

Title: Who says?
Text: Matthew 21.23-32
Theme: The authority of Jesus
Series: Matthew #102
Prop Stmt: Jesus does not answer to us, but we answer to him.

Read Text:

Mike Brown is the Professor of Planetary Astronomy at the California Institute of Technology. He is an astrophysicist. He, along with his team of discovered many trans-Neptunian objects including Eris (that is actually larger than Pluto). A trans-Neptunian object is another name for a dwarf or minor planet that orbits the Sun at a distance that is greater than Neptune. So far, they have found 12. But, in discovering these, they realized that Pluto is just one of these 12 and if Pluto is going to be called a planet, then all 12 should be called planets, or Pluto should not be called a planet. This discovery led to the sad but necessary demotion of Pluto from being considered as a planet in our solar system and thus ruined a number of science fair projects. Pluto is now just one of many dwarf planets. Mike wrote a book on this called, "How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming." As you might imagine, Mike is a fairly bright guy. He was inducted into the National Academy of Science last year (2014).

Now, imagine that Mike agrees to be the substitute teacher of a 7th grade science class one day because they are studying a unit on astronomy. And in the course of the class, several of the students start arguing with Mike about the actual size of the solar system. In fact, one of the kids, acting as the leader of the rest, tells Mike to sit down because he is going to teach Mike a thing or two and then give him a test on the material to see if he is smart enough to be accepted by them. The entire scene would not only be absurd, it would be pathetic. These students would have a wonderful opportunity to listen to one of the premier astrophysicists of our day and they dismiss him and what he has to say because they think they know better.

Here in this text is a scene that is infinitely more absurd than that. The Creator has come in the person of Jesus Christ. His power, his wisdom, his character and intellect are clearly from another world and dimension. But the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees and the scribes presume to be superior to him in every respect and as such they treat him as if he has to answer to them. So, here they come. "We are going to give you a test. We are going to see just how smart you are."

As the Creator, God is infinite. As the creation, we are finite. That means that there is a gap between the Creator and the creation. That gap is not measurable. It is an infinite gap of incomprehensibility. God's being, mind and power is infinitely beyond us. In order for any communication and relationship to take place, God has to speak way, way down to our level in terms that we can understand. Our languages are not capable of grasping and articulating all that God is. We can only get a taste. And as you can imagine, the taste of God that we get is amazing because He is amazing. However, the sad history of the human race is one in which we take what God has revealed to us and in our ignorance,

sinfulness and pride we pretend that we are smarter than God. We attempt, therefore, to speak of God on our terms, instead of accepting the terms that God set forth of us.

When we forget or reject the reality that we are the creation and that we have been made in the image of God, we function as if we can make God in our image. That is the heart of idolatry. The history of the human race is a history of worship and religion, where people have created gods in their own image. Left to ourselves, we would make a god who would do what we would do if we had superhuman powers. The truth is this. God alone is God. He spoke creation into existence. His words have ultimate power. Our words do not have ultimate power. Our words only have authority to the degree that they reflect and echo his words. This is why the study of the Bible is not only absolutely necessary, but it is absolutely critical that we rightly interpret the Bible. I am well aware, just like you, that there are many people who interpret the Bible in many different ways. But, many different interpretations do not mean that they are all valid. Oh no! God has spoken. It is necessary that we make sure that we understand exactly what he has said. And when we say, "Well, the Bible says..." We had better make sure that we are accurately reflecting exactly what God has said and not misrepresenting God so that he appears to be saying what we want him to say. We do not have the authority to misrepresent God.

But, people do just that. They misrepresent God and speak lies in his name and not only convince others of those lies, but believe those lies themselves. It is possible for a person to believe a lie so much that he would argue with God and still not believe God even though his argument is proven to be wrong. It happened here.

I. **Jesus does not answer to us.** (23-27)

Jesus is in the Temple area. It is Tuesday of the Passover week and Jesus is teaching. Verse 23 says "*as he was teaching*" the chief priests and elders came up to him and challenged him. By the way, the Sanhedrin was the name of the ruling body that governed the nation of Israel along with the King. The Sanhedrin and the King functioned under the authority of the Roman government and answered to Rome. The Sanhedrin was made up of the chief priests, the elders, the scribes and the Pharisees. It is very possible that this group described in v.23 was an official delegation from the Sanhedrin. It appears that these guys interrupted Jesus. Imagine that! They interrupted Jesus and demanded to know in essence, "Who do you think you are?" As we read the rest of chapter 21 and the first part of chapter 22, we can understand why they interrupted Jesus. He was exposing them. He had cleared out the Temple physically, and now he is continuing to clear out the Temple by his teaching. The consistent theme of Jesus is that "You are not what you claim to be." Christ is exposing that.

