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Matthew 21:23 - 21:27



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg focuses on Matthew 21:23-27 where Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders about his authority. Gregg relates this to the importance of authority in religious institutions and how it impacts what doctrines are taught. He also explores the complex issue of authority in relation to God and how it can be difficult to determine what is truly from God and what is not. Ultimately, Jesus challenges the religious leaders to recognize the authority of God in their lives and actions.

Transcript

In the 21st chapter of Luke, we have seen the beginning of the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry before his crucifixion. That week began, as all weeks do, on Sunday, and that Sunday was Palm Sunday. It began with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and of his cleansing of the temple.

The next day, Monday, was when he cursed the fig tree, which became an object lesson for the disciples of what could be accomplished through faith and also of the fact that Israel was now to be rejected and no longer given the opportunity to bear fruit for God since they had never really done so before. We next come to the events of Tuesday of that week. Of course, not many days after that, Jesus was crucified on Friday, as most believe.

But on Tuesday, there were a number of encounters Jesus had with persons who wanted to find fault with him, who wanted to test him. And so, there's quite a bit of teaching and interaction and debate that took place on Tuesday of that Passion Week. In Matthew 21, beginning with verse 23, we read, Now when he came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted him as he was teaching and said, By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority? But Jesus answered and said to them, I also will ask you one thing, which, if you tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men? And they reasoned among themselves, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say to us, Why then did you

not believe him? But if we say from men, we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet. So they answered Jesus and said, We do not know. And he said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Now, these people are upset with Jesus, probably because he had cleansed the temple a couple of days earlier. And they finally get around to confronting him, finding him and saying, By what authority are you doing these things? Now, do you know what authority means? Authority means that you have the right to do a certain thing. The person who has authority has the right to rule or the right to decide or the right to settle disputes or the right to give commands.

That's what authority is. It's the right to be in charge and the right to do the things that you do. Now, a person might have authority in one realm, but not in another.

For example, I am a father. I have authority over my children. I don't have authority over someone else's children.

A man may have authority as the principal of a school, but that doesn't mean he has authority in the courtroom. You see, he's not a judge. There are different realms of authority.

And in one realm, a man has the right to decide. A judge in a courtroom has the right to make certain decisions. But when he goes to church, he doesn't have the right to determine what doctrines will be preached there.

He's not an authority there. So, the question is, when you do any particular thing, do you have the authority to do it? Now, I have authority, as I said, to guide my own house, but I don't have the authority to come to your house and do the same thing there. And so, they were wondering, how does Jesus claim to have the right to do the things he's doing at the house of God? He comes to the temple, which is God's house, and he acts like he owns the place.

There are people there selling doves. There are people there exchanging monies. And Jesus throws them all out, as if he has the right to do that, and as if they don't have the right to be there.

Now, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, Jesus was just another citizen, just another guy. He didn't have any more right to throw people out of the temple than they had to be there. And what authority did he claim to do that by? That's what they're asking.

They said, by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? Now, of course, the only answer that would be sensible to someone who is driving people out of the house of God would be that they were authorized by God to do this. It's God's house. He's the one who has the right to chase people out.

Every other human being is just a human being and wouldn't have any more or less right to be there or throw others out, but God would have the right to do so. So, if Jesus had said, my authority is from God, then, of course, that would have been a satisfactory answer in terms of giving him a claim to be able to drive people out of the house of God. But the problem is, if he did say that, see, they had him sort of on the horns of a dilemma, they thought.

Because if he said, well, my authority is from God, they probably would have said, you're blaspheming. You're claiming to be something more than you're not. You're claiming that God is on your side, where you're really a sacrilegious man.

And they would have found some reason to fault him for that. But if he said, my authority is from, and then you fill in the blank, anything other than God, they would say, well, you don't have the right to chase people out of the house of God, then, if you just have human authority. So, they wanted him to commit himself.

They wanted him to identify who gave him this authority. Now, this is interesting because they were religious men themselves. These were chief priests.

These were the people who were the professional religious. These were the clergy of the day. And here he came into their backyard, as it were, the temple.

That's where they worked. And he started cleaning house. He started saying, this isn't right.

Get this out of here. As if he had authority to do that. Now, they thought they had authority, because they were appointed by the high priest to their office, or by the law, or by whatever source.

Actually, the Romans themselves had authorized the priests to continue after the Romans took over Jerusalem. And so, they had human authorization of the highest order. They had it from Rome.

They had it from the high priest. But who gave Jesus authority? He didn't have the emperor saying that he could come in and clean the house. He didn't have the high priest on his side.

How does he claim to be able to do these things? You know, a lot of times religious authorities assume that they have the authority of God on their side. And yet, God sends a prophet to them, and he really has the authority of God on his side, even though he doesn't have the institutional authority on his side. This is very important to note, that a lot of Christians today view the church institutionally.

And they consider the authority in the church to be an institutional matter. Okay, we've got a pastor. He's been hired to lead this operation here.

Okay, he's the professional. He's ordained. He's been through seminary.

