

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Jesus' Authority Questioned.*"ⁱ

We are working our way verse-by-verse through Luke's Gospel, and we find ourselves at **Luke 20**.

Henry Kissinger, who passed away last month, served as secretary of state and national security advisor during Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford's presidencies. This past week I read [an article about the seven people he believed to be the most powerful in history](#). Here's his list.

Number 7: The American President since 1945 because of the nuclear weapons at his disposal.

Number 6: President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)

Number 5: Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) the Emperor of the French Empire

Number 4: Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) the leader of the Indian Independence Movement

Number 3: Peter the Great (1672-1725) the czar of the Russian Empire

Number 2: Qin Shi Huang (259 B.C.-210 B.C.) the emperor of Unified China

Number 1: Julius Caesar (100 B.C.-44 B.C.) the Emperor of the Roman Empire

It's a good thing nobody asked me who I thought the seven most powerful men in history were for two reasons. First, I don't think I would have guessed many of the names on the list. Second, the Person I would have said is number one didn't even make the list, and that's Jesus. He said...

Matthew 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Nobody has ever had more authority than Jesus because he has all authority.

But you wouldn't know that from this morning's account. As we will see, the religious leaders didn't even think Jesus had the authority to cleanse the temple.

—
The context for this account is important. Look one chapter to the left at Luke 19. You can see that:

- The triumphal entry is in verses 28 through 40.
- Jesus weeps over Jerusalem in verses 41 through 44. This was on Sunday, also known as Palm Sunday, and it began the last week of Jesus' earthly life leading up to his crucifixion.

Then, in verses 45 and 46, which was probably Monday, Jesus cleansed the temple. This went over terribly with the religious leaders. Not only did it make them look bad, it also cost them lots of money. If that wasn't enough, Jesus followed this up by calling them robbers and thieves.

Look at Luke 19:47...

Luke 19:47 And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, 48 but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

Keep in mind these verses say they want to murder Jesus, but they can't. This shows why they take the approach they do in this morning's verses. They couldn't directly get rid of Jesus because of his popularity, so they try to indirectly by trapping him.

After Jesus cleansed the temple, even though the religious leaders were trying to murder him, he decided to stay in the temple teaching during the week leading up to the crucifixion. In our sermon on these verses, I said it was like Jesus set up his headquarters in the middle of enemy territory.

Now before we jump into this morning's verses, I want to ask you to think about what it looked like when Jesus cleansed the temple...

He bursts in, and we know by looking in all three synoptic Gospels:

- He drove out everyone who was selling and buying.
- He overturned the tables of the money changers and knocked over the chairs of those selling pigeons.
- Mark 11:16 says he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple, which makes it seem like he interrupted everything that was happening.
- He rebukes them for being thieves.

After all that, he's bold enough to set up shop in the middle the temple and teach everyone.

If you were watching this, what might you say?

"This Man must have an incredible amount of authority to be able to do this!"

But if you hated Jesus, what might you say?

"Who does this guy think he is? Where does he get the authority to do this?"

Which is exactly what the religious leaders asked. Look at verse one...

Luke 20:1 One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up 2 and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority."

More than likely this is Tuesday of the Passion Week.

Notice three groups are mentioned in verse one: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Because each of these groups was part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, more than likely they met together to orchestrate this attack.

Here's something else to know about these groups...

They didn't think Jesus had the authority to do what he was doing, but they believed they had the authority to do what they were doing. Let me tell you why they thought they had authority, but didn't think Jesus had authority.

First, the chief priests claimed their authority from the Mosaic law, because it said that Levites, or the tribe of Levi, could be priests.

They looked at Jesus, and what tribe was he from?

He's from the tribe of Judah. They don't know he is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, so they didn't think he could claim his authority from his tribe or the law. So, they didn't think he has the authority to be a priest, say nothing about coming into the temple like a priest and then driving out the priests.

Second, the scribes were students of the law who claimed their authority from the rabbis whose interpretations they studied. In other words, the scribes studied rabbis writings about the law, the way we would study commentaries. The scribes would defend their positions, or demonstrate their authority, by quoting these rabbis.

But listen to this verse...

