

Human or Heavenly Authority?

Mark 11:27-12:12

Do you think there are times for protest against authority? Like when the truth has been covered up or twisted so that innocent people are victims of abuse?

Sometimes authorities turn a blind eye, are misinformed or even financially motivated to exploit. Child labor and slavery used to be accepted. Sometimes enough people stand in the gap so that laws and attitudes change. But when do you know it's time to make a stand?

Here's some methods people call for correction today:

Letter to MP, Hand out Literature, March Demonstration, Town Meeting, Customer Complaints, Disrupting Business with a Public Protest

In that list, public protest seems the riskiest. It makes news.

It's one thing for a group to stand together holding signs in the way of a business to make a point. Quit another thing for a lone man to storm the capital and begin turning over tables.

Jesus, from little town, backwoods Galilee – with no official authorization marched into the middle of the most prestigious institution of power in Israel, the Jerusalem Temple. On one of the busiest days of the year, He created such a disturbance it is still

talked about 2000 years later. While he had the crowd's attention, Jesus delivered a message of judgement from God, calling the Temple a robber's safe house instead of a house of prayer for all nations. He condemned the religious authorities and their temple system. If I did that, I'd want to be far away fast. But not Jesus. He shows up the next morning and the authorities are ready for Him. This is day three of Jesus' last week: the clash between human and heavenly authority.

Prayer

The chief priests, scribes and elders are the three groups that make up the Sanhedrin, a buffer organization between Rome and Israel – composed of 71 members. They have almost complete religious authority and some political authority. That's a lot of responsibility for maintaining the peace and being the spiritual shepherds of Israel. They've sent a delegation to confront Jesus. Hoping to expose His protest as an unauthorized action against God's Temple. This would be great evidence for bringing Him to court with the charge of blasphemy. A charge punishable by death. [believers today face charges of treason for believing in Jesus - punishable by imprisonment and death.]

They can't accept the truth that no one on earth has more authority than Jesus. Jesus has demonstrated authority over doctrine, demons, the natural elements, disease and death. He has authority to forgive, to save and judge us all. Jesus has authority to lay down His life and to rise again. Jesus does not need permission from any person for anything.

So let's get to a biblical definition of authority.

exousia means rightful or actual unhindered power to act, possess or control. This is real power rightfully exercised. All authority is ultimately God's so all human authority is delegated by God, to whom they are accountable. In OT times, God exercised authority over his people through prophets, priests and kings. They were to be respected as God's representatives, having authority from Him. In the NT, the Apostles have delegated authority from the Messiah and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We have inside knowledge of Jesus' authority. We've heard the testimony of God's blessing at Jesus' baptism that He is the Son of God. And from other testimony it's clear that Jesus is also the Messiah who has come to save many by laying down His life as a ransom. So Jesus holds authority as both Son of God and Son of man. As Messiah, his authority is delegated to

him by God whom Jesus obeys. As Son of God, His authority is co-equal with the Father and the Spirit. Jesus has special authority to judge as both God and Messiah.

"The NT exalted Jesus as 'both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36) - divine Ruler of all things, and Savior-king of his people."

New Bible Dictionary (modified) Amen?

11:27-28 Who gave you the right?

It must have unsettled the delegation to find Jesus calmly walking about the temple for their questions seem a bit jumbled (perhaps it's because they know the crowd respects Jesus). It's unclear whether they are pointing to the temple incident, or the authority He carries all the time. I noted the times Jesus' authority appeared in Mark from chapter 1-11. In chapter 6, it struck me that the Sanhedrin's view of Jesus is like the view of His hometown: "Where did this man get these things...wisdom...miracles? Isn't this the carpenter? Mary's son? And they took offense." (6:1-6) They demonstrate an attitude that says: "How could a handy man from an ordinary family in town be God's chosen? God's Messiah will be different - He doesn't measure up."

The sad similarity the two groups share is unbelief. One must pass through the scandal of Christ's humility to see Him with a heart of faith. Neither the home crowd nor the

Sanhedrin seek the truth. Instead, they dishonor Jesus. In an atmosphere of skepticism, even Jesus marveled at how few could receive God's healing (6:6). Some teachers of the law were so hardened, they were saying Jesus was using the devil's power to help people. That's blaspheming the Holy Spirit (3:29).

Jesus is not surprised by their question. He fires back a question in the style of a rabbi. It's a challenge to see if they are qualified to hear about where His authority comes from.

