

The Authority Problem

Matthew 21:23-32

When Popeye got fed up with a situation he would declare, "That's all I can stand; I can't stand no more!" At which point he would do what? (Open a can of spinach and take care of business.)

The chief priests and elders of the people are at that point. Chapter 21 of Matthew begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As He rides through the streets on a donkey, the crowd shouts, *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!* The chief priests and elders of the people are there watching, but they do not join in on the festivities.

Next, the chief priests and elders of the people hear the crowd say something else about Jesus: *This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.* They don't like the sound of that.

But what seems to push them over the edge is what happens next. *Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"* *The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.*

"Enough is enough! This must not be allowed to continue. Jesus must be put into His place!" So they ask Him, *By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?* They thought they knew the answer. This was their temple. They were the authorities around here. And none of them had given Jesus permission to do what He was doing.

They are out to get Jesus, but He is not out to get them except in the sense that He would have them repent and truly come to know God the Father through Him. And so He answers with a question because He wants them to think.

The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? And they think alright. They think of themselves. If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Jesus knows and wants them to know as well. He still wants to lead them to repentance and faith. And so He asks them another question. *What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." And he answered, "I will not," but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, "I go, sir," but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"*

This question they can answer because it doesn't put them on the spot. Except that it does. *They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John*

came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

Jesus came to earth to do the Father's will. Two Scripture passages make clear what the Father's will is. The first is very familiar – John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* The second is a little less familiar but gets right to the point. It is 2 Peter 3:9 *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Jesus wants the chief priests and elders of the people to get past their authority problem to repentance and faith. That's how the tax collectors and prostitutes became a part of the kingdom of God. It was certainly not by their deeds. They said no right to the Father's face. They rejected His authority. "We will not do what you want us to do." But then they recognized their sin, repented and believed.

Jesus wants the same for the chief priests and elders of the people. They say they accept the Father's authority. They live an outwardly good life. But their hearts are far from Him. They are determined to remain in control of their own destiny. They can't get past this authority problem.

It was a bit of a struggle for me to figure out which group I am more like. Am I the first son, like the tax collectors and prostitutes? Or am I the second son, like the chief priests and elders of the people?

Do I say no to God's face and do what I want to do when I want to do it? Or do I say yes to God and live a pretty good life and expect to be rewarded for my devotion? But then I realized it doesn't matter which son I am more like. Both require repentance and faith to be a part of the kingdom of God.

That's what you need – repentance and faith. Whether you are the first or second son you need repentance and faith to be a part of the kingdom of God. And that's what Jesus comes today to give you.

Jesus is here today working repentance and faith in confession and absolution. He has spoken and delivered to you the forgiveness of sins He earned for you on His cross.

Jesus is here today working repentance and faith through His Word read from the lectern and proclaimed from this pulpit. His Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (Small Catechism).

Jesus is here today to work repentance and faith through His body and blood which are in the bread and wine of His Supper.

Jesus is not going to give up on you. He is out to get you to be a part of His kingdom – here on earth and with Him for eternity! He knows your authority problem but still loves you. It was for this sin that He went to the cross. Forgiveness is yours! The kingdom of God is yours! Every good gift the Father has to give is yours as He works in you repentance and faith. Amen.