



**Mark 11:27-12:12**  
**Problems with Authority**

**Summary:** The most important question in life is: who will you obey?

I want to begin this morning with an intentionally provocative question: who do you obey? Whose authority are you under? Whether you're a child or a grown man, who or what can tell you what to do and what not to do? And how do you feel about that? Are the sources of authority and direction in your life a blessing to you or a burden that you dread and resent?

The issue of authority is central to our daily lives and to the passage we're studying and I want to make the case that authority can be a very good thing, if we're under the right source. So, turn with me now and let's see what happened in the final days of Jesus' life.

**Mark 11:27** Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. 28 And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?"

If I can rephrase that – the leaders ask, why should we listen to You Jesus? You came barging in here, flipping over tables and driving people out yesterday, it caused quite a scene. You've done some miracles. You've made some bold claims – but who gave You the right to do it all, much less the power? Why should we listen to you?

29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: 30 The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me."

He's asking them about John the Baptist. John came along before Jesus and had a spectacular and well-respected ministry. 'John the Baptist' was a name everyone knew and trusted, it was a synonym for righteousness, zeal, and godliness.

So, Jesus is asking them – you tell Me, was John legitimate or not? Did John hear from God or was He just full of himself and his own ideas?

It's an important question and the answer has enormous repercussions. You see, the problem was, John had endorsed Jesus. John called Jesus **The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**. John said Jesus was the one that John came to prepare the way for. John declared publicly **I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God** (John 1:29-34) and said I need to decrease and Jesus needs to increase.

So, Jesus asks, what do you guys think about John? Was he from God or not?

31 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 32 But if we say, ‘From men’ ”—they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. 33 So they answered and said to Jesus, “We do not know.”

They refuse to take a public stance on John’s ministry, even though *this is their job*. They are the leaders of the nation – we’re talking about a group of people that includes the chief priests. It’s like the Supreme Court saying, well, we’re not really sure what to do here. There’s no higher court to appeal to. These are the guys with the authority to make the final determination. This is their job. They just need to *do* their job and make a decision about John, but they won’t.

(33 cont’d) And Jesus answered and said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

And then, Jesus begins to tell a story.

**Mark 12:1** Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around *it*, dug a *place* for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. 2 Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. 3 And they took *him* and beat him and sent *him* away empty-handed. 4 Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded *him* in the head, and sent *him* away shamefully treated. 5 And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some.

Now this may just sound like some wild story to us, but everyone listening clearly understood what Jesus was hinting at. Last week we noted that the nation of Israel was often represented as a fig tree, well it was also often pictured as a vineyard. In fact, the symbolism towered over them on the Temple itself.

Herod’s architects and builders carved an ornate grapevine over 100’ tall around the door leading from the porch where Jesus is speaking into the Holy Place. The whole thing was covered in gold. Wealthy Jews had added to it over time, making additional leaves and clusters of jewels to represent clusters of grapes.<sup>1</sup>

So, what Jesus was saying was obvious to everyone – God was the landowner, Israel was the vineyard, and the leaders of the nation – both at that moment and historically, were the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kent Hughes, Commentary on Luke, 255.

tenants. They were the ones who had consistently rejected the prophets, seen here as the servants, whom the Lord had sent – including, most recently John the Baptist. And yet, God was willing to give one more chance, make one last attempt, and it’s a big one:

6 Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 7 But those vinedressers said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ 8 So they took him and killed *him* and cast *him* out of the vineyard.

In only a matter of days, the leaders of the nation will take Jesus, cast Him out of the city and kill Him on a cross.

9 “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.

Which we saw last week – the Roman army will come to Jerusalem, destroy the city, dismantle the Temple and make it nearly impossible for Jews to continue to live there – others would take over the vineyard and you can read about the conflict that’s still causing in modern Israel today as people try to sort out what belongs to whom?

Jesus continued:

10 Have you not even read this Scripture:

*‘The stone which the builders rejected  
Has become the chief cornerstone.*

11 *This was the LORD’s doing,  
And it is marvelous in our eyes?’*

12 And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

The imagery shifts here as Jesus is portrayed as the stone which the builders rejected. The Temple would be destroyed but God was building another place for worship – a spiritual temple, built of transformed lives instead of bricks – it’s the Church and Jesus is the chief cornerstone.

