

Ultimate Authority

Matt. 21:18-27

Intro. My name is Dean Stewart and I approve the content of that video. It's been our policy as a church to refrain from endorsing candidates for office. Despite all that's at stake in the upcoming election, we won't depart from that policy. I can't think of a more effective way to divide a church than to take sides politically. At the core of the election process is the right each citizen has to choose which party and which candidates will have authority over us all. This is an awesome privilege and responsibility we should take seriously and there's nothing noble about sitting it out. As recent history has proved, our lives and our society are enormously affected by decisions made by the Supreme Court justices chosen by those we elect into office. So, our leadership is in full agreement with the recorded challenge you just saw from David Barton. Because we are people under God's rule, I urge you to prayerfully consider the policies each party represents and then vote with conscience and discernment. We make voter guides available, not to promote a party or candidate, but to inform you where the candidates stand with regard to issues that matter to God and to the welfare of our nation.

Having said that, let's turn our thoughts to the authority of Jesus Christ. There is no king like Jesus, Amen? No one is more righteous or worthy to rule over us than the One who made us. No one has the power or moral authority to set things right in this world. So I vote for Jesus Christ! Rom. 8 says the whole creation is eagerly waiting for the moment of His return.

The predominant theme in **Matt. 21** is the authority of Jesus. By the manner of His Triumphal Entry, He demonstrated His right to receive worship and praise as Israel's king. He then displayed authority to cleanse His temple and authority over all sorts of sickness and infirmity. Earlier Jesus displayed authority over the demonic realm / over the Law of Moses / over the realm of nature / as well as authority to forgive sins. By raising the dead, Jesus proved His authority over life and death. Because Jesus Christ is Lord over all, His authority is absolute and irresistible. The exercise of His authority is immediate and not subject to approval from anybody. He has permission to act without permission. As the chapter unfolds we find the religious establishment challenging His authority.

Students of organizational theory define authority according to its source, or where it came from. For example...a king has "*inherited authority*" by virtue of his birth into a royal family. The president of a corporation exercises "*delegated authority*" conferred on him by a board of directors. A university professor has "*achieved authority*" based on his/her years of academic preparation, research and experience. A "*man of the house*" has every ounce of authority...his wife lets him have. But in each case, the source of authority is external...it comes from outside the person who is given an office. We're told in the NT that God the Father has vested all authority in His Son. Jesus Christ is both the authority and the source of authority because He is the unique Son of God...God in human form. In **Matt. 28:18** Jesus said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**"

1. The authority of Jesus demonstrated by a parable – vs. 18, 19 - Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

Figs and fig trees were common in the Israel and had long been Israel's national symbol. Before the Jews entered the Promised Land the Lord said it is **a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey.** - **Deut. 8:8** Through Zechariah the Lord promised Messiah would come and remove the sins of the land in a single day. Then as a token of the peace and tranquility that will follow, He said, "**In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,' declares the LORD Almighty.**" - **Zech. 3:9, 10.**

Sprawling fig trees often grew to a height and diameter of 20'. They were a favorite spot for relaxing and a natural place to meet with friends. They were the Tim Horton's of the ancient world. You may remember that Jesus first saw Nathanael as he was seated beneath a fig tree. (**Jn. 1:48**)

Fig trees normally bear fruit twice a year but in lower elevations they can bear fruit as many as three times. According to Mark, it wasn't the main season for figs when this event happened. (**Mk.11:13**) But Jesus saw leaves on this tree. Since fig blossoms and young figs appear before the leaves, this tree should have had fruit, but it didn't. When Jesus cursed the tree it withered immediately. Mark says the disciples passed the tree the next day and were amazed to find how quickly the fig tree had withered from the roots up. **Mk. 11:21** says, **Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"**

When Jesus cursed the fig tree He symbolically demonstrated His Christ's authority to judge. The cursed fig tree was a picture of the judgment coming on Israel. A fruitful tree was a symbol of blessing and prosperity but a withered tree represented God's judgment. In the parable created here, the fig leaves represent the Jewish religion and the many ways they outwardly appeared to have respect for God. But their religion was all pretense, ceremony and show. In the sight of God who inspects our lives and tests our hearts, the nation was barren and fruitless. Throughout the Bible, fruit symbolizes righteousness / praise / and the goodness God produces in lives where He is present. Earlier in **Matt. 7:16-20** Jesus said, **By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.**

Jesus didn't curse this tree because it had no fruit. He cursed the tree because it should have had fruit, but didn't. Its leaves advertised fruit, but it had none. This fruitless tree was just like Israel's leaders. They were hypocrites. They made great claims but had nothing of substance to offer God or the people they served. We see the same metaphor in Jude where false teachers are described as **clouds without rain** and **autumn trees without fruit**. (**Jude 12**) What they promote and promise, they can't deliver. So despite Israel's glorious Temple / despite their sacrifices and elaborate ceremonies / despite their priests dressed in flowing robes...the nation was spiritually barren. Their religion was all show and no substance. Their worship was vain and heartless.

