

Questions of Authority

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0 : 0 0] Hello again everyone, and thank you, as Fraser said, for being with us this morning and for sharing with us as we now come to study God's Word. So we're going to be looking in Luke chapter 20, and the passage I'm sure will come up on the screen if you want to turn to it. It will be in your pew Bible as well. We're going to look at the first 18 verses today. Luke chapter 20, reading from verse 1. And it says, One day Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts and proclaiming the good news.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. Tell us by what authority you are doing these things, they said. Who gave you this authority?

He replied, I will also ask you a question. Tell me. John's baptism. Was it from heaven or of human origin? They discussed it among themselves and said, if we say it from heaven, he will ask, why didn't you believe him? But if we say of human origin, all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet. So they answered, we don't know where it was from.

Jesus said, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. He went on to tell the people this parable. A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.

At harvest time, he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty handed. He sent still a third and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, what shall I do?

[1 : 4 4] I will send my son whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. This is the heir, they said. Let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours.

So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill these tenants and give the vineyard to others. When the people heard this, they said, God forbid. Jesus looked directly at them and asked, then what is the meaning of that which is written? The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces. Anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.

I pray that God will help us to understand his word this morning and to apply it in our hearts. This is the handshake between, before perhaps the most famous television interview in history, it's David Frost and Richard Nixon. Richard Nixon had been president of the United States, had been forced to resign over the Watergate scandal, and he was keen in some kind of way to restore his reputation and perhaps to get a role again in public life. And he thought that being interviewed by David Frost would be a relatively easy option. He didn't expect terribly many hard questions from David Frost. Perhaps a bit like last week when Donald Trump was interviewed by Piers Morgan. Perhaps thought that would be a relatively straightforward one for him. Well, for Nixon to begin with, it was.

He was very good at stonewalling, and from what's said, the first few interviews that Frost conducted with him were pretty dull and nothing really emerged from them. But as time went on, it seems that Nixon got worn down. And at the end, he made quite a number of revelations that perhaps he had never intended to at the beginning. He said, for example, that if something was illegal, if he was president of the United States, he could do it anyway because he had that authority. And he ended up apologizing to the American people for letting them down. Frost's interview technique ultimately and the barrage of questions that he fired at Nixon broke him and led him to say things perhaps he didn't intend to. We've come today to Luke chapter 20, and this is a chapter of the Jewish religious leaders trying to break the Lord Jesus down and get him to say something that will incriminate him and allow them either for them to arrest him because he says something that suggests he's doing something illegal, or alternatively to turn the people against him, and that then would give them an opportunity to take him and to kill him as they intended to. Now, as it turned out, the Lord Jesus was a lot smarter and a lot more wise than those who came to question him. And when they questioned him about authority, about procedural things, as we have in this passage, when they questioned him about politics, about allegiance to Caesar, which we'll be looking at next week, or when they questioned him about a kind of abstruse religious question where someone had been married several times and who were they married to in heaven, the Lord Jesus, with his answers, was able to confound them and to continue to astonish the people with his wisdom. And there was no opportunity for the religious leaders to get him and to trap him.

And indeed, when they eventually did arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane in the dead of night, Jesus could say to them, well, I was in the temple courts all week and you never arrested me then. Why do you have to come with swords and spears and arrest me under cover of darkness?

[5 : 26] He was too wise for them. And over the next couple of weeks, I hope we'll see that, as we see the attempts of religious leaders to trap Jesus and the way in which he was able to deal with that and to expose their hypocrisy and to present to them the fact that they would be judged for the fact that they had rejected him. Now, what we're looking at today, I think, is all to do with authority. It's explicitly that at the beginning of the passage, and I think that theme runs right through it. It is questions of authority. So let's begin by thinking, what does authority mean? We could define authority, I think, as legitimate power, as having power or influence, but not that's been usurped or that's been taken wrongly from someone else that is legitimate and that allows you to do and to say the things that you want to.