Well, now that we understand what is happening and what all this means, let’s go back through it and see what we can learn from it all. I want to point out four things about God and then ask one question of us.

### **1. God is Generous**

First, we see that God is generous. When Jesus tells the parable, who owned the vineyard? Who planted it? Who built the wall around it? Who built the wine press and the tower? In other words, who set the whole place up for success? The landowner – God.

He planned ahead and gave the workers everything they needed. He wanted them to grow some crops and then give God *some* of the harvest, a relatively small percentage, and use *all the rest of it* for themselves. It reminds us of the Garden of Eden – God created a perfect world for Adam and Eve to enjoy and watch over. God gave them something well-built, well-designed to experience and enjoy. In both examples, God generously provided everything needed for people to succeed, and the people responded by misusing and mistreating it.

We still do the same thing today. God offers everything you really need for life, He just wants you to live it and enjoy it, and share some of what you produce with Him. But at times and in ways, we all act just like the greedy tenants thinking this is all ours and we can do with it whatever we want. Somewhere we lose sight of the fact that God is generous and He's the one who made all the stuff we enjoy.

## **2. God communicates clearly.**

The second thing we can learn this morning is: God speaks and He is clear. Notice when the religious leaders asked Jesus **by what authority are You doing these things** (vs 28), *they had things to point to*. They had seen His miracles and heard of others. They had heard John the Baptist testify about Jesus. They had Scripture telling them to expect a Messiah. *They did not lack information or evidence, they lacked belief.*

So too, today, we often lack the same thing. We have Scripture to tell us clearly and plainly what God wants us to know and do, and to reject and avoid. But we don't always like it, and so we make excuses or offer explanations. When we're asked spiritual or moral questions, we say, just like the religious leaders, "I don't know" or "I can't be 100% sure" and then we go and do what we want to do.

And it's not just Scripture, we have circumstances that line up miraculously, we have the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have the encouragement, counsel, and perhaps even confrontation of people.

The point is: when God wants to speak to us, it's usually hard to miss what He's saying – it's not that we don't understand, it's that we do, and then we have to determine – will I accept it? Which brings us back to the first question this morning – am I under God's authority?

So let me say one other thing here - obedience is often the path to greater understanding. God rarely shows you the whole picture all at once, but He often gives you the next step. If you're stuck in your walk with God, if you're not hearing Him often, sit back and ask – *was there ever a time* when I knew what God wanted me to do or not do, and I chose to go in a different direction or refused to step out?

If so, that may be where you need to start. It's probably not some tiny thing, you don't have to search your belly button to find it, it was obvious and intentional – His communication was clear – did you ignore it or claim ignorance like these leaders? If so, He may not be

answering any of your other questions or giving you any new guidance, because clear communication is characteristic of God.

### **3. God is patient**

Third, God is patient. The owner of the vineyard sent servant after servant to the workers to get their attention. God makes it hard to miss what He's doing. And He does the same thing in the lives of people today – in your life and in mine – He is patient and persistent in getting our attention about things He wants us to know, ways He wants us to respond.

But did you notice the escalation of the violence? The workers beat the first servant, injured the second, and killed the third they were committed to rebellion. In fact, **the more God tried to reach out to them the more rebellious they became.**

There's an important principle at work here. It has been said: the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. Repeated exposure to God's truth will either break you or harden your resistance. That's true in evangelism, but it's also true in the daily lives of Christians. God patiently reaches out to us and that either draws us nearer to Him or drives us further away. And yet, even as we resist, He goes to ludicrous lengths to reach us, He does not give up easily.

But, do not mistake His patience for His permission. Sooner or later God will act. Which brings us to our fourth point.

### **4. God is unstoppable**

God is unstoppable. Sooner or later God shows up with overwhelming force and accomplishes His plan. He puts down our rebellion and takes a stone that was rejected by people building their project and uses it as the cornerstone of a new development. You can resist God for a while, you can't resist Him forever. You will either be part of what He is doing, or you will be crushed by what He is doing – which will it be?

And that brings me back to where we started this morning – that important question of who do you obey? Whose authority are you under?

