

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 Him in chapter 11 after Jesus had thrown the moneychangers out of the Temple. In response, up to this point in chapter 12, Jesus has told a parable about a vinedresser, talked about Roman coinage, and has recalled the story of the burning bush.

Why does He answer His critics in such a roundabout way? Why doesn’t Jesus just come out and assert His divine authority? He first wants to examine the real source of authority in their own lives. That’s why He points to the hunger for personal power and authority that is driving the religious leaders. That’s why He indicates the hypocrisy and foolishness of the nationalists who use Roman coins all the while plotting against the Emperor whose picture is stamped on them. That’s why He shows 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 isn’t living in a right relationship to the authorities they already recognize, either God or the Emperor or the Scriptures. So if that’s 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. Now, he points out another reason why He doesn’t directly claim to be the Messiah – at least not yet. For his listeners not only have great difficulty living under the authorities they have – they are also completely mistaken about what their coming Messiah is supposed to be and to do. And so, if Jesus were to come right out and claim to be the Messiah, He would simply be setting them up for disappointment, unless He can first correct their expectations.

And so, Jesus tries to get his listeners to think anew about what manner of Messiah the Scriptures have 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.

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 is to be a descendant of David. God 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. Every Jew thus knew that the coming Messiah would be the Son of David, and thus expected Him to reign in much the same way that David did.

And Psalm 110 obviously describes the Messiah as this sort of powerful military ruler. It speaks of the rod of His strength, of Him ruling in the midst of His enemies. It 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, much 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 nations, bringing justice to every country in the world. The Messiah's coming kingdom will 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, the priest who had reigned over Jerusalem and who had blessed Abraham when he returned victorious from battle. David was never a priest, but the Messiah will be both king and priest like Melchizedek – He will thus be much greater than David was.

But not only will the Messiah be a greater king than David was. Not only will the Messiah be a priest as David never could be. The Messiah will also be divine, as the first verse of Psalm 110 points out. The Messiah will exercise 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. The Messiah's reign will be truly cosmic, so far above that of David that David rightly addresses his descendant as his Lord.

It is this paradox – how David's son could be David's Lord – to which Jesus draws his listeners' attention. But they never understood it – 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. The 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 crucified the Son of David for being greater 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 the Mediterranean World. We know that He 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 He 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 that every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, God Almighty. We've read the end of the story. We've looked into the empty tomb. So, what can we learn from this riddle that Jesus 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? 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. Those are matters of mere information. No, the more difficult question for Jesus' listeners in chapters 11 and 12 is also the one that is still before us today: "How will I respond to Jesus' authority?"

But again, we Christians have already answered that, haven't we? We've already bowed the knee to Jesus' authority, haven't we? We know all the answers to the key theological questions, and we believe the truth of all the important Creeds and Confessions.

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 even in what we know. 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, pointing to 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 pillars of the community.

But in verse 38 Jesus points to this supremely 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 of these men's 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 more interested in taking care of themselves. They are interested in 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 it is that pride that allows them so easily to turn on the very people who look to them for wise counsel. 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 placed in them. Sometimes they were appointed as the executors of poor widows' estates – how easy it would be to charge an exorbitant administrative fee! Or maybe they just made a habit of

calling on poor folks at dinnertime, knowing that common courtesy and social deference would prevent them from being turned away.

It doesn't really matter how the scribes abused their influence – the important point is that even while they were making such a big show of their learning, offering long and pious prayers in public, all they were really interested in is what they could get out of the deal. Sure, 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 – they were living as if they were a law unto themselves. Surely, that wasn't just a problem for the religious, respectable people of Mark's time.

But then Jesus points out another option for us, another model of living under authority, someone else who had come into the Temple. But here was a surprise: not only was she a woman, and thus not well-respected by the ancient world. She was also a helpless widow – after all, in those days when a woman's husband died, 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 woman's example so impressive? 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 giving all she had, it is this poor widow, and not the proud scribe, that Jesus holds up for our approval.

For could the two be any more different? Both performed a public act of piety – one praying and one giving an offering. But while the scribe was busy seeking his own selfish gain, this poor widow was just as busy giving away everything she had. While the scribe was trusting in his power and prominence to provide for him, this poor widow emptied herself, cast 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.

Look, we can talk all day long about how far we have to go truly to acknowledge God's authority in our daily lives. We can analyze what it really means to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, what it really means to love our neighbors as ourselves, the summary of the Law Jesus taught us in last week's passage. We can debate about 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.

But if we are just trying to see how much we can get away with, or how much fun or pleasure we can have, or how much of our stuff we can keep, aren't we a lot more like that selfish scribe? 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 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 He's the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, just like Psalm 110 says. And we know He's our Great High Priest, the One Who paid the penalty for all our sins by shedding His blood for us on the cross. And we know He's the Son of God.

We know all that – but will we live like those things are true? Will we truly acknowledge His authority in our lives? Will we give ourselves completely to Him?