

Luke 20:1-19 Questions of Authority

If you pay attention to the news, you've probably seen reporters at a White House briefing firing questions at the president or at other government officials. Some reporters want to hear what the officials have to say about a certain issue; they are just collecting the facts. But other reporters—seems like most of them—ask questions in such a way as to trip up the officials or to make them say something controversial, for which they'll attack them later. They are not seeking information as much as they are laying traps for the officials in the hopes that they can discredit them.

Such tactics are nothing new. The Jewish religious leaders did the same thing to Jesus. But unlike many government officials, Jesus never fell into these traps. In fact, Jesus usually turned the threat around to show his own command of the situation.

Remember that we are looking at events of the Passion Week, the final days of Jesus. He had arrived in the area on Friday, rested on the Sabbath, and cleansed the temple on Monday. Today we're looking at something that happened on Tuesday of that week.

This exchange revolves around the concept of authority. The Jewish religious leaders question Jesus' authority in an effort to discredit him, but Jesus turns the tables and ends up discrediting them.

All of us should consider the importance of Jesus' authority. If God sent him, then there is no reason to reject him. If God sent him, all his claims are true. And if we say that we accept Jesus' authority, then we ought to live in a way that demonstrates that commitment.

Let's take a look at these questions of authority.

- I. .1 The Jewish religious leaders question Jesus' authority.
 - A. .1 Jesus had been teaching and preaching in the Temple.
 - B. The Jewish religious authorities "came upon him" and questioned his authority.
 1. The grammar here seems to suggest that the Jewish religious leaders were trying to catch Jesus off-guard. They came upon him suddenly, as if trying to intimidate him or surprise him.

2. The text mentions three classes of people—chief priests, scribes, and elders. It seems likely that the Sanhedrin—the supreme council of the Jews—has sent these officials.
 - a) Chief priests worked in the temple. They were administrators and overseers of Temple activities. The high priest would have come from this group.
 - b) Scribes were teachers of the law, both Pharisees and Sadducees.
 - c) Elders were political leaders, typically heads of the various clans or family units. These were the high status people, the nobles, the wealthy land owners, the leading citizens.
3. The Sanhedrin was made up of these three classes of people. So this looks like an official delegation representing the leadership of Israel. These were the highest, most authoritative people in the whole Jewish system.
4. To the average person, seeing this group of people descending upon you would have been very intimidating.
5. They arrive and show their opposition to what Jesus was doing. They are not simply looking for information about Jesus. Their intent was to destroy him.

Luke 19:47 *And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and **the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him...***

6. Their purpose in interviewing Jesus was to entrap him in his words, i.e., to entice him to say something embarrassing or disqualifying. You would think that by now the Jewish leaders would know better than to try to trap Jesus in his words. They had tried that several times but it had never worked previously. But they try it again.
7. .2 “By what authority...or who gave you this authority.”
 - a) What they are asking him about is the nature and source of his authority. Is he asserting his own inherent authority to do these things, or did someone else give him this authority?
 - b) What is authority? It’s the right to do something along with the power to do it.

- c) Authority was a big deal to the Jewish leaders. Authority for them came through attending the right schools and knowing the right people. In their minds, if you didn't have the proper credentials, you didn't have authority.

Quote: Every Rabbi had his diploma, every priest his ordination.¹

If you claimed to be a leader or a teacher, you had to go through the proper channels. You had to have the right credentials.

- d) The Sanhedrin held the religious authority within Israel. Even Jesus admitted that they “sat in Moses’ seat” (Mt 23:2) and that people should obey them.
- e) The members of the Sanhedrin are attempting to show that Jesus does *not* have the credentials to claim to be the Messiah. They want to shame him or discredit him before the people. No one should follow him if he didn't have valid authority.

- 8. Jesus was an outsider. He was not one of them. He was not a temple administrator, a recognized teacher of the law, or a wealthy nobleman. He was not trained under their leadership in their schools. They had not sent him or authorized him. Thus, they didn't recognize his authority. They want to cast doubt on his authority before the crowds so the people would turn away from him.
- 9. Remember that the Jewish leaders had already asserted that Jesus acted under the power of the devil (11:15). So they are not sincere in asking this question; their minds were already made up. For them, Jesus did not have proper authority.
- 10. .2 By “these things,” the leaders meant the events of the Triumphal Entry—entering the city with a large following of supporters, claiming to be the Messiah, cleansing the temple, healing the sick, and teaching in the Temple. Did he do this of his own initiative, or was he acting under the guidance of someone else?

¹ Farrar, quoted in Nicoll, *Expositor's Greek New Testament*, vol. 1, 611.

11. What was the intent of the question? They had already planned how they could discredit Jesus no matter how he answered.
- a) If Jesus said that he was doing these things of his own authority, they likely would have responded that he was nothing more than the illegitimate son of an obscure carpenter. He had no training or recognition from any authorities, so he had no personal authority. He didn't have any credentials.
 - b) None of them had authorized him to do any of this, so he could not claim that he had authority from the Jewish leaders. They could accuse him of rebellion against the Jewish authorities or against the nation itself if he doesn't have authorization from the recognized leaders.
 - c) If Jesus said that God had sent him, they would assert that *they* were God's representatives. God had put them into authority, not him. They sat in Moses' seat. As God's representatives, they had determined that God had not sent him.
 - d) So their intent was to ensnare him on the horns of a dilemma. No matter how he answered, they would criticize, accuse, and discredit him.

App: The Jewish religious leaders had a legitimate point. Authority is a big deal. If Jesus is not divinely authorized, then we don't have to listen to him. But if he is, then we must.

That would be true of anyone claiming to be a prophet or claiming to speak for God. In the OT, anyone claiming to be a prophet had to be 100% accurate in all he said. If his prophecies failed to come true, then he was exposed as a false prophet.

Today, we have the completed Bible. We don't believe that there are modern prophets and apostles who speak directly from God. Our primary authority is the Word of God. The Bible tells us to "preach the word." If someone claiming to be a spokesman for God does not speak in harmony with the Bible, we can safely ignore him.

Cf. Acts 17:11—the people searched the Scriptures daily to see if the speakers were telling the truth. That's what we need to do as well. We are responsible to prove all things and hold fast that which is good.

So we agree that authority is important. And we acknowledge that Jesus has authority because he was sent by God.

But Jesus didn't fall into the trap that the religious leaders had set for him.

- II. .3-4 Jesus responded to their question with his own question.
 - A. He recognizes that this is not a request for information. They are hostile to him, and they are trying to trap him in his words. But instead of falling into their trap, he lays a trap for them.
 - B. He doesn't refuse to answer their question; he just makes them answer a related question first.
 - C. .4 He asks about the authority of John the Baptist. There are only two options: Was John's authority from God or from men, divine or human?
 - 1. This was basically the same question they had asked him—what was the source and nature of John's authority? Did it come from within himself or did God send him?
 - 2. This is such a powerful question because John's ministry and Jesus' ministry were directly connected/linked. John was the forerunner of Jesus; he prepared the way of the Lord. So if you say that John was a divinely authorized prophet, then you'd have to acknowledge Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." You can't accept John without also accepting Jesus.
 - 3. So this question was theologically loaded.
- III. .5-6 The leaders quickly realize that they would be in trouble no matter how they answered. Now *they* were on the horns of a dilemma.
 - A. If they say that John's authority came from God, then they should have repented, believed his message, and been baptized. And they'd also have to believe in Jesus, because John pointed to Jesus as the Messiah.
 - B. If they say that John's authority was from men, they risk upsetting all the people who believed John was a genuine prophet. Remember that they were surrounded by people who believed in John. It was reasonable to be concerned about being stoned because most people were "persuaded that John was a prophet."

- C. The religious leaders did not approve of John; they didn't believe he had authority to do what he did, but they didn't want to say that out loud, lest they be stoned.
- D. Note vs. 6b “**they** be persuaded that John was a prophet.” The majority of the people believed in John, but the religious leaders did not. Likewise, Jesus had the support of the common people, but the religious leaders rejected him.
- E. And also notice that the religious leaders were most interested in protecting themselves, not affirming the truth. They didn't want to be forced to explain why they rejected John. They didn't want to face the anger of the crowd. So their main concern was protecting themselves, not finding the truth.

App: That's where many people are today. They don't want to deal with the truth. They don't want to deal with information that would upset their lives. So they defend their own ideas and ignore the truth—“My mind is made up; don't confuse me with the facts.”

- F. .7 The religious leaders quickly realize that they were in trouble no matter how they answered, so they refuse to answer the question. Actually, they tell a lie—“we cannot tell.” I.e., we don't know.
 - 1. As members of the Sanhedrin, they should have known; it was their business to know whether John was a true prophet or not. And in reality, they knew that John was a true prophet, but they refused to follow him in order to maintain their own authority.
 - 2. Had they been honest, they would have said, “We don't want to answer that question.” The way they answered shows their insincerity and hypocrisy.

App: It's a great shame when religious leaders are insincere, dishonest, and hypocritical. Like these men, some religious leaders are more concerned about keeping their power and position than about finding the truth. They don't care about the truth; they care about maintaining their own authority. Every so often, a religious leader is exposed as hypocritical and dishonest. Such people are disqualified for ministry.

God will hold us accountable for recognizing that Jesus had divine authority. If you have heard the Gospel message, then you can't claim that you don't know or cannot tell whether or not God sent Jesus. The evidence is plain. If you deny it, it's only because you don't want it to be true.

IV. .8 Because they refused to answer Jesus' question, Jesus refuses to answer their question.

- A. In truth, Jesus had already told the Jewish authorities many times by what authority he did these things. He had told them that God had sent him to do and say these things.
- B. And he had affirmed that he had his own authority to do these things.
- C. The unspoken assertion here is that Jesus had the same kind of authority that John did—God had sent him; he came “in the name of the Lord.” He was a genuine prophet, but the religious leaders rejected him, just like they rejected John.
- D. And so the effort to discredit Jesus before the people fails. They tried to trap him, and he ended up trapping them. Jesus had once again defeated their attempts to humiliate him. In fact, Jesus discredited them.

Quote Lenski: They had not expected to have their well-planned move against Jesus end so swiftly and calamitously for themselves.² They had to retreat without gaining anything.

App: People fail to see the truth because they don't want to see the truth. If Jesus really is sent from God, then I must follow him. People don't want to deal with the implications of Jesus' authority, so they just deny it. They don't deny it because it's not true; they deny it because they don't like the consequences of that truth.

Quote: Christ's opponents failed to see the truth because they hardened themselves against it. The reason why many people know so little about Jesus and about the joy of living the Christian life is that they refuse to submit themselves to his will.³

The Bible teaches that “men love darkness rather than light.” They would rather not consider Jesus' claims. It's easier just to disregard him and ignore his claims. But if God authorized Jesus, then we can't simply ignore what Jesus said. Jesus said that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. If that is true, then we must believe in him and obey his commands.

² Lenski, 975.

³ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 890.

How would you answer the question—where did Jesus get his authority? Was it from God or from some other source? Your eternal destiny hangs on how you answer. Every bit of evidence in the Bible proves that God sent Jesus into the world. God authorized Jesus to do everything he did. You can try to ignore that fact, but you really can't deny it. If it's true, then we must follow Jesus.

I trust that none of us are like the hypocritical, dishonest group of religious leaders that denied Jesus' authority. I hope that you are not like those who refuse to admit the truth. I trust that you recognize that Jesus' authority comes from God. John the Baptist was a true prophet of God and so was Jesus. In fact, the Bible tells us that Jesus was greater than John (Luke 3:16). We must believe both John and Jesus.

Jesus didn't answer the question about his authority, but we know the answer. God sent Jesus into the world; that's what gave him authority. And there is no higher form of authority. Salvation depends on recognizing that authority.

Phil 2:10-11 at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... And every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 2