

You can find a digital copy of this lesson plan and a co-teaching variation of the plan at myfairviewbaptist.org/small-groups

April 26, 2026

AUTHORITY: MATTHEW 21:23-32

TEACHER'S NOTE: I LIKE THE OPENING ACTIVITY IN THE ETB LEADER GUIDE. HOWEVER, I AM NOT GOING TO USE IT BECAUSE I THINK IT MIGHT LEAD TO AN AIR OF NEGATIVITY IN THE GROUP TIME. THE DIRECTION OF THE DISCUSSION, I THINK, WILL LEAD GROUP MEMBERS TO TALK ABOUT "THOSE PEOPLE" AND WHAT "THEY" ARE DOING OR NOT DOING. INSTEAD, I WANT TO START A LITTLE LIGHTER AND NOT LET THE GROUP TIME GO OFF THE RAILS RIGHT FROM THE START.

Introduction: The title of our lesson is "Authority." One way to think about authority is the ability to rightfully do something that someone does not have the right to do.

Discuss: Ask the group to think of a person or position that has the "right" or "privilege" to do something that someone does not have the "right" or "privilege" to do.

Explain: We might think of law enforcement or a government official. We might also think of a museum docent who has the right to walk behind the velvet rope. We might think of the grocery store employee who has the right to go through the swinging doors at the back of the store. Or we might think of the high school or college football coach or trainer who gets to stand at the sidelines while the rest of us have to sit in the stands or stand behind the chain-link fence. These coaches and trainers have the authority to be there, and by being there, they make things happen. They call plays, or they help the athletes prepare to perform well. Today, we are going to talk about the authority of Jesus. Jesus has the authority to act and the authority to help others get in the game.

Summarize and Transition: We are going to be in Matthew 21. Our studies from this point forward are going to walk us to the cross. Our lesson today concerns the events on Tuesday of what we call Holy Week. This is the Tuesday before the crucifixion of Christ. Chapter 21 is filled with many events we might recognize. On Sunday (Matthew 21:1-11), Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey in what we call the Triumphal Entry. Sunday and Monday also include more healings, the cleansing of the temple, and the cursing of a barren fig tree (representing the barren religion of Israel). Today, we pick on Tuesday, and Jesus is in the Temple teaching. Let's see what happens.

1. AUTHORITY CHALLENGED (MATT. 21:23-27)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 21:23-27.

Explain: First, let's set the scene. Matthew tells us that Jesus was in the Temple. The word that Matthew uses in the Greek helps understand that He was in the Temple courtyard. This was an area we call the Court of the

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

Authority: Matthew 21:23-32

Gentiles. It was the exact location that Jesus had previously cleared of money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. It was open to everyone and surrounded by porticos that allowed groups to gather in the shade. It was not uncommon to find a rabbi teaching here. Matthew tells us that as Jesus is teaching, “the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.” It is important for us to know who these people are. “The chief priests were the leading priests charged with protecting the temple and its worship. The elders were important laymen from aristocratic families. Mark 11:27 and Luke 20:1 add ‘the scribes,’ who were probably Pharisees.” (ETB LG, 100) These three groups were all represented on the high court of Israel called the Sanhedrin. We can interpret their questioning of Jesus as part of their duty. They had the authority to maintain order in the Temple and ensure that correct teaching was taking place. However, throughout Matthew, these people are presented as antagonists of Jesus. Therefore, we should read their questions as an unfriendly expression of their authority.

Ask: What do they ask Jesus? (“By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” v. 23)

Explain: Let’s consider the situation from these men’s perspective. Jesus had done most of His ministry outside of Jerusalem. We know these men had heard of Him, and delegations had been sent to question Him in the countryside and villages. However, this might be the first time some of them had met Him in person. Moreover, what they had already seen this week had left a bad taste in their mouth. First, Jesus rides into town on a donkey. Due to their knowledge of Scripture, they would have clearly seen the Messianic implications of Jesus’ actions. Next, He had entered “their space” and kicked out the money changers and merchants *they* had allowed to be there. Now He was back in “their space” teachings. To put it plainly, they were not fans of Jesus. We should also consider their question itself.

