

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Authority of Jesus

Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32

Code: 2353

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Matthew chapter 21. I want us to examine verses 23 through 32, Matthew chapter 21 verses 23 through 32.

The word "authority" is a strong word. It's filled with meaning. When we hear the word "authority" there's a certain force about that word. There may be even a certain intimidation about that word. We talk about the authorities and we rightfully have a sense of respect...maybe a sense of awe, maybe a sense of fear. The word "authority" denotes permission. It denotes privilege. It denotes power. It denotes rule, control, influence. When someone has authority, that means they're on top of other people. They have responsibility beyond the norm. They are able to determine things, to decide things, to render judgments, to wield certain rights and privileges. And we say in the home there's authority resting with the father, the parents. In the government there are authorities, the police and those who govern us. In the schools there are authorities. In business, in the plant, in the job, in any dimension of life there are authorities. People who have the privilege, the power, the permission to set the rules, to determine the judgments and the verdicts.

But there is one who has authority that surpasses all other authorities. In Matthew chapter 28 verse 18, Jesus said this, "All authority is given unto Me in heaven and in earth." All authority is given unto Me. That is an amazing claim to privilege. That is an amazing claim to power, to permission, to right. And Jesus demonstrated that very well in His ministry. For example, when He had concluded the Sermon on the Mount, it says in Matthew chapter 7 verse 28, "The people were astonished at His doctrine for He taught them as one having authority." You see, He taught with authority. In their particular culture, that meant He quoted nobody, He footnoted nothing. He didn't say He had gotten this truths...this truth from some eminent rabbi. He didn't say that this was an exposition of some commentary written by some respected person of another time. He just spoke with authority.

In chapter 9 of Matthew, He healed a paralyzed man and forgave His sin. And the multitudes saw it and marveled and glorified God who had given such authority unto man. He had authority to say whatever He wanted to say and make it binding on men. He had authority to heal, authority over disease. He had authority to forgive sin. Remarkable.

In the gospel of Mark, chapter 1 and verse 22, again in Capernaum in the synagogue He taught and they were astonished at His doctrine for He taught them as one that had authority and not as the scribes. And then He was confronted in that same place with a demon-possessed man with an

unclean spirit and He healed the man, casting out the spirit. And verse 27 says they were all amazed insomuch that they questioned among themselves saying, "What thing is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority commandeth He even the unclean spirits and they do obey Him. And immediately His fame spread abroad throughout all the region round about Galilee."

He had authority to teach whatever He wanted to teach and footnote no one. He had authority to heal the sick. He had authority to forgive sin. He had authority to cast out demons. Tremendous authority.

In John chapter 1, we read of another dimension of His authority. It tells us in chapter 1 and verse 12, and a very familiar text, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He the authority to become the children of God, even to them that believe on His name." He had authority to make children of God. Tremendous authority. In John 5:27 it says that God had given Him authority to execute judgment...authority to execute judgment.

So He had authority to teach whatever He wanted to teach as truth and make it binding on men's conscience. He had authority to heal. He had authority to cast out demons. He had authority to forgive sin. He had authority to determine the children of God and grant that right. In John 10:18 it says, "No man taketh My life from Me, I lay it down of Myself, I have authority to lay it down, I have authority to take it again." He had authority for His own resurrection. He had authority to give His life, He had authority to raise it from the dead.

In John chapter 17, a most interesting statement in verse 2, "As Thou...He prays to the Father and says...As Thou hast given Him authority over all flesh that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him." And He's referring to Himself. He had authority to give eternal life. What authority! Authority to teach whatever He wanted to teach without any resource, without any precedent and to make it binding on men and determinative on their eternal destiny. Authority to heal the sick. Authority to raise the dead. Authority to cast out demons. Authority to forgive sin. Authority to designate children of God. Authority to give eternal life and authority to judge every person, tremendous authority.

Now He had so much authority that He was a problem to the Jewish system because, you see, they believed that they were the authorities. And they had a very highly developed and sophisticated system of authority and He absolutely ignored it. He never asked their permission for anything. He didn't ask them to approve His doctrine. He didn't ask them to approve His healings. He didn't ask them to approve His casting out of demons. He didn't ask them to approve His verdicts and His judgments. He didn't ask them to help Him decide who were the children of God. And He didn't ask for their advice on how to give eternal life. He totally ignored them.