Mark 1:22 They were astonished at [Jesus'] teaching, for he taught them as one WHO HAD AUTHORITY, and NOT AS THE SCRIBES.

For a few years I wrongly thought this meant that Jesus spoke very boldly and confidently...or authoritatively. Instead, it means he didn't quote anyone the scribes who quoted rabbis.

I don't think we have any idea what Jesus sounded like when he taught. We know the content of what he taught. But we don't know how he taught. Maybe he taught very gently and calmly.

But the point I want you to notice is because Jesus didn't quote any rabbis – like the scribes did – they didn't think he had the authority to teach what he did.

—
Third, the elders of Israel were the leaders of families and clans. They were usually chosen because of their experience and wisdom. They could point to their election for their authority. They could say, “The people chose us for these positions.”

But Jesus wasn't chosen by anyone. In fact, he was rejected by many, including the religious leaders themselves. Or in other words, he was rejected by the most prominent and respected people who would have given him some authority: the religious leaders.

And it gets even worse. He had 12 disciples with him that he could point to, but:

- Peter, James, John, and Andrew were fishermen
- Matthew was a tax collector

We don't know what the other disciples did. But we do know this: they were ordinary men. They were not men you pointed to when you wanted to establish your authority...because they had no authority themselves.

So, the chief priests, scribes, and elders were certain of their authority, and they were not afraid to confront Jesus about his perceived lack of authority.

—
Here's how they were trying to trap Jesus with this question...

Jesus can't say that he doesn't have authority, or he wouldn't be justified in cleansing the temple, overthrowing the moneychangers and vendors, and then setting himself up like a prophet for everyone to hear.

But Jesus also couldn't say his authority came from man. Because the temple was God's house, Jesus needed God's authority to cleanse it. If he says he only had man's authority then it looks like he did something without God's permission.

But Jesus also couldn't say his authority came from God, because then the religious leaders would accuse him of blasphemy and have him executed.

Look at verse 3 to see how he responds...

Luke 20:3 He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, 4 was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”

Earlier I said Jesus couldn't look to the 12 disciples to establish his authority. But there was one earthly figure Jesus could point to, and that was John the Baptist.

John was well-known as Jesus' forerunner. He's the one who introduced Jesus to the nation.

—
You might wonder why Jesus asked them whether John's baptism was from God, versus asking whether John himself was from God? Why ask about John's baptism versus simply asking about John?

The answer is because John's ministry is associated with baptism. He's John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. Asking about his ministry was asking about the legitimacy of what he was doing as Jesus's forerunner.

—
And with this one short question, Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders.

Lesson One: The religious leaders tried to trap Jesus, but he trapped them.

And they knew it. Listen to them discuss the dilemma they found themselves in...

Luke 20:5 And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'"

If the religious leaders admitted John's baptism was from heaven, people would surely ask, "Then why didn't you believe John when he said Jesus is the Messiah?" They would be answering their own question and acknowledging Jesus' authority came from God.

Listen to them explain the other side...

Luke 20:6 But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet."

On the other hand, they also can't deny that John's baptism is from heaven, because John was so popular with the people. He was martyred for standing up to Herod, a man the people despised. Criticizing John would have been like criticizing a national hero. So, they knew they couldn't do that.

—
One of the keys to understanding Jesus' approach is contained in the statement that the people were "convinced John was a prophet." Prophets speak for God. John was Jesus' forerunner who testified Jesus is the Messiah. If John is a prophet they should believe his testimony.

If they say that Jesus is not the Messiah, they would be calling John a liar, which would be calling God's prophet a liar, which would be slandering God's prophet, which would give the people reason to – as the verse says – stone the religious leaders.

—
The religious leaders didn't like either of these answers, so they thought of a third option: "Let's just play dumb. We will act like we have no idea."

Luke 20:7 So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

This was a lie. They did know.

—
You can tell how trapped they were by this response. Saying, "I don't know," takes humility. If there's anyone who wouldn't want to say, "I don't know," and look like they don't know something, it's the religious leaders. They were proud. They wanted the people to think they knew everything.

But even this response looked better to them than saying either, "Jesus is the Messiah," or, "John the Baptist is a false prophet."

