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## BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Luke 19:45-20:8

By

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Luke Lesson 90

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“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is Steve Cole, reporting from Jerusalem, Israel. With me is a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body here in Jerusalem. Sir, can you give us your impressions of the situation here?”

“Yes, I’d be glad to. First, on Sunday the popular, but unofficial, radical rabbi Jesus unexpectedly paraded into town on a donkey. What a scene! People were going crazy, throwing their garments in the street, shouting messianic slogans, like, ‘Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ We leaders were shocked! It bordered on blasphemy! We told him to tell his zealous followers to be quiet, but he told us that if they were silent, the very stones would cry out. Clearly, the man has delusions of grandeur! Not only that, he is emotionally unstable. Right in the middle of all this acclaim, when he should have been waving happily to the crowd, he broke down weeping and babbling something about us not recognizing the day of our visitation!

“We hoped it would all blow over, as it has in the past. But there seems to be an unusual messianic fervor in town right now. Everyone is talking about the possibility that this Galilean carpenter, who, I might point out, has never even been to a rabbinical school, may be the Messiah! Can you imagine, a Messiah from Nazareth! Everyone knows that he will come from Bethlehem, from the lineage of David. Something has to be done!

“And then, yesterday, he came into the temple on a rampage. He overturned the tables of the legitimate, properly licensed vendors there, and drove them all away. I told you, he’s emotionally unstable—he can’t even control his temper! And then he sets himself up in the temple as a teacher and the crowds are loving it! It has to stop! If he goes unchecked, the man is going to destroy our whole Jewish culture and religion.”

“It’s obvious that a serious confrontation is brewing. What is the Sanhedrin doing about it?”

"We called a caucus and decided that at this point we need to take a cautious approach. These kinds of situations, with a volatile crowd, can blow up in your face if you're not careful! To us, it's clear: This man isn't operating under legitimate authority. The High Priest is our duly appointed authority. He licenses all the vendors; he oversees religious matters in our nation; he makes sure that those who teach in the temple are properly approved. We figured that if we let the crowd know that this man is acting apart from the approval of the proper authority, he would be discredited in their eyes and they wouldn't listen to him anymore."

"That sounds like a reasonable approach. What happened?"

"Well, we didn't count on how quick-witted this guy is! He may not be educated, but I have to admit that he's sharp! He turned our question about his authority back on us and said, in effect, that the answer to our question rested on our answer to *his* question. Then he raised the sticky matter about that radical, John the Baptist: Was his ministry from God or from men?"

"That put us in a tight spot. If we answered that John's ministry was from God, Jesus would have retorted, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' If we said, 'It's from men,' well, ... This uneducated crowd wouldn't have tolerated that for a minute, because they strongly feel that John was a prophet. So what could we do? We played it safe and answered, 'No comment.'"

"One last question, 'What's your next move?'"

"I think our lawyers are working on a question about paying taxes, and I've heard some talk about the resurrection issue. But I can't say anything more at this time."

"Thank you for your time. That's the situation here in Jerusalem, Israel. We'll keep you posted on any more developments."

The problem that the Jewish leaders faced was that Jesus and His authority confronted their authority. They had had their share of run-ins with Jesus. Three years ago, at the start of His ministry, Jesus had also gone up to Jerusalem and cleansed the temple (John 2:13-22). But then He left town and had pretty much kept to the north, while they had continued to run the religious establishment in Jerusalem. He had come to town a few times and stirred things up, but He always had left and things had gone back to normal.

But now things were coming to a head. Something had to be done to rid the nation of this troublesome prophet.

The problem that those Jewish religious leaders faced is the same problem that every person who comes into contact with Jesus faces: *His authority confronts my authority*. At first, maybe it's just an irritating sermon that makes you a bit uncomfortable. You don't like it, but you brush it aside and continue on with your agenda for your life. Then, perhaps you have another encounter with Jesus: a passage in the Bible steps on your toes. Your level of discomfort goes up a notch. You realize that if He takes over your life, there are going to be some radical changes, and you're not sure that you want to give up control. So you scramble to dodge the implications of who Jesus is. You raise all sorts of intellectual questions so that you don't have to face the fact that He is Lord. But, He keeps coming to town and confronting your authority to run your own life. Sooner or later, you come to a crisis point where you have to deal with the question that these Jewish religious leaders asked: "By what authority does Jesus say and do these things?" The bottom line for them is the same for us today:

If Jesus is acting by God's authority,  
then we had better submit to Him.