He's been humanly given a position here. Now, some might say, well, he's been called of God, but that's a rather subjective thing. All we can say for sure is that human beings have put him in that position.

He seems to have authority. But what if someone in his congregation challenges him on the basis of the word of God, and says, you know, the way things are being done here, that's not scriptural. That's an offense to God.

That person who's challenging the one in charge, that challenger may not have any institutional authority at all. In terms of the institution, there are officers, and they have the authority to make the decisions. But in terms of God, somebody who's not even a part of the institution may well be God's spokesman, God's prophet.

And that was seen in the fact that Jesus could come into the temple where he didn't have any institutional authority. He was not a priest, but he was a prophet. He had the authority of God.

And we need to realize that the authority in God's kingdom is not institutional. It doesn't rest in a man because he holds an office, an institution. It is in agreement with the word of God.

If a person agrees with the word of God, it is authoritative what they say. It says in Isaiah 8.20, it says, if a man does not speak according to this word, there is no light in him. And where there's no light, there's certainly no spiritual authority.

Now, Jesus had spiritual authority, but the priests had institutional authority in the situation. And they were offended that he came onto their turf, into their office, as it were, and was making decisions about the temple that they weren't making. And they said, who gave you this authority? By what authority do you do these things? And Jesus answered and said to them, I also will ask you one thing, which, if you tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men? And in the parallel in Mark chapter 11 in verse 30, after he asks it, he says, answer me. Mark has Jesus saying, the baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men? Answer me. So he's kind of got them on their heels here.

He doesn't just ask them a question, he puts them under pressure. Give me an answer to this. Now, you see what he was doing.

John the Baptist came from the same authority that Jesus did. Now, John didn't have the same authority Jesus did, because he didn't have a rank as high in God's economy as that of Jesus, but he did come from the same authority. He was a prophet of God.

And anyone who knew that would have to admit that John's authority was from heaven. Now, if a person would admit that John's authority was from heaven, they would have to also admit that John pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. So if John's authority was from heaven, his authorization of Jesus would be something to reckon with.

Now, the chief priests didn't believe John and they didn't believe Jesus either. But John was very popular in the public eye. And John, by this time, had been martyred.

He had been killed by Herod unjustly, and he had become a martyr and a hero in the popular imagination of the people. No one would dare speak evil of John and hope to get away with it. As a matter of fact, when Jesus said, the baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men? They reasoned among themselves, saying, if we say from heaven, he'll say to us, why then did you not believe him? But if we say from men, we fear the multitude.

Actually, in Luke 20, in verse 6, it says they feared that the people would stone them. For all count John as a prophet. Now, here Jesus got them into trouble.

They were trying to get him into trouble, but he got them in trouble. Essentially, his answer was going to be, my authority comes from the same place John's does. He doesn't say it like that, but that would be the true statement.

That would be his answer. But first he says, see if you can figure out where John's authority came from, and then it is implied you'll know where mine came from. Well, there's two possibilities.

John's authority was from God, or it was from men. They could not admit that it was from God, because that would mean that Jesus was from God, because John endorsed Jesus. And they had already rejected both John and Jesus, so they couldn't say it was from God, because Jesus would just say, why didn't you believe him? On the other hand, if they said it was from men, that was simply not an acceptable answer, given the public sentiment.

They were likely to get themselves stoned by the people, by saying that John was not a prophet of God. And therefore, neither answer would suit them, would suit their purposes. Jesus actually had them on the horns of a dilemma.

Many times the critics of Jesus came to put him in that kind of a position. For example, when they came to Jesus with the woman taken in adultery, and they said, you know, Moses said that this woman should be stoned, what do you say? That was putting Jesus on the horns of a dilemma, where either answer would get him in trouble. Because if he said, well, don't stone her, then they would say, oh, so you don't agree with Moses.

And that would get Jesus in trouble with the religious Jews, who knew that Moses was from God. And if they could just say, well, Jesus and Moses, Jesus contradicts Moses, that

would hurt Jesus' credibility in the sight of the Jews. But if Jesus said, go ahead and stone her, which would be agreeable with Moses, that was against the law.

The Romans did not allow the Jews to stone people. And therefore, Jesus could be accused of teaching people to do things contrary to Rome. So, either answer he would give, if he said stone her or if he said don't stone her, he would be in trouble with some group or another.

Of course, Jesus managed to get around that. He said, let him that is without sin cast the first stone at her. And therefore, they were not able to trap him.

But now he's got them in a situation like that. He says, now listen, tell me where John's baptism was from. Did John come with the authority of God or did he come with mere human authority? And they could not answer either way.

Not because they didn't have an opinion, but because they would be in trouble. And Jesus would have them at an advantage if they would say either one. And so they came back and said, we do not know.

Now, that was not an honest answer. They said, we do not know. They actually did know, or at least they thought they knew.

Either they knew in their heart of hearts that John's ministry was from heaven, but wouldn't admit it. Or else they really believed it wasn't and thought they knew that it wasn't, but they wouldn't say so. Their answer was not honest.