### **Am I under God's authority?**

Who sits on the throne of your life? Who has administrator-level privileges? Who or what decides how decisions get made, how money is spent, how time is spent? Who or what decides what you can and cannot do, which options are valid, and which are completely unthinkable?

The fact is, most of us experience an inner resistance to authority – because it feels like the opposite of freedom and opportunity. The Bible calls that inner resistance the 'flesh' and says it's often opposed to the spirit. It's an impulse to look inward instead of upward and outward.

But actually, being under authority can be a blessing to us. Think of what a blessing the conductor is to a symphony. Together they produce better music than any of them could individually because someone is telling them when to start, when to stop, when to play loudly and when to play quietly – authority takes all of their individual abilities and weaves them together to create something beautiful, even though it means they can't do whatever they might want to do whenever they feel like it.

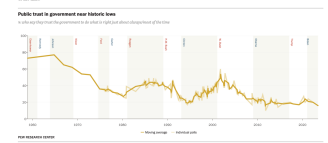
Or, think of the benefit that referees bring to sports – you have a source of authority to determine what's right, what's wrong, what should be cautioned and what should be penalized, or to judge what was done properly and to reward your performance by declaring when goals are scored or points are earned. The presence of authority makes for a better game.

But I'll tell you about a conversation I was having recently with my oldest son who refs soccer at the state and regional level. He was pointing out that players always want you to make the most stringent calls against the other team – but then to let things slide for themselves and their own team. In fact, when a player is demanding a foul against the other team he has learned to defuse tense situations by asking – would you want me to make that same call the same way if it was your teammate who did it? Well, of course not – we always want to go easier on ourselves than on others.

Now imagine how that plays out with us as the players and God as the referee – how often do we want God to let us get away with things but to call every offense made by someone else?

Well, the point is: being under authority, allowing something or someone to tell us yes and no, regardless of how we feel at the moment is good for us. Let me show you how this works out in another way.

It's no secret that trust is at a historic low. In fact, just a few weeks ago, Pew Research published a poll showing less than only 16% of Americans trust the government to do what is right most of the time.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, trust and confidence is falling in nearly every other institution and organization in society.



A little over twenty years ago Robert Putnam began sounding the alarm in his book *Bowling Alone* – a book that pointed out that while more people were bowling in the late 1990s, bowling leagues were disappearing. Something that people had once done as part of a group, they were now doing alone. And that is true across the board in life – we are increasingly independent and isolated living in little bubbles where we do what we want,

---

<sup>2</sup> [Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023](https://www.pewresearch.org) - SEPTEMBER 19, 2023 – www.pewresearch.org

watch what we want, scroll what we want, and order what we want. We are our own authority. Intentionally or not, we are the center of our own little lives.

And as much as we can trace the impact of that to the invention of the smartphone and social media, the trend goes back even further. According to Putnam and others who have studied the issue, society began to fracture in the 1960s and it was all driven by something very surprising. In a recent interview Putnam said:

*I know this sounds really mushy — and I didn't always believe this — but the data and the history have convinced us that the leading indicator is a sense of morality.*

What He just said is that the rapid decline in trust that we are all experiencing began 60 years ago when we underwent a massive moral shift in America – we began to transition from his research team calls a “we” morality to an “I” morality where who I am, what I want, and what I think or feel is most important.

It was a shift toward what others have termed expressive individualism. I determine my own truth and values. It doesn't matter what the church says. It doesn't matter what the government says. It doesn't matter what my parents say. It doesn't even matter what empirical, data-driven sciences like biology and anatomy say – I am my own person, I create my own reality, my own identity, my own gender, my own truth. You do you and I'll do me.

And all of this is why, according to Putnam society is falling apart. It's not primarily, because of political or economic policies it's because of morality - we want unlimited freedom to define ourselves and pursue whatever urges, interests, impulses, or identities we wish. To do anything else we're told is inauthentic and quite possibly oppressive and injurious to ourselves and others.

But chasing unfettered freedom and personal interests has pulled us all further and further apart – from each other, and from God. We all feel this impulse now that I should be able to do what I want, how I want, when I want. And that should be true in every area of life – including my faith. I want a God who encourages me, helps me, and accepts me, as I am, no questions asked and no change, denial, or work required.

