

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Sermon Title: "Grateful for the Authority over Us" (A Journey through Matthew)

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We know what kids can be like, if we tell them to do something. We ask our teenager, "Put out the garbage please," or "Take the dishes from the dishwasher, please," or "Put away your clothes, please;" and we basically know how they will respond. They do the same thing as they did before: they refuse. They roll the eyes and voice some complaint, and then we re-ask the question, to which we get more complaining. Sometimes the teen offers an excuse, "I'm in the middle of a videogame." "I'm on Facebook with my friends." "I'm talking to somebody on my phone right now." We once again ask them to put out the trash or pick up their clothes, and we don't get an immediate response.

But then, we might look out back and see our children carrying the garbage to the can. We go to their rooms, and find the clothes are in their drawers and on their hangers. They refused and complained before, but then did what we wanted them to do. All ends well, and we are happy.

Sadly, there are times we have to sit on our kids to

get things done. This could happen when we ask our son to mow the grass. He is in the middle of something, so we negotiate a time in which he will go outside: "At 10:00am – in about 45 minutes." Of course, more than 45 minutes go by, and I don't hear the lawnmower running outside. So I ask him again, and there are more delays. In fairness to my son, about half the time I forget that I asked him to mow the grass. It could be 5:00pm, and then I remember that I asked him to go outside at 9:00am. By then Parker is an agreeable person and mows the grass. He does the job, most of the time with prodding, but he does the job. He is the first son in Jesus' parable in Matthew 21.

It would not bode well for all of us, if we had the second son. If he gladly said, "Yes, my dear father, I will be more than happy to mow the grass at 10:00am, which is in 15 minutes," and then never got the job done. 5:00pm rolls around, the next day, the next week, and he still hasn't run the lawnmower. What would a household look like then? A lot of fighting, a lot of shouting. Eventually, the parent would have to go out and mow the lawn, feeling as though his or her child has no respect for him or her. The child shows no respect to the authority that the parent has, an authority the child might not agree with all the time,

but an authority the child has to respect for his or her own good.

This is what Jesus has to deal with. He gets no respect from the leading priests and elders of the Temple. They want to see his credentials. Does he have a license to practice, does he have a diploma from a major university, who were his teachers and who gave him authorization to do what he does? Apparently these priests and elders have the credentials that prove they are smart individuals. The people show them respect by bowing to them, kissing their rings, and giving them special places of honor at their parties. What about Jesus?

Funny thing is, throughout the Gospels Jesus would quote passages from the Old Testament, and then he would say, "But I say to you." "You have heard it said, but truly I tell you." When a senior high or college student writes an essay for school, he or she has to look up quotes from books, written by more-professional people who have the authority to share ideas. When I write a sermon, I usually go to commentaries to make sure I know what I am talking about. Jesus doesn't need commentaries. He doesn't need to quote people who are smarter than he. Jesus is the Commentary. Jesus is the Quote. "I say to you"

carries the highest authority that anybody could ever carry, because he is the Word of God. Nobody gets more important, more powerful, than that. So his words hold weight. His words transform lives. As he is the Word, the Word says a word, and people are healed.

But, the leading priests and elders do not hear his words. They cannot see the Word, Jesus himself, standing in front of them: Son of God, Savior of the world. They give no respect to Jesus, maybe because they are bitter: bitter toward Jesus' powerful ability to influence people, bitter toward his compassionate heart to reach people where they are.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller talks about a friend of his called Tony the Beat Poet. Tony has a smooth way of reflecting on theological and cultural customs and practices. At one point Tony the Beat Poet says that the church is like a wounded animal these days. The church used to having power and influence over the culture, probably back in the 1950s and the decades before that. Church leaders reveled in the fact that their churches were filled, and whatever they said from the pulpit would be believed. No questions asked. But now the church leaders don't have so much influence, and that has made them

upset. Tony the Beat Poet says that church leaders tend to act like “spoiled children, mad because they can’t have their way. They disguise their actions to look as though they are standing on principle, but it isn’t that... it’s bitterness.”¹ Their power and influence doesn’t work anymore. People may listen to a preacher on one Sunday, and if they don’t like it they can visit another church. They can stay home and watch church on TV, if they like, and listen to some other preacher. They get their preaching from FoxNews, MSNBC, and MTV.