Now in thinking about the authority of Christ, perhaps it's helpful to consider two words. The first is the word dunamis which the Bible translates "power." The second is the word exousia which the Bible translates "power" or "authority" and is best understood as "authority," and there is a difference. Dunamis or power is the ability to do something. Exousia or authority is the right to do it. And when we say Jesus had authority, we mean not just that He had power but that He had privilege. God had given Him the privilege of acting in His behalf in this world with no regard for the authorities of men. And so He had both dunamis and exousia, He had the power and He had the privilege. It was given Him by God and He said that again and again. He said in John's gospel at least three or four times from chapter 5 to 8, "I do what the Father shows Me to do and that's exactly what I do."

He had God-given authority. And when He went into the temple early in His ministry in John chapter 2 and He made a whip and He threw everybody out of the temple and He cleaned the place up and when He did the same thing at the end of His ministry as we've seen recently, He didn't ask anybody's permission. He didn't check in with the Sanhedrin and say, "What are the rules for cleansing the temple?" He didn't ask any permission from anybody ever except the Father. And when He was released by the Father's permission and the Father's will, He sought no earthly approval, no earthly accreditation, no earthly ordination, no earthly credentials. And because of that, you have to understand, that He pitted Himself against the authority system that existed in a very dramatic way and ultimately it led to His death. You see, the Jews were amazed. They were distressed. They were appalled that He acted without any approval, without any authorization. I mean, you just don't go in and cleanse the temple. He never consulted the Sanhedrin. He never quoted an eminent rabbi. He did what He wanted. He said what He wanted. And He acted as He wanted.

Such behavior was absolutely unacceptable to them. You see, rabbinical teaching had no inherent authority. The rabbis quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis and that's the only authority they ever had. And you had to get approval from the Sanhedrin. You had to be ordained by the Sanhedrin to function as an accepted rabbi. But Jesus was His own authority because all authority had been given to Him by God. And He never had authorization from men for anything at all. In fact, He ignored their whole system of authorization.

And this sets up conflict. It sets up conflict. All through His ministry, He's in conflict with existing authorities in the Jewish community. And it comes to a head as we come now to Matthew chapter 21. And it comes to a very, very severe conflict.

Now let me remind you of the setting. Jesus has concluded His Galilean ministry, concluded His Perea ministry, crossed the Jordan River, entered Jericho, healed two blind men, one by the name of Bartimaeus, brought Zacchaeus into the Kingdom and now He in the midst of a procession goes from Jericho up the hill to Jerusalem for Passover. Having arrived in the vicinity of Jerusalem, He stays in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus that first Saturday night. He arrived on Saturday, He

stayed that night with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

On Sunday, He awakened in Bethany to a great crowd that had thronged out of the city and gathered around the home to see Him. They knew Him as the miracle worker. They knew Him as the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead and they wanted to see Him and be with Him and hear Him and all of that. And so, Sunday He spent with that multitude of people who had come to Bethany.

On Monday, He rose in the morning, sent His disciples to find the colt, the foal of a donkey to bring to Him fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. He got on that colt and rode triumphantly into the city of Jerusalem while they threw palm branches and clothing in His path and hailed Him "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the Son of David." They hailed Him as Messiah. It was His triumphal entry. He came in on that Monday and that procession ultimately ended at the temple. And then He returned to Bethany on Monday night to spend the night again in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Tuesday morning dawned. He awakened and went again back into the city, this time He went directly to the temple. And when He came to the temple, He saw the wretched wicked devastation by the selfish money-changers and animal sellers and all of that and so He cleaned out the temple. And this infuriated the religious leaders who already despised Him and wanted Him dead. And now the flames are fanned even hotter and hotter. And when He is just finished cleaning out the temple, little boys began to sing "hosannas" and to sing in praise Him and this infuriated the leaders even more, perhaps those little boys were the sons of Levites being trained in some of the temple activities. And when they see the temple being cleansed and in that cleansing He unmasks their hypocrisy and the falseness of their religious systems, the religious leaders are threatened more severely than ever. And when they hear the hosannas of those little boys, they know they represent the people who are on His side and who are enamored with Him. And in fear they work all the more feverishly to plot His murder. They cannot tolerate a person who exposes their false worship, who unmasks their rabid hypocrisy and so they must eliminate Him as fast as they can before a religious revolution takes place.

