

Who's In Charge Here? Part 1
By Jason Huff
Psalm 118:14-23, Ephesians 1:13-23, Luke 20:1-19

Today's third Scripture reading comes from Luke 20:1-19. Listen now to God's Word. "One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?" He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet." So they answered, "We don't know where it was from." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When the people heard this, they said, "May this never be!" Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people."

Jack Bauer knows where his authority comes from. Jack Bauer's the main character on the television series **24**. He's part of a counterterrorist unit that attempts to stop threats to the country. Jack has survived eight seasons because he knows that he serves the President of the United States. When things get crazy and moral complications arise, he makes a call to the president. Jack's authority comes from the president, and Jack knows that what the president says, goes. As Harry Truman said about the Oval Office, "the buck stops here." There are times in the series when those closest to the president sell out...they want power for themselves, or think that somehow betraying the president is for the greater good. Anybody who followed presidential politics on **The West Wing** or watches The History Channel knows that power struggles are part of the executive office. But at the end of the day, the big decisions are the president's alone to make, and authority flows from the president's decisions.

In our lives, God is the final authority, and that authority was displayed in Jesus. Over the next two weeks, we're going to see the religious authorities of Jesus' day try to find any way they can to discredit Him or arrest Him. They're getting into a power struggle with Him about the nature of His ministry and His very person. And through this struggle, we can learn about the nature of who God is and His authority over us.

The first thing we learn about God's authority in this passage is this: ***because of His authority, God has no need to answer dishonest questions.*** The religious leaders have had enough of Jesus, especially after He cleared out the temple. They ask Him, "By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?" These are the folks who have at very least heard about Jesus' ministry for three years, who probably heard tales in their youth about His questioning the rabbis in the temple as a boy. They know who He is and they know His miracles. They have been asking Him questions all throughout His ministry. They aren't asking a sincere question. They're trying to entrap Him into saying something so they can bring Him up on blasphemy charges.

But just when they think they have Him, Jesus turns it around and asks them a question – who validated the ministry of John the Baptist? And they have no answer. They know that whatever they say, they're trapped. One option is to acknowledge that John was from God – but if they do that, since John said that Jesus was the One greater than Himself, Jesus' authority would be confirmed. Their other option is declaring John a false prophet, but doing so would have turned the people against them. Their final answer, "we don't know," is a total cop-out. It's not honest, for one. And more, it's motivated by their lust for power and their disdain for Jesus. So Jesus says, "If you don't know the answer to that question, I'm not going to tell you the answer to your question."

It might seem rude...why isn't Jesus straightforward and just say that He's been given authority by His Father? He's said as much to the disciples. So why not now? As the Son of God, isn't He obligated to be truthful? It's an issue of granting power to those who don't deserve it. If Jesus were to answer the question simply, it would play right into their plans to have Him killed. The whole line of questioning is deceitful, and Jesus sees right through it.

God has no moral obligation to anyone but Himself, least of all to those who hate Him. Not only was answering a question with a question a standard form of reply in rabbinical argument, Jesus' answer shows that God has the right to keep His own counsel. In the end, Jesus *does* wind up answering the question indirectly through His parable – He is the son of the vineyard owner; He is the Son of God Himself. Jesus answers in such a way that the truth is made clear while the religious leaders are left holding the bag.

How does this principle apply to us? It has to do with our honesty in approaching God. On Easter, we talked about how we shouldn't be afraid to investigate God in the unexpected places, to seek Him out with our whole minds, to reason our way through the Scriptures. God wants us to know Him. There are parts of Him that will always be mysteries to us, but He wants us to love Him with our whole minds. We can honestly ask Him questions and know that He will answer us. Questions aren't the problem. Sometimes we think it's not right to question God, but that's not the case when those questions stem from an honest and searching heart.

In our honesty, we can call out to God in our pain and sorrow too. 2 Corinthians 7:6 tells us that God “comforts the downcast.” We can cry out in our fear and anger and shame and know that we are heard. Sometimes we long for what my friend Kelly last week called “Jesus with skin on.” I don’t just *tell* you that you can talk to God this way, I *encourage* it. It’s when we get honest with God, get real with Him about all our hurts and all our fears and all of our very selves, that we experience His deep healing and His deep cleansing and His deep forgiveness that goes beyond all our sins and sufferings and grief.

The problem for us lies not in questioning and not in the heartfelt cry, but in dishonesty. The religious leaders asked their question only out of self-interest. They weren’t interested in glorifying God, only in establishing their own authority. We can fall into the same trap. We fall into it when we begin demanding things of God. Do we ever demand God answer a prayer or show us a sign as proof of His existence? That belittles His authority. What other ways can we differentiate honest questions from dishonest ones? Do we question why God made the universe the way He did because we want to understand Him more through His creation, or because we would prefer not to believe there was a God in charge of it? Do we question why something goes badly in our lives because we want Him to be our refuge in times of trouble, as the Bible promises, or because we want to be free of the constraints of living under God’s direction?

It’s hard to answer these questions sometimes. As human beings, we are self-deceivers. Perhaps the first step in being honest with God is recognizing our own wickedness. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” When we turn to God realizing our own sinful state and ask Him for relief, it will come. But if you find yourself always angry at God that He isn’t answering you or proving Himself to you, I urge you to look within yourself to see if you are being honest with yourself and with God.