This story brings out three things about the important matter of authority that we would do well to consider:

1. Authority is a fundamental question of life: Who has the right to govern?

The Jewish leaders' question is a basic one: "Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?" Their question was valid, but behind their question was an assumption that they had not carefully thought through. They were assuming that *they* were God's rightly appointed religious authorities. After all, Israel was God's chosen nation. The temple was His designated place of worship. They had the proper training in the Jewish Scriptures. In other words, they assumed that they were right and, therefore, anyone who challenged them was wrong.

By nature, we all make the same assumption. We automatically justify ourselves and resist anyone who challenges our right to

govern our own lives. We assume that we know what's best for our own happiness and well being. Who does this intruder Jesus think that He is, coming into our world and overturning the tables of how we do things? The issue is one of authority to govern.

Jesus doesn't dodge their question. He says, in effect, that if they will answer His question rightly, they will have the answer to their question. If John was God's prophet and he pointed to Jesus as Messiah, then Jesus was acting under God's authority.

There are only two sources of authority (20:4): Heaven (a Jewish way of saying, God); and, men. Of course, sinful men are under Satan's domain, in rebellion against God. But most people acting under Satan's domain are not aware of that fact. They simply act on their own authority, out from under God's authority. Most people aren't consciously in league with Satan and, perhaps, not even consciously in rebellion against God. But if they aren't knowingly obedient to God and His Word, then they're not under His authority. All authority comes either from God or from some illegitimate source.

The Jewish leaders had some political authority, but they were not under God's authority or they would have followed John the Baptist and the One to whom John pointed, Jesus. Like many politicians, their authority was not very secure. They didn't like what John had taught, but they knew that their constituency liked John, so they had to tread carefully. But when you play politics, carefully wording your answers so as to please people, you are not living under God's authority.

Even so, their question, turned back against them, is a basic question in life that we all must answer: *Who or what is the final authority in life?* Who determines what is right or wrong? Who said that you could act as you do? Mark 11:30 records that Jesus pressed them: "Answer Me." Even so, He demands that we answer this basic question.

Have you answered it for your life? Who is your final authority? You say, "I let my conscience be my guide." What informs your conscience? You say, "I just feel inside what is right." Really? I've read of hired killers who could shoot a man in the face without a twinge of conscience! Perhaps you say, "I obey the laws of the

land.” What about when those laws say that it’s okay to kill babies or gas the Jews? Does that make it right? Do you obey the state when you don’t like its laws or just when they agree with you? Maybe you obey reason? Whose reason? There are proponents on both sides of most moral questions. By what authority do you live your life?

Our society generally used to agree that the Judeo-Christian standards of the Bible were moral absolutes. But now that we have rejected that moral base, our judicial system is in crisis. You often hear, “You can’t legislate morality.” Really? Aren’t rape, murder, molesting children, and racial discrimination *moral* issues? The crucial question is, how do we determine *whose* morals we are going to legislate and uphold in our courts? If we throw out God’s moral standards in the Bible, we have no basis for determining right and wrong, other than majority opinion.

“By what authority” is a fundamental question of life each of us must answer. Will you live your life under God’s authority or under some human authority, be it yourself or someone else?

## 2. God’s authority always confronts our selfish lives.

These religious leaders liked their place of authority. Matthew 23, which records some of Jesus’ teaching in the temple during His final week, shows why these men opposed Jesus and wanted to retain their own authority. Jesus says that they had assumed their own position of authority (they had “seated themselves in the chair of Moses,” Matt. 23:1). But it wasn’t to serve God and their fellow men. It was to gain status, to receive honor (23:5-7), to make money off their position (23:14, 25 [“robbery”]), to live as their own authority (23:25, “self-indulgence”), out from under God’s true authority (23:28, “lawlessness”).