After cleansing the temple, He returns to Bethany that night again most likely spending it with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. And it is Wednesday morning. And on Wednesday morning, He goes back to the temple again. This time walking pass the fig tree which has been cursed and teaching His disciples some profound lessons about false pretense and the power of prayer. And then Wednesday, having passed that fig tree, proceeds directly back to the temple. And it is on Wednesday morning in the temple that we find Him in verse 23. He has cleansed the temple the day before. He now confronts the leaders and the people who are gathered there. It's almost as if He had to clean the place up before He could go back and minister.

Now, He begins a confrontation in verse 23 that doesn't end until the end of chapter 23. It's a long morning, folks, of confrontations. And it builds up the flames that ultimately lead to the crucifixion.

Now as we look at verse 23 to 32, I want us to just kind of hang our thoughts on four words, four ideas. Let's begin with the confrontation...the confrontation in verse 23. "And when He was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto Him as He was teaching and said, By what authority doest Thou these things? And who gave Thee this authority?"

Now you know the issue is authority. That's the whole issue here. When He was come into the temple, it says, that was His turf, remember? Remember that I've been telling you that He didn't come to overthrow the Roman occupation, He came to clean up Israel. He wasn't concerned with Fort Antonious, He wasn't concerned with economics. He wasn't concerned with the state of the nation militarily, economically, or socially. He was concerned with the state of the nation spiritually. He was no political Messiah. He was a Savior. And He came and confronted the heart of the nation where it needed to be confronted and that was at the point of its religion. So He came to the temple. That's always the place where God has to begin His work. That's why the New Testament says judgment has to begin at the house of God. He's cleansed the place and now He takes center stage.

That temple had a tremendous courtyard...huge courtyard. And surrounding it were these high walls and pillars. And in among those pillars were porches and colonnades and porticos and people would mill all about, especially at Passover, the place would be filled with people and especially having been cleansed. That would invite even more people. And then when Jesus came who had cleansed it, no doubt it was just teeming with people. And it says, you'll note, in verse 23 that He was teaching...He was teaching. He went back, took center stage in the cleansed temple. Now with its emptied courtyard and moving throughout that courtyard and up on the steps and into the porticos and porches and colonnades, He was teaching. And the people were collected around Him, a vast multitude.

You might ask the question: what was He teaching? I can tell you what He was teaching. O, I can't give you His outline but I can sure tell you what He was teaching. He was speaking, as it says in Acts chapter 1 verse 3, of things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. He was doing what He always did, He was talking about the Kingdom. And if you were to read the parallel account to this in Luke chapter 20 verse 1, you would hear Luke say, "And He was preaching the gospel." And if you saw the parallel account in Mark 11:27, Mark says He was walking.

So, He went into the temple and walking about amidst the mass of people, He is teaching and preaching, teaching the Kingdom, preaching the gospel. And likely He talked about sin, the wretchedness of it and the folly of hypocritical religion. And likely He talked about judgment, the inevitability of hell for those who refused God's truth and God's way of salvation. And no doubt He talked about righteousness, the hopelessness of self-righteousness and trying to attain salvation by

your own good works. And He must have talked about humility and the place for brokenness and self-emptying and self-crucifixion and bankruptcy of spirit. And He must have talked about love, the love of God and the love men should have for God. And He must have talked about peace. He must have talked about the fact that God wanted to make peace with men, not on a temporary basis but on a permanent basis. And maybe He talked about false prayers. And maybe He talked about vain repetition. And maybe He spoke about doing religious deeds to be seen by men. And maybe He talked about false humility and maybe He spoke about spiritual pride. And maybe He talked about the cost of following Him and maybe He talked about persecution. And maybe He talked about eternal glory.

Perhaps He spoke about the law of God, the Word of God. Perhaps about honesty or marriage or forgiveness or true riches or faith or hope or grace or mercy or false teachers. Maybe He talked about entering the Kingdom, maybe about a narrow gate and a narrow way, or a broad way and a broad way. Maybe He talked about life. Maybe He talked about death because He must have talked about the Kingdom and preached the gospel. And you know something? The people really listened...they really listened. They were awe struck by Him, hopeful that He would fulfill all their dreams and expectations. And it says in Luke 19:48, "All the people were very attentive to hear Him." He had their ear and so He taught.

But the leaders, they could see a religious revolution taking place. They were in a state of panic and they wanted Him dead. And so as he moves about teaching, they confront Him and they stop His teaching. And stop it they wanted to do so fast, they couldn't allow this to go on. And they ask Him, "By what authority do You these things? And who gave You that authority?"