The second thing we learn from this passage: ***in His authority, God is incredibly patient with us.*** These farmers are nuts! They are crazy enough to think that they’ll inherit the land by murdering its owner’s son. And if I were the owner, I wouldn’t have kept sending servants to take my share of the produce. When that first servant returned home half-dead from a beating, I would have been calling Roman 911 to have the farmers arrested! In comparison, the landowner that represents God is incredibly upright. He gives the tenants every benefit of the doubt. Until they reject the son and murder Him, the owner gives them every opportunity to do what’s right. By our reasoning, He’s *too* generous.

But this parable is also the history of Israel. God gave the Hebrews the land of Israel, even though they continually rejected God and His servant Moses as they were led out of Egypt. God sent prophets, and the Israelites despised their teachings and killed them for witnessing to God’s truth. Finally, God sent His Son to change their hearts and minds, and just as they disbelieved the prophets, they disbelieved Jesus and killed Him. God rejected the nation of Israel and opened up the vineyard to us. *We* are the other tenants – those who would believe in Jesus – and we are accepted regardless of race or nationality. Even now, God brings into His fold Jew and Gentile alike, any who would come to Him.

God's patience isn't limitless, but it is far more than any of us deserve. The vineyard owner had every right to eject the tenants for beating his servants. God has every right to dismiss us from His sight eternally for our disobedience and sin. We are unholy and thus unfit to be in the presence of the holy God. But He doesn't reject us. Instead, He endured our sins and disobedience through the cross. He made it possible for the unclean and unholy to be cleansed and made holy through the blood of His Son. He sees us through our missteps and faults, and He washes us when we are stained with sin. He transforms us to be like Him in His own holiness. He is so patient with us that there is no point where we cannot turn to Him, no time when we are beyond His deliverance, no sin so grievous that God cannot blot it out.

As our authority, God shows incredible patience with us, and so not only do we experience the grace of His patience, we learn to practice it. As believers, we learn to be patient with others when they offend us, when they sin against us. Patience doesn't come naturally to us. We have on-demand cable and microwaves to make instant food; we push the barriers of the speed limits and we text people on our cell phones because it's faster than a real conversation. But God teaches us patience by example. He was patient when we rebelled, and He's slow to anger even we forget Him in our daily lives. So too can we show patience to others, whether it's letting someone ahead of us in line or forgiving someone seventy times seven. Patience shows God's true authority, and when we display it, we show that we are His children.

There's a third and final thing I see about God's authority in this passage: ***God's authority is not changed by our opinions.*** Remember when as a kid you'd play cops and robbers or tag or keep away, and somebody was always changing the rules so they couldn't get caught? "You can't tag me 'cause I'm on base." "Who made up the base?" "I did!" "You can't do that!" "Yes I can!" And on it goes. Because nobody had real authority, it usually ended up with a shouting match and somebody gets pushed and then everybody has to go home. But when somebody has real authority, saying, "You can't do that 'cause I said so" just doesn't work.

In the ending of the parable, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22, which we heard this morning. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." The religious leaders rejected Jesus. That didn't make Him any less the messiah. In fact, as Jesus says, that very cornerstone winds up being dangerous; it crushes some and breaks others. Jesus is dangerous. His words change lives. His teachings cut us to the heart. Some people are simply angered by Jesus and want to do away with Him even 2000 years after He lived. Others are broken by Him and find themselves repaired by His love. But no matter what we think of Jesus, He's still God's Son. He still has all the authority and power and might the Father has given to Him. He is the cornerstone on which salvation is built.

In our world where opinions about morality and about the existence of God are constantly changing, it's good to know that God is a constant. Malachi 3:6 quotes God Himself saying, "For I, the LORD, do not change." We are told by the prophets that God is not a man, that He should change His mind. Who God is in His very nature is unchanging. He uses an extraordinary number of ways and means to bring people to Himself; He presents Himself in different ways over time, but He does not change at the core of who He is. This should be a comfort to us as we try to understand the rapidly changing ethics of the culture around us.

This truth should comfort us. When we grieve and know real pain, when we are depressed or despairing, when we don't see God near us, we can know that God is not somehow absent just because we don't feel His presence. When someone tries to justify sin in a new way and we become confused about what we think, we know that God is not confused. God's authority is not changed by new discoveries in science or new philosophies or new religions or anything else. He is there, He does care, and He still reaches out to us regardless of what we may think or feel. We can stand strong in Him because He is our cornerstone; He is the rock on whom we can rely completely. God will always be our authority; nothing can change His love for us or His care and watchfulness over us.

God is looking for grateful tenants. He is looking for those who will tend His vineyard faithfully and give Him His due...and they will reap an incredible harvest themselves. What we celebrated in Easter a couple of weeks ago is that God has the authority to do what we consider impossible. He can raise the dead to life, and not just to die again but to live eternally. In raising Jesus from the dead, He extends the offer of the vineyard to everyone...Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, those with power and those with none. He wants us to acknowledge His authority and rejoice that we are under the rule of a perfect King whose benefits have no end. In this life, we have people in authority over us...bosses, parents, police, presidents...but there's only one authority who has the power of life and death, who holds the keys to eternal life in His hands. Turn to Him today, and find your rest in knowing the One who's really in charge.