

68 Mark 11:27-33

Consider the Source

Text

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, 28 and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” 29 Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.” 31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 32 But shall we say, ‘From man’?”—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. 33 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Commentary

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him,

This is the Sanhedrin. This is the ruling body of Israel. Its members consisted of the chief priests, the scribes (who were the scholars of the time, many of them were Pharisees), and the elders (who were the heads of tribes or villages). It was rare to see a united judgment from these people. The fact that representatives from different sects here unite to contend with Jesus is telling. The Pharisees and the Saducees, in particular, did not agree on much. Jesus is causing enough of a scene to unite the political rivals against him.

and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”

This is slightly given the kind of authority and evidence that has attended Jesus ministry (see Mark 1:22; 27; 2:10).

The specific point they want to pin Jesus down on is authority. They were the rulers, not Jesus. They were the ones who ran the temple, not Jesus. Here is this Galilean preacher sticking his nose where it does not belong. "If you want to go cause a ruckus around Galilee, fine, but don't come into Jerusalem, into the temple and presume to run the show. By what authority are you doing this? We are the ruling class."

Of course, they were not ok with Jesus preaching in Galilee either. They have opposed him almost the whole way. He is a threat to their way of life, and they have purposed in their hearts for a while to kill him. In fact, in the previous section we were told that they were seeking a way to destroy him.

Their question of authority had more to it than just a complaint that Jesus was acting outside of his jurisdiction. They intended to trap him. It is kind of like nailing Capone on tax evasion. They

are hoping that he will slip up just enough that they will be able to make some charge stick and thereby put him to death. And so they ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" *29 Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me."* The answering a question with a question was a common rabbinic debate technique. Jesus used it frequently.

Mark 2:6-9 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?"

Mark 2:18-19 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

Mark 2:24-26 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?"

Mark 10:22-23 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

Mark 10:2-3 And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

Mark 12:14-16 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" 15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

It may seem that Jesus is dodging the question, but he is not. Jesus' question was very much on topic. If they desire to know where he derives his authority, all they need to do is answer whether John the Baptist spoke God's words or men's words. Did John's message come from men or from heaven? John's baptism of Jesus was the beginning of Jesus' ministry. That was when the heavens were torn open and God said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." To answer the question of John's baptism is to answer the question of Jesus' authority. The only other time that we have a voice coming from heaven is in Mark 9:7 "And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.'" You don't get

any better credentials that when God the Father speaks from heaven and says , "Listen to him." Jesus' authority was from God himself.

John was the forerunner of the Messiah. He was to prepare the way. He proclaimed a message of repentance. John was the last OT prophet. His ministry was the last chance for Israel. The King was coming, and in his train came the covenant blessings and curses. It is under John that they have a chance. Once the Messiah comes, it will be too late. Dr. Riddlebarger notes that

John came preaching in the wilderness, it was this event which first exposed the unrighteousness of the Jewish religious leadership and caused the people to begin to question the authority of the Sanhedrin. In asking this question then, Jesus is drawing a line in the sand. The members of the Sanhedrin either cross the line and identify with him and John, or else they are rejecting the messianic forerunner and the Messiah himself.

31 And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 32 But shall we say, 'From man'?"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. 33 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

The ruling body is hoping to make the case that Jesus has been acting without authority. They want nothing more than to kill Jesus, and they are hoping that this charge will turn the people against him as well as provide a reason for arresting him.

Our text says that Jesus was walking in the temple. As you remember, this was a massive structure, and Jesus was likely walking through the colonnades. I imagine that all eyes were on him in light of the previous days events. And as usual, perhaps more than usual, Jesus likely had a crowd following him and listening to him teach. Seeing a chance to turn the crowd against him the pharisees approach Jesus and demand an accounting of the previous days behavior. "On what authority did you act?" But Jesus turns the table on these rulers and now they find themselves embarrassed in front of this crowd. The very group that they hoped to turn against him become a reason for shammed silence.

True to his word, Jesus refuses to then answer their question. The scribes, elders, and chief priests must tuck their tail between their legs and sneak back out of the picture. They are now more furious than ever. They are bound and determined to kill him. It is only a matter of days from now that it happens.

Application

Why was this episode preserved for us? Why is this in our Bible? What was Mark's purpose in giving this to us?

The Sanhedrin failed because they had the witness of John the baptist and they refused to listen. Their pride and tradition kept them from the truth. They were not interested in a real dialog, all of their interaction is a mere jockeying for position. I fear that this is the case too often in our life as well. There are many different ways I could go at this point. Different denominations will just speak past one another just trying to score political points are have no real interest in the truth. At home, you may be in the awkward position of having to eat your words, but pride prevents you from exercising humility and admitting you were wrong, so a huge fight ensues. There are many

other ways to apply this, and I would encourage you to reflect on this and find other areas of application.