They ask Jesus about His authority to do “these things.” Matthew does not tell us what “these things” are, but we can imagine they mean healing, teaching, parading into town like a king, and acting as if He had authority in the Sanctuary of God (cleansing the Temple). By what authority does He have the right to do such things? In effect, they were asking, Does your authority “come from heaven, or [is] it of human origin?”

Jesus does not give them a direct response to their question. Instead, He makes a proposal.

Reread or have someone read verse 24 (See Notes Box)

Explain: Asking a question in answer to a question would not have been out of the ordinary, and readers of the Gospels know that Jesus did this often. The religious leaders obviously were not taken aback by the proposal because it appears they agreed to it.

Ask: What did Jesus ask them? (“Did John’s baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”)

Notes:

Matthew 21:24

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.

Authority: Matthew 21:23-32

Discuss: Now, this is a problem for these religious leaders. Ask the group if anyone remembers anything about the interaction between John the Baptist and religious leaders.

Explain: John and the religious elite did not start on good terms. John was Jesus' cousin, and his birth was a miraculous act of God. He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He was also a little eccentric. Matthew 3:4 tells us, "Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." In that same chapter, we learn that some Pharisees and Sadducees, religious authorities, had come to hear John preach. When John saw them, he called them a "brood of vipers" (v. 7) and told them to "produce fruit consistent with repentance" (v. 8). He then warns them of the coming judgement for those who do not repent (v. 10). So, clearly Jesus is presenting them a personage they know of and with whom they had a negative relationship.

But let's back up. They had come to Jesus to question His authority. In response, He asks them about *John's* baptism. Jesus asks them, "Did John's baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" In other words, He is asking them, "By what authority [did John act]? Who gave [John his] authority?" We can see why this is important if we go back to Matthew 3 where John had that interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Read Matthew 3:11 (See Notes Box)

Explain: In the gospel of John, chapter 1, John the Baptist says something very similar about baptism in verse 33. Just prior to this, he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I told you about: After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me, because he existed before me" (vv. 29b-30) In asking about John's authority, Jesus was asking about John's teaching concerning Himself. The religious authorities were concerned with *Jesus'* authority. By answering positively about John, they would be affirming *Jesus'* authority, and answering negatively about John's authority would negate *Jesus'* authority.

Jesus put them in a sticky situation both theologically and politically. We read about that in Matthew 21:25-26. They can't admit that John's authority came from heaven because they knew Jesus would ask them, "Why didn't you believe him?" They also can't deny that his authority was from heaven "because everyone considers John to be a prophet."

Summarize Transition: In the end they refuse to answer. Per His agreement with them in verse 24 Jesus thereby refuses to answer their question. What does all of this mean? What is Matthew trying to teach us? We will see that in the next passage. Jesus doesn't answer their question, but He does tell them a story. Let's look at that story.

Notes:

Matthew 3:11
"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

2. AUTHORITY RECOGNIZED (MATT. 21:28-32)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 21:28-32.

Explain: In this story, Jesus is going to answer His own question about John and allude to their question about Him. As we have done with previous parables, let's see what it tells us and then see what it teaches us.

The parable is short and simple. A man owns a vineyard. It would be expected that the sons would do their fair share and work the vineyard. The father goes to the first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. The son rudely answers the father and says, "I don't want to." He refuses to submit to the authority of the father. Later, after a bit of reflection, he "changed his mind and went." The word translated "changed his mind" is elsewhere translated "repented." O'Donnell calls him the "I-won't-but-did boy." After speaking to this son, the father goes to his other son with the same instruction. This son, the people pleaser with smooth words, tells his father that, of course, as a good son, he will work. However, he disobeys his father and does not go. This is the "I-will-but-didn't boy" (Preaching, 615). It's a pretty simple story, but it has a great lesson to teach these religious leaders. The lesson is not about the distribution of household duties. Nor is it about sons obeying their father. Instead, it deals with what it means to truly follow the Lord and enter into His Kingdom. Jesus begins to reveal that with the follow-up question.

Ask: What follow-up question does Jesus ask, and how do the religious authorities answer Him in verse 30? (Which of the two did his father's will?" They said, "The first.")