What I hope you can see now is that this is actually an ancient impulse. Go back to the events described in Mark and you find people who clearly heard what Jesus said and saw what Jesus did, they knew the truth – but they walked away from it or stood up to resist because they didn't like it. It wasn't 'their truth.'

Go all the way back to the Garden of Eden you will find the same thing - you discover a man and a woman, naked, standing in front of a tree, choosing to do what they want to do instead of what God has said. Choosing to trust themselves and their observations of the world more than the clear communication they had received from God.

And this is why, according to Putnam, the only way out of our current decline is through what he calls “a moral re-awakening of America.” I tell you this because he’s not a prophet, or a pastor, or even a Christian. He’s just a popular professor at Harvard, and even he says, we have to put the brakes on all this expressive individualism and start remembering our neighbors.

As a pastor I absolutely agree, my only question is, where will we get that morality from? Will we insist on determining it ourselves? Or will we receive it from the God who formed us and fashioned us and gave us every reason to listen.

Remember, Jesus worked miracles as evidence of His **authority**. People were shocked because He taught as one having **authority**. A Roman centurion came to Him recognizing His **authority** and asked Jesus to command the healing of His servant just as the officer would command his own troops. After His resurrection, Jesus sent His followers out to make disciples of people from every nation. He told them,

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

The question for you and me today is: are we under it or not?

The gospel, the good news, that Christians talk about so much is this:

Jesus died and rose again, and  
Our sins are the reason for His death, so  
We must repent and be converted.

Sin is described as missing the mark, abandoning a path, defying an authority, disobeying the law, but the mark missed, the path abandoned, the authority defied and the law rejected all belong to GOD. That’s why sin is also described as rejecting God’s Word, and refusing Christ.

Repentance on the other hand, is turning to God and asking for forgiveness and help in this life – it’s telling Him you can’t do it all on your own and you need Him. It’s inviting Him into your life in deeper and wider ways each day.

Not long after the events we covered this morning, Jesus will be nailed to the cross and die. He’ll be put in a tomb, and then three days later, He will rise from the dead.

A few weeks after that Peter, one of His disciples is going to tell crowds of people about all of this and tell them simply and clearly how they should respond. He’ll say:

**Acts 3:19** Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,



In other words, stop living life for yourself, put yourself under the authority of a generous, clear, patient, unstoppable God.

Let's take a moment now to pray – maybe you need to take a moment and give God thanks for the vineyard He has made for you – life is going well and you need to recognize and remember that your blessings come from Him – give Him a share of the harvest.

Or maybe you need to listen the servants God has been sending you – in various ways God has been trying to get your attention, are you listening – or are you insisting on doing things your own ways? You need to turn toward Him before He turns against you.

Or maybe someone you love is off trying to run their own vineyard, maybe you need to pray for them – that they would listen to the servants God sends – maybe even be the servant God sends, even if that means be mistreated – call them, point them, toward God – maybe you want to pray for them right now.

Whatever your need – take a moment now and bring it before God.

Take a moment now and pray.



## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Mark 11:27-12:12 Problems with Authority

**Summary:** The most important question in life is: who will you obey?

- Is there any authority that you trust? Who or what do you distrust? Why?
- Has God ever asked you a question you didn't want to answer? Why?
- Put yourself in the place of the servants in the parable of the vineyard – going where God sent them resulted in difficulty and death at the hands of the workers. Was this a tragedy? Why or why not?
- Give some examples of when being under authority is helpful and good.
- The religious leaders, the people with the most freedom and authority of their own found it hardest to accept Jesus. Why do you think this is?
  - o What in your life makes it hard to receive God's authority today?
- According to Robert Putnam, we need a reawakening of morality in order to turn society around – economic and political policies are not enough on their own. Do you agree or disagree?
  - o How can you make a direct contribution to this change?
- Obedience is often the conduit through which understanding flows. How has obedience to God resulted in greater direction or understanding for you? How has resisting Him led to silence or confusion?
- Read Romans 1:18-32. What are the results of suppressing the truth?
- Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What do you learn about God and His vineyard? How would this familiar passage have spoken to the men resisting Jesus?
- In the parable God planted the vineyard and completely prepared it before the workers ever even asked to use it. How have you seen God prepare things in your life and then give them to you to use or benefit from?