But God’s authority as manifested in Jesus confronted their self-appointed place of authority. He upended their neat little temple operation and showed them that their hearts were far from the Lord. If they had been following the Lord, they would have submitted to John’s baptism of repentance. That would have prepared them to submit to Jesus as their rightful Lord and Savior. But they resented Him confronting their selfishness. Note two things about God’s authority:

## A. God's authority is contained in His Word.

When Jesus overturned the tables in the temple, He backed up His actions by saying, "It is written" (19:46). He quoted from Isaiah 56:7, that God's house should be a house of prayer, and from Jeremiah 7:11, which charged the Jews with turning God's house into a den of robbers. Note also Luke 19:47 and 20:1, which emphasize again Jesus' teaching ministry. In the course of His teaching, He was preaching the gospel to the crowd. Jesus didn't assume that just because they were Jews in the Temple, they knew God and walked with Him. He preached the gospel to the religious crowd, and so should we.

All true spiritual revival involves a return to and a renewed emphasis on God's Word. Luther and Calvin built the Reformation on a renewed emphasis on biblical preaching. T. H. L. Parker begins his wonderful book, *Calvin's Preaching* ([Westminster/John Knox Press], p. 1), "Sunday after Sunday, day after day Calvin climbed up the steps into the pulpit. There he patiently led his congregation verse by verse through book after book of the Bible." He goes on to show that the reason Calvin did this was that he believed in the total trustworthiness and authority of the Bible as God's Word. I have read many of Calvin's sermons as they were written down by those who heard them. They are as relevant today, 450 years later, as they were then, because they simply explain and apply God's authoritative Word.

## B. God's authoritative Word confronts our sin.

Many Christians in our day want to go to a church where the sermons make them feel good about themselves. But when the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about the inspiration of Scripture, he said that it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). He went on to exhort Timothy in the strongest possible language to preach that Word, especially in light of the fact that the time would come when people want their ears tickled and would pile up teachers in accordance with their own sinful desires.

So that Timothy would have no question, Paul spelled out how he should preach the Word: "reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (4:2). Preaching that does not re-

prove, rebuke, and exhort people regarding sin is not biblical preaching! Preaching that avoids confronting sin and that just makes people feel good is not pleasing to God! As Calvin pointed out when preaching on 2 Timothy 3:16, preaching that picks the verses that meets people's fancy and neglects the verses that confront how they live is not biblical preaching (Parker, p. 9).

Calvin argued that the faithful pastor needs to use enough vehemence that people realize that this is not a game (p. 12). He pointed out to his church that some would complain about such direct, confrontational preaching: "Ho! We want to be won by sweetness." "You do? Then go and teach God his lessons!" "Ho! We want to be taught in another style." "Well then, go to the devil's school! He will flatter you enough—and destroy you." "But believers [will] humble themselves and are willing to be treated severely so that they may profit in God's school" (p. 14).

I hope that you've read the story of Joni Eareckson Tada, a happy 17 year-old who dived into water that was not as deep as she thought and broke her neck, paralyzing her from the neck down. In the months that followed that accident, she struggled with hard questions for the Lord like few of us have had to do: "By what authority can You do this to me?" But as you read of her struggle, she makes it clear that if the accident had never happened, she probably would have gone on being a nice, church-going girl who professed to believe in God, but who ran her own life according to her own selfish goals and desires. But God forcefully confronted her with His right to be the Sovereign Lord of her life. As a result, she has had a worldwide impact for Jesus Christ.

Has the Lord Jesus upended any tables in your selfish life? Has He stopped you in your tracks in a way that shocked and upset you? Maybe, like those moneychangers, you weren't doing anything illegal. You were just going about your business, making a living, providing for your family. You attended church regularly. You weren't doing anything immoral or flagrantly sinful. Then one day Jesus stepped up to your life, took hold of it, and with a sudden jerk, everything was upended. His authority suddenly confronted the self-oriented direction of your life. Perhaps, like these religious men, your immediate reaction was, "Who do You think You are, to upset my life like this? By what authority do You do this to me?"