Now, you've got to understand who this gang is. This is a big group. First of all, Matthew says the chief priests and the elders, and those are very general terms to engulf a whole group of people. The chief priests would include all the priests. That would mean the high priests, perhaps Caiaphas and Annas who was behind the scenes. That would include the captain of the temple who was second in command, he was in charge of all the worship, he was able to arrest people who did violate the temple rules, as we find in Acts 5 when he arrested the Apostles. The captain of the temple was an office from which the high priest was elected. If the high priest was ill on the Day of Atonement or couldn't serve, then the captain of the temple was elevated to that role. So it was like being vice-president.

And then under him came the priests of the weekly course of which there were twenty-four of those who offered sacrifice and carried out ceremony. And then there were the priests of the daily course and there were 156 of those. And then there were ordinary...what was called overseer priests who had charge of the keys and the doors and the gates and little areas of administrative responsibility. And then there were the treasurer types who cared for the money, collected the money. And history tells us that these last two categories of overseers and treasurers could be divided into all kinds of

people. For example, one would be over the branches used for festivals. One would be over music. One would be over trumpets. One would be over the bakery. One would be over the salt. One would be over the wood. One would be over the drink offerings. One would be over the lots. One would be over the burnt offerings. One would be over the animal offerings. One would be over the water, one over the signs, one over the show bread, one of the incense, one over the curtains, one over the robes and one to take care of people who got sick. And they all had their area of responsibility.

And then you probably had other priests. And then you had the non-priests, the rabbis and the scribes. And there's a large group of guys involved in wanting to bring Jesus' ministry to a fast stop. It always fascinates me how people who can't get together on any other thing can get together against Jesus Christ. Have you noticed that? I mean, here you've got the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, maybe even the Zealots and the Essenes, none of whom could agree with each other. You've got all these divergent rabbinical viewpoints coming together and everybody had their own rabbi and everybody's own rabbi had his own view. And they can't get together on much but they can sure get together on stopping Christ because of this, folks, all religion that is false has this in common, it is the religion of human achievement...it is a religion of works. And thus it can define itself as against the religion of divine accomplishment which is the gospel.

It's that way even today. You can take all the religions of the world and though they all disagree with each other, they can commonly stand together against the truth of Jesus Christ, can't they? It's amazing what religion does to the truth, amazing. So all of these guys have been having a meeting, see. And they've been plotting how to get rid of Jesus. They can't take what's going on. He counters everything that they affirm. And so they say, "By what authority do You do these things? Show us Your ordination papers. Show us Your credentials. Where is Your Sanhedrin approval?"

What do they mean by these things? Well, no doubt teaching and preaching but more than that, cleansing the temple, the royal entry, accepting the accolades of the crowd, all of that and probably the miracles and everything else He did, commanding demons, forgiving sin, whatever else. "Where did You get the authority for this? Where are Your credentials? Where is Your Sanhedrin authorization?" By the way, it's the same question they asked Him in John 2:18 the first time He cleansed the temple. "Who gave You the right to do that?" I mean, really, that was a very, very strange thing for someone to do without authorization.

I mean, I could imagine recently when I was at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem that if...right under the wailing wall there's a synagogue there of a sort, a special prayer place. And then deeper down where they believe is the entrance to the Holy of Holies, they say is the most sacred spot now in the land, and they've built a little synagogue there. I remember the first day when we went there, I wanted to go into this place, there's all this stuff going...all these people praying and so I was curious. I put on a little cardboard yamalka and I thought I'd just...you have to have your head covered so I'll go in. And I

started to go in and this man started waving his arm and telling me to go back, not to dare go in there. And maybe he perceived that I was a Gentile, which wouldn't be too difficult a perception and didn't want me in there. But anyway, I said to someone, I said, "What should we do?" He said, "Well, you don't want to go against them or they'll throw stones at you and spit at you." And all I was going to do was go through...walk through there, I wasn't going to...I thought, "What would it have been like if I had just gone in there and made a whip and just started cleaning out the place?" I can't even imagine that. Inconceivable what would happen.

But that's what Jesus did. Went to the temple, not even a synagogue which is a sad substitute for a temple, to the temple of God, made a whip and started throwing them out of there. You can imagine what that did to them, horrified them as well as pitting Him against their own authority. And they wanted to know where He got His authorization. They wanted to know where He got His permission. I mean, when we were there, we went down one night and there we ran into the chief rabbi of the holy places and then the chief rabbi of the state of Israel. I mean, those guys are in charge. And I suppose if you wanted to do anything special, you'd have to get their permission to do it. You just didn't take things into your own hands and exercise your own authority and do whatever you wanted, but Jesus did that, see. And they didn't like that. See, they were used to authorization. I mean, you either had to be the disciple of an eminent rabbi or have Sanhedrin approval.

