

“On Whose Authority?”

We've been working our way through the book of Matthew,
but today it's important to note that we've skipped over a major event.
Anyone know what we've skipped?
OK - I will give you a hint: in our gospel reading for today, where is Jesus? That's right – in the temple.
And where is the temple? That's right – in Jerusalem.
OK - now does anyone know what we've skipped?
We skipped over Jesus' third prediction of his death and his subsequent triumphal entry into Jerusalem.
In order to understand what's happening in today's reading, we need to understand the context.

Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem like a king would ride – albeit a strange kind of king
since instead of riding on a king's horse, he's riding on a donkey.
But still, the crowds are responding to him as if he is their king
and that could certainly be seen as a threat to anyone with political authority.
And since people are shouting, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!”,
that could certainly be seen as a threat to anyone with religious authority.

And what's the first thing Jesus does after his triumphal entry into the city?
He enters the temple and drives out all the merchants,
and overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.
He shouts at them, “It is written,
‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”
And then? He begins healing, causing the blind to see in the lame to walk.

He's entered the city in a way that threatens the authority of the government leaders,
and he's entered the temple in a way that threatens the authority of the religious leaders.
But how can the religious leaders throw someone out who is healing the blind and the lame?!

Eventually the day is over and Jesus leaves the temple and the city
and all the leaders can breathe a sigh of relief, hoping that that will be the end of things.

But no! The next day, he's back – in the city, and in the temple – and he's teaching the people!
At this point, the scribes and the Pharisees, feel they have no choice but to intervene.
This guy has no right to be here! They are the ones whose job it is to teach here.
They are the ones with the authority to decide who can, and who cannot, teach.
So when they say, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”
it's not a question they were asking; it's an accusation, an accusation meant to show Jesus the door.

Jesus, however, knows that true authority comes from God and God alone,
and that the scribes and Pharisees, like the moneychangers and the merchants,
are not carrying out the work that God has given them to do.
They are operating on their own authority and not God's,
while Jesus, on the other hand, is always operating under God's authority.
Which is why he doesn't answer their “question” but instead asks them a related question:
was John the Baptist operating out of God's authority, or his own?
Jesus knew that John was operating out of God's authority,
but he knew that the scribes and Pharisees did not see it that way.
He also knew that they'd have a hard time answering his question
which would give him an excuse for not answering theirs.
And before anyone else can say anything,
Jesus launches into a parable about how two sons responded to their father's authority.

The father asked them each to go and work in the vineyard.
The first son says he will, but doesn't; the second son says he won't, but does.
Jesus asks the scribes and Pharisees: which one did the father's will?

Of course the answer is that neither did.
In order to do the father's will, the sons would have to say yes, & then follow thru, & neither of them did that.

Instead, the first son's response to his father's request
is not out of gratitude, not out of love, not out of respect.
Even more so in that culture than in ours, his response is disrespectful, offensive, and rude,
completely disregarding, discounting, and dismissing the father's position of authority.
For a child to speak to a parent, or a servant to speak to a master, in that way,
would have been felt and seen like a slap in the face.
Yes, he ends up doing the work after all, but we don't know why –
maybe he has remembered that that's his job, or maybe he fears what others will think,
or maybe he's afraid his father will disown him.
He has challenged his father's authority, and if the work is not flowing from that authority,
then he's doing it for the wrong reason.

The second son responds as he should, in a way that acknowledges his father's authority
and perhaps expresses love and gratitude as well.
That's what his father and any onlooker would have expected.
But then, for some reason, son number two does not follow through.
We don't know why.
Maybe he never intended to, or maybe something came up that was of greater priority, or maybe he forgot.
While the father would have been pleased with this son's initial response,
he would have been disappointed that the work did not get done.
Clearly, neither son's response was what the father desired.

