

# The Authority of Jesus

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Matthew 21:23-32

A close reading of the gospels will yield numerous passages referring to Christ's authority. Notice a few and their trajectory.

The authority of Jesus demands a changed mind that believes and obeys. Jesus taught with authority (**Matthew 7:29**, *For he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes*. **Mark 1:22**, *And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes*).

But what does this authority mean?

In **Matthew 21:23-32**, Jesus is once again confronted by religious leaders about His authority to perform the works He is doing. The religious leaders feared His authority would threaten their own positions.

## I. The Confrontation (Matthew 21:23)

*It is likely Wednesday morning of Passover week in Jerusalem. The city is filling with travelers gathering for the holy festival. Murder is on the minds of the religious leaders. They are charting a course to kill Jesus of Nazareth. In three days, they will be successful.*

*There were sects of religious leaders. Among them were Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, and Essenes. They had major disagreements among themselves, but on the topic of Jesus of Nazareth, they were united. He must be eliminated.*

### A. The offensive message

1. **Matthew 4:17**, *From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*
2. **Acts 1:3**, *He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

### B. The calculated questions

1. By what authority are you doing these things?
  - a) Rabbinical authority (**Acts 22:3**; **Philippians 3:4b-6**)
2. Who gave you this authority?
  - a) Jesus had no earthly authority that was recognized by the religious leaders. Though the authority was not recognized, His possession of power and authority was never questioned.
  - b) The miracles were public, numerous, and were witnessed in many cases by the very leaders questioning His authority!

*The leaders recognized Jesus' power and authority as of supernatural origin. But their unbelief in Jesus as the Son of man only allowed them to attribute it to Satan and his forces of evil. In Matthew 9:1-8, Jesus heals a Paralytic. In doing so, the scribes accuse Him of blasphemy (your sins be forgiven).*

*In verse 6, Jesus says, "That you may know the Son of Man has authority over earth to forgive sins..." The crowds did the obvious thing: they recognized Jesus' authority. See verse 8.*

### C. The authoritative conclusion

1. This was the amazing difference in Jesus (**Matthew 7:29**, **Mark 1:22**,
2. One of the key attributes of false doctrine is no absolute or dogmatic conclusions

*These spiritual leaders were probably hoping to draw Jesus into identifying His authority as God as He had many times before. That would give them another opportunity to charge Him with blasphemy, and perhaps succeed in putting Him to death in judgment. John 5:18 and John 10:31.*

## II. The Counter Question (Matthew 21:24-27)

### A. The baptism of John?

1. Of heaven? The leaders would have to acknowledge John the Baptist's message.
2. Or, of men? The leaders would cross the majority of the crowd and face a riot.

### B. The leaders chose door number 3 – embarrassment over acknowledgment or opposition. **Matt 21:27)**

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C. Jesus chose silence. (**Matthew 21:27, see also 26:63, 27:14**)

### **III. The Characterization (Matthew 21:28-31a)**

*In this short parable, Jesus characterizes two contrasting responses to the gospel. And once again He gives His opponents the opportunity to condemn themselves out of their own mouths.*

- A. A Father with Two Sons and a Vineyard
  - 1. The vineyard is a familiar Old Testament image for Israel (**Isaiah 5:1-7**).
  - 2. The father has the right to ask. The sons have the duty to go.
- B. The First Son (**Matthew 21:28-29**)
  - 1. He said, "I will not."
  - 2. He changed his mind. He went.
  - 3. The Greek word is *metamelomai* — he was sorry, he reconsidered, he turned around.
  - 4. This is the picture of repentance.
- C. The Second Son (**Matthew 21:30**)
  - 1. He said, "I go, sir."
  - 2. He did not go.
  - 3. The right words. The wrong life.
  - 4. This is the picture of religious pretense.
- D. The Verdict (**Matthew 21:31a**)
  - 1. Jesus asks: which of the two did the will of his father?
  - 2. The chief priests answer correctly: "the first."
  - 3. They have just judged themselves.
  - 4. It is better to rebel and then comply...
  - 5. ...than to give the false appearance of obedience and not obey.

### **IV. The Connection (Matthew 21:31b-32)**

- A. The Example.
  - 1. Matthew, "Levi" (**Luke 5:27-32**)

*A publican was a Jew who had contracted with the Roman occupying government to collect taxes from his own people. He was, in the eyes of his community, a collaborator — a man who had sold his nation, left his synagogue standing, and forsook his covenant identity for a Roman commission.*

*Capernaum, where Matthew sat, was on the trade route between Damascus and the Mediterranean. His tax booth would have collected duties on fish from the Sea of Galilee, on caravans, and on goods crossing into Herod Antipas' territory. He was wealthy because of it. Luke 5:29 confirms this — he could afford to throw a "great feast" with a large guest list on short notice.*

*The system was built on extortion. Rome set a quota; anything the publican collected above the quota, he kept. There was no appeal, no oversight that mattered. In rabbinic literature, publicans were grouped with thieves and murderers. Their testimony was inadmissible in Jewish courts. They were barred from the synagogue. A pious Jew would not eat with them, marry into their families, or accept their charity at the temple.*

*In the gospel pairings — "tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:9, Luke 15:1), "tax collectors and prostitutes" (Matt. 21:31) — the second word is not a different category. It is a synonym. To a first-century Jew, "tax collector" was the category of moral and covenantal apostate.*