And the travesty exposed here is present still today. This is how it is with so much that happens in Christ's name...it's leafy but fruitless and barren. When Jesus returns He will expose and judge the sham and hypocrisy of many. This is what He meant in **Matt. 7:21-23** when He said, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"** So the lesson we from the parable of the fig tree is this...religion isn't what God approves, respects, blesses or rewards. Fruitfulness is only possible in people and churches where hearts are converted. Fruitfulness is only possible in those who acknowledge their sin and trust Christ to save them. Jesus is the One who produces the fruit of righteousness and He produces it from the inside out. But apart from a living relationship with Him, we can do or produce nothing of eternal value. Jesus said that in **Jn.15:5!**

The effect of Christ's curse on this tree was supernatural and sudden. It was a picture of what would soon happen to Israel and a picture of what will happen when Christ returns to judge the nations. Hypocrisy and the fruitlessness of religion will be exposed. Jesus will cleanse His planet just as He cleansed His Temple and no one will be able to resist Him.

The warning had already been thundered by John the Baptizer who said, **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. - Matt. 3:8-10**

Good fruit is defined in the NT as righteousness or the fruit of a life that is transformed by the grace of God. The fruit God approves is not something anyone can manufacture or replicate...it's the result of God's presence and power working in and through us. Without Him our lives and worship is fruitless.

2. The authority of Jesus delegated by prayer - vs. 20-22 - When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked. Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

The disciples were blown away by how **quickly** the fig tree withered. We're not sure how old the white oak tree was that stood where our narthex is now. The diameter of its trunk was 49". When that tree fell, the earth shook. But the leaves of that fallen tree remained green for days. They gradually dried up, withered and turned brown. But it wasn't that way for this fig tree. The tree's leaves withered **immediately**. The next day the tree was obviously dead and the disciples were amazed it happened so quickly. The demise of this tree was supernatural. It was a picture of the sudden devastation that came in 70 AD when the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. God sent those invaders to punish His people. In **Lk.19:43, 44** Jesus said, **"The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."** Yet aside from the judgment God sent in 70 AD, the sudden demise of the fig tree is a picture of a coming worldwide judgment known in Scripture as the Day of the Lord. **I Thess. 5:3** says, **While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.**

Jesus drew a secondary application from this event. Amazed by what happened to the tree, He told His disciples that His power and authority working in them could result in miracles even greater and more impressive than this. He said, **if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."** Mountains were symbolic of significant obstacles. Yet here Jesus taught the importance of faith and how everything is possible when believers pray in faith.

This kind of mountain-moving faith is defined throughout the NT and it must be clarified and based on everything the NT teaches, not just a single verse. The believing prayer spoken of here isn't the same as rubbing a magic lamp / positive thinking / or faith in faith. In the first place, this kind of prayer involves unreserved faith in God and His power to do **immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... - Eph. 3:20**. Secondly, this prayer of faith isn't selfish or greedy. **Jas. 4:3** says, **When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.** It's not the sort of "God-do-for-me-prayer" so often launched when we lust after something we don't have. Instead, the prayer of faith asks for God's will to be done, not our will. **I Jn. 5:14** says, **This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.** In **Jn. 14:13, 14** Jesus condensed what this kind of prayer boils down to.

And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. To ask *in Jesus' name* isn't the same as tacking His name on the end of our prayers as we often do. To ask **in Jesus' name** means to place ourselves under His authority when we pray. His name signifies His Lordship and all that He is. The prayer of faith is prayer that is aligned with God's principles and purposes. So when these verses are combined we learn that Christ's power and authority to accomplish great things (even things that seem impossible), is available to those whose lives are right with God / to those who believe without doubting / to those whose motives are pure and unselfish / and to those whose will is less important than His. In years gone by, godly men and women called this, "*being on praying ground.*" It's what the NT means when it speaks of praying **in faith** or praying **in the Spirit.** (Eph. 6:18) The authority and power of Jesus is activated in the lives of those who trust Him this way.

