

“God in the Dock”
Matthew 21:23-32
April 7, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The day after Jesus chased out the moneychangers and sellers and buyers of animals in the temple, he is at the temple again. This time he is teaching the people when the religious leaders approach him and ask him who he thinks he is to act in such a manner. They don't say it exactly like that. They ask, **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”** They want Jesus to defend himself, to justify his right to act with such authority.

The title of this morning's sermon is taken from an essay by C. S. Lewis. The “dock” in this title is a reference to the place where the accused criminal sits during a British trial. Lewis writes as follows:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.

Jesus will not allow the pride of man to put himself in the place of judging God, so he responds by asking them a question which immediately reverses these roles and serves to put them on trial. **“I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”** It is not Jesus who is on trial after all, but his questioners. Jesus isn't just seeking to win an argument here. He is actually being gracious to them by helping them come to a place of committing their lives to him and his authority. Jesus knows that the only path that leads to joy in our lives is the path of such commitment. This incident at the temple and the parable that follows serve to call us to a commitment to Jesus. He is graciously inviting each one of us here today to make such a commitment.

I. A Commitment to Jesus' Authority – v. 23-27

The issue at stake in this interaction between Jesus and the religious leaders is the most basic issue in life, the issue of authority. Who gets to call the shots in your life? Is it God, or someone or something else? Your eternal life, as well as your ability to flourish in this life, depends on your answer to

that question. The first sin, and every one since then, is a rebellion against God's authority and the assertion of our own authority. The chief priests and elders in our passage were asking an age-old question. Does God have the authority to enter our lives and disrupt them, such as Jesus disrupted the temple worship the day before this? Does God have the authority to run your life, especially when he brings to you difficult and unwanted circumstances? As a pastor, I have been saddened many times by seeing people who profess faith in God turn against God when he allows something unwanted into their lives, when he disrupts their plan and desires for life. Such things as unwanted illness, economic setbacks or marital challenges have all been the cause of people walking away from God. At root, this is an issue of authority, of who gets to call the shots. People will follow God as long as he cooperates with their agenda for life, or, to say it differently, as long as they are allowed to call the shots. But when God asserts his will, as Jesus did in the disruptive act of the temple cleansing, everything changes.

When these leaders approached Jesus, their initial question seemed to be neutral. It was as if they were saying, "Jesus, that was a very bold thing you did in cleansing the temple. Can you tell us by what authority you did so?" Jesus could simply have answered them straight up: "I did this by my own authority, because I am God." But as I said earlier, he doesn't do that because he doesn't want to cooperate with their assumption that they are allowed to be an authoritative judge over him. So he asks that question about John the Baptist instead. It is a multiple choice question with only two possible answers—John's baptism came from God or from man. But they don't answer with either of those two options. Instead, their final answer is, "**We do not know.**" They have given the answer that generations of agnostics have given, claiming not to know whether or not God exists.

Something happens before their agnostic answer that tells us what is really happening. After Jesus asks his question, they huddle up and ponder their answer. In this huddle we are given a glimpse of what is really happening inside their hearts. So they reasoned, "We can't answer, 'From heaven,' because then he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' On the other hand, if we say, 'From man,' we are going to be in big trouble with the crowds, because they think John was a great prophet." So what is really going on inside their hearts? They want to sit on the fence, don't they? On the one hand, they don't want to believe that John the Baptist had any authority from God. They want to do what they want to do and not submit to God's authority through his prophet, John. But on the other hand, they want the approval of the crowds.

Let me highlight two important lessons we learn from this. First, lack of commitment to Jesus' authority is more a matter of the heart than of evidence. We start with the conclusion and then find the evidence that fits the conclusion. The conclusion of the human heart is that I am my own authority.