Now, the religious leaders, they were the authorities, the priests and elders and so on, and they saw that as being part of their entitlement. Perhaps not that different from 21st century Britain, having authority depended on who you were, who your parents were, who you knew, what kind of wealth you had, what your knowledge was. And the people who were in positions of authority, they felt that they had an entitlement to that, and that anyone who came in and tried to seize that didn't have genuine authority. And so, of course, for them, Jesus was someone to be opposed. He had come kind of out of nowhere, come from Galilee, and he'd gathered a lot of people around him, become very popular with the multitudes, and the religious leaders thought that he was trying to usurp their authority.

And then to cap it all, he came into Jerusalem on the donkey, accepted the praise of the people, and he even went into the temple and started throwing over the tables of the moneylenders and destroying in some ways what everything that the chief priests and the rulers stood for and their livelihood, their way in which they got wealth. They saw him as someone who didn't have authority. But of course, the authority of Jesus was different. He had authority because he is God's son, so he has the ultimate authority from that point of view. And the authority he demonstrated was through his character and through his teaching and through the way that he acted. So, for example, it could be said earlier in the gospel that the people wanted to listen to Jesus because he spoke with authority and not like the teachers of the law. And what that meant was that Jesus was able to say things to them because he was God's son without having to refer back to all the Jewish traditions.

He was able to teach by himself, whereas all the religious leaders, they were very careful to make sure they didn't go against anything that had been said. Jesus cut right through that and he said, it's been said to you this, but I say this, and the people recognized his authority. Then displayed authority over illness, over death, and indeed over sin in being able to forgive people. So Jesus had authority, but it was not the same authority as the religious leaders had. And so they dispute his authority. They don't understand it. And they disputed. Verse two, tell us by what authority you're doing these things, who gave you this authority? Now, on the surface, that's not a bad question. If someone were to come into this church and overturn all the tables there in the foyer and start shouting about what a bunch of crooks we are and how we aren't really doing God's will, then I think we might quite legitimately say to them, well, what gives you the right to do and to say that. And that is, in a sense, what the leaders here were doing.

But they weren't really wanting to know the answer. They weren't doing it out of a sense of, well, let's find out what authority he has got. They were doing it to try to trap him, either to get him to say, I am God's son, at which point they could accuse him of blasphemy, even though it was true, or perhaps to kind of shrink away and be a bit reticent. Then they could arrest him for an act of vandalism or whatever. They weren't really interested in knowing the answer.

[9 : 59] And Jesus recognizes that. And so he doesn't immediately answer their question. He poses them a question instead. And it might look as if he's not answering their question, but actually he is. So he asked the question about the baptism of John, John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, the one who had pointed people to Jesus. But the question is not about that, about what John said about Jesus. It was about the baptism of John. Was that from God or from man?

Now we know the answer was from God. I guess the religious leaders knew the answer was from God, but they had rejected John. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, of people recognizing that they had done lots of things wrong and that they needed to change their lives. And baptism was a symbol that they were doing that, that they had repented, that they had changed. And religious leaders, frankly, were too proud to do that. They didn't want people to see that they needed to repent. They wanted to be seen to be above that. And so they rejected John and wanted to have nothing to do with him. And yet when Jesus asked the question, he puts them in a real quandary.

They're not really interested in what the answer is at this point. They're interested in how it will appear, whichever answer they give. And they say, well, we can't say that he was from God, or they say, why didn't you believe him? We can't say that he wasn't from God, or the people will try to kill us.

So they say, we don't know, a real kind of cop-out kind of answer. But Jesus, in asking about John, was answering their question, because if John was from God as he was, then because he pointed to Jesus as the one who was greater than him, the one who was the Lamb of God, then that would say that Jesus was from God that he was the Son of God, that he had authority to do the things he did. So he did answer the question, but he answered it in a slightly different way. What can we do to apply that to us?

