

The Authority Controversy, Part 1

Luke 20:1-4

Luke chapter 20 as we get into this section, I think I mentioned it a little bit last week, but we're getting into ah, the final section of Luke's Gospel. The, the last 20 percent, if you're keeping count of Luke's Gospel. And the section that we're into here, we're gonna see this happening over the next couple of chapters where Jesus is in confrontations with the religious leaders of the Jews. This whole section has to do with rightful and false spiritual authority. Right and wrong shepherding, a right and wrong instincts, right and wrong exercise of authority in ministry.

One concern that our elders have. It's a perennial concern. It's a, it's a continuous concern for us whenever people come to Grace Church, when people visit, when people join as they are here for some time. One of the concerns that we see and is raised often quickly is to see what their past experience is with shepherding, with spiritual authority.

Some people are shepherded well, but I would say that that's very few who come to Grace Church and they've been shepherded well. That they've got a good experience with, with biblical leadership, authority in the church. Most often people have been totally neglected with regard to shepherding or they have been abused in spiritual shepherding situations, heavy-handed shepherds, invasive harsh shepherding. A lot of times people who come near to us, you can tell that they have been beaten down, they're fearful.

Most often we see people who have been completely non shepherded and so they become their own authorities and their own shepherds and so they resent any inquiry into their lives, any concern about how they're doing spiritually, any question from the elders they resent and they consider that to be abusive and that's become pretty common today as well.

What does rightful spiritual authority look like? What is good authority? How is it to be used? What is false authority look like? What is true spiritual abuse look like? Well, the

text this morning as we get into the first eight verses of chapter 20 is about authority. At the beginning of the account, in verse 2 the challenge of the religious leaders, and also at the end of the account, we read this phrase which poses the question; by what authority? And that really is the most fundamental question of all, isn't it? Who has the right to tell someone else what to do, what not to do, how to live, how to act, what to say, what not to say? Who has the authority to come in and make changes?

We're reading about the return of masking. Have you heard this? Have you read this on the online? There are some colleges and businesses that are actually requiring masks due to, I guess new COVID variants and an uptick in cases, and we are all asking as we, I think we, COVID taught us to do, the pandemic taught us to do, says who? In other words, we're asking the question, by what authority? Who has the authority to tell me that I've got to put on a mask? Who's got the authority to tell me I have to shoot a vaccine into my body? Who has the right to tell me to pay taxes for that matter, or put my life on the line serving in the military? Who has the authority to command my speech or

restrict my speech? Who has the right to command my behavior?
Who has the right to command my conscience?

Ultimately, there's only one answer to that question. We Christians know the answer. It comes from Scripture. Ultimately, only God has authority. Isn't that right? Only God has authority, Romans 13:1 "For there is no authority except from God." And that is why Jude, after he spent his letter writing about something that he didn't want to, but he was compelled to. He wanted to write about the common salvation of Christians, but he was compelled to expose unlawful, fraudulent, immoral, the immoral manner in which false teachers commandeered religious authority for themselves and used it to abuse people, and take their money, and commit adultery, and all manner of vile things.

And he, Jude, ends with this benediction, "to the only God... be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time, now and forever." I'd say that's pretty comprehensive wouldn't you? Only one authority and it's God, before all-time began, now as well. So, whatever now is for you and then forever.

Pontius Pilot tried to coerce Jesus and get him to answer his questions, and in doing so he appealed to his own authority. As Jesus stood before his tribunal and Pilot said, "You will not speak to me?" Jesus was remaining silent. All these charges coming from the religious leaders, and Jesus said nothing. You won't speak to me. "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above.'" In other words, there is only one ultimate authority, Mr. Pontius Pilate. There's only one with the power of life and death and son it ain't you.

God, the eternal infinite one, he is the almighty creator. He is the holy lawgiver. He is the only just judge, and God has the right, by virtue of who he is, by virtue of his essence, by virtue of his person, he has the right and the only right to tell, to tell anyone, and to tell everyone what to do, how to live, how to speak. And I'll, I'll get invasive here, not me get invasive, God is, he has the right to tell you what to think, what not to think, what to like, what not to like.

He has the authority to command your imagination, what you imagine, that's not your own territory. That's why we in Christ cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalted itself against the knowledge of God. We bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Anything that we have or think we have that inner space, it's God's. And we're gonna give an account for everything that we think we have.

