

The Question of Authority

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

What authorities do you honor? Which ones do you sometimes disregard? And are there some which have lost credibility in your life?

I think we are experiencing a crisis of authority in 2020. It didn't start this year, but all this year's troubles have exacerbated it to a point of crisis.

Our society's mood of questioning authority might be traced to the 1960s. In that turbulent decade, the authority of the older generation was challenged. The younger generation blamed authorities, who no longer commanded their respect, for racial oppression, gender discrimination, and an unpopular war. Traditional religion and the Bible were often lumped together with those "outdated" authorities. Individual freedom and personal choice became authoritative in the lives of many.

Today's crisis takes aim at some other authorities. Where science was formerly respected as a reliable source of truth about the natural world, it is now questioned or rejected. For decades, climate scientists have overwhelmingly agreed that human activities are making significant changes to the earth's atmosphere. But some still choose to disregard scientific authority despite devastating impacts happening before our eyes. Vaccines which have saved the lives of millions of children are discredited by a social media post which goes "viral." (Note the irony of that metaphor!) In this pandemic, medical authorities are being undermined by political interests. Even our hard-working local health authorities are challenged by some. Science struggles to be heard over the noise.

And in other arenas, other authorities are being questioned. Sometimes it looks like the rebellion of the sixties, protests against the abuse of authority. Racial oppression is still very much with us. I believe police abused their authority against George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, with tragic outcomes. I believe those examples are wake-up calls to all of us, to acknowledge and repent of the pervasive patterns, let's call it sin, of a race-based society. But when I hear of calls to "defund" the police, I hear an extreme rejection of the authority of law and the need to enforce laws.

Do laws apply to some and not to others? Should we give in to those who yell the loudest, and concede authority to them? Will we allow those with power to exert their muscle, and get away with crimes? These are some of the questions swirling around our country today, questions which I am calling a crisis of authority. We could have a lively discussion of our varied viewpoints and ideas about this—I'm not an authority, just an observer—but I think we could agree that authority is in crisis these days.

Which is why, when I read the question which the chief priests and elders pose to Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, the word "authority" leaps out at me. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they ask. "These things" are teaching, healing the blind and the lame, and throwing out the money changers from the Temple. I hear in their question that they might be feeling just a little bit threatened. This is their bailiwick. Like everyone else in first-century Palestine, they live under the domination of the Roman Empire. They don't have power over much, but they do have authority over what goes on in the Temple. They are the keepers of religious authority, and what Jesus is doing feels like an impending crisis to them. So they ask him for his credentials.

And he responds with a question about John's credentials, one which exposes their feelings of vulnerability. Even the chief priests and the elders feel a need to not ruffle the feathers of the people. They want to preserve their power, and not give any to these upstarts John, who is now dead, or Jesus. But they know that they hold authority in part by virtue of their office and in part because of the agreement of the people to respect their authority. Oh my goodness, some things don't change, do they?

So they waffle in their answer. "We don't know." Actually, "We don't know" is probably quite truthful. They don't know. They don't understand. They just don't like it.

So Jesus tells a story, a parable. This is one of the most obvious of his parables. There was a farmer with two sons, and he asked them both to work in his vineyard. One son says he will disobey his father, but ends up doing what his father asks. The second son says he will obey, but does not follow through. Which of these did his father's will? This is a question even the most wishy-washy can't evade. Of course it was the first son. Actions speak louder than words. Well done is better than well said. A promise is a cloud; fulfillment is rain.

And the contrast between these upstarts, John and Jesus, and the authorities, the keepers of the Temple, is exposed. What does obedience to God require? The scriptures were as clear to first century Jews as they are to us today: Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. John called people to repentance, and the poor in spirit, such as the tax collectors and prostitutes, complied. Jesus saw corruption taking place in the Temple, and called for justice. He showed compassion for the sick, and healed them in the Temple. He taught God's Word in the Temple. Jesus, and John before him, were doing their father's will. What were the chief priests and elders doing? Apparently, their desire to hold onto their authority was keeping them from righteous action. They were saying one thing and doing another. Jesus had little patience for hypocrites.

By what authority did Jesus do what he did? Matthew tells us repeatedly that Jesus both spoke and acted with authority. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel writer comments, "The crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority." (7:29) A Roman centurion recognizes Jesus' authority over diseases when he asks him to just say the word and heal his paralyzed servant. (8:9) Jesus demonstrates his authority when he both forgives sins and heals yet another paralyzed man. (9:6) When he sends his disciples out, he gives them authority over unclean spirits and diseases. (10:1) And in the final words of Matthew's gospel, before he ascends into heaven, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (28:18) The source of his authority is his divine nature, which is evident to those with eyes to see. He is sent by God; he is of God; he is the closest thing we'll ever get to seeing God face to face. His credentials are in his actions, which embody his words, God's Word to a world in need. His authority lies in his undivided life.

Of course, it's not just the chief priests and the elders who are afraid to acknowledge his authority. Every time we say we'll do God's will and then fail to follow through, we join them as the disobedient first son. Every time we cling to our little bits of power out of fear, or because we love control, or because power inflates our egos, we miss out on the blessing of poverty of spirit, that humility which is the first step toward living in the kingdom of heaven. Every time we perpetuate injustice, avoid doing kindness, and walk proudly with a God we think is ours, we are claiming a false authority, not the authority of Christ. And like the chief priests and the elders, we are skewered by the little, most obvious parable of the farmer and his sons.

So the question turns back on us: by what authority are we living our lives? Surely we need human authorities to order our relationships and roles in society. In the letter to the Romans (13:1-6), Paul tells us to be subject to ruling authorities. But there is a higher authority to whom we claim allegiance when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He is Lord, we say, and when we say that, we are submitting our wills and our ways to his authority, his rule, his way. Being a Christian is less about assenting to a belief system and more about entering a relationship. And it's not a relationship of equals—Jesus is Lord, and we are his people. Being a Christian means giving one's entire life to learning love and living love. Our Master, our Shepherd, our Ruler, our Lord is the one who teaches and heals and overturns what is wrong in our lives, as he did in the Temple. His authority overrules all others. Or as the Barmen Declaration of 1937 says, Christ is "God's mighty claim upon our whole life."

And isn't that an amazing gift? Isn't that true freedom, the lifting of the burden of authority from our sagging shoulders, letting Christ be the author of our lives? By this we empty ourselves, pour ourselves out, for the life of the world. By this we become Christ-like. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

My friends, the world's crisis of authority will still need sorting out. And that is our work, under Christ's authority. We live in a not-yet-fully-redeemed world, in which we are Christ's agents. He calls us to teach his Word of life, to heal the brokenness and suffering around us, and to turn over the tables of injustice and desecration of his beloved world. There can be no separation between our confession and our living. We are to live undivided lives, as he shows us.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, go and do likewise.