

“Authority from Above”

**Matthew 21:23-32**

<sup>23</sup>When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

<sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

*Holy Lord, your Word calls us into the world to be a blessing.  
Inspire us through your Gospel of life to bear your promises to those  
who seek your truth. Amen.*

On the day following what we typically call Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and his cleansing of the temple, the chief priests and elders confronted Jesus, inquiring by what authority he was doing these things. Jesus returned the favor by confronting the chief priests and elders with a parable:

Two sons were asked by their father to go into the vineyard to work. One was obstinate and refused to go; the other *appeared* obedient, even respectful and said he would go. But appearances can be deceiving, for the second son did not follow through on his promise to work. Meanwhile, obstinate number-one son had a change of heart and went to work as his father requested.

Then Jesus asked the chief priests and elders: Which son did the will of the father? They were obliged to say that it was the first son, the initially obstinate son; the one who actually worked in the vineyard. Jesus was likely using the term, *vineyard*, as a symbol of the kingdom of God. Jesus used this parable to expose how the righteous talk of the chief priests and elders was not backed up with true

kingdom living. Their contempt for the poor, the widow and the orphan showed that their lives did not manifest God’s compassion and love for others.

In the expansive world of parable, the vineyard is an apt symbol for the kingdom of God. In parable speak, the 2 sons were asked to go labor for the kingdom of God; to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. The second son, however, only gave lip service, and his lack of action corresponded to a rejection of the kingdom of God.

In this way Jesus’ parable leveled a critique against the chief priests and elders who put on the appearance of righteousness, but exhibited no love or compassion behind their pretense. In other words, the Jewish leaders put on the appearance of laboring for the kingdom, but were never actually engaged in the work of transforming lives through loving acts of compassion.

What Jesus was saying is that, with respect to the kingdom of God, they had no authority. Any authority they did have was of human origin. Thus they would not understand the source of Jesus’ authority even if he told them.

Then in what must have been a shocking and stinging statement, Jesus declared to the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them! How was that to be?

Jesus explained that while the tax collectors and prostitutes had followed a path of *un*righteousness, when they met John the Baptist, they believed him to be God’s prophet; they turned and repented. In this way Jesus was showing that true authority came from above; from God.

Jesus was pointing to John’s God-given authority which was revealed and made manifest in the transformed lives of saved sinners. Both John and Jesus received their authority from God, the source of all transformative power. Most other types of power are top-down and have little or no ability to give life, or inspire rebirth.

Yes, Jesus' authority was revealed and made manifest in the transformation and healing of people; indeed, an experience of rebirth. It seems to me that this parable is inviting us to see ourselves as the first son, which I don't think is hard to do!

I can't tell you how many times I've put the wrong foot forward, insisting, foolishly, on my own way. But then there is grace; I keep learning from my mistakes, I repent, turn around, and choose the obedient path to which Jesus calls me. I find it interesting that the older I get the more willing I am to see my mistakes and repent.

The Jews were challenging Jesus' authority because they perceived that Jesus was undermining the authority of the temple institution, which was the source of the chief priests and elders' authority. Herein lies the difference; the Jewish leaders based their authority on an institution – the temple – which grew out of the Law given through Moses. The institution, however, had no power to give or transform life. Jesus' authority, however – like John's – came directly from God.

I would like to suggest that you and I have authority from above in the way Jesus and John did, which means we have the authority to make a difference in the world, even to transform lives. Now I don't mean we are going to raise that dead anytime soon, but we have the power of love on our side. Our works of compassion born of love are works that bear the authority of the kingdom of God.

The authority of the kingdom is love. Acts or works of compassion inspired by the love of God are powerful, and they make a difference in the world. Heidi Root and her daughter, Anya, recently had an experience that illustrates how compassion and love are manifestations of authority that come from above.

Heidi came forward and shared the experience she and Anya had on Grand Manan Island off the coast of New Brunswick, Canada. When they arrived at the ferry terminal they found the ferry was full, so they couldn't take their car across; they boarded on foot with their backpacks. Once on the island they discovered the cabin they booked was on the other end of the island; a sixteen mile walk. Heidi still believed it would all work out.

Indeed, they met an elderly couple who insisted on driving them and giving them a grand tour of the island. The next day Heidi and Anya had scheduled a whale watch excursion. The older couple promised to pick them up when the boat came back. Because whales were spotted late in the cruise, they returned 3 hours later than scheduled. The older couple was still there waiting. They had kept themselves busy and were just happy to be there.

Heidi and Anya took them out for dinner that night and they had a marvelous time. The next day they drove Heidi and Anya to the ferry terminal, and wished them well.

The older couple's offer to help was a simple act of compassion, but it made all the difference for a memorable 2 days on a Canadian island. For Heidi and Anya it was an experience of heart, and an experience of the kingdom of God.

The authority of the kingdom is in our hands in every act of compassionate love. Praise God! Amen.