THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

Matthew 21:18–32

Key Verse: 21:32

“For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collector and prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

Authority. Our gut reaction to it is to be suspicious. We tend to associate it with abuse and oppression (cf. 20:25). On the other hand, authority is important. For example, when we don’t want bad advice we consult somebody who’s an “authority” on a subject. It’s like young people’s term, “legit.” As there’s legitimate human authority, so there’s legitimate spiritual authority. This topic of authority is related to Matthew’s main theme that Jesus is our King. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18). He teaches with authority (7:29), heals with authority (9:8) and forgives with authority (9:6). He also gives his authority to his disciples to spread the gospel and make disciples (10:1; 28:19). Last week he entered Jerusalem as God’s King who comes in the name of the Lord (21:9). Some people really liked it; some hated it. Now they come to challenge his authority. In today’s passage we learn about the nature of Jesus’ authority, the source of his authority, the outcome of his authority, and especially, how to respond to his authority. These things show what it really means to receive Jesus as our King. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

**First**, the nature of Jesus’ authority (18–22). Read verses 18,19. Wow! Was Jesus being “hangry”? Some people feel badly about that poor, innocent tree. It was unusual for Jesus to do this. He was always using his power to heal and give life. This was the only time he used it to curse. What was happening? It wasn’t an abuse of power when he couldn’t satisfy his hunger. Here Jesus was like one of the Old Testament prophets, doing something seemingly bizarre but acting out a prophetic message from God. For example, Isaiah stripped off all his clothes and went around naked for three years (Isa20). Jeremiah hid his underwear in a rock and went back to get it only after a long time (Jer13). Hosea married a prostitute (Hos1). Ezekiel shaved his head and beard with a sword, divided the hairs into thirds, set one third on fire, scattered another third around the city, stabbing at it with a sword, and threw the remaining third into the wind; then he kept a few, sewed them into his clothes, and burned some of them (Eze5). Each time God commanded these prophets to do these things; God was sending his people a message through them. If so, God must have told Jesus to do this. What was his message to his people through Jesus cursing this fig tree?

Verse 19 emphasizes that when he went up to this tree, Jesus found on it nothing but leaves. From a distance, it looked like it had fruit, but it didn’t. This real life event was a metaphor. For what? In one sense it explained what had happened the previous day. Jesus had gone to the Jerusalem temple to see about the worship of God. When he arrived, there were many people, so it looked really good, like a tree with many leaves. But upon closer examination, they were using the Court of the Gentiles at the temple, a place for lost people to seek God, as a place to sell animals and exchange money (21:12). So all their worship activity wasn’t really about worship; it was about people’s convenience and making a personal profit. Israel’s worship had become an outward show with no content. Jesus drove those people and their business out of the temple and made it a place where sick people could come to him to be healed (21:14).

This fig tree with leaves but no fruit also can be a metaphor for a person. Who’s *that*? It’s someone who looks good outwardly, who comes from a Christian family, knows and says all the right things, goes through all the motions, but has no good fruit. To Jesus, what’s important is not appearances but life fruit. He said God “cuts off every branch in [him] that bears no fruit” (Jn15:2a). And he taught, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (7:16,20). So what good fruit should we be looking for, both in ourselves and in others? Basically, it’s two-fold, first *in* us, and then *through* us. First is the fruit of spiritual maturity, the fruit of the Spirit that make us Christ-like—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal5:22,23). We can’t produce such fruit; only the Spirit can do it in us. Next is the fruit of helping others until Christ is formed in them (Gal4:19). Again, we can’t produce it; the Spirit does it through us. So, as I grow in Christ, through the Spirit’s work, I also help others to know Christ. But how? John the Baptist said, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). It’s not fake but real repentance that allows the Spirit to change us. Only through repentance can we produce the fruit God wants. We shouldn’t deceive ourselves, live before people, or depend on what happened in the past; we should live before God, depend on his Spirit and produce good fruit today.

Read verse 20. The disciples were amazed that the tree withered so quickly. In Greek the word for “amazed” can also be translated “disturbed.” Over the past three years they’d seen Jesus do and say so many powerful things, but they’d never seen him like this. Probably they were still troubled by what had happened at the temple the day before. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem, but he seemed determined to challenge the entire religious establishment.