I am god. If I am god, that means there is no room for the true God, for this God who can disagree with me and who can disrupt my life. The only kind of god I have room for is the one who will submit to my will and help me be successful with what I want to do. These religious leaders wanted a god who would elevate the temple by chasing out the Romans and allow these Jewish leaders to assume the place they thought they deserved in the world, which was to be at the top. They had no room for a God who would not cooperate with this agenda. So they found Jesus wanting. They started with the conclusion instead of the evidence. Had they started with the evidence, they would have paid attention to John the Baptist. They would have seen the hand of God in the words and works of this great prophet, and they would have believed his prophetic utterances. If they had done that, they would have known about Jesus' authority, because John spoke of it. John said that Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). But they didn't believe John, God's prophet, and so they didn't believe the one to whom John pointed. Their unbelief came not from a lack of evidence, but from the sin of their hearts.

Let me apply this before moving to the second lesson. Are you willing to let God disagree with you? What do you do when you come across a passage in the Bible that you have a hard time with? Maybe you're not as bold as Thomas Jefferson, who created his own Bible by simply cutting out all those passages. But maybe you dismiss them in some other way. We commit to Jesus' authority by receiving everything in the Bible. And do you allow Jesus to disrupt your life, as he disrupted the temple the day before this?

Here's the second lesson. You will be limited by whatever authority you accept. There is no such thing as life without limits. One of the biggest and most destructive lies of our age is that true freedom comes by being your own authority. If you take direction from no one other than yourself, this lie says, then you will be truly free. The truth is that being your own authority brings bondage and death. We can see it in this passage. The religious leaders rejected the authority of Jesus and were doing what they wanted to do. The result, however, was not freedom, but bondage. They were in bondage to the crowd and its opinions.

Adam and Eve experienced the same thing. They asserted their own authority when they rejected God's limits by eating the forbidden fruit. The result was bondage, not freedom. In trying to become limitless, they brought ruin to the world. When we assert our own authority and reject God's authority, we ruin ourselves. Tolkien's character Gollum, in *Lord of the Rings*, is a great example of this. The origin story of Gollum is that he was once a happy hobbit, enjoying friendship and food with his fellow hobbits. All of that changes on the fateful day when he finds the ring and it becomes precious to him. He even names it, "My Precious." But it turns out not to be precious at all. It ruins his life in every way, isolating him from others, even deforming his

body, and eventually taking his life. If you regard your own will as your precious thing, it will destroy your life as well. One of the ways I see this working itself out in people's lives is a reluctance to commit to anything. One must keep his or her options open as long as possible, and that means never limiting yourself by committing. That path leads to isolation and destruction.

The authority of Jesus limits our lives as well, but these are the limits that bring freedom rather than bondage. He knows the proper limits for us, the right things to commit one's life to. We find him precious and submit to his authority, and it brings life. What are those limits? They are the ones in the Bible. Freedom comes as you limit yourself by committing to the things Jesus commands: to his Word, to prayer, to involvement in a church community, to loving the people God brings into your life.

II. A Commitment to Repentance and Faith – v. 28-32

Three judgment parables come next, parables aimed mostly at unbelieving Jewish leaders. The first one is the parable of the two sons. A father owns a vineyard and asks one of his sons to go and work in the vineyard on a particular day. The son refuses, but later changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. A second son is asked to do the same, and he replies that he will go, but then doesn't. Jesus asks a question for which the answer was obvious. **“Which of the two did the will of his father?”** (v. 31). Clearly, it was the son who worked in the vineyard, even though he at first said that he would not.

Jesus then applies the parable. **“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you”** (v. 31). Most commentators agree that the words “before you,” are an idiom that doesn't mean they will get into heaven, but only after going to the back of the line. Rather, it means that they don't get in at all.

Let's look at these two sons a little more carefully, beginning with the one who says he will go work in the vineyard but then doesn't. What was his problem? Do you think he was just boldly lying to his father when he said that he would go? I don't think so. I think he intended to do so. He thought of himself as a dutiful son who obeyed his father. His problem was that he didn't know himself very well. He was self-deceived, and one of the primary tools he used to feel better about himself was his words and his intention to obey. Can you identify with that? I know I can. I have often been guilty of thinking that an intention to obey is the same as actually obeying. The result is that it is easy to be deceived about my sin and brokenness. I can think that I am much more righteous than is actually the case. That was the problem with these religious leaders.

