

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2010

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Hymns: 221, 237:1, 339, 353:1-4, 47.

Lessons: Genesis 28: 10-17, Romans 5: 1-11, John 1:19-27.

Sermon Text: Mark 11:27-33.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You heard last week how the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders were outraged that Jesus threw the money changers and the sellers of animals out of the temple courts. You also heard how these same people sought to kill Jesus. Now, on the next day, they find Jesus in the temple courts and demand of him: **“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. ‘And who gave you authority to do this?’**” Their authority had been challenged. Now, they were no doubt hoping to get rid of Jesus by challenging his authority and making it clear that he had no authority to do anything in the temple, which was really, they thought, their jurisdiction. So today, we talk about

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

- 1. All the human authorities of the Jews challenge Jesus’ authority.**
- 2. Where Jesus really got his authority.**
- 3. Jesus ‘answers’ their challenge.**

On Tuesday of holy week the Lord was again in the temple and preaching the good news to the people that gathered there. A group of men from the Sanhedrin approached him. You know from last week’s sermon, that they were **“looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.”** Mark 11:18. Christ knew that, too. As members of the Sanhedrin they had not only the right but also the duty to ask by what authority Christ was doing such things as overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers and those selling doves and teaching in the temple. This was definitely a challenge to those in charge. However they had already made up their mind about Jesus.

Jesus ultimately refuses to say by what authority he is teaching and doing all that he is doing. His authority was not from a body of men like the chief priests but directly from God. In fact Jesus is true God.

They were seeking an answer whereby they could either ridicule him in front of the people or accuse him of blasphemy – the very accusation they later brought against him at his mockery of a trial.

They are upset and even alarmed that people come to hear this outside teacher. He proclaims the good news that the door of God’s kingdom is open to all who repent and believe him. That the temple leadership should come and question Jesus about the source of his authority for his words and deeds surprises no one. In a sense they were only doing their duty. So, in a very public place, they challenge his authority.

Because there were many pilgrims in town for the Passover, this time would normally have been a very busy and profitable week for the money changers and the merchants. When Jesus disrupted business at the temple, that must have been something like shutting down the shopping mall in the middle of the Christmas shopping season. If the chief priests were counting on getting their cut of the profits, it’s no wonder they were so upset.

Jesus avoided the trap they laid for him and by means of his question gave them an answer they could not misunderstand. He asked them about John’s baptism – to be understood as John’s entire ministry – whether it was from God or from men. They had from the very start made up their minds about John by rejecting his baptism and his teaching. In their hearts they rejected both John and Jesus as sent by God.

The chief priests and elders of the people regarded themselves as the authorities. The point of their question to John about three years earlier, as you heard in our Gospel lesson, and the point of their question to Jesus was the same: we did not authorize you to do what you are doing, so just who do you think you are anyway? John answered their accusing question by subordinating himself to Jesus: ***"I baptize with water ... But among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie"*** John 1:26-27.

Jesus knew they had rejected the authority of John the Baptist. So it is very appropriate that when they asked Jesus by what authority he was doing the things, he responded with a question about the authority of John's baptism.

But where did Jesus really get his authority? Let's talk for a moment about authority. How is it that anyone has the authority or the right to do something? Either someone has given him that authority or he has seized it, usurped it. Let me give you an example. I hold in my hand a ring of keys. I call these my keys. These are keys to my house, the cars that I and my wife drive and keys to Christ our Redeemer Lutheran Church and Faith Lutheran Church. I have the authority to use all these keys. No one else has the authority to use all of these keys. Other people have the authority to use some of these keys but not all of them. Each church has given me authority to use these keys in a proper and lawful manner. Because I "own" my house and my cars, I can use these keys properly and legally. Well, I really own my house and my cars in the sense that God has permitted me to use them while I am here on earth. He is the real owner of everything, as his Old Testament people often recognized. So you see where I've gotten my authority to use these keys.

What about the authority of Jesus? Where did he get his authority to preach the Word of God and to throw the money-changers and merchants out of the temple? I think you know the answer. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God the Father. Jesus was present at creation as we read, for example, in Genesis and in Hebrews. And God sent his Son to earth to preach the gospel, to heal the sick and in other ways to be his servant and messenger. Just look at Luke chapter 4 where Jesus says: ***"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*** Luke 4:18-19.

