

Authority and Power

A Sermon on Matthew 21:23-28 by the Rev. Philip Major
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We face many challenges and unexpected events in our lives. Where do we turn, to find strength and wisdom? What is most reliable for us? What will be authoritative for you and me in our lives?

This is one of the main themes of the New Testament. In the Gospels, one of the twists in the story is that the everyday, regular people, with their problems and diseases and poverty, are the ones who understand that Jesus is offering them something powerful. Jesus teaches with authority. They can trust him when he tells them something. His words are reliable.

The people who are seen as inferior understand that Jesus is trustworthy, but the people who should understand that Jesus is exercising gifts given to him by God are very suspicious. You would think that the people who have had years of religious training, such as the scribes and the high priests, would recognize that Jesus' authority is like Moses' and Elijah's authority and the other prophets of the Hebrew religious tradition. Jesus ministers with authority, and they feel threatened.

In our Gospel passage we witness a direct confrontation between Jesus and the leaders of the religious establishment. *When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"* The chief priests and elders are asking this question, not because they want to hear his response, but in order to challenge Jesus. They are trying to trap him and create a pretext for Jesus to be arrested on false charges.

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? You know the answer to the question. Jesus was teaching the people, and healing the people, and feeding the people using the authority given to him by God. His authority came from the fact that he took on God's way of doing things, as his way of doing things in the world.

Jesus' authority did not come from himself. Jesus didn't do whatever he felt was best. Jesus made decisions to do things and say things that he understood to be in accordance with God's will.

Jesus did this so consistently that there seemed to be almost no separation between God's will and what Jesus would do. There was alignment between Jesus' actions, and God's intentions for Jesus' life. For Jesus, there was only one authority in life. God's will was authoritative in Jesus' life.

How does this work for you and me? We have aligned our lives with a set of values and priorities and rules. Which set of values, priorities and rules will be authoritative for us in our lives?

I think you came to St. Paul's Church today because you are trying to have alignment between your actions and what God intends for you in your life. You have discovered that God's way of doing things is reliable and trustworthy. We are striving for God's way of doing things to be authoritative in our lives.

There are two difficult parts for us who are striving for God's way to be authoritative for us. The first difficulty is that it's not always easy to know what God intends for us in each situation in life. So we try to know more about God's priorities and God's way of doing things in the world. We learn about God's priorities and God's way of doing things by studying the Bible.

When we read and study the Bible we learn that God's priority is to feed the people who are hungry. God's priority is to welcome the people who are refugees, the people who are fleeing civil wars, violent gangs, and corrupt rulers. God's priority is to take care of people who are suffering. God's priority is to take the side of those who have been brought up on false charges. God's priority is for justice. This is what we learn when we read and study the whole Bible, not just one chapter or one book of the Bible.

When we are following God's will, the Bible is authoritative over us, not the other way around. I don't always feel like I want to take care of the people who are living on the streets. But the Bible is authoritative for me in my life, so I try to do it, even when I don't feel like it.

You have probably noticed that, even if you have spent a lot of time studying the Bible, there are situations where it's not easy to know what we should do in order to follow God's will. Sometimes it's hard to know what is right and what is wrong. So we talk about the decisions we are making with people we trust, and we try to tell right from wrong.

It's not always easy for us to know what God intends for us in each situation in our lives. That's the first difficulty for those of us who want God's way to be authoritative for us in our lives. The second difficulty is that, even in situations where we know what God intends for us, we often do the opposite thing.

We've been reading this passage from the second chapter of Philippians for many years: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* God intends for us to be generous, but we are greedy and selfish. God intends for us to not think of ourselves as better than others, but we think our ideas are better and our way of doing things is better.

If God's way of doing things is authoritative for us in our lives, we turn back toward God by admitting our mistakes. We turn back toward God's way by saying the confession together, or praying a prayer of confession on our own. We admit we have made mistakes, and we ask each other for forgiveness. We turn back toward God's way of doing things when we give up our pride and say to God, "I need your help. I cannot get this right on my own."

This is what it looks like for us to be Jesus' disciples. We try to learn as much as we can about God's intentions for the world, and even though we often fail, we try to let God's intentions be authoritative for us.

The Good News is that God doesn't expect, or ask us to be perfect. God knows we are going to make mistakes. God doesn't ask us to do everything right, God just encourages us to turn back towards God's way of doing things. God offers us something that will sustain us and guide us back onto the right path. This is what frees us and empowers us as people of faith; God is generous and forgiving.

One of the most important things that ever happened in my life is that when I was a boy I spent a lot of time at a church that was a lot like St. Paul's Church. I was just a boy, six or seven years old, surrounded by other children but mostly I remember being surrounded by a bunch of adults who were just like you guys; they were always doing things like serving at the Samaritan Center or painting the dining room or filling *The Open Pantry* or singing hymns in worship or visiting members who couldn't get to church.

Life changes and I grew up and moved away from the church. When I was in my twenties I spent more time than ever with people who did not start each day with the assumption that God's way of doing things would be authoritative in their lives. I'm not saying that these people were bad or wrong in any way, but eventually I realized there was something missing. There was something missing in the lives of my friends who did not spend their free time serving meals at the Samaritan Center, or filling *The Open Pantry*, or visiting church members who were stuck at home.

So I went on a search, until I found a church that was at least a little bit like the church I attended as a child. As a young adult, it seemed strange to me, because the people at the church were spending their time volunteering at the homeless shelter, or helping the refugees and immigrants in the city, and yet they acted like they had all the time they needed in life. They seemed to be less frantic and busy. It was strange because the people at the church had seen many painful things in life, yet they were joyful people. It was strange because the people at the church gave a lot of their time, their talent, and their treasure, yet they seemed to be ready to give more.

The people at the church were steady and strong and loving and joyful because God's way of doing things was authoritative in their lives.

This is what Jesus understood. This is what the crowds of people following Jesus understood. This is what the priests and the elders were afraid of. Those who let God's way of doing things be authoritative in their lives are empowered to be generous, to forgive, to love, and empowered to serve with joy.