

Obedience to True Authority

Matt 21:23-32

Let us pray: Father, cause us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in today's message. Pour out the Spirit of obedience so that we may follow the word we have heard. In our Lord Jesus' name. Amen.

As children grow, they learn what it means to follow authority. They learn to listen to their parents and their teachers, the adults who care for them. Through this, they begin to understand the rules and norms that help them live as members of society. Authority exists for the good of everyone. Even the reason we follow traffic laws is because we respect the authority of the law.

A traffic officer pulled over an elderly gentleman who was weaving across the lanes on the highway. The officer approached the window and asked, "Sir, where are you going in such a rush?" The old man sighed and said, "Officer, I am rushing to a lecture on obedience, respect for authority, and the dangers of reckless behavior." The officer was impressed and asked, "Wow, that sounds very serious. Who is giving a lecture like that at this time of night?" The old man looked toward the passenger seat and replied, "My wife, as soon as we get home."

As Christians, who is our highest authority? We can easily say with our mouths that it is God. But are we truly recognizing his authority and following him? The first human beings did not follow God's authority, and because of that, the world lost its paradise. When they followed the serpent's lie instead, sin and death entered the world. The cost of rejecting true authority was immeasurably great.

According to 1 John 3:8, the reason the Son of God came into the world was "to destroy the devil's work." Everything we see Jesus doing in the Gospels points to this purpose. His teaching, his healing, his casting out of demons, his compassion, his authority—all of it is aimed at undoing what the enemy has done.

As we continue today's passage, we are now at the point where Jesus has about one week left in his public ministry. Jesus knew that he would soon carry the cross, yet he never stopped doing what he always did. He continued to teach faithfully. When he entered the temple and was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people challenged his authority. Why did they do that? They were already hostile toward Jesus, but something that had happened earlier made them especially angry.

It was the cleansing of the temple. The religious leaders had been renting out space to the merchants for money, and Jesus drove those merchants out. Selling animals for sacrifices and providing currency exchange for travelers coming from far away were all permitted by the Law at the time. These services were necessary. But the religious leaders were using them to line their own pockets.

Even worse, the place where all this business was happening was the Court of the Gentiles. It was the only area where Gentiles could pray. The leaders had turned that sacred space into a marketplace for their own profit. That is why the Lord overturned the tables. And that is why the religious leaders, whose financial interests were threatened, came out to challenge him.

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They could not accept the authority of Jesus. This is the spirit of rebellion. Ever since Adam's rebellion, the spirit of rebellion, or in other words the spirit of disobedience, has ruled the world. Many people feel uncomfortable with authority. Abused authority and authoritarianism are wrong, but authority itself is not a bad thing. When authority collapses, order collapses. The most serious danger is refusing to acknowledge God's authority. It is unbelief. If a person does not recognize God's authority, the whole structure of life will eventually fall apart. Every sin comes from this spirit of rebellion, and the devil is the very spirit (Ephesians 2:2).

These religious leaders were under the influence of the spirit of rebellion, under the realm of Satan, so they lacked discernment. The true authority had come, yet they could not recognize him. How could people who spent their whole lives studying the Law and offering sacrifices in the temple be so spiritually blind? Did they truly wait for the Messiah with sincere hearts? If they had, they would have recognized him just as Simeon and Anna did when he came to the temple as a baby (Luke 2:25–38).

Anyone who saw Jesus preach or witnessed even one of his works could sense that he was God's man, the Son of God. The religious leaders likely sensed it too. But they could not acknowledge it. If they admitted it, they would have had to deny themselves. Their position and influence would have been shaken to the core, so they could not accept the authority of Jesus.

When they came and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus responded with a question of his own. This was a common method among rabbis. When someone asked a question, the teacher often answered with another question. Jesus said, "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 of human origin?"

It was a question they did not expect. They knew that if they answered, "From heaven," Jesus would ask why they did not accept John's testimony. John had testified that Jesus was the Messiah, so if they said John's baptism was from heaven, they would be obligated to believe in Jesus. But if they answered, "Of human origin," the people would turn against them, because everyone regarded John as a prophet. They feared the crowd, and that is why they hesitated.

Friends, are we ever held back by traditions that have become fossilized, by things that are not essential, so that we fail to recognize the Lord who is the essence and the ultimate authority?

The religious leaders could not find an answer, so they chose ignorance. "We don't know," they said. Then Jesus replied, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Jesus was about to give them a parable, and within that parable was the answer he wanted them to hear. The heart of the parable is obedience. Jesus desired to awaken them.