Did you know there was a regular ordination process? I don't know if you're aware of that. But there was a regular ordination process. It started out that eminent rabbis would ordain their own disciples but there was some abuse to that so the Sanhedrin took that over. And then the chief priest also had the right to ordain people without the Sanhedrin but he abused that so they eliminated that so it came to the time of Christ when according to Edersheim, the Jewish historian, the Sanhedrin was the one that gave authorized ordination papers. And a person who wanted to be ordained as a rabbi was ordained as Rabbi Elder Judge, because he was given the right to teach, to show wisdom and to make decisions, to render verdicts. Those three functions combined in one office. And a rabbi had to come to a special ordination service, he had to give a discourse, he had to be approved. And then after his discourse, there was certain poetry read, there were certain hymns read, there were certain traditions followed and there was a ceremony by which he was granted the power to bind and loose, that is he was granted the power to teach and judge and so forth. And once he had his rabbinical authorization, which by the way could only be given within the land of Israel, not outside, he was recognized as a rabbinically credentialed teacher. Jesus had no such credentials, no such authorization.

They're big on that. I went to the synagogue in Tiberius one night and I noticed as they were going through their Shabbat that they all had different kind of hats. They all wear black long clothes and black...the frontlets of their hair they grow long, they had the prayer shawls, but they had different kinds of hats. Everything looked the same except the hats. Some had short brimmed hats with round tops, some had wide brimmed hats with flat tops, some had fuzzy hats, fuzzy little hats, fuzzy big

hats, all different kinds of hats. And so I said to someone, "What is the hats...hat routine? What's with the hats?" And he said to me, "Well, the hat signifies the rabbi, that is your mentor. They identify themselves with certain rabbis and the tradition of those rabbis by nature of the hat."

So, everybody comes down the line, you see, hooked to some traditional rabbinical teacher, some eminent past person. Jesus didn't do that. He hooked up....He didn't wear a hat, if you want it in the contemporary sense. He didn't hook up with any traditional eminent rabbi. He didn't have any Sanhedrin authorization. He just wielded authority and it was totally apart from anything from within the Jewish system. And they said, "Where did You get this authority to do the things You do?" That was the confrontation.

Look at the counter-question...the counter-question. "And Jesus answered and said unto them," and in typically rabbinical fashion, He answers a question with a question, "I also will ask you one thing which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things." He says I'll answer your question if you answer My question. I've got a question for you. He's not evading the answer. In fact, if they answered the question, they would have the answer to their question. He's not evading it. He's giving them an opportunity to honestly answer the question. And if they answer the question, their own question will be answered.

You see, they knew what authority He acted on. They knew He had said many times that He did what the Father showed Him to do. They knew that. And I think they would have liked Him to have said that again and then they would have accused Him of blasphemy and killed Him. Because, you remember earlier when He had claimed that He had authority from God, they said that He had blasphemed, making Himself equal with God, right? Perhaps they wanted Him to say that again so that they could accuse Him of blasphemy and that would be part of hatching the plot that would ultimately bring about His death.

But He didn't answer their question with an answer, He answered it with a question. And He says if you answer My question, I'll answer yours. Here comes His question in verse 25, "The baptism of John," now He's talking about John the Baptist, "The baptism of John, from where was it? From heaven or of men?"

It's a fair question. John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness, out beyond Jordan, readying a people for the Messiah, everybody knew about him. The last prophet of the Old Testament age, a great man, he had been out there, all Israel had been going to him, remember? And he had been saying the Messiah is near, the Messiah is near, the Messiah is coming, the Messiah is coming. And the people were saying, "O, we must be ready when the Messiah comes." And they were confessing their sin and they were saying, "We want our hearts right so that when Messiah comes we can receive Him and His Kingdom." And so John was preaching a message of repentance. John was preaching a message of confessing sin. John was preaching a message of get your heart right with

God.

