

By what Authority?

- Mark 11:27-33
- A Department of Water Resources representative stops at a Texas ranch and talks with an old rancher. He tells the rancher, "I need to inspect your ranch for your water allocation." The old rancher says, "Okay, but don't go in that field over there." The Water representative says, "Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me. See this card? This card means I am allowed to go WHEREVER I WISH on any agricultural land. No questions asked or answered. Have I made myself clear? Do you understand?" The old rancher nods politely and goes about his chores. Later, the old rancher hears loud screams and sees the Water Rep running for his life. And close behind is the rancher's bull. The bull is gaining with every step. The Rep is clearly terrified, so the old rancher immediately throws down his tools, runs to the fence and yells at the top of his lungs, "Your card! Show him your card!"
- That story illustrates what we encounter in this text today between the arrogant religious leaders of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, and Jesus, the Son of God. The Sanhedrin so badly wanted to maintain their control, but the card they held up was just not sufficient to stop or even slow down the Lord who was after them. And he was after them for their own good! The one they hated so much, Jesus, was their only hope for salvation and had come to pay the ransom price for any who would believe.
- This encounter today is the first of 7 conflict stories Mark records between Jesus and the religious leaders, culminating in the story of a penniless widow who gives more to the offering than any of the powerful but faithless religious leaders. These seven stories are similar to the conflict that took place in Galilee in the early chapters. Remember? They questioned him about healing on the Sabbath, about telling a lame man that his sins were forgiven, about eating with tax collectors, and more. What stood out to the people in Galilee was his authority: They said, "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" His disciples said after he silenced a storm, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Well, here, in Jerusalem, in the temple, standing before the most powerful leaders in Israel, Jesus opens a window into his authority for those who have eyes to see. Let's look at this text under two main points: 1- Who do you think you are? 2-What do you believe about John's baptism?
- **Who do you think you are? (verses 27-28)**
- Jesus and his disciples enter the temple again and he is immediately confronted by representatives of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of 71 members and stood between Rome and the Jewish nation as a buffer. They were allowed almost complete religious freedom and had more limited political authority, and they were revered by the Jews. This is the only time in Jesus' life, apart from his trial in chapter 14, when the Sanhedrin showed up to confront him. They did so because of what he had just done, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and driving the commerce out of the temple. The clearing of the temple was not a momentary fit or a symbolic act by Jesus: it was a clear expression of his authority. That's what prompted the Sanhedrin to ask, "By what authority (exousia) are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"

- Exousia: the word denotes justified executive power. A person with authority has the right and the might to do what he does. Paul tells Agrippa in Acts 26 that he was sent to Damascus by the Chief Priests to arrest believers, given exousia, the right and the might to do that. And on the way he was arrested himself by the Lord, and called into a new exousia, given authority by Christ to call sinners to repent so that they would no longer be blind and no longer be under the exousia of Satan, but under God. All authority for men is derivative. This is what amazed people about Jesus, the sovereign freedom and magisterial authority he had to teach, heal and to cast out demons. Paul knew his authority to arrest Christians came from the Chief Priests. The Sanhedrin knew that their authority came from the Roman government. But where did Jesus' authority come from? How could this man possibly believe that he had the right and the might to clear the temple on the biggest week of the year? So, they ask him, "By what authority are you doing this?" (who do you think you are?), or "who gave you this authority?" We are suddenly back in Capernaum and the scribes are questioning in their hearts, "who can forgive sins but God alone?" Edwards writes, "Jesus' presumption to speak and act in the place of God is again at center stage." Saints, the issue of authority is central to who we are and how we live. Every one of us is called to be under the authority of the Lord, first, but also under the authority that he has provided for us in the family, the church, and the state. If anybody has ever said to you, "Who do you think you are?" their question went to this matter of authority.
- Jesus answers their question with a question of his own.
- **What do you believe about John's baptism? (verses 29-30)**
- Here is where Jesus opens the window for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Everything the Sanhedrin needs to know about Jesus can be summarized by one event in his life, the baptism of John. Was John's baptism from heaven or from men, he asks. In other words, when John baptized me, was that something ordained from God, or was that just a scheme of man? Jesus follows the custom of the day by avoiding using God's name. So, he asks, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" He tells them if they will answer this question about the baptism, then he will answer their question about his authority. And I am sure you all see this, but if they HAD answered the question correctly and not dodged it, they would have answered their own question as well! Because remember, it was at the baptism of Jesus that the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11) This event was the inauguration, not the beginning but the introduction of what was true, the exousia that Jesus had in heaven and on earth. It was John the Baptist who said the next day when he saw Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29) Jesus asks, what do you believe about the baptism of John? Edwards writes, "The question of Jesus implies that he stands not under the Sanhedrin but over it."
- The Sanhedrin were on the horns of a dilemma, just as all those are who do not want to believe in the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. If they said the baptism was from heaven, then the obvious question would be, why weren't you the very first ones to follow him and to submit to him? Why didn't you leave the temple and follow the One who has come to replace it as the center of worship? Why aren't you using your powerful