What did he tell them? Read verses 21,22. Jesus wants his disciples to access and use his spiritual authority. How? It’s through faith and prayer. Many people think he was teaching his disciples to attempt all kinds of impossible things. He surely didn’t want them going around cursing trees or showing off powers. What he was really teaching was to challenge situations where opposition and hostility to the gospel seem insurmountable. He himself had entered Jerusalem, the place so hostile to him and his message, but through faith and prayer he believed God would win the greatest spiritual victory. In every place and generation people don’t like God’s message. But when we believe and pray God can use even weak people like us to change the world. First, we need to really believe God can move such mountains. Then, we need to really pray. When we really believe and really pray, even though we’re so small, God will surely answer according to his will (1Jn5:14,15).

**Second**, the source of Jesus’ authority (23–27). Read verse 23. From early in the morning Jesus was at the temple teaching people the Bible, doing what God called him to do. Then the religious leaders, who should have been doing that, came and challenged him. They were upset about what he’d done in the temple. To them, Jesus was nothing but a carpenter from Nazareth. How dare he let people call him King! How dare he come into their temple and start teaching people what to do! Especially, how dare he make them look bad during Passover before all those Jewish pilgrims! In modern terms, they were accusing him of operating without a license. They thought they could intimidate him with this.

How did he respond? Read verses 24,25a. Here, “from heaven” means “from God.” Jesus knew exactly how to handle these people, and what was at the core of their problem. He mentioned the ministry of John the Baptist not to avoid but to actually answer them. Like himself, John the Baptist didn’t have any official position or authority. He was out in the wilderness telling people to repent. But everybody knew John was a great prophet of God who eventually died for his faith. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had been too proud to accept John’s challenge to repent; they thought they were already in good with God because of their heritage (3:7–9). They thought they knew better than John and saw him from a human point of view, so they never listened to him.

Read verses 25b–27a. It shows that though they were supposed to be religious leaders, in fact they were politicians, sensitive to popular opinion. They were full of calculations. They had no courage to stand for the truth or tell the truth. They knew the truth but pretended not to know. How pathetic! How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 27b. Jesus doesn’t explain himself to people not interested in truth, and neither should we. He taught us, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (7:6). Despite their poor response, the source of Jesus’ authority was very clearly from God, not humans.

**Third**, the outcome and how to respond to Jesus’ authority (28–32). Jesus goes on to tell them three parables: the parable of the two sons (21:28–32); the parable of the tenants (21:33–46); and the parable of the wedding banquet (22:1–14). They all continue the theme of the authority of Jesus as our King. But today we’ll just focus on the first one. The parable of the two sons is found only in Matthew’s Gospel. It must have had a special meaning to Matthew, who used to be a tax collector before Jesus called him. It’s a short and simple parable with a powerful message. Read verses 28–31a. Jesus always told parables from ordinary life. Most people in a family can relate to this. Sometimes a parent will tell a child to do something, and the child first says “No!” but later listens. Sometimes the child first says, “Sure!” but then ends up not really doing it. This parable again illustrates the authority of Jesus. Even more than a human father or human king, Jesus has the right to tell us what to do with our lives, and to expect our obedience. But like the two sons in the parable, we tend to have a problem really accepting his authority.

So who do the two sons represent? Jesus tells us. Read verse 31b. Here he’s talking about the first son, the one who told his father “No” but later changed his mind and obeyed him. The tax collectors and prostitutes first said “No!” to God. They chose to live for themselves, in their own way. Their lives had been one big, long “No!” to God. But later they changed. How? It was through listening to John the Baptist explain the way of righteousness (32). The “way of righteousness” is the way of repentance and faith in Jesus. It’s the only way to receive God’s forgiveness. These unlikely people, the tax collectors and prostitutes, were humble enough to listen. What happened when they did? Jesus said they were entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religious leaders! It was like Jesus’ repeated saying, “The last will be first” (19:30; 20:16). It shows us that Jesus used his authority to forgive people’s sins when they repented, and, to welcome them into God’s kingdom. So, the outcome of his authority is not crushing us, but helping us truly experience God’s grace. God is ready to welcome anyone who truly repents and accepts Jesus, no matter how sinful.

Read verse 32. Through the ministry of John, and through the changed lives of sinful people, God is trying to show us that it’s all about his grace to us in Jesus. He’s trying to show us that repentance isn’t scary. Even if we’re as selfish as a tax collector or as rotten as a prostitute, if we just humble ourselves, turn to him just as we are, and put our faith in Jesus, God will welcome us and shower us with his grace. He’ll heal us, restore us and save us. In this way we can welcome Jesus as our spiritual King. We can live gladly under his reign with fervent loyalty to him. We can obey him and work in his vineyard wholeheartedly.

Today we learned that our Lord Jesus expects good fruit from us, inwardly and outwardly. We can access and use his authority when we believe and pray. His authority is from God, and it always leads us to experience God’s grace. When we repent and receive his grace, we can obey and serve him as our King.