I think a lot of us, when we think about talking to people who aren't Christians, who aren't following Jesus, are really worried about the kind of questions they might ask us. And if people aren't really interested in learning about Christian faith, then they will ask questions that are designed to deflect us and to detract from the real issues. And it's very easy for us to get dragged into being very defensive, to trying to answer the questions they ask directly, and to get deflected away from being able to talk to them about the real things, the things that really matter. And I think if we take Jesus' example both here and indeed in the other questions he's asked in this chapter, then sometimes we need to be not so defensive, but to be quite assertive in directing the conversation and in helping people to get to the real issues. They might be trying to avoid them, but to help them to get to the real issues. And the real issue, as far as we're concerned as followers of Jesus, is who is Jesus and what does he mean to us? And we need to get people onto that question rather than anything else. And a really good way to do it is to encourage people to read the stories about Jesus and the words of Jesus. Perhaps as some people in this church do, to spend time sitting reading with them and discussing the Bible with them, or even just to give them a book that describes what Jesus' life was. There's a lot of copies of this in the foyer, the information point. It's just the gospel by Luke, but it says Jesus, the facts. And it would be good if we could just encourage people who might have some interest or are asking questions just to take the gospel of Luke or any of the other gospels indeed, and to read it and to see for themselves what it was that Jesus said and did and who he is.

[14 : 11] And similarly, if you are asking questions, if you're not very sure this morning about Christian faith, I would encourage you to take a copy of this. It's absolutely free. Read it through. Read it with an open mind, looking for God to speak to you and to find out about who Jesus is and what he can do for you. So Jesus' authority is disputed at the beginning, and he asks a slightly question to the side, but he really brings it round to the point. And if the Pharisees and the chief priests and so on were willing to listen to him, then they would have got the right answer that his authority was from God. But just to drive it home, Jesus tells a parable, a parable that's in the next few verses.

I've called this one authority despised. This is one of these parables in the Bible. It's very easy to skip over. You read it and you think, yes, I understand that. Clearly in the parable, the vineyard owner is God, his son is Jesus, the servants that were sent are the prophets, and the tenants are the Jews or the Jewish leaders. Absolutely right. But we then kind of move on and say, well, this hasn't got very much to teach me. Perhaps if we look at it in a bit more detail, we recognize that it has parallels with an Old Testament parable in the book of Isaiah in chapter 5 about a vineyard. Slightly different story, but certainly the Jews, as Jesus told it, would have recognized that he was referring to that as well. But again, even if we do that, even if we go back to Isaiah, very easy to skip over it and to miss the point.

What is the key point of this parable? I think the key thing in this parable is what happens after the third servant comes back to the vineyard owner. So this guy, he's got the vineyard quite legitimately.

He's sending his servants to get the rent in from the tenants, perfectly entitled to do that. And they come back, and they come back, each of them having been beaten up. And the language in the parable suggests it gets worse every time. And when the third servant comes back, the vineyard owners got a decision to make. Quite legitimately, he could say, well, I've had enough. I'm going to go and I'm going to take my army or I'm going to send the authorities. And we're going to deal with these people who are so rejecting and despising my authority. They won't play ball when I send my servants to them. Therefore, I'm going to go and do it by force. And he would have been perfectly entitled to do that. The law would have been on his side. But that's not what he does.

Instead, he says, I'm going to have one more go. And this time, I'm going to send my son. And the language is very strong. I'm going to send my son whom I love. So he's going to send the one who is most precious to him in many ways, the son whom he loves. And he's going to hope that the tenants will then respect him and will pay the rent that is due. Now, this is tremendous grace being shown by the vineyard owner. Almost anyone in that situation would have gone and would have, by force, taken what was due to them. But he is willing to take the risk of sending his son and to see if they will recognize the authority that the son has and do what they should have been doing from the beginning. And presumably, if they do, then the vineyard owner will say to them, well, let's forget what's happened before. You've now paid your rent. Let's move forward together.

