to exercise force, to determine, to decide. That's authority. And no one who has ever walked on this planet has ever had such authority as Jesus Christ.

As we have walked with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark we have been witnesses of His authority. We saw many occasions where He exercised authority over disease, demons, and even over death.

Mark 1:22 - And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Mark 1:27 - Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? What new doctrine is this?"

For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."

Mark 2:10 - **But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"--He said to the paralytic,**

Mark 5:30 - **And Jesus, immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of Him, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My clothes?"**

Jesus not only exercised authority and power, He even delegated it to His disciples.

Mark 6:7 - **And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits.**

Looking at this in a negative way, just to make the point even stronger, Jesus never asked permission from anyone to do anything...no one. Never asked if He had permission to teach or heal or even to eat at someone's house. Jesus acted as if He Himself possessed all the authority He needed.

He had only one authority in His life and that was the divine will which He knew perfectly as the divine Son. Our Lord never consulted the Pharisees. He never consulted the scribes. He never consulted the rabbis to get permission to do anything. He never consulted the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel, on anything at all. He acted solely on His own authority.

When Jesus taught without their approval and did things without their permission it struck a massive blow to their spiritual pride, devastating their imagined privilege and power. And it just continually infuriated the Jewish religious authorities. They developed a vicious hatred for Him. The issue here is the issue of authority.

This first encounter of Jesus and the religious leaders involves their demand (vv.27-28); they ask Jesus by what authority he has driven out the money changers and merchants; Jesus provides His defense; where does authority come from--heaven or man? The religious leaders realize no matter how they answer they will be caught in their own trap--what a dilemma! The dilemma turns to defeat as they give a deceitful answer (we don't know).

1. The Religious Leaders' Demand (27-28)

Verse 27 tells us, **as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him.** The chief priests and scribes were both present during Jesus' cleansing of the temple the day before. And now they are joined by the elders to confront Jesus. This constituted the entire Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel of Israel.

A little background: The chief priests were made up of "the acting high priest, those who had been high priests, and members of the privileged families from which the high priests were taken." The elders were the "tribal and family heads of the people and priesthood." And the scribes were the experts in Jewish law.

Both the Pharisees (scribes and elders) and the Sadducees (high priests and elders) were a part of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin, at the time of Christ, had the authority to judge in civil and criminal matters for the Jews. However, under Roman law, which Jerusalem was under at this time, only Rome could order capital punishment. Nevertheless, the Roman leaders tended to side with the decisions of the Sanhedrin in order to keep the people at rest. If the local Roman magistrates couldn't keep control of their assigned region they would face strict punishment from Rome itself. On the other hand, the Jews had to tread carefully so that the Roman leaders wouldn't come down on them with an iron fist. There was a very delicate balance going on here. This becomes very important in the last days of Jesus' life, as we will soon see. Here, though, I want you to simply understand that under Jewish tradition the Sanhedrin had the legal authority to censure and/or punish Jesus should He commit any crimes against Jewish law.

Mark says, "**they came to Him**," really they came to attack Him. They came after Him. The big issue was what Jesus did. It was tough enough for these Jewish leaders endure His teaching that seemed to contradict all their traditions. It was really hard to swallow that He came into Jerusalem on Sunday with massive crowds saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." The people were throwing messianic titles and names at Him and He never ever refused to receive them. In fact, He took them. That was aggravating enough. But the real issue was His action on Monday when He tore up the temple and threw all the merchants out.

So they finally cannot hold back, they demand an answer, "**By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?**"

Where is Your authority for Your teaching and Your action against this temple? They didn't expect Him to give them His rabbinical credentials, they knew He didn't have those. They knew He hadn't gone to any school, gone through any ordination process. They want Him to say, "My authority comes directly from God," and they would spin that as the final straw in His blasphemy. But He was too wise for that. And so we go from the demand to the defense.

2. Jesus' Defense (29-30)

What might the Lord Jesus have answered in His defense? He could surely have claimed that His authority came from the Old Testament Scriptures, especially those which prophesied His first coming (John 5:39,46). The Father also had given witness to Jesus as His Son (John 8:16-18). If for no other reason men should listen because of His works (John 5:36). In what Jesus said and taught, there was intrinsic authority. Men could not disregard what He taught (cf. John 7:45-46).

The real issue with these leaders was not really a lack of evidence which would accredit His authority, but a stubborn refusal to draw the conclusion which that

evidence demanded. Because of this, Jesus sought to expose their willful rejection of the truth. This He did by posing a question to His opponents.