3. The authority of Jesus denied by the priests – vs. 23-27 - Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism--where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

This episode is part of a longer section that runs through **22:46**...a section that includes all sorts of controversies that happened in the temple courtyard during the Passion Week. Here in **vs. 23-27** the priests and other officials questioned Jesus' authority. Now remember, authority is defined by its source or where it came from. So these religious leaders asked, **By what authority are you doing these things?... "And who gave you this authority?"** When they asked **by what authority**, their question related to the whole scope of things Jesus had been doing...His miracles / His teachings / and particularly, the tables He overturned in the Temple. It's significant that no one denied the miracles Jesus performed and no one denied the authoritative manner of His teaching. These leaders had seen Jesus do greater miracles than anyone had ever done in Israel! Yet still they refused to believe in Him. Still they refused to embrace Him as their Messiah. As we've said so often, believing in God and trusting Jesus is a matter of the will. No amount of information or evidence can convince a person who stubbornly refuses to admit their sin and accept their need of Him.

As Jesus often did when answering questions, He answered their question with a question. And notice, He struck a deal with them. He said, **If you answer me (or the question I ask you) I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.** So here's what Jesus asked them... "**John's baptism**—(or John's authorization to preach and baptize people) **Where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?**" The question prompted a sidebar...a conference. (They should have "phoned a friend") **v. 25** says, **They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'** They were caught in a dilemma. If they said John was authorized by heaven (which means he was sent by God), they would indict themselves for not believing his call to repent. And if John was the one God sent to prepare the way of the Lord, as Malachi prophesied, they should have embraced Jesus, the One for whom John prepared the way. In other words, they should have embraced Jesus as their Messiah. But that wasn't about to happen. Their minds were made up. Jesus didn't fit the profile of the political revolutionary type Messiah they wanted or were looking for.

On the other hand, they were in deep trouble if they said John's authority came from men. **v. 26 - But if we say, 'From men'--we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."**

The average person on the street was convinced that John was a heaven-sent prophet. If these leaders said John was anything less than that, they would anger the people and lose favor with them. To dismiss John as an ordinary prophet would be like saying Miguel Cabrera is just an average baseball player. Anybody heard saying that around Tiger Town is asking for trouble.

So, the priests and religious officials were in a bind. They couldn't say John's authority came from God and they couldn't say it came from men. Finding no other option, in unison they shrugged their shoulders and said, **"We don't know."** This lame answer exposed their hearts and turned their own words into an indictment because those who were responsible to know didn't know. Those who had the Scriptures which pinpoint the Messiah's identity were without excuse for not knowing. According to the deal, Jesus said, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."** Because these men refused to accept truth that was so evident, Jesus refused to give them any more. His response to these religious men illustrates an important principle that goes like this...*If human beings respond in faith to the light they're given...God will give them more light. But if human beings reject the light they're given...God is under no obligation to provide any more and He may not..*

Later this same week when Jesus was on trial and questioned by the High Priest, Caiaphas, Jesus kept silent. He refused to give further testimony. - **Matt. 26:63** Then when Pilate asked Jesus to respond to the accusations of the chief priests and elders, He **made no reply, not even to a single charge--to the great amazement of the governor.** - **Matt. 27:14** Jesus demonstrated the principle we're talking about. God has grace and truth for every human being. But when these are refused, God may refrain from giving any more. Today, when a person stubbornly refuses to listen to God's truth and receive His grace, the Lord may withdraw Himself. In Noah's day the Lord said, **"My Spirit will not contend with man forever..."** - **Gen. 6:3** Later, when the Egyptian Pharaoh hardened his heart in the presence of God's servant / God's message / and many supernatural miracles, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. God has grace for the guilty and we celebrate the fact that His grace is greater than our sin. But those who resist God's grace are risking more than they could ever imagine because God may go silent and turn away from them!

So as we wrap this up, let me ask...when Jesus passes by, what does He find in your life and mine? Does He find fruit or just leaves? Does He see church people all cleaned up outwardly but not so clean inwardly, or does He find people who worship Him in Spirit and in truth? Our loving Savior is also King of kings and Lord of lords with absolute and irresistible authority. In **Lk. 6:44-46** Jesus said, **Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.** "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? To claim Jesus is Lord is to acknowledge His ultimate authority. To claim He is Lord and yet continue to disobey Him is a total contradiction...its leaves without fruit. Jesus has told us why the lives of unsaved people are fruitless. Apart from His life pulsing in us, there can be no life or fruitfulness. He longs for the unsaved to come to Him. But His displeasure is reserved for those who live fruitless lives while pretending He is their Savior and Lord. At the bottom of the sermon notes and displayed on the screen, is a prayer called the Ultimate Authority Prayer. We learned it many years ago as part of a 50 day spiritual adventure. I share it with you as a good reminder for the start of each day.

"Lord Jesus, You know that I live in a 'two-boss world.' Conflicting voices call for my allegiance, but yours is the one I choose to obey. Help me to please you today by upholding your standards, resisting temptation, and faithfully representing you in all I do. I claim the promise of your presence this day as I go about my work. Christ, you are my ultimate authority. Amen.

Would you pray this prayer out loud with me as we close?