

True Authority

Mark 12:35-44

“Who gave You the authority to do these things?” That’s what the chief priests and the scribes and the elders asked Jesus in chapter 11 after He had thrown the moneychangers out of the Temple. In response, up to this point in chapter 12, Jesus told them a parable about a vinedresser, talked about Roman coinage, and recalled the story of the burning bush.

So, why did Jesus answer His critics in such a roundabout way? Why didn’t He just come out and assert His divine authority? Perhaps He first wanted them to examine the real source of authority in their own lives. Maybe that’s why He pointed to the hunger for personal power and authority that was really driving the religious leaders. Maybe that’s why He indicated the hypocrisy and foolishness of the nationalists who used Roman coins all the while plotting against the Emperor whose picture was stamped on them. Maybe that’s why He showed the wealthy and powerful Sadducees that even the five books of Moses call people to live lives of holiness and devotion, to live for the God Who is the God of the living.

In other words, up to this point in chapter 12, Jesus has indicated why each group of His critics really wasn’t living in a right relationship to the authorities they already recognized: either God or the Emperor or the Scriptures. So if that was the case, how could they be ready to hear the truth about Jesus’ authority? Why should they be any more successful in bowing the knee to their true Messiah?

But in today’s passage, Jesus goes further, pointing out one more reason why He hadn’t directly claimed to be the Messiah, at least not yet. For his listeners not only had great difficulty living under the authorities they already acknowledged. No, they were also completely mistaken about what the coming Messiah was supposed to be and to do. That’s why Jesus first needed to correct their expectations before revealing His true identity.

And so, Jesus tries to get his listeners to think anew about what manner of Messiah the Scriptures had told them to expect. And He does this by pointing to Psalm 110, one of the clearest Old Testament prophecies of the coming Son of David, written by David himself.

And it’s precisely that relationship between the Messiah and David the King that Jesus tries to get His listeners to understand more clearly. For of course the Messiah had to be a descendant of David. After all, the Lord had promised David that he would never fail to have a descendant to sit on his throne and reign over God’s people forever and ever (II Samuel 7:16). Every Jew thus knew that the coming Messiah would be the Son of David, and naturally expected Him to reign in much the same way that David did.

And in Psalm 110, David does describe the Messiah as a powerful military ruler. He speaks of the rod of His strength, of Him ruling in the midst of His enemies. He speaks of His armies gathered in the day of His power, appearing with the suddenness and abundance of the dew on the grass in the morning.

Yes, the Jews expected their Messiah to rule over the Promised Land of Israel in power and might, in much the same way as David had done. But Jesus shows his listeners that their Messiah would do much more than that. For Psalm 110 speaks of the Messiah ruling not just over Israel, and not even just over the Roman Empire, but over all the kings, over all the heathen, the unbelieving nations, bringing justice to every country in the world. The Messiah’s coming kingdom would thus overshadow David’s kingdom, dwarfing it by comparison.

But the difference between the Messiah and David is even greater than that. For Psalm 110 speaks of the Messiah not only as a King, but as a priest: a priest not in the line of Levi, but after the order of Melchizedek, who had reigned over Jerusalem but had also been a priest of the Most High God in the days of Abraham. Now, King David was never a priest, but according to Psalm 110, the Messiah would be both king and priest like Melchizedek. He would thus be much greater than David was.

But the Messiah would not only be a greater king than David was. He would not only be a priest as David never could be. No, Psalm 110 goes so far as to say that the Messiah would also be divine, exercising all authority in heaven and on earth while seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, to use the words of the Apostles’

Creed. It is because the Messiah's reign would be truly cosmic that David rightly addresses his descendant as his Lord.

It is this paradox – how David's son could also be David's Lord – to which Jesus draws his listeners' attention. But they never understood what He was trying to tell them. In fact, not even Jesus' closest friends could begin to imagine what sort of Messiah He really was. That's why they all abandoned Him at the end of the same week during which He had ridden into Jerusalem with such pomp and popularity. For you see, the Jerusalem crowd, the religious leaders, and even Jesus' disciples just couldn't let go of their tiny ideas of a tiny Messiah. They couldn't embrace the mind-shattering reality that God was planning for them. And so, far from bowing the knee to Jesus' rightful authority, they ended up crucifying the Son of David, even though He was much more powerful and more wonderful than David could ever have hoped to be.

But let's face it: we modern Christians know all that. We know that Jesus' kingdom is much larger than the nation-state of Israel or even the whole Mediterranean World. We know that Jesus is our great High Priest, whose death on the cross opens the way for us to be adopted into the very family of God. We know that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, and that one day all His enemies will be placed under His feet, and that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Him to be the Messiah, the Lord, God Almighty. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we know all this to be true without a shadow of a doubt. So, what can we learn from this riddle that He posed to his perplexed opponents?

Well, first let's remember the reason that Jesus didn't openly confess His identity in chapter 11: His listeners weren't ready for it. They hadn't responded well to God, or to earthly rulers or to God's Word in the past. And once Jesus did reveal Himself as Messiah they confirmed their rebellious nature by crucifying Him. Since Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah they wanted, they rejected Him.