[17 : 55] And then he sends his son and the son is killed. And the vineyard owner must have recognized that was a possibility, but he still was determined he was going to do that. He would send his son.

And then, of course, the parallel with God and with what he did becomes all the more powerful. Israel is a nation over many hundreds of years, had rejected God at various different times, had scorned the prophets, had nothing to do with them. Some of them had been ill-treated.

And God could have said, well, let's just give up on this. They're clearly not worth it. But God chooses to send his son, to send the Lord Jesus into the world and to allow men to take him and to kill him. And that is a tremendous demonstration of the grace that God has and that God wanted to show.

To give the one who was most valuable to him and to allow men to kill him. And through that, as we know, for him to take the punishment for sin and to allow us to have forgiveness and a relationship with God. That, I think, is the key point in the parable. That is where Jesus really brings home that these people he was talking with had rejected, had despised the authority that came from God himself. I think it's probably also significant in the context of the parable that the people knew that it was the son who had been sent to them. These tenants were under no illusion that the landowner had sent his son. And indeed, they thought, this is our opportunity.

Get rid of the son. There's no one to inherit. We can then keep the vineyard. I think equally in their hearts, the religious leaders, the chief priests and so on, they knew that Jesus was God's son. And yet they weren't willing to accept him. And ultimately, they got him put to death. And so Jesus says, there will be consequences for that.

[20 : 02] God's grace is wonderful. It's awesome. It's past our understanding. But if people continually reject him and reject his son, at the end, there are consequences. And so the people who had done this thing, Jesus says, that then the owner will come and he will make sure that justice is meted out.

Authority was despised. Authority was despised and there ultimately was a price to pay. Finally, fairly briefly, in the last couple of verses, I've described it as authority displayed.

So Jesus, as a kind of extra to the parable, quotes a verse which is from Psalm 118 in the Old Testament. The stone, the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone.

Now, there's a bit of uncertainty about exactly what is meant here by the cornerstone. And you get lots of different views on it. Cornerstone, I think we probably naturally think of as part of the foundations of a building. When we're saying Jesus Christ cornerstone, we're thinking of him as Christ's lone cornerstone. We're thinking of him as being the foundation of our faith.

I'm not sure that's what's intended here. Some versions say it's the capstone or the head of the corner. So where the cornerstone in the ground is the first part of the foundations it's built and that gives direction to the building, the capstone or the cornerstone on top is the last piece that's put into place and that demonstrates that the builder has got all his calculations right, that it fits perfectly where it should, and that it holds the top part of the building together and gives a stable structure. I think that's what's intended here. It certainly looks like a stone that wasn't used at the beginning but was used later, and also there's the reference to it falling on people. It doesn't really matter from the point of view of the application. What Jesus is saying is the stone the builders rejected, and that's clearly him, and it makes clear elsewhere in the Old Testament that's him. The stone the builders rejected is the one who becomes the most important one of all, who the builder, the architect of the building chooses to take the most important position.

[22 : 19] And of course that is a reference to the fact that having been through death, having suffered, having died for our sins, Jesus was raised from the dead, and he is now at the place of authority, the place of power, the place of greatest esteem at the side of the Father in heaven. And one day he will come back, and his authority will be completely clear to everybody as he rules in righteousness.

The stone the builders rejected, the one whose authority was despised, ultimately his authority will be displayed, and everyone will see it. And again at the end, there is this thought of judgment about those who reject the stone, that it falls on them or they fall on it, there will be punishment for those who keep rejecting Jesus. So important that all of us accept Jesus for who he is, and accept what he's done for us, and have our trust in him.

Just to finish, this gentleman here is King Hussein of Jordan. King Hussein drew Jordan for, I think, about 47 years towards the end of the last century. In the latter part of his life, he became highly respected as a statesman, as a worker for peace in the Middle East, and at his funeral, almost all the leaders from the world, I think about four American presidents, went to attend his funeral as recognition of what he had done in the cause of Middle Eastern peace. But King Hussein, like many leaders in that part of the country, he was in a volatile region, and there were people who didn't want him to be king.