So, these guys came up with a plan that they think will force Jesus to incriminate himself. They ask him two questions. Notice them (v.23): "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" (Performing miracles and teaching) and "*who gave you this authority?*" In their plotting out of this conversation they think that they have created a trap. If Jesus says that he has divine authority, they can accuse him of blasphemy and if he says that he has human authority then he will have contradicted himself and they can reveal that he never

got credentialed or training from them. Either way, they think they have him. And they probably played out all possible answers that Jesus could give, but here is what they do not yet realize. Jesus does not answer to us. In another amazing demonstration of humility, Jesus plays their game for a bit on their level. He responds to their question with a question which was common in rabbinic conversations. But, Jesus is doing more than simply avoiding a direct answer to their question. In reality he is answering their question, isn't he? He asks them about John the Baptist. Why does he do this? Is it simply to trap them? Is it simply to expose them? It is to avoid getting trapped himself? It is all of this and more. Even in this response, Jesus is teaching his disciples and us a very important truth.

Do you remember John 1.6? *“There was a man SENT FROM GOD whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.”* John the Baptist came as the forerunner to Christ. He came to prepare the way for Christ. He came to point to Christ. His message and his methods were used by God to help people be ready to receive Jesus. John was preview of Jesus. The people who rejected John were the same people who rejected Jesus and the people who accepted John were the people who accepted Jesus. Now, let's step out of this conversation for just a minute. In a few days, Jesus is going to die. He will arise again and will be with his disciples for less than 6 weeks and then returns to heaven. The disciples are going to be given a mission. They are to declare the message of the gospel all over the world. One of the obvious tensions of the message of Jesus is the response of people who hear this message and say, in essence, “Who says?” But, that is not just a tension for the listener, it is a struggle and question for the speaker. We ask ourselves, do I have the right to tell other people what is right and wrong? Do I have the right to tell people that they can be forgiven and that they can go to heaven? Do I have the right to tell people what to believe and how to live their lives? I think about that from time to time before I go up these steps and step into this pulpit. What right do I have to tell you these things? And why do you come to listen? Jesus is saying that when we say what Jesus has said, when we accurately reflect God's word, and people believe it, they are not ultimately believing us, but believing God. And when people reject what we have to say, that they are ultimately rejecting God. And sadly, many people do that. But there are those who believe.

So, for Jesus to ask these guys about the legitimacy of John's ministry, he was revealing the fact that having rejected John they were going to reject him. But, they had a problem. They were not willing to say what they really believed. They did not believe John, but the people did. And because these men did not have intrinsic authority, they were only kept in power by their ability to manipulate the people in order to do what they wanted. And Jesus exposes all of that. But, notice in particular what Jesus exposes.

These men were willing to ask Jesus the questions that they were not willing to answer. Why did they think that Jesus had to answer their questions but they did not have to answer his? What made them think that they could operate according to two different sets of rules? They believed, like so many in our world, that there are different rules for different people. And they were assuming that about Jesus. They were assuming that there was inconsistency with Jesus. When Jesus asked them about whether or not the

baptism of John was from heaven or from man, they were stuck. Notice how they responded? They were not concerned with telling Jesus the truth; they were concerned with how they would be perceived. Look at them huddling together and frantically discussing this amongst themselves. “If we say this, then he is going to say this, but if we say this, then the people are really going to get angry and we cannot afford that right now.” All they care about is staying in power. They figure that the least damaging answer is to say, “We don’t know.” And the trap that they laid for Jesus just snapped on them. If there was a scoreboard over the Temple area it would say: Jesus 1 Leaders 0

Once again, Jesus in an act of judgment and mercy refuses to give more information to people who have already made up their mind that they will not believe.

A. We tend to assume that Jesus plays by our rules.

What are some of the rules that we assume to be true?

- Titles and degrees validate you.

We love credentials and credentials can be useful to a degree. But man-made credentials are not impressive to God. God’s love and favor for you is not based upon your title or position.

- Endorsements from impressive people are all that you need.

Have you ever gone into a restaurant and have seen several pictures of the owner with celebrities? The message is obvious. These famous people have eaten here; therefore people should be impressed with you. That’s fine for a restaurant. That is not fine for a church. We are not validated, nor are we impressive because some famous leader speaks here. But that is easy to believe. Jesus does not play by our rules. He knows what we really are, whether or not anyone impressive knows a thing about us or not.

- Reputation and image are more important than reality.

