

Mark 11:27-33 | 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.”

Mark 11:27-33 | Jesus’ Authority Challenged

This is our fifth Fall in the Gospel According to Mark and we are picking up where we left off at the end of last year. We’re in the middle of Holy Week in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the center of life for the Israelites and the seat of religious authority. It is from Jerusalem that Jesus’ ministry has been tormented and ultimately in Jerusalem that the Sanhedrin will orchestrate his death.

On Sunday Jesus entered the city triumphantly. Crowds cheered Hosanna and blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming of the kingdom of our father David! On Monday walking into Jerusalem he cursed a fruitless fig tree, and then he cleansed the temple of those unjustly profiting off of the worship of God. Driving out the money changers and vendors who blocked the court of the gentiles. On the way out of town on Monday the fig tree was dead.

This is Tuesday morning and the first of seven direct conflicts between Jesus and the chief priests scribes and pharisees.

1. The Sanhedrin’s Authority

Mark 11:27 | 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,

Yesterday when Jesus came into the temple he flipped tables and drove out the money changers. The crowds were astonished at his teaching. Which consisted of both words and actions.

Mark 11:18 | And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

They didn’t want to destroy Jesus because they were afraid of him, that isn’t the immediate threat, they were afraid that the crowd might grasp his teaching as truth. Which it is. And therefore the crowd would discover that their teaching was lies. And then they would no longer have the power of the crowd. The source of their authority. So today,

when Jesus walks in they immediately come to confront Jesus. So you must see the dynamic at play is not the Pharisees vs. Jesus for the sake of the truth. It is the Pharisees vs. Jesus because the crowds are following Jesus. If the crowd was not at play the Pharisees would not care about Jesus. If you understand the dynamic you can understand the content of the question is not designed to seek the truth but to win the crowd by discrediting Jesus.

Mark 11:28 | and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”

First we must establish what these things they are talking about. Most immediately in view would likely be the cleansing of the temple and teaching with authority in the Temple. But they have sent others from Jerusalem to pester Christ’s ministry before and even leveled the accusation that “by the prince of demons he casts out demons” (Mark 3:22). Therefore I think we can conclude that “these things” includes the full scope of his ministry. Which was once a competition to their authority far away, but after yesterday’s overturning of the temple has become a direct adversary to their authority.

They have two questions. By what authority? or who gave you this authority? If Jesus is unable to describe the authority by which he is acting or if he is acting under an illegitimate authority such as by demons then Jesus will be plainly discredited before the people. The hope of the Pharisees is that Jesus would be unmasked and humiliated before the crowds. But notice the question implies the need for an external authority to provide legitimacy to Jesus’ work. That’s because we all require external authority to provide grounds for our work. Fundamentally what authority means is you *ought* to be listened to. If the king commands it you ought to do it, this is the authority of the King.

And there is a connection between authority and truth. 4 out of 5 dentists recommend trident. This is a good reason to think trident is good gum for your teeth. But it does not mean that trident is good gum for your teeth. It could very well be 80% of dentists are wrong. Their authority, even in aggregate does not equal truth.

Think of the authority of the Chief Priests, Scribes and Pharisees. They have authority because of their education in the law and they have authority because of the institution of the Sanhedrin. Therefore their two questions, by what authority, they might say, by the authority of the Law of God and the high court of the Jews has given us our authority. There is however only one true and final authority, and that is God. Because in God absolute authority is wed with absolute truth. Not because he always speaks the truth and only ever commands the truth (both true). But it is not because he conforms to the truth as though it were outside of him, he is the truth. Christ is the truth and he is the authority. So the answer to their question is God and I Am. But Jesus doesn’t answer there question because it’s not a question. They want him to dance for the crowd like they do because they know they don’t have a legitimate authority.

2. True Authority

Mark 11:29-30 | 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.”

Jesus, rather than asking two questions as they did, asks only one. The question is whether or not John’s Baptism was from heaven or from man. Then by his authority, he commands an answer.

Jesus takes their question of extrinsic authority to its maximal example, authority which is given to a person from heaven. There is no higher authority which is perfectly aligned with the truth. So the question is whether or not John’s baptism of repentance was a true authority in the absolute sense, or a counterfeit. Now this might seem like Jesus is changing the subject away from himself to talk about someone else’s authority, but it actually isn’t. Because John is the one who proclaimed:

Mark 1:7 | And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Therefore by implication if they answer that John’s authority is from heaven they are acknowledging that Christ’s authority is likewise from heaven, and therefore an ultimate and unquestionable authority.

But Jesus is not merely pressing them to answer a question about his own authority in an indirect way. He is actually pressing them to admit what they actually consider the source of their own authority, which is neither God nor the truth but the crowds. This is fundamentally because the Chief Priests, Scribes and Pharisees don’t really believe there is an authority above them, but authority is only a trick to be pulled over the crowds. Their authority rests in the deception of the people beneath them. The group of questioners then gather together in order to game theory the way they might possibly answer this question. In doing so they reveal their true corruption.

Mark 11:31-32 | 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.

If they say from heaven, the clear implication is that John then had the most real authority and ought to have been listened to. But they didn’t listen to John. They didn’t repent when called because they did not see themselves as needing repentance. They are offended by the holiness of God and consider it might undermining their own claims to holiness.

But if they say from man. They would lose the crowds. Because the crowds believed John.

Jesus is so good at this. In one question he exposes that they don't really care about their two questions because they don't really care about true authority. He exposes that they pragmatically understand that their power is not linked with any true authority but only to the fear and approval of the people. If they lose the people, then they lose their authority.

They think if they can undermine Jesus' credibility before the crowds they could strip him of his authority. But if the crowds turn on Jesus, which shortly they will, Jesus will have lost none of his authority. His authority is not from man but from God and it is absolute. When he speaks he speaks the very words of God, when he acts he commits the very actions of God. He ought to be obeyed and worshipped. His authority is absolute. His authority is not to be questioned, but raises the question, will you worship him?

Mark 11:33 | 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."

Sometimes you don't know, and then it is right to say you don't know. And other times, you know and it is wrong to sit on the fence. It's not that they didn't know, this is a lie. But they understood that they couldn't commit one way or the other without undermining themselves. If they acknowledge Christ's authority then they undermine their own, and if they betray the crowds they undermine what they consider to be the source of their authority. They don't care about the truth, they care about their power and they don't think these two need overlap in order to get what they want.

If you seek Jesus and don't care about the truth, he will not answer you. The only way to see him is to understand him on his terms, the son of God who is the way the truth and the life. He is the only way to the father. There is no lasting power outside of him, only in him. If you ask and don't really want to know, you won't. The only way to receive Christ is to receive him as Lord of all.

The wonder of Christ's refusal to answer this questioning is that its one more step in hardening the hearts of the Pharisees against him, drawing them closer to an exercising of what will look like a complete power over him. They will use the authority of the crowd to crucify him and make his power look plainly impotent. But this will be a demonstration of the greatness of his power, that even in its apparent weakness it cannot be defeated.

One type of glory is to never lose. This is the only type of glory that a human could strive for, there is no greater team than the one who goes undefeated. But a type of glory only available to God is the glory of being victorious in defeat. Death will not hold him, he has authority over death and hell, and by his sacrifice under his authority we are freed.