



Authority

JESUS HOLDS ALL AUTHORITY, AND THOSE WHO
REJECT HIM WILL BE CONDEMNED.

MATTHEW 21:23-32

Steady erosion can eventually undermine a foundation, resulting in destruction. In the same way, erosion of respect for authority can undermine an institution, a business, a government, or a country. Authority is the right to influence or command another. The weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many actively reject established authorities.



What are the results of rejecting established authority?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 21:1-46

Matthew 21 moves into the final week of Jesus’s ministry before His crucifixion. Much of the action recorded by Matthew in chapters 21-22 occurred in the temple. The week began with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the shouts of praise from the crowd of pilgrims entering the city for the Feast of Passover. Once inside Jerusalem, Jesus moved into the temple precinct. Here began a series of confrontations with the religious leaders who opposed Jesus.

The first confrontation began in the outer courts of the temple (the Court of the Gentiles) when Jesus cleansed the temple of the money changers and sacrificial animal sellers. Because so many of the worshipers during the Passover Festival were from out of town, for convenience’s sake the priests had set up selling points in the outer court so that pilgrims could buy their sacrificial animals. Also, they would need to have the exact coinage to buy these animals and pay the temple tax. This had to be the coinage of the temple, so those from foreign lands would need to exchange foreign currency with the coin of the temple. This action and the triumphal entry led the priests and scribes to challenge Jesus when the children in the temple precinct began singing His praises.

The next confrontation occurred the following morning with the unusual act of Jesus cursing a fig tree. The fig tree had long represented the nation of Israel, and Jesus was symbolically condemning the nation for their lack of the fruit of repentance and faith. This led immediately to a challenge by the religious leaders to Jesus’s authority as recorded in the passage for today’s study.

Matthew 21 closes with another parable that brought indictment on the leadership of Israel for their rejection of Jesus as God’s Messiah. The rejection of Jesus would grow stronger and stronger throughout the week.

 **Read Matthew 21:23-32 in your Bible. Note the frequency of the use of the word “authority” and jot down how the word is used in these verses.**

EXPLORE THE TEXT

AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (MATT. 21:23-27)

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” ²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we’re afraid of the crowd, because everyone considers John to be a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

VERSE 23

After the events of the previous day, Jesus was confronted by the *chief priests and the elders* as He arrived at the temple. They questioned His right to do what He had done the day before. Jesus was not officially recognized as a rabbi. He had not gone through the training and ordination to be recognized as a rabbi. Because of this, they asked, ***By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you*** the right to throw the merchants and money exchangers out of the temple precinct? They had brooded overnight about Jesus’s actions and now wanted an answer. They were seeking to trap Him into saying or doing something with which they could accuse Him of violating the law, both of Rome and of Judaism.

The *chief priests* consisted of Caiaphas the high priest, Annas his father-in-law who had served as high priest before him, and several other leading priests in the Jerusalem temple. The *elders* referred to leading Pharisees and Sadducees who were part of the Sanhedrin, or high council of Judaism.

Jesus was aware of the trap being set for Him. If He told them the truth that His *authority* came from His heavenly Father, they would accuse Him of blasphemy against God. This was not the first time these men had questioned His authority. On other occasions He had told them that He spoke for His Father and that His power

to do miracles came from His Father (see John 5:17-18). They saw the authority with which He healed the sick, blind, lame, and demon-possessed. These religious leaders could not deny the miracles of Jesus but had attributed them to the power of Satan. They also heard the authority in His teachings. They simply refused to believe or acknowledge Jesus's authority.

Jesus didn't need the permission of men to carry out His purpose on this earth. His authority came from God, and nothing would detour Him from accomplishing the Father's will.

VERSES 24-27

Jesus answered their question with one of His own: ***I will also ask you one question.*** This technique of answering a question with a question was typical of Jewish rabbis. In so doing here, Jesus tied His authority to the ministry of John the Baptist.

Many in Israel recognized John the Baptist as a prophet of God (see Matt. 21:26). Yet John had prophesied concerning Jesus that He was "more powerful than I" (3:11). Herod Antipas made a connection between the authority of John and Jesus when he spoke of Jesus as being John raised from the dead (14:1-2). The disciples also linked the authority of John to Jesus when they spoke of the crowds identifying Jesus as John the Baptist (16:13-14).

With His question concerning the source of ***John's baptism***, Jesus laid His own trap for these leaders. They did not recognize the divine authority of John; therefore, Jesus knew they would not recognize His own authority. Not only had they rejected John, but they had rejected John's testimony concerning Jesus (John 1:29,34). What was the source of John's baptism—was it from ***heaven*** or from ***human origin***? John's baptism stood for the entire ministry of John. Was his calling from God (*heaven*) or was it simply human creation? If John's ministry was from God, then equally true is the fact that Jesus's authority also came from God.

The chief priests and elders were confronted with the possibility of losing face before the crowds surrounding Jesus. They could say how they truly felt about John's ministry, but then they would suffer the wrath of the crowd for that opinion. Or they could admit that John was a prophet with divine authority, and by association, admit that Jesus had the authority of God on His own ministry. Either way, they would come out the loser. Because of that they responded, ***We don't know.*** It wasn't that they didn't know, they just refused to admit the truth.