To the Unbeliever

For my purposes here, however, I want to give an application that flows more naturally from the text. My question is, "What about you?" The Sanhedrin refused to let go of their traditions and pride and see Jesus for who he really was. Dear friend, is there anything preventing you from seeing Jesus as he really is? If you are not yet saved, what reason have you for holding off any longer? What reason can you give? We have the testimony of the prophets. We have the testimony of the apostles. Why do you refuse to lend an ear to them? You know what they would say and so you keep the prophets at an arms length. You know to whom the apostles would point you and so you refuse to give them a hearing for fear of conviction. Things are comfortable now and you know that this is a decision that may require much of you so you maintain a buffer zone between you and the facts.

But dear friend, that is not a game that lasts forever. You never know how much time you have. All life comes to an end, and then you will be held accountable for what you deliberately turned your back on. How will you answer when God says on that day, "Why didn't you listen to John the Baptist? Why didn't you listen to my prophets or apostles? Why didn't you listen to my preachers or evangelists"? There was the light of creation, there was the conviction of conscience, there was historical evidence, there were moral imperatives that you knew to be true and you turned away. How can you hope to escape?

To the Believer

For those of you who believe, a similar question confronts you. What will you do with the grace that is given you? The same prophets and apostles that urge the unbeliever to repent and rest in Christ are the same men who command Christ-likeness in you. You were not saved just to be justified. You were saved in order that you would be conformed to the image of Christ. This burden of sin was not taken from you that you could fold your hands and rest more comfortably, the burden was lifted that you could don the armor of God and take up the sword and fight the enemy with great swiftness.

You have not been set free from the bondage of sin to sit in your cell with the door wide open. You have been released in order to enjoy the freedom of being in Christ! When life begins to depress us or we find ourselves struggling with malcontentment, it is because we remain in the rancid, dark, cold dungeon refusing to believe the apostles that there is sweet air and warm sunshine to be had in living a Christ-centered life. They urge you onward but it seems too odd to believe that we can rejoice in suffering and so you don't abandon yourself and fling yourself fully on Christ.

To the Church

Finally, let me say a few words to the church as a whole. Looking back at the text, when Jesus asked the question, the Pharisees discussed it. What is odd is not that they discussed it, but how

they discussed it. They did not discuss the facts and evidences of the ministry of John, their discussion was all pragmatic. It was all about the ramifications of their answer. They were only thinking of how they could get the upper hand.

This is a big problem in the church today. There is a tendency not to do what scripture says because we deem it to be impractical, uncomfortable, or inconvenient. There is no other area that suffers as much as evangelism. It is one of the most uncomfortable things we can do. It does not promote our self-image. It does not serve our kingdom of one. And so we take the pragmatic approach which is far more comfortable. Thus, lifestyle evangelism. This is the notion that we just live good lives for others to see. Obviously living good lives is right and biblical, but it is not evangelism. It may help to remove obstacles, but it is not evangelism. Calling it so gives the doer the sense that he has fulfilled the Great Commission.

When we talk with unbelievers we seem unable to find the right words to say. We leave Jesus, God, and the Bible out of the equation. I was once told that you cannot tell a person that affairs are wrong by appealing to the Bible, because they do not believe the Bible. The answer they suggested was to find some kind of common ground. It is not practical to refer to scripture. I understand that reasoning. But I do not accept it. I am not interested in creating moral people who are bound for Hell. That is just dressing up the dead. I want them to be exposed to the gospel, if per chance God may spare them.

We will often find that God's ways are highly impractical. Yet we need to obey in order to see his wisdom. The problem is not that God is impractical, it is that God's ways are not our ways. God's methods are terribly inefficient and impractical for serving your kingdom. But that is not his desire. His desire is for his kingdom! If your desire is to simply fill the seats in church, then you may use all kinds of methods to do that. But one of the worst ways to get people to fill your church is to tell them that they are sinners in need of a savior. That does not sit well. But God is not interested in building my kingdom. He desires that his Son be glorified through the salvation of people from every tribe nation and tongue. I desire this church to be filled only if this church will serve as a faithful purpose to the kingdom of God.

The chief priests and elders and scribes were interested in maintaining their own kingdom, not in proclaiming the kingdom of God. And so they opted for the pragmatic response that would best limit the damage of Jesus' question. Dear friends, if you are faced with something in scripture, and you ever find yourself saying, "That's just not practical," then there is a high likelihood that you have replaced God's design with your own.