

By Whose Authority?
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Matthew 21:23-32

What comes to mind when you hear the word “authority”? The Dictionary.com website defines “authority” in part as: “the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues or disputes; the right to control, command, or determine” and “persons having the legal power to make and enforce the law.” Authority can be granted to an individual or group by a community to make such decisions on its behalf, or it can come with a particular rank or status. It almost always implies being entrusted with responsibility for the welfare of others.

Theologically speaking, the definition of authority, and the rights and responsibilities which come with it, are much the same. The Greek word for authority, *exousia*, is used some 40 times in the New Testament. Its most literal meaning is “from a substance” or “from a being,” and during the Classical period of the 5th century BCE, it nearly always meant “a person with power” in a political sense. In the context of the temple debate that’s taking place here, *exousia* is used three times in short order. It serves to frame the questions surrounding the authority both Jesus and John the Baptist exercised as either/or proposition. That is, it’s either God-given, or human-given. If it’s God-given the priests are in trouble for not believing either of them in the first place - which, in Matthew’s worldview, is the exact opposite of what a “righteous” leader should be doing. On the other hand, if Jesus’ authority comes from the people, the priests are also in trouble. They’ve already killed one prophet, John, whose words resonated with the people, and if they start agitating against another one, they risk losing the people’s

support, or worse. (Hold onto that thought.) So what's really at stake here is whether the chief priests will be honest with Jesus about who they think he, and John before him, are. Which they are, but only to a point, "Well, if we say what we think, we will definitely lose. So let's not say anything, and see what Jesus does next."

The chief priests recognize, correctly, that they've been trapped. And, this trap has serious implications for them and for the positions they hold. There was no question that the Romans would A) quickly swoop in to crack down harshly on any protests staged by an agitated crowd, and B) likely also remove them from office as well. At some level, they know Jesus is right about how their behavior is not up to the high standards set for leaders within the Hebrew Scriptures. As we see throughout Matthew, leaders like the chief priests are interested mainly in preserving their own privileged status, and not necessarily in promoting God's version of justice and righteousness among the people. For them to admit publicly that this nobody of a carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth is on to something where their behavior is concerned is like asking a narcissist to accept responsibility for their own behavior. They just can't do it, not without completely destroying the false self they show to the world, and exposing their fragile, real self to ridicule. They'd much rather destroy the person who's trying to point out their poor behavior. That's kind of the mindset these particular chief priests demonstrate here. They try very hard to dodge Jesus' question instead of answering it outright, despite how they know that Jesus will not let them the hook off easily, if he does at all.

The stakes in this debate are almost frighteningly high. It takes place a mere 48 hours before Jesus will be arrested, and it's one of the things which sets the Temple

authorities firmly against him. What they especially dislike is how he pulls back the curtain on their leadership failures. According to him, they've failed to provide material support for the people, in the form of feeding the hungry and advocating for the poor, widows, and orphans. They also act like entitled elites. They treat Jesus, John the Baptist, and others like them with contempt because they lack the formal education and wealth that these leaders possess. Instead of someone to be engaged with in respectful debate, Jesus and John have become threats. In the black-and-white thinking which was very common in that era, they aren't friends, and so they must be destroyed in order to preserve the *status quo*.¹

Jesus follows up his refusal to tell the chief priests by whose authority he is doing these things by telling a parable. Its point is not only that these leaders are like the second son, who did not go to work in his father's vineyard after saying he would. It gets at the truth that actions speak louder than words do. In the case of the chief priests, their refusal to engage Jesus' question about authority tells him everything he needs to know. They'd rather not confront people like him and John honestly, much less receive their criticisms – doubly so if it means keeping their power and prestige intact. One commenter on the text frames the challenge Jesus issues like this:

“Matthew has a way of cutting through the red tape and of by-passing the religious bureaucracy. There is no room for [pretense] or pretentiousness. The prostitutes and toll collectors, the lousy rich and the women they exploited, got the point, at least some of them. Is it because they allowed themselves to be vulnerable, to be

¹ Eunyung Lim, “Commentary on Matthew 21:23-32.” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26/commentary-on-matthew-2123-32-7> [accessed September 21, 2026].

*moved, to let the word of compelling compassion address their deeper needs? Were the religious leaders so defensive in protecting their system - in the name of the people of God and the Scripture - that they suppressed their inner cries, stopped their ears?"*²

This issue of protecting the *status quo*, whether in church systems or anywhere else, isn't unfamiliar. People don't like change, and will fight very hard to keep it from happening. Nor do they particularly like to give up authority, or political power, or even the privilege that comes with certain roles, when they get it. But here's the catch: Real authority, the God-given kind which enabled John the Baptist, Jesus, and every other prophet before or since to speak truth to power, looks and feels a lot more like the love which spoke the world into creation and allowed itself to be nailed to the cross than a brutish display of force. It's not having "authority over" someone else as we might think of it. That is, it's not about telling someone what to do or lording it over them to ensure they stay in their lane. Rather, the authority Jesus has provides the foundation for the new life we accept through our baptism. He shares it with us. We continue to grow it and give it away as we live into the pattern of gathering to pray and break bread, and then going back out into the world to do the work we've been given to do.³

Jesus' own authority is the foundation for everything he does, whether it's healing the sick, teaching, preaching, or challenging the authorities of his day to do better. He is able to do it because he himself is under God's own authority. And what power he has, he gives away entirely when he is killed. What that shows us is that authority is never

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the Lectionary: Pentecost 18." <https://billloader.com/MtPentecost18Ord26.html> [accessed September 21, 2026].

³ The Rt. Rev. Susan E. Goff, "The Stewardship of Authority." Talk given to the Diocese of Virginia Spring Clergy Retreat, May 8, 2018, Orkney Springs, Virginia.

about “glory unto me.” Rather, it’s about “glory unto God” – as well as making sure that the tax collectors, the prostitutes, and anyone else who is counted among society’s “least of these” are not only seen, but loved, and given the respect and dignity they are due as children of God.