If the Lord Jesus has not confronted you with His sovereign authority to rule every aspect of your life, then you haven't met Him, no matter how long you've gone to church and no matter how many times you've sung hymns about how much you love Jesus. When Jesus Christ enters your life, He comes in as the absolute Lord. He confronts our selfish lives and says, "I am the Lord of this temple! This has to go!" How do you respond? At first, most of us respond like these Jewish leaders: We challenge His right to do it. But we shouldn't stay there.

3. When God's authority in Christ confronts our selfish lives, we must honestly submit to the truth.

If Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, who gave His life for you on the cross, then He is the absolute sovereign who has the supreme right to govern your life. With these chief priests, scribes, and elders, Jesus pointed to His forerunner, John the Baptist. If they had accepted John's ministry as being from God, then they would have submitted to it and they would have accepted Jesus as being from God. John pointed away from himself to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). He said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). If they had believed John, they would not have any problem believing Jesus.

Of course, by "believing John" (Luke 20:5) these men weren't talking about just intellectual belief. They knew that it meant believing so as to repent and submit their lives to what John taught. In Luke 3, John spelled out what believing his message meant: "Bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance." Don't count on your religious background to save you (3:7-8). They needed to believe in such a way that they lived differently: Generosity toward the poor; honesty in business; and contentment with their wages (3:11-14). That always has been and always will be the meaning of saving faith in the Bible: Submitting your life to the lordship of Jesus Christ, whose authority confronts your selfishness.

But these men wouldn't deal honestly with Jesus' question. Confronted with the truth, they didn't want to face it. They decided to reject Jesus' authority. "We do not know," they lied. They did know, but they wouldn't honestly face their sin of rebellion against God. So Jesus refused to cast His pearls before these

swine. He wouldn't directly disclose the source of His authority. They could figure it out if they were really interested in knowing.

J. C. Ryle perceptively observes, "The ruin of thousands is simply this, that they deal dishonestly with their own souls. They allege pretended difficulties as the cause of their not serving Christ, while in reality they 'love darkness rather than light,' and have no honest desire to change" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], on Mark 11:27-33, p. 246).

### Conclusion

The late Bill Klem was one of major league baseball's best-known and powerful umpires. When he was behind the plate, he made it clear that he was completely in charge of everything that mattered. In one important game, it was the ninth inning. The batter hit the ball to left field. The runner on third ran for home with the potential winning run. The catcher crouched to make the tag. The runner, the catcher, and the umpire all collided and were laid out in the dirt.

From one dugout, the players were screaming, "He's safe! He's safe!" In the other dugout, they were shouting, "He's out! He's out!" The fans in the stands were going wild. In the midst of all the confusion and noise, Bill Klem stood up, looked directly into the stands, raised his fist and exclaimed, "He ain't nothin' till I've called it!" Bill Klem made it clear that everyone had to submit to his authority.

Jesus Christ could go into the temple, turn over the tables of the moneychangers, drive out those who were selling, and confront the religious leaders because He was acting under the authority of the sovereign God. That same authority gives Him the right to confront you and me with the way we are living for ourselves, even if we cover it over with religiosity.

The question is, how do we respond when He suddenly up-ends our comfortable way of life? Do we challenge His right to confront us? Or, do we honestly face our own sinful selfishness, our insistence on running our lives on our terms? Do we yield to His rightful lordship? Since Jesus Christ is acting by God's authority, we had better submit to Him!

## Discussion Questions

1. Can someone knowingly reject Jesus Christ as Lord and yet truly know Him as Savior? How much should we push lordship when sharing the gospel?
2. Does living under Jesus' lordship mean that we can't do anything enjoyable for ourselves? If not, what does it mean?
3. How can we see our own selfishness since we're often blinded to it?
4. An emphasis on God's Word is essential to true revival. What are some other marks of genuine revival?

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