And then he was baptizing them in the Jordan River to symbolize on the outside the inward cleansing of their hearts. And he was readying a people for the Messiah. He was gathering a people whose hearts were readied for the coming of Messiah. And all the nation was flocking out to him in excitement. And his demeanor and his power and his preaching and his content all said he was a prophet of God. The people believed it. In fact, in chapter 14 when Herod wanted to kill John, it says in verse 5 he was afraid to kill him because everybody knew John was a prophet.

And so, here was this man out there and he was saying the Messiah's coming, the Messiah's coming and he was collecting a people ready for the Messiah. And then one day Jesus walked down to the shore and John pointed at Him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." And in effect John said He's the Messiah, He's here. He's here.

Now when Jesus says "the baptism of John," He means the whole ministry of John which was symbolized by his baptizing work. So He's saying you tell Me then, was the ministry of John the Baptist from God or of men? That's His question. And remember now, they're all there in their little gang with all their rabbinical stuff on, their priestly stuff, and the crowd is all around and they're a part of this. "You tell Me, was it of heaven or of men, the ministry of John?"

Tough question. You say, "It's not so hard for me." No, because you're not in the situation they were in. Here's their situation. Let's say they say it was from heaven. Then what do they have to admit? Jesus is...what?...Messiah, cause that's what John said. If they say no, it was of earth. Then what's their problem? The whole nation believed he was from God and they're going to lose their credibility (snap) instantly. People are going to say everybody in the whole nation knows he's a prophet, how can you not conclude that? How could you possibly not conclude that? You're suppose to be the people who figure out all these things, you're suppose to be the observers of religious happenings. You conclude he's not a prophet? Everybody knows he's a prophet. So if they said he wasn't a prophet to avoid having to say Jesus was the Messiah, they would lose their credibility with the people. If they say he is a prophet of God, then they put themselves in a position to have to accept His message. Difficult question.

So, they called a huddle. Regroup, fellas. Verse 25 says, "They reasoned with themselves," dialogizomai, they dialogued, imperfect tense verb means continuous action, they got in a continuous discussion. "What are we going to say? What are we going to say? Boy, if we say this...we say that...blah-blah- blah," and they're all in this little huddle, see. And what do they say in their huddle? "If we shall say from heaven, He will say unto us, Why did you not believe him?" When he said Messiah was coming, Messiah was coming, Messiah's here, if you say he's from God, why don't you believe him? That's what He'll say to us.

Verse 26, "But if we say from men, we fear the people, for all hold John as a prophet." For the people are going to say, "Some religious leaders you are, we don't need you, we know more than you do." So typical...my. John had announced Jesus was the Messiah. John had made it so beautifully clear. "He must increase, I must decrease." He said, "I'm not the Christ, there's the Christ, there's the Messiah. I'm just earthy, He comes from above." Remember that in John chapter 3 verse 25 to 30? He's the Messiah. That was John's message, so clearly. Jesus said He had the witness of John, chapter 5. He said, "I have greater witness even than that of John, and that's the works I do," but He did have the witness of John that He was the Messiah. And so if they say it's from heaven that John has come, then they have to accept the Messiahship of Christ. They're not going to do that.

So, on the other hand, they're going to have the fear of the people on them, or rather the rejection of the people, and they're afraid of that. So typical. These guys were trained at ignoring facts. They had trained themselves at that. It didn't matter what the evidence was, they could ignore it. It didn't matter what Jesus said, it didn't matter what He did, didn't matter how powerful His miracles were, how utterly inexplicable they were on a human basis, how utterly unanswerable was His teaching, they still refused to believe. You remember in John 5, He heals the man at the pool of Bethesda and He's all finished healing the guy and it says, "Therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus and sought to slay Him." They wanted Him dead instead of saying He has the power of God, He can heal, He must be the Messiah John spoke of, they wanted Him dead.

John chapter 9, they met a blind man, Jesus made the blind man see. And they said to him, "Well, who is He and where is He from?" And the blind man says, "It's a strange thing that you don't know who He is or where He came from and He made me see." When unbelief investigates the truth, it comes up with the wrong answer, see, because it's already predisposed to ignore the facts. Typical of people who come to look at the gospel message and look at the virtue of Jesus Christ already having convinced themselves that their way is right and the way of God is wrong and no matter how much evidence you give them, they'll still reject because that's their predisposition.

So, here's the astute answer of the mass of religious leaders of Israel. Verse 27, "And they answered Jesus and said, We don't know," literally, "We know not...We can't give You an answer." Now it was their duty to be the acute observers of religious matters. It was their duty to know. And they ignored all the evidence because they would not be put in a position where they would admit Jesus Christ to be the Messiah. Oh, the hardness of their hearts.