11:29-30 The same authority as John

There is passion in that question. For Jesus was baptised by John and He saw heaven ripped open, the Holy Spirit descend like a dove, and heard the Father's blessing. John did a great service as God's prophet...and gave His life to prepare many hearts for Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit, John brought sinners to repentance and heart cleansing apart from the Temple system. But not the Sanhedrin. They are not the true worshippers God is seeking.

11:31-32 Compromising the Truth

Jesus exposes them for what they are...unbelievers and false shepherds. Instead of a swift answer (like many in the crowd could give) they need a committee meeting. If they were seeking the truth, 'heaven' would be the simple answer. John was God's

prophet that started a revival. People came from everywhere to repent and receive forgiveness. But the Sanhedrin is motivated by pride, popularity and power. So they cannot answer.

Answering 'Heaven' would also be admitting that Jesus' ministry is from heaven too. It would force them to face the faithless condition of their heart.

If they say John's ministry was just human origin (the truth by their actions) it would incite the crowds against them. In Luke's account... "all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet."

They're trapped. How are they going to answer?

11:33a Bankrupt Spiritual Leaders

Instead of being diligent in the truth as spiritual shepherds, these spiritually bankrupt leaders squirm out to softer ground like politicians pleading ignorance while lying through their teeth. Human authorities reject Jesus and John. They're answer reminds me of Jesus warning to the wealthy Laodicean church. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. *I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth!* (Rev 3:15-16)

The Sanhedrin confronts Jesus like He owes them an explanation for

declaring God's truth. While they plead ignorance to knowing whether God is working through His prophet or not. Hypocrites!

Jesus wept for Jerusalem as the Temple came into view. He knew they would not believe...and what would happen.

11:33b You Don't Measure Up

This is a great time of a famous Bible quote: *You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.* (Dan 5:27)

Jesus is not quite finished with them. He has a parable to cut their puffed-up authority down to size. It's a story with a familiar setting...an absentee owner's vineyard being worked by tenant farmers who pay a middleman for the owner's portion of the crop. In Jesus' time this was a big issue because owners were demanding so much, farmers difficult time making a go of it.

I have studied several interpretations of this parable. Many find it difficult because there is no Q & A time with the disciples after to clue us in. I'm in agreement that the parable would have been so obvious to Mark's audience in the 1st century that no explanation was needed. We must draw upon clues inside the parable: especially reference to other scripture. We must also be aware that parables have symbolic elements. This

is a story about God, Israel, it's leaders and God's Son.

12:1 An Owner Rents Out a Vineyard

Jesus chooses a setting like Isaiah's well known tragic song of the vineyard (Isa 5). In the song, God plants Israel, like a vineyard. He takes great care of it. But despite all the care and hard work, it only yields bad fruit. This is because Israel has been turning to sin. The vineyard is destroyed and God cites seven woes against them.

The idea of God being a distant owner plays well to the thinking of His audience, the Sanhedrin. But instead of focusing on the fruit from Israel's obedience, it's about the one's overseeing Israel: the tenant farmers.

12:2-3 Tenants beat up the Collector

The tenants ignore the authority of the absentee landlord. In Jesus' day, there may have been some secretly pleased that they had gotten away with it because of the existing problem. But if God is supposed to be the owner, they're defying the highest authority. And then it gets even worse.

12:4-5 Escalating Violence

The tenants think they have the authority to defy the landowner, robbing him of his due. They kill his servants without remorse. These servants would represent God's prophets (Jer 7:25, Ezek 38:17, Dan 9:6, 10, Amos 3:7, Zech 1:6). Jesus continues to tilt the

sympathies toward the landowner who is trying to collect the fruit due to him.

12:6 The Owner's Son

The beloved son is Jesus, whom God declared beloved at the baptism and transfiguration. Did God naively think Jesus would be received well by the Sanhedrin? God is all knowing. That's why God's grace is so scandalous and radical. God so loved the world that He gave Jesus as our ransom...knowing all the grueling human frailty, insult, misunderstanding, torture and public execution.

12:7-8 A Tragic Grab for Power

The tenant farmers have deluded themselves into believing that they will reap benefits by usurping the owner's authority. It also speaks to the mentality of the Sanhedrin...it's either him or us. They must decide to either submit or kill Him. Will the owner give up His vineyard...His Israel. No, He won't.

12:9 Vengeance and Replacement

The arm of God's patience is only so long. If we are to take this as a literal replacement of Israel...it does not fit the parable. For the farm tenants (false shepherds) are the ones killed and replaced.