influence on the nation to tell everyone to listen to this man and follow him, along with you? But if they said the baptism was from man, then they risked an uprising from the people who all regarded John as a prophet. Luke records that they were even afraid the people would stone them. What will they do? They talked it over.

- They chose the expedient, the politically correct, the safe answer, which is oh so deadly for those who choose it instead of the truth. They go with strategy over submission. They choose calculation over contrition. They simply say to Jesus, "We do not know." But that was not the truth, was it? The truth was they were unwilling to know. Unwillingness to know the truth about the baptism which began Jesus' ministry puts them in a position to be unwilling to acknowledge the resurrection at the end of his ministry. Remember? It was the religious leaders who told Pilate after Jesus' crucifixion, "this impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He is risen from the dead.'" (Matthew 27:63-64). It was the religious leaders, after Jesus had risen from the dead, who paid the soldiers who had been guarding the tomb, bribing them to "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" (Matthew 28:13).
- There was a window. Jesus opened it up for these men, these religious leaders, he threw back the curtain and pointed to the truth of who he was. And they. Refused. To see. An important lesson for all of us to never begin the process of hardening ourselves against the truth. Hebrews warns against it several times, quoting from Psalm 95, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." (Hebrews 3:7-8, 15) The message is clear that when we refuse God-given authority and give in to rebellion, our hearts grow hard. The next time, the voice of the Spirit warning us to submit to authority is harder to hear. Then it fades to a whisper, and fades until it is a distant memory. That's why we are told to listen and heed it **today!**
- Jesus answers their unwillingness with this: "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." They were unwilling and incapable at this point to acknowledge his authority. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "You will not truly confess Jesus as the Christ until you are willing to bow to his authority as your Savior, Lord, and Teacher!" This is true of individuals and it is true of institutional religion, which is empty and meaningless unless it is built upon and centered in the person of Jesus Christ, and his death, burial, and resurrection.
- This week I read this in an email newsletter: "A record number of pastors have thought about quitting over the last year. No wonder. It's been a killer season. I surely don't need to reiterate the reasons." I spoke to a pastor in Moldova this week who has done 7 funerals in five weeks. He is discouraged about the suffering his congregation has endured. He is also discouraged about the resistance some of them have to his leadership. It has been a difficult year for us at Antioch as we have suffered loss as well, not just families leaving, but the struggles we have faced through Covid and the loss of the level of fellowship we are used to and so desperately need, and the struggle sometimes with conflict because of those things or because of disagreements people have had with the leadership of the church. What do we do in such times? The author went on to say that our encouragement, whether we are a pastor or not, is in Christ. Paul wrote, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts

to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:6-10)

- Pastor Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor and educator, suffered terribly under the Communists before the fall of the Iron Curtain. After one particularly cruel bout with an interrogator he was very discouraged. Then the Lord met with him giving him a Christlike perspective. The next week the interrogation began again but everything was different. His interrogator stopped and said, "Mr. Tson, who visited you this weekend? I have in front of me a different person than the one who left here. Somebody came and changed you completely. I have to know who came and visited you." "Jesus visited me," said Pastor Tson, "and made me ready for the battle again."
- Amen! May we continue to feel and know the presence of the Lord Jesus in our hearts, in our lives, and in this church. May we work hard together to walk together in a way that pleases the Lord, for the sake of His name, for the sake of our fellowship, and for the sake of our witness to the world.
- Prayer