

**“By What Authority?” (St. Matthew 21:23-27)**

For Your Life in Christ the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LC-MS)

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**Introduction: Authority...Good or Bad?**

- A. God’s authority was staring me face-to-face through the fourth commandment: “Honor you father and your mother.”
- B. I was about five years old, and my whole family was sitting around the kitchen table for dinner. My dad and mom gave me an order: “Eat your sweet potatoes!”
- C. But I had a problem: at the time, I could not *stand* sweet potatoes! Much to my great shame, I did not obey my parents. To this open defiance, my oldest brother Larry (13 years my senior) decided to try intimidation. He pointed his finger at me, and using the most threatening voice he could muster said, “EAT YOUR SWEET POTATOES!” By this point, my sinful nature was in full bloom. I got up and made a stand and said, “NO!”
- D. And in that instance I proved what it means to be a sinner: God asserts His authority, and then we assert ours.
- E. This state of affairs reminds me of a story one of my college professors shared. He had been thoroughly witnessing to a colleague and unleashed his formidable arsenal of Christian apologetics. In the end, his colleague said that strictly on an intellectual level my former college professor had completely convinced him that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was absolutely true. He said, however sadly, that he would not follow it because quote, “He was having too much fun.” This too was open defiance. God said, “follow me!” But the man said, “NO!”
- F. This is heart and soul of sin: it is putting our authority (no matter how illusory it may be) over God’s true and legitimate authority.

**Part I: Along the way, however, not only do we disrespect the Lord and His authority, but we make up sinful excuses!**

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- A. First of all, sinners shamelessly question the Lord’s authority! Recall that up to this point in Matthew chapter 21 the Lord had demonstrated His authority through His many miracles and His amazing prophetic preaching. This was the Creator of all things (Colossians 1), the One who commanded the wind and the waves, walked on water, fed the multitudes, raised the dead, and yet He is questioned:

**Matthew 21:23: “When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’”**

- B. The key word here is “authority.” It means “**absolute power**” and “**warrant.**” **In this case, the person referred to has the right and power to do what they do.**
- C. Jesus’ authority is completely intact and He is fully vested with the power and authority of God. To question His authority is ludicrous; it’s like saying that He didn’t have the right to create us. Of course He did.
- D. The true problem is a *moral* one, and it begins because we feel threatened by God.
- E. When the text mentions the “chief priests and the elders of the people,” these refer to the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Great Council of the Jewish Church. These men had great power, prestige, and authority. Point blank Jesus threatened their position.
- F. How often does this occur?
  - 1. God says to have no other gods before Him and this threatens us because it means that we will have to give up things we know for a fact that we love more than God.
  - 2. God says not to misuse His name and this threatens us because it means that we should give up our routines that put prayer and devotion in the Word on the shelf. After all, we don’t want to seem too religious or anything by taking time to pray, praise, and give thanks.

3. God says to remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy, but this threatens the other priorities we put ahead of worship.
4. God says to honor our parents, but this threatens us because we want to maintain all of our reasons for holding back the honoring service God bids us to give them. After all, so many other things are more pressing.
5. God says not to murder, but this threatens us because if we weren't so angry with so-and-so and take pleasure in convincing ourselves of their evil, where would we be? We would lose our strange way of feeling better about ourselves by dumping on someone else.
6. God says not to commit adultery, but this threatens us because it seems to deny our natural desires and the way we are. We are after-all human and how easy it is to laugh at our excuses for lust, but there is nothing funny about it.
7. God says not to steal, but this threatens us from having what we really want and think we deserve at someone else's expense.
8. God says to protect our neighbor's reputation, but this threatens us because we enjoy going on and on about someone else's problems, after all, we are just trying to show concern and state what is true.
- 9-10. God says not to covet our neighbor's material possessions or our neighbor's relations, but this threatens us because we believe deep in our hearts that we deserve these things more than they do.
- G. At every turn, we prove that we have a sinful, moral problem: we love our own sinful desire more than God, and we do it all while questioning -- directly or indirectly -- God's authority.
- H. In the end, we want to be relativists, we want to pick and choose what parts of God and His Word we will "believe in," and which parts are just plain inconvenient and the parts that we will cancel through our own self-appointed authority. This is our terrible sin.

**Part II: But our Lord takes us back to His authority from heaven:**

- A. When He asked the question about John's baptism (v 25), He was not being evasive, but simply substituting John for Himself. The people knew John was from heaven; they also knew that Jesus was too, but was even greater than John.
- B. Because the leaders of the Jews said, "***We do not know***" to Jesus' question about where John's baptism came from (v 25), they proved that they loved their positions more than God.
- C. This is exactly our sinful problem.
- D. To address it, however, Jesus indeed came from heaven. And in conducting our salvation, He fulfilled the proper response to the Heavenly Father's authority:
  1. He came from heaven to honor the Father's authority through His perfect life lived in obedience to God. This life was not lived for His own will, but for the will of God.

**John 6:38: "*For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*"**

- As a result, Christ's perfect life which honored the Father and the Father's authority is now counted as ***your*** life. This means that never again do you have to feel that God threatens you, because in Christ God knows you as honoring His authority. His authority and your life align in Christ!
2. Secondly, Jesus came from heaven to honor the Father's authority through His sacrificial death on the cross. This was the payment for your lack of honoring God's authority and for your terrible excuses against God's Word. Instead, the Lord glorified the Father and His authority by submitting Himself even to death on the cross so that all of those sins of yours are covered by the blood of the Lamb.

**Conclusion: We now have new lives in Christ and Christ's authority.**

- A. After paying for sins and defeating death. Christ announced having "all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18)."
- B. He now sends you forth to live joyfully. ***By His authority***, you are free to love and serve God; free to love and serve others.