Who became the new tenants of God's vineyard?

Mark's original audience would probably say the apostles. Christ

chose them to shepherd God's people, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Many Jews did believe after Christ rose again...even many priests.

12:10-11 The Lord's Authority

Stone structures are impressive and can last for centuries. They often symbolize the authority of humanity. Parliament buildings, banks, courts of law. For ancient structures like Herod's Temple, the first stones had to be perfect. The builders had to know stone very well. Stones that didn't meet the requirements in one section might be used in another. But Jesus quotes from Ps 118:22-23. A stone has been completely rejected. It doesn't fit the builder's expectations at all.

Jesus is that building block being rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. God gave authority to these people to oversee Israel's spiritual health. But instead, they made compromises and their judgement is clouded by sin.

The marvelous thing is that God will make Jesus the centerpiece of worship. The block rejected for the foundation will become the middle piece above the archway for God's temple. No one comes to the Father, except through Christ. (Jn 14:6) Jesus is the foundation and the centerpiece of His Church.

12:12 Fear of Man

The Sanhedrin delegation knew they were the tenant farmers in the story. And Jesus had their hearts read correctly. They had been plotting to kill Jesus. Their predecessors killed the prophets. What would really cut deep is that Jesus has nailed them for defying God's authority. Instead of letting the conviction turn to repentance...they are even more determined to do away with Jesus. But even as the most powerful group in Jerusalem besides the authority of the King, they are frozen by the fear of public opinion. Frozen by fear of man. That can happen to us too. How many times have we felt conviction to make a stand in public, but remained silent? Let us seek the Lord for help in belief and courage. Let us pray for each other in this regard.

Authority from Heaven Today

Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth (Matt 28:18-20). And He has commanded His followers to go and continue His work to build His church...make disciples. We demonstrate God's power when we surrender to the Holy Spirit's work in us. Like the miracle of a prideful, selfish heart being changed into a heart of thankfulness and mercy. Like the miracle of a fearful heart changed into a heart of confidence in God to declare the truth. The authority to

share the truth has been passed on to us (Titus 2:15). When the Holy Spirit was sent, the center of worship moved away from the temple system that Judaism had become. It was not limited to official gathering centers like synagogues. The new believers gathered in homes. It became more personal. We are God's temple now... His living stones (1 Peter 2). By His Spirit, God applies the Scripture to our hearts and minds so we may worship Him anywhere in spirit and truth (Is 59:21, Jer 31:33, Heb 8:10, 10:16). Now we form a structure for God to reside whenever and wherever we gather for His glory. Jesus did not find God's fruit in Herod's Temple. What fruit does He expect from us today? Let me first remind us that the fruitful heart...the one that produced a harvest, was the one that was humble and ready to receive. We please God by continuing to have faith in God (Mark 11:22) and continuing to pass on God's mercy to others (11:25). This is Jesus' lesson from the previous passage, last week. Pray full of faith in God, unhindered by any grudges. Then we become His vessels of love and good works in Christ (Eph 2:10). God never desired massive buildings to show His authority. What became of Herod's temple?

Herod's temple mount is now a platform for a Muslim shrine...the Dome of the Rock. Where they believe Abraham almost sacrificed his son Ishmael. Inside is an inscription that instructs 'People of the Book' (that's us) that Jesus is only an Apostle and that it will be better for us if we say God is only one, not three. "Far be it from his glory that he should have a son."

Jesus' authority is still questioned. But one day every knee will bow and tongue confess Jesus is Lord! (Rom 14:11) AMEN?

Authority in the Local Church

Sometimes we will be called upon to risk our reputation as good Canadians when we point to sin crouching at our town's door. Jesus was attacked for standing up to human authority that was ignoring God's authority. We too, will face trouble. Sometimes human authority worms its way even into the church and has to be confronted.

It could be said that human authorities are gathering to protest God's authority in Vancouver today. A Gospel presentation is coming there next week and Vancouver authorities are trying to shut out the main speaker. The collision is over what God calls sin. Many Canadians (even ones who say they represent the church) call this hate speech. There will always be ways that human authorities try to control God's agenda.

Even if we can't be in Vancouver next weekend, we can approach God in faith with unhindered prayer. We know that God desires for the Gospel to reach far and wide. Let us also pray that God gives courage and protection to His people working with Samaritan's Purse who may be affected by this. Pray they would continue to be God's demonstration of authority...righteousness and mercy in locations all over the world.