In the parable, a father had two sons. He gave both sons the same mission. He told each of them to go and work in the vineyard. The first son responded boldly and immediately with a "No," which must have shocked his father. But later he changed his mind, repented, and went to the vineyard. The other son said

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“Yes” with his mouth, but he did not go. He had no intention of obeying from the beginning, but he said “Yes.”

It was clear who these two sons represented. The first son represented the tax collectors and prostitutes who believed in Jesus. The other son represented the religious leaders. The second son likely said “Yes” because he did not want to upset his father in that moment. He saw his father only as someone to fear, not someone to love.

Scripture says that if we love God, keeping his commands is not burdensome (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). What the second son did not understand was that obedience is certainly for the Father, but it is also for himself. When we obey the word, the blessings and power hidden within the word begin to unfold. If we do not obey, it is like receiving a gift and never opening it. Disobedience causes the blessings meant for us to remain unused.

On the other hand, the sinners represented by the tax collectors and prostitutes had lived disobedient lives at first, but they repented and returned. Because of that, their lives were changed, and they received the blessing of entering the kingdom of God.

The words Jesus speaks at the end of this parable are extremely important. He says, “For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” In this short verse, the word *believe* appears three times. It shows us what true faith is and what false faith is. A faith that does not lead to repentance is not real faith. True faith begins with sincere repentance.

The devil deceives us by saying that if we escape from God’s authority, we will become like God and be free. But that path does not lead to blessing but to curse. A person who constantly rebels and insists on living by his own will may look free, but in reality he is enslaved by the devil, who is the very spirit of disobedience.

The spirit of Jesus is the spirit of obedience. The authority of Jesus came from his complete obedience to God. Because of Jesus’ obedience, the devil was broken before him. Jesus lived a life of total obedience to the heavenly Father, and that is why all authority in heaven and on earth was given to him. When we obey the Father’s word, we also receive authority, just as Jesus did.

In the parable, the vineyard represents the kingdom of God (Matthew 20:1). Sending them to work in the vineyard means that God was inviting both sons to become partners in accomplishing the work of his kingdom. When we are saved, we also receive a calling. If we forget that calling, obedience becomes impossible. The proper response of human beings to God’s authority is obedience. If repentance is the beginning of true faith, obedience is the height of faith.

Whether the first half of our lives has been like the first son, openly disobedient from the start, or like the second son, saying “yes” with our lips but living in disobedience, the second half of our lives does not need to be the same. If in the second half we sincerely repent and turn to the path of obedience to the Father’s will, our lives begin to change from that point on.

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Jesus did not abandon the religious leaders whose hearts were lifted up in pride and who could not believe, like the second son. If he had abandoned them, he would not have taught them with this parable. As a result, later in the book of Acts we see that many priests came to believe in the Lord (Acts 6:7). Other religious leaders also returned to God (John 19:38–39; Acts 15:5). One of them was the apostle Paul (Acts 9).

David Wilkerson was a simple pastor serving peacefully in a small rural church in Pennsylvania. One day he read a magazine article describing the trial of gang members in New York City. In that moment, the Holy Spirit placed a strong burden on his heart and spoke to him to go and find those boys. Though he was afraid, he went to the streets of Brooklyn, where he had no connections, and preached the gospel to the gang members.

Nicky, the notorious gang leader, beat him and threatened to kill him. But Wilkerson did not give up and said, “Yeah, you could do that. You could cut me up into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street, and every piece will still love you” (*The Cross and the Switchblade*, David Wilkerson).

Those words began to shake Nicky’s hardened heart. A few days later, at a youth rally Wilkerson was leading, Nicky and his gang had come intending to cause trouble. But unexpectedly, Wilkerson handed them the offering baskets and asked them to collect the offering. At first, they planned to run off with the money. As Nicky was about to walk out, his body suddenly froze. He began to think, *Why would this pastor trust me with the offering?* He had never met an adult in his entire life who trusted him. In that moment, the Holy Spirit came upon him. He went to the front with his gang members, knelt down, and wept in repentance. The hardened first son who had shouted “No!” to God finally returned. He later became a world-renowned evangelist who led countless young people to Christ. This was Nicky Cruz.

Beloved, today the Lord is calling each of us to the work of his kingdom. The forms of our calling may differ, and our gifts may vary, but God has a plan for every one of us. When he reveals it, may you respond with obedience and be joyfully used in the kingdom work that sets people free. Amen.

We will pray together with one voice using the prayer on the PowerPoint.

Let us pray: Father, I want all of you. I freely give you all areas of my life. I want your Holy Spirit to work through me. Make me so sensitive to you and your Spirit that I walk obediently in your perfect will every day and in every situation. Open my eyes, ears, and heart to the hurting people around me. Let me walk in the compassion of Jesus and be his hands as I reach out to help others. Give me greater faith to do your work and carry out the calling you have on my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.