

Who do you think you are?! And what gives you *the right* to do what you are doing?!

These are the questions at the heart of this confrontation between Jesus and “*the chief priests and elders of the people.*”

By *whose authority* is Jesus acting... speaking... teaching... healing... forgiving?

Let’s take a step back... and see what has the religious leaders and elders all worked up. The simple answer—Jesus has been disrupting things... as usual! (...and they are at the end of their ropes!)

This is the first of a series of five “controversies / confrontations” that Jesus will have with the temple authorities (leading up to his death)—each in the form of “Question and Answer” (the authorities question... Jesus answers)... and each of them taking place in the temple.

If you look in your bible at chapter 21, you will see that this chapter starts out with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (with palm branches and shouts of “hosanna”—which, remember, literally means: “*please, save / deliver us*”)... And then Jesus enters the temple and drives out the money changers and sellers, overturning tables and disrupting “business as usual”... And then he proceeds to heal and teach in the temple (on their turf!) before leaving the city to spend the night in Bethany.

And now he’s back in the temple *again*... teaching *again*...

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they ask him, **“and who gave you this authority?”**

Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus does something very typical of him—he asks them a question... followed by a story (with, notice, another question). [It takes a little longer than giving a straight answer, but Jesus is never one to give people answers that they can come up with on their own.]

“You answer my question,” Jesus replies, **“and then I’ll answer yours.”**

“Let’s back up to my predecessor, John. By what authority did he baptize? If you can tell me where his authority came from, then I’ll tell you where mine comes from.”

Well, this question about John the Baptist puts the religious leaders on the spot—and they know it! Whatever answer they give, they know they’ll be in trouble. But that’s not all. This question about John is actually a clue to the answer Jesus could give—but *doesn’t yet*—to their question of him / *his* authority.

We know that Jesus has already been anointed by God, with the Holy Spirit, through his baptism by John. *That is* where he is first declared to be God’s beloved Son—the Messiah. IF the chief priests and elders really understood what John was doing, they would *know* where Jesus got his authority to do what he is doing. But, because they didn’t see John’s authority as coming from God, they don’t see Jesus’ authority in that way either.

They *know* they are boxed in by any answer they give—a no-win situation.

They don’t want to expose themselves (their position)... and they don’t want anyone upset with them... so they play it safe and say they don’t know. And since they don’t live up to their end of the bargain, Jesus says, **“Well then, I’m not going to tell you about my authority either.”**

But Jesus isn’t finished with them. He presses home his advantage after this Q&A—he ups the ante, you might say—and poses a hypothetical scenario in the form of a parable—about two sons.

Now, the chief priests and elders may not believe that John was a prophet sent by God; but supposing he was... then what? What would that mean?

Some people did what John said to do—“*repent and be baptized*” / “*turn from your sinful ways*”—many of them looked like utter riff-raff / totally unacceptable / even rebels against God. But other people refused to do what John said—even though, on the surface, they looked / acted like God’s chosen ones.

Like Jesus’ parable about the 2 sons...

One said “no” to his father when he was asked to help out in the vineyard, but then later changed his mind and went and did what he had been asked... the other said “yes” to his father, but then failed to live up to his word / do what he said he’d do.

“What do you think?” Jesus asks. **“Which of these two did the will of his father?”**

This was an easy question to answer—as easy for them as it is for us. The 1st son ultimately did the will of the father, of course. It wasn’t what either boy *said* that mattered... but what he *did* → As we say, “Actions speak louder than words!”

There *should be* consistency / integrity between what we say and what we do. But if there isn’t, we’ve learned that a person’s actions “speak” the truth—a person’s actions show their true attitudes... what a person really thinks / feels is shown in what they *do*, NOT what they *say*.

Now, if Jesus had ended here, it would have been one thing; but he pushes it... he goes on to “*explain* the parable” to the religious authorities / elders... telling them which son *they* are.

The 1st son—the one who told his father that he didn’t feel like working in the vineyard but then did after all—Jesus says, stands for the tax collectors and prostitutes... those who, by all outward appearances seemed to be saying “no” to God; but when they heard John, they had a change of heart... they admitted their sin / their need for forgiveness—in other words, they repented... their lives were changed.

The 2nd son—the one who politely told his father that he would go work in the vineyard, but then didn’t—stands for *YOU*, Jesus says to his audience.

You look as though you’re doing the will of the father... you say the right things / profess to “believe” the right things... but you don’t *do* the what the father is asking you to do.

You didn’t recognize John’s authority as coming from God... you refused to hear / take to heart John’s message (of repentance... and of the coming Messiah – me). You did not have a change of heart... you did not change your minds and believe... you did not repent ... you did not change your ways.

So, are chief priests and elders condemned? Is that what Jesus is telling them?

Are they banished / expelled from the kingdom? Is there no hope for them?

Listen to what Jesus says. “*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you...*”

Ahead of them... NOT instead of them.

The tax collectors and prostitutes are going *first*... but the implication is that the chief priests and elders are still going too—that means there is hope.

You see, God doesn't really care about our station in life / our status / our titles / our roles. What God pays attention to / cares about is the heart—and what flows from it... our words AND our actions (which should always go together / be consistent).

No, the chief priests and elders will not enter the kingdom *first*—as they probably expected... but they are not banished / they are not condemned. There is still room for them, Jesus says —still room for those corrupted by power... still room for those who neglect their duties / who say “yes” but don't follow through... still room even for those who reject Jesus' words and deeds (as they rejected John's) / those who will soon conspire to have him crucified. They can still repent... and believe... and be changed...

Dear friends, what we *say* we believe is apparently less important to Jesus... than what we actually *do* because of it. The important thing is what our lives—our words AND our actions, together—say... that our lives (the integrity of our words AND our actions) are as easy for people to read as this story that Jesus told.

You see, for Jesus, a faith that says one thing but does another... a faith that doesn't result in faithful / “right” action... is just talk... empty words...

The truth of our true commitment (our core beliefs) live in our hearts... and what we *do* AND *say* / how we live each day is the best measure of what's truly in our hearts.

Using Paul's words from his letter to the church in Philippi: *We are to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. We are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. We are to look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. We are to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus...*—easier said than done, right?! Only with God's help...

Today Jesus says to each of us, “Let your words AND your actions speak the truth of your heart. Let me be the authority for your life. Love me and obey my commands... follow my example... reflect me in what you say and do... live with integrity / truth!”

At worship on Sunday, six 9th grade confirmands will stand *with us* and make a public profession of their faith in Christ Jesus their Lord – the true authority for their life. And they will promise to continue in the covenant God made with them in Baptism... to strive to live out their faith in daily life:

- To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- To serve all people, following the example of Jesus
- To strive for justice and peace in all the earth

They will promise to do ALL of this... NOT on their own... BUT with God's help.

Perhaps this is a good time for all of us to reflect on our lives of faith—and to ask ourselves: Who / what has authority in our lives? Is it God—the author and giver of life who invites us, again and again, to renewed relationship?... God—who does not count our past mistakes / empty words / hurts against us?... God—who refuses to define us what we do (or don't do), but instead sees us always and only as God's beloved children?

Perhaps this is a good time for all of us to re-affirm our Baptisms... and the promises we have made to God... and to ask God to help us live lives in which our words AND our actions—together—point to the only One who sets us free / gives us life... the only true authority for our lives. Amen.