Look how Jesus responds to their response...

Luke 20:8 And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

I’m not saying this is the case, in fact in a moment I will tell you why it is not the case, but let’s just be honest, that on the surface, it looks like Jesus is being evasive in not answering the question.

And why do people typically evade questions?

Because they can’t answer. They have no good answer, so they refuse to answer. Just like we saw with the religious leaders.

But that’s not at all what’s happening, and this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson Two: Jesus would not give what is holy to the dogs.

This is a good example of Jesus doing what he preached:

Matthew 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Even though Jesus’ response is short, it is deep and did many things...

First, Jesus’ response makes it look like the religious leaders lacked the knowledge and wisdom to question him. It’s like he said, “If you can’t answer this basic question about my forerunner then you have no business questioning me.”

Second, Jesus’ response revealed the religious leaders didn’t have a heart for truth. By not answering them it was as if Jesus communicated, “Why would I give you more truth, when you already rejected basic, foundational truth, such as, ‘Was John’s baptism from God or man?’ I am not giving what is holy to the dogs or throwing my pearls before swine, because you already trampled previous holy teachings and pearls you were given.”

Third, it looks like Jesus refused to answer their question, but – believe it or not – by not answering, he did answer. Here’s what I mean...

The statement, “I don’t have to answer you” or, “I don’t have to answer to you” is a statement about authority. It communicates, “You don’t have the authority to question me or tell me what to do.”

And Jesus communicated this when he refused to answer.

In fact, if Jesus did answer, it would have shown that they had the authority to question him.

Fourth, by refusing to answer, Jesus showed that he didn’t have to answer to man, or that man didn’t have authority over him, which showed his authority came from God. He indirectly communicated, “You don’t have the authority to question me, because my authority comes from God himself.”

Sometimes we communicate more by saying less, and we see that with Jesus’ response.

As you know from our time going through Luke’s gospel I like to use the other Gospels to fill in the details Luke doesn’t include. This is how we should use the Gospels, because it provides a full picture.

We can see from verse six that the religious leaders were afraid of the people. They said, “All the people will stone us to death.” But Mark’s gospel really spells it out for us. Go ahead and turn to the left to Mark 11:32. We won’t turn back to Luke.

Mark 11:32 But shall we say, ‘From man’?’—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.

Notice two things that happened in this account with the religious leaders...

First, they disobeyed Jesus. We see this in two ways: questioning him and refusing to answer his question.

Second, the religious leaders obeyed the people. The people would not want them to say that John the Baptist’s baptism was NOT from God, so they refuse to say that.

They won’t obey Jesus, but they will obey man. And why is that?

We obey what we fear. And this brings us to lesson...

Lesson Three: We obey what we fear.

Think about what happened with Saul...

God commanded him to destroy the Amalekites. He left their king, Agag, and enough of their people that they were later able to attack Ziklag and take David and his men’s wives and children.

God sends Samuel to confront Saul...

1 Samuel 15:19 Why then did you not OBEY THE VOICE OF THE LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?”

Listen to Saul’s excuse...

1 Samuel 15:24 Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I FEARED THE PEOPLE AND OBEYED THEIR VOICE.

Saul obeyed the people because he feared them more than God.

Whatever we fear has power over us:

- If we fear God, we will obey Him.
- If we fear man, we will obey man.

—
Jesus said...

John 14:15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

When we think about why we obey the Lord, this verse comes to mind. And it should: we obey Christ because we love him. We don’t obey Christ to be saved. We obey him because we are saved.

But it would be equally true to say we obey God because we fear him.

Let me give you a few examples from Scripture. Turn to Genesis 22...

Genesis 22:2 He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

God told Abraham to sacrifice the son he loved. Look at verse 12 to see what the Angel said to Abraham when he stopped him...

Genesis 22:12 He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that YOU FEAR GOD, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Because God commanded Abraham to sacrifice the son he LOVED, when Abraham obeyed, we would expect the Angel to say something like, “Now I know that you LOVE God,” because Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, it showed he loved God more than he loved Isaac. But the Angel said that when Abraham obeyed it was obvious that he FEARED God.