People who didn't feel that he was doing the right thing, people perhaps from different sects or from different ethnic groups who didn't want King Hussein to rule over them. And so several times during his reign, there were plots against him. On one particular occasion, King Hussein heard about a plot against him.

And indeed he heard that the key plotters, some of his army generals, were meeting in a hotel not very far away from his palace. A king Hussein called in his private helicopter and he said to the pilot, you fly me over to where the plotters are, land on the roof, and I'll go down. If you hear the sound of gunshots coming from inside, then you just fly away, don't bother waiting or doing anything about it.

[24 : 45] King Hussein went down and he went into the room where the plotters were, and I'm sure they were kind of staggered to see him coming in. But he said to them, if you go ahead with your plot, and if you try to overthrow me, there's going to be civil war. There are going to be tens of thousands of people killed in this power struggle for our country. So I'll tell you what you should do.

Shoot me and then you can have power. There will be a peaceful transition and instead of lots of people dying, then just one person will be killed. And at that point, all the plotters came forward and they pledged allegiance to him and recognized that he was the true ruler of Jordan.

King Hussein was willing to take that risk and to make that sacrifice if necessary for his people. In this parable here, the ruler of the vineyard was willing to take the risk and to send his son to these people. King Hussein's risk worked out. He kept his power and he kept peace in the land.

You say the vineyard owner's risk didn't work out. He hoped that the people would recognize the authority of his son and would respond, and they didn't kill the son. When we think of the reality in the Bible, God didn't take a risk. Taking a risk implies there could be two possible, or at least two possible outcomes. God sent his son to us knowing his son would be killed.

He voluntarily gave his son so that we could have forgiveness. Jesus voluntarily came into the world, lived this life where he demonstrated the love and the authority of God, and went to the cross and did it willingly. And we now need to think how are we going to respond to that. In a few minutes, many of us will be taking communion together. As we do that, let's reflect on the great love that God had for us and the grace that he showed in sending his son, knowing what the outcome would be. And let's also rejoice in the fact that Jesus died, but he rose again. He is alive and he is reigning today.

[27:10] If you don't yet know Jesus, if what I've been saying maybe in some ways makes sense, but it isn't what your experience of him has been and you haven't understood exactly who he is or what he's done, then I do urge you to think about what it was that prompted Jesus to come into the world, for God to send him, and what that means for you today. Jesus came into the world so that we could be saved.

God sent his son to be our saviour and to bring us forgiveness for all the wrong in our lives. And we need to recognise that Jesus is God's son, that he came with that purpose, and that he is the only one who can offer us forgiveness. He has the authority to forgive sins because he took the punishment for our sins and therefore when we come to him recognising, repenting of our sins and believing in him, then we can have forgiveness. We can have a relationship with God. We won't be like these tenants who rejected him. Rather, we'll be like those who accepted Jesus and to know his peace, his love and the hope that he gives. So all of us, let's go away reflecting on the grace of God this morning and what that means or can mean for us in our lives and make sure that we have accepted the authority of God's son, that we know him as our saviour. Let me pray and then we'll move on into our time of communion. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for your son, the Lord Jesus. We thank you that he indeed has authority that comes from being divine, being God himself and authority too, given him by you, his father.

Remember he said, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. And we bow this morning before him and we acknowledge him as our Lord, as our saviour, as the one to whom we owe absolute allegiance. We pray that you will help us, those of us who know him, to truly love him and to adore him and to live for him and to recognise daily the authority that he has over our lives.

We pray that any who don't yet know the Lord Jesus may recognise the reason why he came and the difference they can make as they put their trust in him. We thank you for this time we've had together and we pray that you will continue to be with us now as we move on to remember the Lord Jesus and to think more of his sacrifice for us. We give you our thanks in his name. Amen.