The culture of America has shifted nowadays: Sunday isn’t the day to go to church anymore – it is the day to sleep in, play golf, mow the grass, pick up the groceries, and/or generally relax. Sunday is a day away from church, because people are busy with work from Monday to Friday, then they have to shuttle their kids from one game to another on Saturday, from sunup to sundown. The only day they have left for errands and Me Time is Sunday, and so God is pushed aside. Church leaders are upset by this, and so instead of becoming bitter and trying to regain their own power and influence over others, they need to turn to the authority of Christ. They need to relinquish whatever power they think they have. They

¹ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 116.

need to release their bitterness as well. They should submit to the authority of Christ, and do what he wants them to do to reach a stubborn and lost world.

The leading priests and elders are bitter toward Jesus and what he can do. So instead of fighting him, join him.

The priests and elders who want to see Jesus' credentials are asked a question, "The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from humans?"² Who came up with this baptism that John the Baptist shared with all? Was it an invention of John's, so he was going around by his own will and authority to baptize people? If the leaders give this answer, they would be mobbed by a bunch of people who thought John was a great prophet. So for fear of angering the crowds, they will not say that John made up baptism on his own. But they cannot say it is from heaven, because that answer would erase their demands to see Jesus' credentials. They would have to acknowledge that Jesus doesn't need credentials. He doesn't need proof. He is the Proof that God the Father is saving the world from sin.

So instead of fighting him, join him. Help save the world along with Christ, since Christ is the only one

² Matthew 21:25.

with the authority to save creation. Give sight to the blind, help the lame to walk, touch those whom nobody else will touch, let the deaf hear, let the dead rise, and share the good news with every stubborn and lost soul.³

Abundant life doesn't come by any power we have in our hands. Abundant life comes from the authority Christ grants to us. We submit to that authority out of respect for what Christ can do and what Christ will do in us.⁴

Jesus gives to the leading priests and elders something similar to an insult, when Jesus says, "Tax collectors and prostitutes are going to enter the kingdom of God before you."⁵ That's a bucket of cold water right in the face. Those people in my parable, who say no at first but then do what I want, will stroll right in before you do. This is not to say that the leading priests and elders won't enter God's kingdom. Jesus doesn't shut the door on them. They still may go in. However, they will not go in immediately, not like the sinners, because they are too busy standing at the gate of God's kingdom, questioning Jesus' credentials. They are wasting valuable time by

³ Cf. Luke 7:22

⁴ Cf. Ephesians 5:21.

⁵ Matthew 21:31.

checking papers like a customs agent at the airport checking people's passports. The priests and elders sadly stand at the gate like the second son saying, "Yes, we believe God exists. Yes, we believe he is the Lord of all, the King of the universe," and then doing nothing that their King commands them to do. Doing nothing that the King's Son calls them to do.

Faith is not just in the words we speak but also in the actions we perform. The tax collectors and prostitutes will stroll right into the kingdom, because at first they said no to God, but when Jesus came he had an authority they had never seen before. He spoke and healed them – they immediately said yes. They bowed before Jesus in respect. They opened their ears to his life-giving words. They tried to reflect the kind of life Jesus lived, showing kindness and mercy, offering compassion and forgiveness, to anybody. The first son in Jesus' parable put away his sin for Christ, because he acknowledges that only he has the power to remove sin. He has the power to hold back death and command it never to come. That's why the first son and all the former sinners will find themselves in God's kingdom.

We cannot give lip service to Jesus, either. We cannot say that he is the Lord of lords in church, and

then act as though our problems and pains rule our lives during the week. We cannot respect Christ's authority over us in here, and then disrespect it out there by doing our own thing in the name of "freedom." Jesus doesn't stop being our Lord and Savior when we leave here. He still calls us to believe in him and to serve as he did. He expects us to be a combination of the first and second son, in which we say yes to Christ and then do as he wants.

We desire Christ's authority over us, because we need help. We need support. We need Somebody to take control of what we have no control. We need somebody with the answers we cannot find. We need our Lord to solve the problems we cannot solve. When we are done with all the praying and the wishing, when we have come to the end of the rope and can do nothing else, we need the Lord to take over. No amount of arguing, no amount of complaining, no amount of blowing off time (delaying) will ever save us ultimately. Only Christ can. Christ is our authority to keep us from being stubborn and lost souls.

Assurance of Pardon

Paul said to the Ephesians that we were once aliens to God. We were strangers to God's perfect grace. But then we heard the word of God, and believed it, and accepted it. We are no longer aliens and strangers. We are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. We are forgiven, healed, and brought back to new life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God, amen.