And so He says, verse 27, "Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things." I'm not answering your question either. "Why cast pearls before swine?" They rejected the light so He turned it off, I have nothing more to say to you, nothing more. And He didn't, He really didn't. He said to them in 23:33, "You serpents, you generation of snakes, how can you escape the damnation of hell?" In verse 38 He says, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate...desolate." I mean, it was over, He

turned off the lights. And when He was confronted before Caiaphas in Matthew 26:63 it says, "And Jesus held His peace." Never said a word. He had nothing to say. And when He was accused by the chief priests and elders, Matthew 27:12, "He answered nothing." Nothing.

O, what a fearful moment. They had so long rejected that He rejected them. Genesis 6:3, God said, "My Spirit will not always strive with man." In Hosea 4:17 God said, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone." In Isaiah 63:10 God says, "This people has so long rebelled against Me and vexed My Holy Spirit that I have now determined to fight against them." That's where they are, fearful thing.

In a very, very poignant and provocative statement in the nineteenth chapter of Luke in this very same setting, Jesus came to the city of Jerusalem, it says, and wept over it, saying, "If thou hadst known even thou at least in this thy day the things which belong unto thy peace." If you knew the peace that God wanted to give you, "But now they are hidden from thine eyes." And at the end of verse 44, "Because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation." You just didn't know, you willfully wouldn't know when God visited you. As a result, He describes to them the destruction of their city and their system and says not one stone will be left upon another as God comes in judgment.

So, the confrontation and the counter-question, He's not through with them, though. He has nothing more to say to them of light, but He does have something more to say to them of judgment. And so, in verse 28 we see the characterization. This is very simple, now watch. "What think ye?" And what He's really saying there is, "Now I want you to think about this. A certain man had two sons. He came to the first and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not. Afterward he repented and went. He came to the second and said the same. He answered and said, I go, sir. And went not."

Now some of your New American Standards have switched those two which means in the manuscripts that are available, some have the "I will not" first and some of it second, but it doesn't change the meaning of the story at all.

It's a parable. Very simple. A father has two sons. The reason you have a father and two sons here is because built into that relationship you have a responsibility for obedience. The father goes to his sons, he runs a vineyard, he says go to the vineyard and go to work. Son number one says, "I will not." But afterwards he repents and goes. Son number two says, "I will." And never does. It would seem to me that somewhere there ought to be son number three who said "I will" and did. But not in this story. You just have two bad ones, it's a characterization of humanity, see.

"What do you think?" He says. And He says in verse 31, "Which of the two did the will of his father? And they say unto Him, The first." And they're so excited to be able to answer a question, thinking that at last they've got one that won't incriminate them. But it did. "The first...the first. I mean the guy who did it was the guy who said he wouldn't but repented and did." Well, they were right. That was

the characterization, the parable.

Fourth is the connection. How does He connect that with them? How does He apply that? This is devastating. When they hurriedly answered the first, they put themselves in a dire situation for a great rebuke. "Jesus saith unto them, Truly I say unto you that the tax collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you." Whew! You see, this is the religious elite, folks. These people are so moral, they're looking for the first vacancy in the trinity in their own thinking, see. They are living under the illusion that God is thrilled with them because of their purity. And tax collectors and harlots is a proverbial statement. That's a euphemism for the scum of society. Tax collectors were treasonists, traitors who...Jews who sold themselves to Rome to exact unfair taxes from the people. They were traitors. And harlots were those who sort of symbolized all of the gross God-defying immorality. Tax collectors and harlots were outcasts, the scum of society. And Jesus says, "You--in effect--are like that second son, you say we will and you never do. "You feign to obey God but you never do go in His vineyard and live under His terms and obey His commands."

And on the other hand, there are the rebels of society, the tax collectors and the harlots who start out rebelling but repent and do go into His vineyard and obey Him. The point here is you have people who claim obedience and don't obey, people who deny obedience but ultimately do and that's the difference. Tax collectors and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you. I mean, that is a strong statement. And, boy, have they lost face in front of the crowd. He's not saying you're going to go in after them. That's not the implication. The idea is they're going to go in and you're not. Religion doesn't get in you in the Kingdom. And sin repented of and forgiven doesn't keep you out. Isn't that good news? They were the worst of humanity. They were the very worst of humanity.