So we know where Jesus' authority came from. We know the answer to the question of those who challenged him. They may have known the answer. But they did not want to recognize it. So Jesus challenges them with a question that should have been easy to answer. In answer to their question, ***"Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism--was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!"***

You may remember how Jesus, at the end of his time on earth, just before he ascended into heaven, told his disciples that he had all authority and power. This authority had been given to him by God his Father. This is the same authority or power that Jesus spoke of in the last chapter of St. Matthew. ***"Then Jesus came to [his disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*** Matthew 28:18-20. You know that the people had marveled at the authority that Jesus exercised on earth. Very early in his ministry as St. Mark records it, we have this illustration: ***"The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law."*** Mark 1:22. Mark even records ***"The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."*** Mark 1:27.

He spoke as one who had authority. His actions showed that he had authority and power over such things as evil spirits. He had power and authority over illness. That was plain from his healing and from his teaching. But early in his gospel, St. Matthew gives us this picture: ***"But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ."*** Then he said to the paralytic, ***"Get up, take your mat and go home."*** Matthew 9:6. And then, ***"When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men."*** Matthew 9:8. Notice this was done to show that Jesus even had the authority to forgive sins. But the leaders of the Jews challenged this fact, too.

You heard in our Gospel today how these human authorities challenged John the Baptist about three years earlier. When they asked where Jesus got his authority, ***"Jesus replied, 'I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism--was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!'"*** Remember that their goal and purpose was to kill him.

Now the leaders of Jesus' enemies try attacking him by challenging his authority. Is it possible they were trying to intimidate him? That might seem to be the case. They knew that they could not attack him directly, for fear of the people. They knew they could not simply take him prisoner publicly; for fear that people would riot, as you heard last week.

Jesus' question places them between a rock and a hard place. His question really put them on the spot. ***"They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' . . ."*** When they talked among themselves they realized that Jesus had them over a barrel. They couldn't admit that the baptism of John the Baptist was from heaven. Then he would ask ***'Then why didn't you believe him?'*** Since the people accepted John as a prophet, they feared the crowd would stone them if they were to answer ***"from men."*** Scripture says: ***"They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet."***

Those questioning Jesus find themselves in a dilemma. They are trapped by the choice which Jesus puts before them. If John was really God's prophet, then they should have accepted him. But if they deny that John was from God, then the people may stone them for blasphemy. They knew that John the Baptist in his preaching and teaching had pointed to Jesus as the Christ. So they answered, ***"We don't know."*** In this way they condemn themselves. They refused to face the truth of God's Word, which John had quoted as support for his own ministry, and which Jesus had proclaimed in his preaching and attested by his miracles. How sad! Christ here gave them the opportunity to repent and confess their sins, but they would have none of it. They rejected the Savior because they valued their positions more highly than their salvation.

The best option for the temple leadership seems simply to express their ignorance. They confess that they don't know where John got his authority -- a rather embarrassing admission for them to make. Even if Jesus had told them the source of his authority, his questioners still would not have believed him, just as he told them at his trial: ***"If I tell you, you will not believe me"*** Luke 22:67.

Is Jesus merely using a trick of rhetoric to avoid answering them? Is he just playing word games with them? Of course not, for this is a deadly serious matter. It is deadly for them, for they are damned eternally if they deny Jesus' authority comes from God. He wants them to see the truth and be saved eternally. And if they were to repent of their unbelief, they would then have eternal life that Jesus came to earn for all men but here we see the sad fact that even though Jesus died for all men, only those who believe in him as Savior will benefit.

So they conclude that they cannot answer Jesus. ***"So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.'"*** And of course his answer settles the matter. ***"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."***

If they had answered his question at all, they would have had their answer about who he is and what he had come to do. Jesus' question really is a call to repentance, an eleventh hour invitation to believe in him as Savior. This final call to repentance and faith is at the heart of the parable Jesus tells in the next verses.

May we always recognize the authority of Jesus Christ, our Savior, as coming from God, for he is true God come down to earth to save us from our sins. Amen.