The reason they didn't answer him had nothing to do with not knowing. It had to do with not being willing to answer in a situation where it would give them a disadvantage in the debate. In other words, they pleaded ignorance when in fact they simply were not being honest.

Because they didn't like the consequences of admitting one way or the other what they knew or thought to be true. And Jesus said, neither then will I tell you by what authority I do these things. Now, they said, we don't know.

And he says, then I won't tell you either. He's saying, you say you don't know, but you really just won't tell. It wasn't, but they wouldn't say so.

Will I tell you? The idea here is that Jesus would not deal with people who weren't going to be honest with him. If they wouldn't commit themselves on the matter, then he wouldn't bother with them. He would not cast his pearls before a swine.

He wouldn't give them information that they could use against him. If they refused to give him the information that he could use against them. So, Jesus doesn't answer their question.

Because they're not honest men, they're not worthy of an answer. You know, in order to have your questions answered by God, you need to be honest with God. There are lots of things people want to know from God.

I've heard people say, well, I want to know what God is going to do about people who have never heard the gospel. Or, you know, I want to know how God can be a good God and still allow evil or suffering in the world. Or they want God to give them answers about things.

But God doesn't answer them. And in many cases, the reason is because they're not really being honest at all. God does not owe you any answers, but he delights to reveal himself to people who are of an honest and good heart.

But there are people who are not honest. They want information from God so that they can then critique it. I mean, as far as the question, you know, what is God going to do about people who have never heard the gospel? There may be some who honestly want to know an answer like that.

However, in most cases, that's not the case. They just want to try to find some fault with the doctrine that everyone needs to hear about Christ. And they want to make it seem like God's unfair if he condemns people who've never had a chance.

In most cases, if they were honest, they'd have to admit, it doesn't matter to me what God's going to do about those who haven't heard because I have heard. And therefore, I'm in a position that God's going to deal with me as a person who has heard. And it's irrelevant to me how he deals with those who haven't.

A lot of times people ask those kind of questions just to dodge the reality that they're on the hot seat with God. You know, well, you know, I don't want to accept the gospel, so I'll try to find some fault with the claims of the gospel like, you know, God would be unjust if he allowed people to go to hell who never heard the gospel. That's a dodge.

That's a side issue. Likewise, when people say, well, how can a good God allow evil in the world? Well, that's a little more honest, perhaps. I mean, a lot of people really would like to know that.

I would like to know more about that, too. However, a lot of people are waiting for God to give them an answer on that before they will honestly surrender to him and repent of the evil in their own lives. They're just not being honest with God.

They're trying to find excuses not to surrender to God. And they do so in the guise of saying, well, I need more information. I need God to explain something to me.

This is a question that puzzles me. I can't really believe until I get this answer. But the fact is they're not being honest.

They don't want an answer. They don't want to believe. They're just glad to have a question that seems unanswerable so that they can feel comfortable in their refusing to believe.

That is where the scribes and the Pharisees were at. They didn't want to believe. They didn't want to really know if Jesus was from God.

When they said, what authority do you do this by? Certainly they must have suspected he would say God's authority. And they wanted to hear him say it, but they didn't really want to know whether it was true. They wanted him to say it so they could find fault with him for saying it.

But they were not curious to find out if Jesus really was the Messiah, if he really was a prophet sent from God, if he really did have God's word for them that they should submit to and to obey. That's not what they wanted. And, therefore, Jesus put them in the position to have to either admit or not that God had already spoken through John the Baptist.

And if they wouldn't answer that honestly, then they didn't care enough about the truth to deserve it. The Bible says when people do not receive the love of the truth, it says this in 2 Thessalonians 2, that God sends them a strong delusion so that they'll believe a lie. It simply means that if the truth isn't important enough to you, then you don't deserve it.

God does not give the truth to those who take it lightly. Just like a woman would not very well give herself to a man who didn't take her seriously, didn't value her. Truth is a woman in Scripture.

Wisdom is a woman who is to be sought and to be valued. If it is not valued, it cannot be obtained. Now, the Pharisees were religious people who wanted to keep things going according to their religious system without the kinds of interruptions and problems that Jesus was causing them.

And the best they could hope for was that they'd find some way to discredit Jesus, some way to make him look bad in front of the people and prove that he was really not of God and therefore to kind of put him out of their mind and out of the public mind and get on with their business of their religion. Unfortunately, God has a way of interrupting our religion with confrontation. When we are not in the truth, the truth comes and it intrudes into our religion.

And we must be prepared to change our whole perception of things. Even if we've traditionally believed and practiced something, if we realize that God is coming with a new insight, that the truth is against us, then we need to be willing to humble ourselves and accept the truth for what it is. This, the chief priests were not willing to do.

There was too much at stake. Their whole life was their religion. And Jesus was bringing

truth their way, critiquing them.

And they were not willing to accept that critique. Instead, they tried to shoot the messenger and they eventually did crucify him. But he pointed out that their hypocrisy was just what it was and did not entitle them to an answer from him.

And God will not answer those who do not care to know and submit to the truth.