So what does that mean for us? It means that the most important question in chapters 11 and 12 isn't "Who is Jesus?" It isn't even, "What kind of Messiah is Jesus?" Those questions about Jesus' identity are relatively easy to ask and answer, for they deal with matters of mere factual information. No, the more difficult question for Jesus' listeners in chapters 11 and 12 is also the one that is still before all of us today: "How will I respond to Jesus' authority?"

But again, we Evangelical Presbyterians have already answered that, haven't we? We believe the truth of Scripture and of the Westminster Standards. We've already acknowledged Jesus to be our Lord and Savior. And by joining the Church we have committed ourselves to follow Him.

But as we move on into today's passage, we discover that the crucial test of our relationship to Jesus isn't in what we say or in what we believe. No, the way we prove Jesus' authority over us is by how we live our lives.

And in verses 38-44, Jesus presents us with two possible options for living, by pointing out two examples which could be seen in the Temple where He was preaching. First, he directs our attention to one of the scribes, standing no doubt in a very prominent place in a long flowing robe. These scribes were honored for their immense knowledge of the Bible, and they were expected, in fact, to use that knowledge to settle disputes, much as a judge does in a courtroom today. They were, without a doubt, considered to be pillars of the community.

But in verse 38 Jesus points to this scribe, this supremely knowledgeable and respectable person and says, "Beware." Why? Because of what people like the scribes desire, and because of what they do.

For what does Jesus say is the real focus their lives? Sure, they know a lot about the Word of God, but that doesn't mean that God is the most important person to them. Oh no, they are actually more interested in taking care of themselves, aren't they? Their focus is really on the perquisites that go along with their education and their position: the respectful greetings, the dinner invitations, the seats of honor in the synagogues. What really drives them isn't piety, but pride and profit.

And it is their pride that allows them so easily to turn on the very people who look to them for wise counsel. Now, we're not exactly sure what Jesus means when He accuses the scribes of "devouring widow's houses," precisely because they had so many opportunities to abuse the trust others placed in them. Sometimes

they were appointed as the executors of poor widows' estates, so it would have been easy to charge an exorbitant administrative fee. Or they could have made a habit of calling on poor folks at dinnertime, knowing that common courtesy and social deference would prevent even unwilling hosts from turning them away.

In short, it doesn't really matter how the scribes abused their influence. No, the important point is that even while they were making such a big show of their learning, offering long and pious prayers in public, they were only really interested in what they could get out of the deal. Yes, they knew all the right things and said all the right things, but they didn't really care about God, and they really didn't care about helping other people. All they cared about was themselves. So, no matter how they looked or what they said, they weren't living under the authority of God at all. Instead, they were living as if they were a law unto themselves.

Surely, such selfish, proud religiosity wasn't just a problem for the knowledgeable, respectable people of Mark's time. Surely that's a danger of which all of us oh-so-respectable modern Presbyterians need to beware as well.

But Jesus shows us another way of living, pointing to yet another example his listeners could see in the Temple. But His selection was once again surprising: not only was she a woman, and thus not well-respected by the ancient world. She was also a widow, which in those days meant that she was doomed to a life of poverty unless she had sons or other male relatives to look after her.

So, why does Jesus find this obviously helpless woman's example so admirable? Because even though the sum total of her worldly wealth was only two mites – two tiny copper coins which put together were worth no more than a quarter in today's money – she put both in the offering box in the Temple. In short, she gave everything she had to the Lord. And that's why it is this poor, helpless widow, not the proud, self-centered scribe, that Jesus holds up for our approval.

Yes, both performed an act of public piety: one praying and one giving an offering. But while the scribe was busy burnishing his reputation, this poor widow was just as busy giving away all her worldly wealth. While the scribe was trusting in his power and prominence to provide for him, this poor widow emptied herself, casting herself completely on God's mercy and grace. While the scribe was obviously living under his own authority, this widow was just as obviously living under the authority of God.

Now, is Jesus really calling all of us to go as far as she did? Well, how did Jesus summarize the whole Law of Moses in the verses immediately before today's passage? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. Oh, and you shall also love your neighbor as yourself" – just as much and in the same way that you love yourself.

Now, we can try to minimize the meaning of Jesus' command, debating how much we ought to give of ourselves to God and to others, and in what ways. We can try to walk back the shocking nature of Jesus' call to radical discipleship. We can frown on fanaticism and object to extremism and insist that we must keep religious things in their proper perspective, lest they intrude too much on the comfortable lives we have created for ourselves.

But when you get right down to it, all means all. So, if we are just trying to see how much we can get away with, or how much fun or pleasure we can hold onto, or how much of our stuff we can keep, aren't we a lot more like that self-centered scribe than that faithful widow? And if Jesus didn't think that poor widow was a fanatic, if He didn't think she was an extremist for giving away all she had, how much of our time, our talents and our treasure can it really be right for us to hold back from God?

Sure, we modern Presbyterians know all the right answers. We know Who Jesus is. We know He didn't just come to be the military ruler of the Promised Land, or even the whole Roman Empire. We know Jesus is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, just like David describes in Psalm 110. And we know Jesus is our Great High Priest, the One Who paid the penalty for all our sins by shedding His blood for us on the cross. We know He's not only the Son of David, but also the Son of God.

We know all that. But will we live like those things are true? Will we bow the knee before His authority in every aspect of our lives? Will we give ourselves – all we are and all we have – completely to Him? Or will we be the kind of proud, self-centered religious people of which Jesus has to warn others to beware?