“Jesus said to them, **“I also will ask you one question.”** That was a very typical rabbinical way to teach, answer a question with a question. **“then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.”** That is honest, that is not contrived. That is a matter of fact offer that Jesus makes to them. I’m going to ask you a question if you answer the question I ask you, I’ll answer the question you ask Me. Here’s My question, verse 30. **“The baptism of John--was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.”**

What do you mean the baptism of John? John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Messiah, the greatest prophet who ever lived up until His time. John the Baptist was in the wilderness preaching repentance and preparation for the coming of Messiah. And one day the Messiah shows up and Jesus comes and John says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The baptism of John includes all of John’s ministry. He was preaching repentance, preaching preparation for Messiah, preaching that Jesus is the Messiah and he was baptizing with a baptism of repentance to prepare for the coming Messiah.

One of the primary witnesses to the identity and authority of Jesus was John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for Messiah (cf. Mark 1:1-11). How did the chief priests, scribes and elders regard John and his claim? Did they accept his testimony?

The truth was they did not. But they were very discreet to keep their verdict to themselves, for they knew the masses accepted him as a messenger of God, a true prophet (Mark 11:32).

Jesus put them between a rock and a hard place. He didn’t resent their question. He just knew their phony intentions. That leads us to their dilemma.

3. The Leader's Dilemma (31-32)

I marvel at the gospel accounts of the religious hierarchy’s private discussion, for not once did they consider the issue theologically (in terms of what the truth was), but only politically and pragmatically (what will the crowds think?). Their theology seemingly was only a facade, a high-sounding explanation for their moral wickedness.

If they parroted the position of the majority, then they would play into the hands of Jesus. If John were a prophet, indeed, then why did they not consider John’s testimony sufficient authority for Jesus’ teaching and ministry? If, on the other hand, they revealed their true appraisal of John (which probably was that he was some kind of religious ‘nut’) they would lose whatever esteem the multitudes had for them.

Our Lord is stunningly brilliant. They’re really on the hot seat. If they said the ministry of John is from God, then they have to admit that Jesus is the Messiah because that’s what John said. If they say the ministry of God is not from God, it’s from men, then they’ve got a problem because all the people knew that John

was a real prophet. You see, it's a package deal. You can't take John without Jesus. And you can't throw away Jesus without throwing away John.

It is important for us to see that Jesus' answer was really helpful to the audience who asked it. He was speaking to them of something they could believe. He was using as evidence for His authority an issue that should have been clear to them. These priests, these scribes knew the Scripture. They were steeped in Judaism. They should have been able to recognize when a prophet of God was present. That was their area of expertise. Jesus was not asking them to believe something that they did not know anything about. What He asks them to consider is this: "You know what a prophet is like. You ought to be able to recognize one, and so I ask you to consider, 'Was John a prophet?'" He is giving them the greatest chance possible to believe in Him.

That is another characteristic of Jesus' love for his enemies, for those who oppose him. He will chase us down. He will back us into a corner. He will make us ask the question, "How is it that can claim such authority?" Then He will answer in a way that we can believe Him, in an area that we can understand, with evidence that will make sense to us.

But the religious authorities refuse to believe in Jesus. Now you understand the dilemma, right? What are they going to do? The praise of men was everything to them. It was absolutely everything, power, prestige, privilege, honors. They wanted the chief seats always in the synagogues, didn't they? The high places in the banquets. They wanted to be given titles and honor and recognized in public as holy, lofty elevated sacrosanct men. Just the opposite would happen to them. They're stuck if they say John's ministry is from God, then they have to embrace Jesus and that they cannot do. If they say it's from men, they're liable to get stoned to death and they can't let that happen, and so they were reduced to the worst possible thing that can happen to somebody who has intellectual pride. So we see in verse 33:

4. The Deceitful Answer (33)

They were forced to say in verse 33, **"We do not know."**

When Jesus replies, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"** He is not simply refusing to answer their question--He will not let them off the hook--that easy. In chapter 12 Jesus will give them a condemning parable.

The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be the ultimate authority. They were those who ordained and accredited religious leaders. They set aside scripture and made it subservient to their traditions (Matthew 15:6). They rejected the witness of the Law and the prophets. They refused to hearken to the preparatory announcement of John the Baptist. They made themselves the authority.

That is precisely what men and women do today. The reason that many reject Jesus as their Messiah and Savior is that they place themselves above the authority of the Word of God. They trust in their own reasonings rather than in

divine revelation. The fundamental question we must face in deciding about Jesus Christ is "What is my ultimate authority?"

There are so many people who approach the Bible this way: every time they see something in a passage that does not correspond to their philosophy of life they say, "That's not my god, he would never do that, my god would never act that way".

I would respond, "You're right, your god would never act that way, but that is because your god is not the God of the bible, it is the god of your own imagination." The religious leaders of Jesus' day refused to recognize the authority of Jesus, so they could continue to justify the sin in their lives.

Jesus said to them, "**Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.**" You don't ever want to be in that position where Jesus says, "I'm through communicating with you." Dear friends, you don't want your life to get to that point. If you've become comfortable rejecting Jesus Christ, you don't ever know when the Lord will just say, "I am through."