But the gospels tell us so beautifully that in the ministry of John, many...it says, "Many harlots believed on Him." It was the people who were overwhelmed with their sin and they came down to John and they said, "We've got to get ready for the Kingdom. If the Messiah is coming, we've got to get ready, we want to confess, we want to repent of our sins." But when the Pharisees, you remember, in Matthew 3 came down and John was baptizing, and John says, "You snakes, you snakes, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come, you better bring forth fruits unto repentance because the Messiah's coming and when He gets here He's going to take the axe and He's going to lay it at the root of the tree." And he says, "He's going to come and in His hand is the fan and He's going to separate the wheat and the chaff and He's going to start a furnace of fire."

In other words, he gave them a whole judgment message. He was taking the sinners in and they were confessing and repenting and being baptized in a baptism of repentance to get ready for the Messiah. And the religious leaders were coming and not accepting the message and not believing at all and not repenting and he says because of that your like son number two who says, "O yes, God, we will obey You, and you never do. And on the other hand, these who rebel have turned to repent

and obey." That's why in chapter 23 verse 3 He says to those same religious leaders, of those same religious leaders, "They say...at the end of verse 3...they say and do not." They say they obey God, they don't.

Then verse 32, "For John came unto you in the way of righteousness," and here He answers His question, was John's ministry from heaven or earth? "He came in the way of righteousness." Not just with a message of righteousness, no, in the way of righteousness. He didn't just have a good word, he was a good man. He fasted. In fact, his disciples were curious why Jesus' disciples didn't fast like John's did. His way was a way of righteousness, it was a way of virtue, it was a way of morality, it was a way of godliness. He was a good man. He was a holy man. He was a righteous man. And he had a righteous message as well as a righteous life. And here he came with a righteous example and a righteous message and you believed him not. You heard a good man speak a good word and you refused to believe it. That's indictment enough, that's indictment enough.

And then He gives them another indictment. "But the tax collectors and the harlots, prostitutes, believed him." They believed him. They heard John. They accepted his message. They repented. And then this, "And ye when ye had seen that repented not afterward that ye might believe him." That's a double indictment. Listen very carefully. He says you saw a man with a righteous life preach a righteous message and you didn't believe that. And then when you saw tax collectors and harlots repent and have their lives transformed, you didn't even believe after seeing that. In other words, you rejected the message and you rejected the power that you saw in the prophet of God. Doubly indicted.

Like today, you can sit and listen to the preacher preach. You can listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can listen to the saving message of Jesus Christ. And you can walk away and you can say, "I will not believe that. I will not believe that message, that word preached by John, that word preached by Jesus, that word preached by the preacher today, I will not believe it." And that's your first indictment. And then comes your second indictment because you too have sat and seen that power in that gospel transform lives and you've seen people's lives changed and their lives transformed. And even after having seen that, you still don't believe. That's a double indictment. And the word that we see in this to those men is a word of final judgment, a word of doom, a word of hell, hopelessness. For those who had been exposed to the full light of the Son of God, the full light of the prophet of God, John the Baptist, they'd seen it all, they'd heard it all and they wouldn't believe the message and they wouldn't even believe the transforming power. And so He turns out the light. End of discussion.

So, you looked at your own heart? And what did you see? Do you believe the message? How about the transforming power? Can you deny that? "My Spirit will not always strive with man." The Lord didn't always strive even with His own rebellious hard-hearted willfully blind people and He won't with men today either. And no man...no man...should know the wrath of God, should fall under the wrath

of God to condemnation that comes to unbelievers. Let's bow in prayer.

While your head is bowed in just a closing moment, please, I want you to think on the things that you've heard. Jesus was His own authority. He didn't need to be approved by men. He didn't need to quote human teachers. He didn't need authorization from the false religious system. He spoke and did what God told Him to say and do. And over and over again He revealed Himself, as He does now, through His Word, through His power. You've heard His message. You've seen His transforming power in the lives of others. Do you stand with these religious leaders who willfully reject in spite of all of that you've heard and all of that you've seen? Inconceivable. Open your heart to Christ. Receive Him as Savior, Lord, Master, King for this is your day. Jerusalem had their day, this is your day. May it not be said that you entered into judgment because you didn't know the day of your visitation.

Father, we pray that each of us might sense the working of the Spirit of God in our hearts and no one would go away without knowing Christ, without coming to Him in faith. O Spirit of God, break down the walls of unbelief, take the scales off the eyes, unstop the deafened ears, melt the hard hearts.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).