- 2. Zacchaeus (**Luke 19:1-10**)

*The Greek word Luke uses — *architelōnēs* — appears nowhere else in the New Testament or in classical Greek literature. Luke seems to coin it. It means "chief tax collector," a regional supervisor over a network of subordinate publicans. Zacchaeus didn't sit at a single booth; he ran the operation.*

*His district was Jericho, which made him spectacularly wealthy and spectacularly hated. Jericho sat on the main trade route from the east, the crossing point for caravans coming in from across the Jordan, and the last major stop for pilgrims walking up to Jerusalem for Passover. Every commercial good moving through that region was subject to Zacchaeus' tax authority.*

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Luke states it plainly: "He was a chief tax collector and was rich." The two facts belong together. He was rich because he was a chief tax collector. Every shekel he had was understood by his neighbors to be a shekel skimmed off Israel by Rome's collaborator.

His name carries its own irony. Zakkai in Hebrew means "pure" or "righteous" or "innocent." His parents named him Pure. The town of Jericho would have called him anything but.

### 3. The woman of the city. (Luke 7:36-50, esp. vss. 36-37, 48, 50)

A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to dinner. During the meal, a woman walks in uninvited — Luke calls her "a woman of the city, who was a sinner," first-century shorthand for a publicly known prostitute. She stands behind Jesus at His feet, breaks down weeping, wets His feet with her tears, lets down her hair to wipe them, kisses His feet, and pours out a flask of costly ointment. Simon watches in silence, thinking that if Jesus were really a prophet He would have known what kind of woman was touching Him and recoiled.

But Jesus knows exactly who she is. He turns to Simon and walks him through the contrast: "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears... You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet." The religious host withheld every ordinary courtesy. The public sinner lavished them all. Jesus' verdict: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." Then to her: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is Matthew 21:31 in living color. A Pharisee and a prostitute, in the same room with Jesus. The Pharisee never knelt. The woman never stopped weeping. One of them went home forgiven — and it was not the religious man.

### 4. Rahab (Joshua 2, Matthew 1:5, Hebrews 11:31, James 2:25)

Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute living in the wall of Jericho — a pagan, a Gentile, and a woman whose trade made her the kind of person no Israelite would have expected God to spare. When Joshua's two spies entered Jericho, she hid them on her roof, lied to the king's men to protect them, and confessed something stunning: "**The Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.**" (Josh. 2:11) She had only heard reports — the Red Sea, the defeat of the Amorite kings — and she believed. The whole city heard the same news; Rahab alone bowed to it.

What happens next is the point. The walls of Jericho fell, the city was destroyed, and Rahab was spared by a scarlet cord in her window — **a small Passover written into the conquest**. She married into Israel. She became the mother of Boaz. Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, Jesse fathered David. And Matthew, in the very first chapter of the New Testament, names her in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5). A Canaanite prostitute is in the family tree of the Messiah. **Hebrews 11 lists her by faith. James 2 lists her by works.** Both writers point to the same woman.

This is Matthew 21:31 written into the Old Testament. Rahab said no with her life and went when grace called. Meanwhile, the priests of Jericho — the religious establishment of that city — perished inside the walls she escaped. When the chief priests in Matthew 21 rejected Jesus, they were rejecting the same God who had already put a Canaanite prostitute in their Messiah's bloodline. The principle of verse 31 was not new.

- B. The Rejection (**Matthew 21:32a**) "You did not believe him!"
- C. The Unbelief (**Matthew 21:32b**)
- D. The Unchanged (**Matthew 21:32c**)

They had been exposed to the full light of the prophet of God and the even greater light of the Son of God, yet they refused to be enlightened. They had heard the message of the King's herald and the message of the King Himself, yet they would not listen or believe. They had witnessed the power of John and the power of Christ, yet they would not be moved.

When we started today, we said, "The authority of Jesus demands a changed mind that believes and obeys." This is Authority to judge but also includes the authority to forgive.

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## V. Light for Our Path — Which Son Are You?

- A. The Question Before Each of Us.
  - 1. Two sons. One said no and then went. One said yes and stayed.
  - 2. The chief priests answered the parable correctly and missed that the parable was about them.
  - 3. The same question is in this room this morning.
    - a) Have you only said yes — or have you gone?
    - b) Have you only walked the aisle, raised the hand, joined the church — or have you truly believed and obeyed?
- B. The Authority of Christ to Forgive
  - 1. The same Jesus who exposed the chief priests is the same Jesus who called Matthew at his tax booth, Zacchaeus down from his tree, the woman of the city at His feet, and Rahab out of a doomed wall.
  - 2. His authority is not only to judge. It is to save.
    - a) **Matthew 28:18**, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*"
    - b) That authority includes the authority to forgive sins.
    - c) **Mark 2:10**, "*the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*"
  - 3. The chief priests refused that authority. Matthew, Zacchaeus, the sinful woman, and Rahab bowed to it. One group is forgotten. The other is in the family of God.
- C. The Call
  - 1. Repent — change your mind about Jesus.
  - 2. Believe — trust His person, His cross, and His word.
  - 3. Go — real obedience, not spoken obedience.
- D. The Take-Home
  - 1. If you have been the second son this morning — saying yes with your mouth and no with your life — the same Christ who has all authority still has the authority to make you the first.