The other son shows the transformative power of repentance and faith. Listen to the language of repentance and faith in verse 32. **“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.”** The religious leaders, unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes, did not change. To repent is to change one’s mind about God and sin. And then notice that the word “believe” is used three times in this verse.

The message is clear. The gospel can change anyone as they repent and believe, even tax collectors and prostitutes. But those who deceive themselves and think they are okay, like this second son who said he would go work but didn’t, are left smugly self-righteous and unchanged. The Church is often criticized because within its walls are so many hypocrites. There is some truth to that. In an article in *Christianity Today*, pastor Andrew Wilson noted the following:

In many ways, the story of Christianity is full of light—mission, education, art, healthcare, abolition, compassion, justice... But there is an undeniable dark side: attacking, burning, crusading, drowning, enslaving, flogging, ghettoizing, hunting, imprisoning, Jew-hating, killing, lynching, and so on through the entire alphabet. What makes this difficult to stomach is that the people involved, as far as we know, have loved God, followed Jesus, and received his Spirit.

We encounter the same in the Bible. Noah’s drunkenness, Abraham’s cowardice in betraying his wife, King David’s adultery and murder, Solomon’s idolatry, Peter’s betrayal of Jesus, and on and on we could go. The frequent failure of Christians, however, is a great argument for Christianity, because it highlights the wonderful grace of Jesus. Ray Ortlund, a pastor in Nashville, summarizes Christianity like this. “I am a complete idiot, my future is incredibly bright, and anyone can get in on this.” How do you get in on it? Through repentance and faith, just like the tax collectors and prostitutes.

CONCLUSION:

The events of this passage were instigated by Jesus’ disruptive behavior in the temple. When we commit ourselves to Jesus’ authority and to a life of repentance and faith, it will be disruptive. Repentance is disruptive because it requires us to humble ourselves and say we have been wrong. Faith is disruptive because it requires us to trust another rather than ourselves. And submitting to Jesus’ authority is disruptive because we let him run our lives. Are you ready to be disrupted by Jesus? You will never regret it if you do. Jesus will become precious to you. Like Gollum, you will say “My precious,” but you won’t be talking about an idol that will destroy you, but about Jesus who has died for you and given you everything.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 21:23-32

1. Have you known any agnostics or atheists? Have you experienced in them what we see in the profession of agnosticism by the religious leaders (v. 27), that their agnosticism was a cover for not wanting to give authority to Jesus?
2. This incident was sparked by Jesus' disruptive behavior in the temple (v. 12-13). What is the most disruptive thing that has ever happened to you?
3. Have you known others, or have you yourself struggled to submit to God's authority during a time of disruption in life?
4. Are you willing to let God disagree with you? Can you remember a time in your life when you did something only because God required it?
5. The point was made in the sermon that you will be limited by whatever authority you accept. If you accept only the authority of yourself (doing whatever you want), it results in bondage. We see that in the fact that these leaders were in bondage to the people's opinions of them (v. 26). Can you think of examples of how doing whatever you want leads to bondage?
6. When we accept Jesus' authority and the limits he places upon us, it brings freedom. Can you think of examples of that? What limits from Jesus are you currently living under? How have those limits brought you freedom?
7. The second son in the parable says he will go and work in the father's vineyard, but then doesn't go. He is deceived by good words and good intentions. He used his words and intentions to do the right thing to substitute for actually doing the right thing. Can you identify with that? Have you ever done so? Think of times when you have made promises to God with all sincerity, but have failed to fulfill those promises.
8. The other son repents and believes, and shows us the power of repentance and faith to change even the worst among us, such as these tax collectors and sinners. Is there a sin you have repented of recently?