Let’s say that you have a company that sells hats and scarves. In order to increase sales you want to create the impression that your hats and scarves are in hot demand and are the latest craze. So, as part of your media presence, your hat and scarf company has a website, a Facebook page and a Twitter feed. In order to get create the image of momentum you go out and buy Facebook likes and Twitter followers. Seriously, there are companies, (some in the Philippines and Indonesia) that are called “click farms” that will sell you Facebook likes and Twitter followers so that your hat and scarf company can have 530,000 likes on Facebook and 275,000 followers on Twitter. You can buy 5,000 likes for \$85. Now, none of them are real. They are false profiles created and sold in order to give people the impression that all of these people really like the product when in reality a few people are being paid money to say that there are all of these people who like the product. Do you see the rule? The rule is that reputation and image are more important than reality. Did you know that the U.S. State Department spent \$630,000 on

buying Facebook followers? I'm not surprised at that. But what is absolutely disgusting is when churches and leaders do the same type of thing. Let's say that I write a book and in order to make people think that the book is an instant hit and a "must-read", that I buy 150,000 copies on Amazon. This creates the impression of momentum and results in an image of success. Jesus does not care about image. Jesus cares about reality!

- Power and position are to be used to protect power and position.
- The more people you get to agree with you, the more believable you are.
- If you give Jesus something that he needs, then he will look the other way about your sin.

What are we really after with our rules?

- We want to be God.
- We want to be worshiped.
- We want to be respected.
- We want to have influence.
- We want to be important.

Don't you know who I am? That is what these leaders were attempting to challenge Jesus with. Don't you know who I am? The truth is, that Jesus did. They were not who they claimed to be.

Here is the contrast. Either I am what people think I am, or I am what God says I am. If I am what people think I am, then I am going to try to get people to say what I want in order for them to make me what I want to be. (reverse of creator/creation distinction)

B. Our rules do not work.

If you live for titles and degrees, you will never have enough. If your validation comes from endorsements, you will never have enough. You will never have enough power or high enough position to protect your power and position. There will never be enough people who agree with you to satisfy you. If you seek your validation and significance in the validation of others, you will never have enough. You will never have enough likes on Facebook to be satisfied. The world says that if you have the respect, awe, jealousy and approval of the world that you will be successful. It is a lie! You will never have enough. Our rules do not work.

So, here we have two opposing sides. The one side (leaders) has all of the symbols, titles and positions of authority, but it is not real authority. In fact, the other side (Jesus) has real authority. The chief priests and elders are terrified of Jesus. Why are they terrified of Jesus? They are terrified of him because their rules do not work. Jesus is exposing them for what they are and they are desperate to shut him down. Jesus, on the other hand has never leaned upon marketing and image as a means to inflate his reputation and gain

followers. He is who He is and does not need to resort to manipulation to coerce anyone to believe. Truth will win. Truth will prevail. When you know the truth and you believe the truth. You can relax.

There is so much freedom for us in admitting the truth about ourselves. When I admit my sin, my failure, my weakness, even my doubts, I do not fear you discovering what I already know and more importantly what Jesus already knows about me. In fact, I am set free. We do not ultimately answer to this world. This world has a Creator.

II. **We answer to Jesus.** (28-32)

Jesus turns the table. He puts them on the spot, because, in reality, they answer to him.

A. **Jesus has the authority to tell us what to think and do.**

In the parable, the father tells the sons to go and work in the vineyard. The father is in a position of authority and he is right to exercise that authority and he tells his boys what to do. The expectation is clear. You obey your authority. The first son says “no” but changes his mind (repents) and in the end, he does what he is told. The second son says “yes” but he changes his mind and doesn’t. Jesus then uses the response of these boys as an example of how these leaders responded to John who, as a prophet from God, revealed to these men what they really thought about God. John had a message from God because God gave John a message. God gave John a message not only to prepare people for Jesus but in the ultimate sense because God is God and he has the right to tell people what to do. The message of John was the same message of Jesus. You are not what you claim to be and you must repent. These men listened to what John said, they claimed that they were actually men who were following God, but in the end they did not do what God told them what to do then, just as they are not willing to believe and follow the final Messenger from God now.

B. **What we really believe will be revealed in what we do.**

The authenticity of your profession will be evidenced in your life. Saying that you believe Jesus is only credible when you obey Jesus. You may have titles, degrees, robes, and an amazing ability to speak convincingly. But, the validity of your profession is going to be seen in the integrity of your life. What you really believe is revealed in your personal decisions. Our words do not have real power. Only the words of Jesus have real power. Our actions reveal whether or not we really believe the words of Jesus.

III. **And that is a very good thing.**

The history of the creation is the history of people who try to replace God with their own rules and their own rulers. But the rules do not work and the rulers always fail. The result is always disaster. But, the future of this creation will be a kingdom where Christ rules and it will never be a disaster. It will be a perfect and it will never end.