—
Turn to Exodus 1.

Here’s the context: when the Israelites multiplied in Egypt, Pharaoh became afraid of them. Look at verse 16 to see the command he gave the Hebrew midwives...

Exodus 1:16 “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” 17 But the MIDWIVES FEARED GOD and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.

The midwives were commanded to murder all the Hebrew baby boys. Now it’s not to say that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh because they didn’t fear him. If Pharaoh was wicked enough to murder all these babies, then we can be sure he wouldn’t have any problem murdering midwives the disobeyed him. Instead, the Hebrew midwives feared Pharaoh, but they obeyed God, because they feared God even more than they feared Pharaoh.

—
Turn to Exodus 20.

God brought Israel to the base of Mount Sinai. You might remember this was a terrifying experience for the Israelites. Look at Exodus 20:18...

Exodus 20:18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off 19 and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

God was so terrifying they thought his voice would kill them.

We know Moses was a great mediator between God and man, so this is when he steps in and tries to alleviate the people’s fear. He tells them they’re nothing to be afraid of.” And he asks God to be a little less scary. He prays, “God, these are your people, please don’t scare them.”

Nope...

Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, THAT THE FEAR OF HIM MAY BE BEFORE YOU, THAT YOU MAY NOT SIN.”

Moses told Israel their fear of God was a good thing, because it would cause them to obey.

—
Turn to the right two books to Deuteronomy 8. This is when Moses gave the law to the new generation that was entering the Promised Land, because the old generation died in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 8:6 So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

Moses said they would obey God if they feared him.

—
We don't have time to flip around to every verse I would like you to see, so I will just read some to you...

Deuteronomy 31:12 Assemble the people...that they may hear and LEARN TO FEAR THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND BE CAREFUL TO DO ALL THE WORDS OF THIS LAW,

If they learned to fear God, they would be careful to obey Him.

—
Listen to the other side of this...

During Jeremiah's day the people forsook God. I would think they forsook him because they didn't love him. That's probably true, but listen to what else God said...

Jeremiah 2:19 Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; THE FEAR OF ME IS NOT IN YOU, declares the Lord God of hosts.

God said Israel abandoned him because they didn't fear him.

And again...

Jeremiah 32:40 I will put THE FEAR OF ME in their hearts, that they may not turn from Me (or that they will obey me).

God would cause them to fear him, so they wouldn't forsake him.

Here's a good way to look at it...

Love keeps God's people near him, but fear keeps us from departing from Him.

—
David Wilkerson said...

"What produces a consistent, lasting obedience? I am convinced that godly, loving obedience springs from one source: the fear of the living God! I'm going to make a very bold statement: I believe it is impossible to consistently walk in obedience and holiness unless you have the fear of God in your heart. If you don't have the fear of God, you will eventually believe that God is easy on sin. You'll think that you can sin all you want. You'll get on a merry-go-round of 'sin, confess, sin, confess'—and you'll say to yourself, 'I'll just run back to Jesus and make it right. He'll forgive me at any moment!'"ⁱⁱ

—
Let me conclude with this verse from the wisest man who ever lived, second to Christ...

Ecclesiastes 12:13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, for this is the whole duty of man.

It might look like fearing God and keeping his commandments are two separate things, but Solomon made the point they go together.

—
Notice he said "this is the whole duty of man."

When I first looked at this, I found it surprising. I thought, *“This is it? This is my whole duty? I have all these responsibilities. I have so many things to do and keep track of. But my whole duty is bound up in fearing God and obeying him?”*

Then I found it very encouraging, because it provides such beautiful simplicity for us. Our lives can seem very confusing and chaotic, but this makes things clear, and I hope it blesses you too.

—
If you have any questions, or I can pray for you in any way, I’ll be up front after service, and I’d consider it a privilege to be able to speak with you.

Let’s pray.

ⁱ Done:

- John MacArthur
- Moody
- Pulpit Commentary
- Wiersbe

ⁱⁱ Wilkerson, David. “Love, Fear, and Obedience.” World Challenge. August 17, 1992.

<https://worldchallenge.org/newsletter/1992/love-fear-and-obedience>