Explain: The religious leaders could not help but give the correct answer, but in doing so, they leave themselves open to Jesus' rebuke.

Read or have someone read verses 31b-32. (See Notes Box)

Explain: That might seem like it is coming out of nowhere. In the parable, the father represents God the Father. The "I-won't-but-did boy" represents the tax collectors and prostitutes. The "I-will-but-didn't boy" represents the religious leaders. Jesus is explaining that the tax collectors and sinners at first said, "I won't." They had been living lives opposed to the ways of God. However, after hearing the preaching of John, many had repented of their sin and began to serve the Lord. The religious leaders, on the other hand, were like the "I-will-but-didn't boy." They had said with their mouths that they would do the will of the Father. They professed faith and allegiance to the Father, but they did not listen to the words of John. They did not truly follow the Lord.

Summarize and Transition: The religious leaders had come to Jesus, questioning His authority. Their refusal to answer Jesus' question about John's authority gave Jesus the opportunity to tell this parable. In the

Notes:

Matthew 21:31-32

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."

Authority: Matthew 21:23-32

parable, He reveals that both John and Jesus acted in the authority of God the Father. He also revealed the bad situation that the unbelieving religious leaders found themselves.

Let's end our lesson with some practical application gleaned from the passage.

APPLICATION

Its Ok to Ask Questions

Let's begin back to the top. The religious leaders came to ask questions of Jesus. The Lord responds to them in what appears to be an antagonistic manner. Does this mean we should never ask questions of the Lord? No, what matters is the manner in which we ask the question.

Discuss: What are some areas of life that might cause us to ask questions of the Lord?

Explain: There are many life situations that might cause us to ask questions of the Lord. They include things like illness, wayward children, and unexpected financial challenges outside of our control. We might also question some things we learn in the Bible or some Truths revealed in the Bible. There is nothing wrong with asking God or pastoral leadership about these things. Nor is it wrong to seek answers about confusing passages in Scripture. We *should* take our questions to the Lord. However, we should not come as the religious leaders did with accusatory questions or a haughty disposition. They came *at* Jesus. We should go *to* Jesus with our questions.

We Must Repent

We can also learn from the discussion about John the Baptist. The first thing we can apply to our lives is the concept of repentance. John the Baptist practiced a baptism of repentance. He called people to turn away from ungodly lifestyles so they could walk the path of godliness. The blatantly sinful, like the prostitutes and tax collectors, needed to repent of their sinful actions and unbelief. Likewise, the religious leaders needed to repent of their unbelief and sinful actions. Every person is born with a sin problem. Only Jesus can deal with that through His death and resurrection. After we come to faith in Christ, we still struggle with obedience. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to help us stay obedient and to repent when we fail to do so.

We Must Follow Faithfully

Lastly, we can learn from the two sons in the parable. First, we can learn that following the Lord requires more than lip service related to God. There are people who say good things and believe in God but fail to follow the Lord. These are like the "I-will-but-didn't boy." Every person must be like the "I-won't-but-did boy." We all start out saying "I won't" to

Notes:

Authority: Matthew 21:23-32

the Father. We must repent and come to a saving faith through Jesus. Second, believers can act in a similar fashion. We can be like the second son and profess loyalty to the ways of God but fail to follow through. We should not waver as followers of Christ to do what we ought to do. And when we do say “I won’t” to the Father, we should let the Holy Spirit bring us to a place of repentance and true commitment to the ways of a disciple.

CONCLUDE

The religious leaders questioned the authority of Jesus. They wondered if He had the right to be where He was and doing what He was doing. The truth is, Jesus was “in [His] Father’s house” (Luke 2:49) doing the work of the Father. Our lesson takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is just days away from the cross. He is just days away from doing exactly what the Father sent Him to do. In these final days, He continues to teach and heal. He continues to confront the sinful actions and attitudes of the religious leaders. The week will end with His death and resurrection. After which, He will declare that “all authority” has been given to Him.

Let us go out this week knowing that only through the One with all authority can we experience salvation and the abundant life He promised in John 10:10. Let us also remember to share that Truth with others who need to experience repentance and salvation.

Notes: