

Luke 20:1-8

A Challenge to Authority

I think it is reasonable to suggest that most people struggle with authority. Whether that struggle is with authority itself, to the way in which authority is exercised, most people simply do not like being told what to do, what to say, or how to behave. It is a natural characteristic that comes from our pride. Enhanced by our sin nature, it is an ever-present element of human behavior.

But authority exists for a reason, and Scripture reminds us that “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Romans 13:1). Therefore, whether the authority is being exercised appropriately or not, or whether or not we feel that authority is valid, we are commanded to submit and obey.

Still, it is obvious that some authority is more well-founded than others. Rightly elected governments, for example, are easier to submit to than dictators who achieved power by usurpation. In terms of our faith, submission to authority ought to be easy, for we acknowledge a sovereign, loving God to Whom we owe absolute allegiance. But to those who do not believe, submission is seen as both foolish and unnecessary. To those who refuse to acknowledge the truth of Scripture, obedience to its authority is out of the question. Such our the times today, and such were the times of Christ. Despite His clear mandate to authority, Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders, and when He once again demonstrated that His authority came from the God Whom they claimed to worship, they had no answer.

Context

Luke begins this passage with the rather inconclusive “on one of the days” (v. 1). Though not definitive, it was quite likely the very next day after the confrontation in the temple. After all, the time was drawing close. His location is not recorded, but Jesus may have been in either the Stoa Basilica or Solomon’s Porch, both of which were popular areas of the temple grounds for teachers.

Jesus had triumphantly entered Jerusalem on a few days before. He had received the praise and adulation of thousands of people who claimed Him to be the future king of Israel, and the leader to Whom all good Jews looked to drive out the Roman oppressors. Then, Jesus had gone into the temple and challenged the ruling religious authorities by rebuking their handling of the sacrifices for Passover. When the dust from that had settled, He resumed what had been a frequent activity of His earthly ministry, “teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel” (v. 1). The content of His teaching is recorded by Luke in this chapter and the next.

Over the next few days, Jesus taught about the upcoming rejection of Himself as the Messiah and the consequences for those who did not believe. He talked about the proper relationship between the Jews of Israel and their Roman rulers. He spoke the truth about the resurrection - specifically challenging the false view of the Sadducees, who led the Sanhedrin. He taught about proper worship in the temple and the signs of the Messiah. Finally, He spoke of the future and of the return of the Messiah to establish His eternal dominion. In each of these areas, His teaching ran counter to the established doctrines of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.

No doubt Jesus also spoke of other things; Luke made no claim to have given an exhaustive report of all Jesus said or did. Jesus probably continued to emphasize the themes for which He had become known. He was surrounded by His disciples and probably many others who had come to listen to this demonstrative rabbi who had confronted the religious authorities in the temple the day before. The local religious authorities, however, were licking their wounds from the day before. It had not been a good day for them. Not only had this itinerant rabbi received the praise of the masses, but He had then disrupted their very lucrative Passover business.

But it was not so much what Jesus did that offended the religious leadership, though what He did certainly offended them very much. It was the way He had gone about it. He had not sought permission. He had not acknowledged the authority of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. He was within the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin, the great Jewish high council, and yet He had behaved as if He were still on His own out in the countryside. More than that, Jesus had continued to challenge their authority and undermine their leadership with what He taught. This was unacceptable, and the Jewish leaders could not allow it to continue.

The Challenge

As Jesus taught, there were those in the crowd who held back. For how long they listened before they came forward we are not told. Luke identified them as “the chief priests and the scribes with the elders” (v. 1). These three groups composed the main elements of the Sanhedrin. The chief priests were the ruling high priests of the temple. The group may have included the current chief priest, Caiaphas, as well as the previous chief priest, his father Annas. Others among them were other former and some probable future holders of that divine office. Usually these priests were Sadducees, since they had the political connections with the Roman authorities. They were entrusted with the care and maintenance of the temple, and had been those most directly offended by the actions of Jesus the day before.

The scribes were the workhorses of the Pharisees. They studied, interpreted, and taught the Law. They were experts in every detail and could find every possible loophole, when advantageous. Allied with the Pharisees, they had opposed Jesus from the very beginnings of His ministry, and Jesus had often confronted them in the past. ²⁹“And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’ ³¹And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick’” (Luke 5:29-31).

The group called elders represent a more general membership. In ancient Israel, it had referred to the head of one of the twelve tribes, or perhaps a division within a tribe. Eventually, every Jewish settlement boasted an elder, who generally oversaw Jewish life in the community. They were not priests, instead they served as the lay branch of the Sanhedrin. These three groups did not always agree on either theology or practice. But they did have one thing in common - they hated this rabbi Jesus.

Their hatred spilled out in the way they approached Jesus. Luke stated that they “confronted Him” (v. 1). The word refers to an act of suddenness. It implies the hostile intention of the aggressor. The same

description is given of the actions of the mob in Thessalonica when they attacked the home of Jason. “But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people” (Acts 17:5). The action of these men drips with desperation. Jesus, in His words and actions, had pushed them beyond what they could bear. Yet the crowds supported Him, and that made Him inviolable. At least for a time. To break the power of the crowds was the point of their attack.

These men could have been acting on their own, but more likely they were sent as emissaries of the Sanhedrin to assess the situation and, if they found an opening, challenge Jesus. They resorted to the same strategy they had used the first time Jesus cleansed the temple, at the beginning of His ministry. After that original confrontation, “the Jews then said to Him, ‘what sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?’” (John 2:18).

They asked the same question now. “Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?” (v. 2). Their desire was to embarrass Jesus. They wanted to place Him in the dilemma of having to either admit He was acting on His own authority, or that He was acting as an agent of God and appropriating God’s authority to himself. If he admitted that He acted on His own authority, He would be guilty of operating outside of the Jewish law and the people would lose respect for Him. If He claimed to be acting as God’s special agent, He would be guilty of blasphemy, since only the Jewish authorities could vouch for someone acting as a prophet of God. Either way, the Jewish leaders believed that they controlled the situation.

Ironically, the word used for ‘authority’ combined two terms that equally and thoroughly describe the complete primacy of Jesus Christ over all things. The first, *dunamis*, is a word that emphasized power and ability. The second, *exousia*, implied the concept of right or privilege. That is, they wanted to know if Jesus not only had power to do what He did, but the absolute right to exercise that power as He saw fit as well.

“These things” must refer not only to the cleansing of the temple, though it certainly meant that, but also to the triumphal entry earlier where Jesus accepted the plaudits of the masses and did not deny their claim that He was the rightful king of the line of David. It likely also included the healings He continued to do at the temple where, as Matthew described, “the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them” (Matthew 21:14).

The Counter

Jesus did not try to avoid the confrontation. But He did not directly answer the question either. Instead, “³Jesus answered and said to them, ‘I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me - ⁴was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?’” (v. 3-4). Jesus reversed the situation. They had tried to place Him in an impossible situation, so He returned the favor.

This was a common strategy in discussions among rabbi. Frequently, when challenged, the best response was to answer a question with a question. Jesus, Himself, had often done this.

²¹The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, ‘Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?’ ²²But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, ‘why are you reasoning in your hearts? ²³Which is easier, to say, “your sins have been forgiven you,” or to say, “get up and walk?” ²⁴But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’ - He said to the paralytic - ‘I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home’” (Luke 5:21-24).

³³And they said to Him, ‘the disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.’ ³⁴And Jesus said to them, ‘you cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days’” (Luke 5:33-35).

²But some of the Pharisees said, ‘why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ ³And Jesus answering them said, ‘have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, ⁴how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?’ ⁵And He was saying to them, ‘the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’” (Luke 6:2-5).

¹⁵But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.’ ¹⁶Others, to test Him, were demanding of Him a sign from heaven. ¹⁷But He knew their thoughts and said to them, ‘any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls. ¹⁸If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges. ²⁰But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are undisturbed. ²²But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder. ²³He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters’” (Luke 11:15-23).

It is important to notice that Jesus was not evading the question. If His adversaries had answered His question, they would also have answered their own. It is also important to reflect that Jesus spoke highly of John the Baptist. Remember His commendation of John to the people, “I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). Neither ought we to overlook or discount his ministry. After all, it was the ministry and teaching of John the Baptist that left the Jews without excuse when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

The aggressors were now on the defensive. And they knew it. ⁵They reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, “from heaven,” He will say, why did you not believe him?’ ⁶But if we say, “from men,” all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet’” (v. 5-6). They understood their predicament perfectly. They had to either acknowledge that John the Baptist was a true prophet, and thereby admit that Jesus was the Messiah whom John had proclaimed, or they had to

argue that John the Baptist was a false prophet and thereby incur the wrath of the crowd who had believed in him.

Faced with this choice, they choose not to answer. They simply stated that “that they did not know where it came from” (v. 7). They feigned ignorance. This was a desperate act. For the religious leaders to admit that they had no knowledge of whether or not someone was a true prophet was to admit ignorance and vulnerability. Yet, it seemed the best choice under the circumstances.

But was it that they could not tell, or was it that they would not tell? Clearly, the truth was evident, but they refused to acknowledge it. We must agree that people will say anything rather than admit they are wrong. Think of Ananias and Sapphira.

“¹But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ²and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’ ⁵And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it” (Acts 5:1-5).

There is much dishonesty in religion, and we must be on our guard.

The Condemnation

Jesus had the last word in the confrontation. For three years He had preached the kingdom of God. For three years, He had performed sign and miracles to affirm the truth of His claims to be the Messiah. For three years, the opportunity to believe and follow had been available to all who heard. The Jewish people had received all the light they could possibly have needed. No more evidence was required, therefore nor more evidence would be given. As Jesus succinctly stated, “nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things” (v. 8). He simply ended the conversation and went back to teaching those who would genuinely listen.

There are many attributes of God that are infinite. His patience, however, is not one of them. There is a time to believe, and a time when the opportunity to believe will have passed. Such had been the case throughout the entire history of the Jewish people.

“Then the Lord said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” (Genesis 6:3).

“But they rebelled
And grieved His Holy Spirit;
Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy,
He fought against them” (Isaiah 63:10).

“However, You bore with them for many years,
And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets,
Yet they would not give ear.
Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands” (Nehemiah 9:30).

“⁷For I solemnly warned your fathers in the day that I brought them up from the land of Egypt, even to this day, warning persistently, saying, ‘listen to My voice.’ ⁸Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked, each one, in the stubbornness of his evil heart; therefore I brought on them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not. . . .¹¹Therefore thus says the Lord, ‘behold I am bringing disaster on them which they will not be able to escape; though they will cry to Me, yet I will not listen to them’” (Jeremiah 11:7-8, 11).

And now, that time had come for these Jewish leaders.

The Authority of Jesus

We are faced with the same option that Jesus gave the “the chief priests and the scribes with the elders.” We must either acknowledge that Jesus has authority and respond by obedience and submission, or we can assume that authority for ourselves. Scripture leaves no doubt as to the authority of Jesus. He claimed absolute authority of Himself while on earth, when He “came up and spoke to them [His disciples], saying, ‘all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth’” (Matthew 28:18).

Jesus has authority in Himself. “²⁸When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; ²⁹for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28-29).

He has authority over the natural world. “²²Now on one of those days Jesus and His disciples got into a boat, and He said to them, ‘let us go over to the other side of the lake.’ So they launched out. ²³But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended on the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger. ²⁴They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, ‘Master, Master, we are perishing!’ And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. ²⁵And He said to them, ‘where is your faith?’ They were fearful and amazed, saying to one another, ‘Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?’” (Luke 8:22-25).

He has authority over the spiritual world. “³³In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴‘let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are - the Holy One of God!’ ³⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘be quiet and come out of him!’ And when the demon had thrown him down in the midst of the people, he came out of him without doing him any harm. ³⁶And amazement came upon them all, and they began talking with one another saying, ‘what is this message? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out’” (Luke 4:33-36).

He has authority over death. ¹²Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘do not weep.’ ¹⁴And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, ‘young man, I say to you, arise!’ ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother” (Luke 7:12-15).

He has the authority to forgive sin. ¹⁸And some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of Him. ¹⁹But not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. ²⁰Seeing their faith, He said, ‘friend, your sins are forgiven you.’ ²¹The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, ‘Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?’” (Luke 5:18-21).

He has the authority to save. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).

He has the authority to judge. ²²For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, ²³so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:22-23).

Takeaways

Jesus is the Son of God, sent by God the Father for the redemption of those who believe. As such, He has all authority, and there is a time to acknowledge that and to submit to His Lordship in our lives. That time is now. ¹²Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12-13).