But here's the interesting thing.
By asking this question of the scribes and Pharisees,
Jesus traps them into answering them out of their own value system.
When they answer "the first", they are making it clear that it's the task that matters to them,
and not the relationship.
They are all about the task, the work, the law.
That's how they judge themselves and that's how they judge others.
Obviously, those tax collectors and prostitutes are not following the law,
or doing the right kind of work, or completing the tasks that God wants,
and so they see those tax collectors and prostitutes as wrong and themselves as right.

They answer, Jesus; but Jesus doesn't give an answer to his own question.
Instead, he takes their answer, and tells them what their value system will get them:
"the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you".

Now notice that Jesus doesn't say that they won't go into the kingdom of God;
they're just not going into it now as the tax collectors and the prostitutes are.
Why? Because the tax collectors and the prostitutes recognized God's authority
made manifest in John the Baptist and now they are recognizing God's authority made manifest in Jesus.
They said yes to John and they are saying yes to Jesus, which means they are saying yes to God.
And when they say yes to God, then God is able to transform their lives, and they step into the kingdom.
Since they are open to God's authority, and not insisting on their own,
God is able to do the work that God wants done through them.
The scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, can do all the work they want,
but it will be their work for their own reasons, out of their own authority,
instead of it being God's work that God is working through them.

So what does this mean for us?

It all goes back to the greatest commandment, which is what?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.”

That’s the first commandment; that’s the greatest commandment.

Keeping that commandment means that we recognize God’s authority over our lives.

Keeping that commandment means that we’re saying yes to whatever God asks of us.

Keeping that commandment means that we are saying that we are willing to do the work that God asks us to do.

The scribes and Pharisees thought that they were doing God’s work because they thought they were keeping the law,
but all they were doing was adhering to a list of rules and principles,
and that’s very different from doing God’s will.

For God’s will is not a lifeless list of laws; God’s will is what God is saying to us in the moment.

Feeding the hungry is not a bad thing; in fact, it can be a good thing.

But feeding the hungry is not the same as following God’s will for our lives.

Feeding the hungry is just looking at a law and deciding in one’s own authority
that that is what one is going to do.

Following God’s will at any given moment, on the other hand,
might mean feeding the hungry, or it might mean housing the homeless,
or it might mean telling somebody about the amazing God we serve,
or it might mean visiting someone who is sick.

There were probably a whole lot of tasks that were on the “to do” list of those sons in the story,
but in Jesus’ story, the father asked them to do a specific task right then: to work in the vineyard.

The son that said yes, and then didn’t work in the vineyard,
might have been taking care of another task that was on a list he had been given.

Following God’s will doesn’t mean that God gives us a list of things to do
and then we decide what we’re going to do and when.

No, seeking to do God’s will is saying,

“God, what would you like me to do today? What would you like me to do next?”

And then doing it, of course.

Because again, it’s not enough to say we love God with all of our heart & soul & mind & strength.

It’s not enough to give lip service to God’s authority.

It’s not enough to just show up for worship on Sundays.

It’s not enough to say, “What do you want me to do, God?” and then leave it at that.

When we ask the question, we need to follow through,
and as we follow through, we end up keeping the second commandment,
which is to love our neighbor as ourselves –
not as we think that they should be loved according to some list of rules,
but according to how God directs us to love them at any given moment.

In the end, it’s all about whose authority we recognize.

If we’re acting on our own authority, we are not recognizing God’s authority.

And if we are following others who claim authority but whose authority is not from God,
we are not recognizing God’s authority.

What Jesus wants us to remember is that we are God’s children and God is our father
and we are to love God and acknowledge and respect his authority above all else.

And when we acknowledge God’s authority & we open our selves so that God can work thru us,
then we are acting in God’s authority.

Will we fail? Of course. we’re not God; we’re human.

But neither the scribes and Pharisees, nor the tax collectors and prostitutes are prohibited from the kingdom.

Its doors are open and everyone of God’s children can enter it at any time.

All it takes is recognizing that God is king and we are his subjects, his servants,
and most of all, his beloved children. Amen