The pattern of the Jewish religious leaders was to deny and attack anything that didn't line up with their man-made rules. They weren't interested in truth. Their interest was more self-centered in securing their stranglehold on the religious system of Israel. For these religious leaders, it was all about maintaining power.

Because they refused to answer Jesus, He refused to answer them. He was not going to fall into their trap, which would have resulted in His arrest and death. Those events would have to wait a few more days until Jesus declared His identity to the high priest Caiaphas after His arrest (Matt. 26:62-64).



For what reasons do people not accept Jesus's authority?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.
(See 1 Peter 1:15-17; Hebrews 12:28-29.)

AUTHORITY RECOGNIZED (MATT. 21:28-32)

²⁸ **“What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘My son, go work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He answered, ‘I don’t want to,’ but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered, but he didn’t go. ³¹ Which of the two did his father’s will?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn’t believe him. Tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; but you, when you saw it, didn’t even change your minds then and believe him.”**

VERSES 28-30

Jesus told a parable that served as an indictment against these religious leaders. Using a familiar pattern, He spoke of a superior figure giving directions to subordinates. In this case, it was a

father and his **two sons**. What is key for interpretation here is that these two were related—they were sons and brothers. Jesus was equating both sons to the Jewish people. This was a parable about the response to Jesus by the people of Israel, including the religious leaders.

The **vineyard** was symbolic of Israel. Both sons were given the direction, **go work in the vineyard today**. Each son responded in a vastly different way. The first son responded to the father with the words, **I don't want to**. Later, however, this son **changed his mind** and **went** to work in the vineyard. This son is later linked with “tax collectors and prostitutes” (v. 32). These were the spiritual outcasts of Judaism. They found themselves outside of the orthodox religion of Judaism. However, they were the ones who responded in obedience to the gospel message Jesus brought.

The second son said, **I will** but then **didn't go**. This son represented the religious leaders of Israel. Although they claimed to be called by God to tend His vineyard of Israel, they had failed miserably. Jesus had denounced their hypocrisy throughout His ministry. Because of their failings in recognizing God's Messiah, the entire nation of Israel failed.

VERSES 31-32

Jesus brought the issue to a head with His next question: **Which of the two did his father's will?** On the surface, this would appear to be teaching that actions speak louder than words. While this would be a true application of the parable, that was not the aim of Jesus in this parable.

When the religious leaders answered by saying **the first** carried out **his father's will**, they indicted themselves for their response to John's message and subsequently to Jesus's ministry. Jesus compared the response of the religious leaders to His ministry with that of **tax collectors and prostitutes**. These groups of people would be the last that the religious elite would expect to be a part of the **kingdom of God**. *Tax collectors* were considered to be traitors to the Jewish people. *Prostitutes* represented those who were without any morals whatsoever. For Jesus to compare these two groups to the religious leaders would be an extreme affront to these leaders.

Jesus told them that these outcasts would enter God's kingdom **before you**. This does not necessarily imply that these leaders would eventually make it into God's kingdom. The phrase *before you* could be translated “take the place of.” Simply stated, unless

the priests and elders changed their thinking about the Messiah, they would be left behind.

The discussion returned once again to John the Baptist and his baptism. Although the religious leaders would not acknowledge the authority of John’s ministry, Jesus did. He exclaimed that ***John came to you in the way of righteousness***. That is, John’s preaching set forth the way in which a person is made right before God: repentance and belief. Not only did John point to *the way of righteousness*, but he illustrated it with righteous living.

Jesus had endorsed John and his ministry earlier: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared” (Matt. 11:11). The outcasts of Jewish society, the ***tax collectors and prostitutes***, accepted his teachings and baptism. These religious leaders did not. They had checked him out (***when you saw it***) but rejected John and his baptism (see John 1:19-25). As a result, they stood condemned and under God’s judgment.

 **Practically speaking, what does it look like to recognize Jesus’s authority?**



BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about people in the Bible.

Using a Bible dictionary, collect information on the following topics: the chief priests, the elders, tax collectors, and prostitutes in first-century Israel. Reflect on the role each played in Jesus’s ministry. How did each one impact Jesus’s message and ministry? Spend time in prayer asking God to help you understand Jesus’s work more clearly and to relate to people in a way that reflects His character.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can expect some to oppose or reject Jesus’s authority.
- + We demonstrate our acceptance of Jesus’s authority by our obedience to Him.



As a group, discuss the consequences of rejecting Jesus’s authority. What steps might each of your group take to ensure they recognize and respect Jesus’s authority?



Intrinsic authority comes from innate qualities in a person, such as the authority belonging to God because He is sovereign Lord. Delegated authority arises from a commission given to someone by a person with intrinsic authority. Based on this, why is obedience to Jesus absolutely essential? Who might be some delegated authorities in your life?



Memorize Philippians 2:9.

Prayer Needs