God in creating the world he instituted, ever since the creation of the world, this concept of representation. He created mankind in his image to represent him, to exercise his dominion over all the earth and God has chosen for mankind to be justly governed. He's delegated due authority and he's done that in three realms. We know the family, very first human institution, the family. Also to human governments as families come together and organize. There's a tribal head, there's government. And then also to religious institutions, priestly institutions you might say, those who bring the people to God, who represent God to man and man to God.

In our time, the religious institution that we're familiar with, that occupies our time, our life, our week, our service,

our ministry, this is the one that he has chosen, it's the church. And Christ, the head of the church exercises his lordship and authority in and through local churches like this one.

And in Jesus day we know that in first century Palestine, the institution, religious institution there was the temple of Israel in Jerusalem. That is why this question of authority has come up, because Jesus has just visited the temple and without getting anyone's permission, without filling out any forms, without running this by any duly appointed authority, he came to the temple and he made some changes. They want to know what gives him the right to do that. That's where we are in the text.

Let's read it. Starting in verse 1, chapter 20 of Luke. "One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, 'Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who is it that gave you this authority?' He answered them, 'I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?' And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say from heaven,' he will

say," well, "'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered," but, "that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'"

You want a tip? Call it the ultimate life hack. Never try to set a trap for the Son of God. Not gonna work out well for you. It's gonna to backfire, big time. Proverbs 21:30, I love this verse. It says, "No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord." Don't try it. So that's application point number one. If you want to write that down your notes, don't try to set a trap for God. You can file that away, but there is more to see here as we go through the text. I'm just gonna give you several points to keep track.

Here's a first point for your notes, number one. The sinful interrogation of rightful authority. That's what we see here, the first two verses. The sinful interrogation, questioning of rightful authority. Of all the authorities in the temple we know one for sure was the right one. One for sure was speaking with

the voice of God. One for sure had been commissioned by God. One for sure had come into the temple of his Father. This is Jesus' place. He is the rightful authority. And now any questioning of him in this, especially in this manner, well, we know right off the bat it's sinful.

So the sinful interrogation of rightful authority, back to verse one. Luke sets the scene for us. He says here, here's what it looks like. He says, "One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up," and you can stop there. He's just briefly setting the scene for us, just first of all, noting the relative time, one day, the location, which is the temple, and then the activity of Jesus. Namely, he's teaching the people he's preaching the gospel.

The one day most likely refers to the next day, that is the next day after the temple cleansing. So this is Tuesday of passion week the previous day says, starts in Luke 19:45. Jesus drove out those who are selling sacrificial animals. He turned over the tables of the money changers. He swept the place up. He got them all out of there. And having rid the temple of its

corrupting distractions, he set, he then settled the place down, and he reclaimed the temple so that it could be used for its original purpose. My house is to be a house of prayer.

And what is he gonna do to make it a house of prayer? He's gonna make sure their prayers are well informed, by teaching, by telling the truth. So many people pray in ignorance. They pray according to error. They pray according to traditions. They don't pray according to the truth. That's why an expository ministry in a church is so vital. To make sure people have the proper interpretation and understanding of the truth from scripture in order that their prayer life will be well informed and they will be good stewards of their life and their ministry, their families and all the realms of their stewardship, so they can pray.

So he rid the temple of its distractions, he reclaimed the temple to be used for its original purpose, and he called the people back and spent the rest of that Monday teaching the people and preaching the gospel. It's reasonable to assume, then, that the temple authorities did not approach Jesus that day. They needed time to catch their breath, really recover from

the shock, gather their wits about them, regroup, strategize, talk tactics with one another. How are we gonna, what are we gonna do with the Jesus problem?

So on Tuesday they go out and look for Jesus and they find him back in the temple doing what he came there to do. He's teaching the people, preaching the gospel. Matthew also tells us in Matthew 21:14 that "the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them." This is the rightful use of spiritual authority. As a shepherd, you use both parts of your staff. One end is for driving away the wolves and the hirelings. The other end is for gathering together the sheep. And when he brings the sheep together, what's he doing it for? Just to have a powwow? Just to get warm together?

No, to feed them, to bring them to good pasture, bring them besides streams of water, help them to drink and eat well, because he wants healthy, productive, fruitful sheep. So Jesus comes, teaches, preaches the gospel. He heals the people. He lifts their burdens. He's doing exactly as we have seen him do ever since the beginning of his ministry. He's been going through the cities and the villages of Israel. He's been

proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom. He's been casting out demons everywhere, healing the people of all their sicknesses, and diseases, and ailments, and maladies.

Wherever he went, Luke 9:11 says, he welcomed to the people, he spoke about the kingdom, he cured those who had need of healing. He loved them by teaching them, incessantly teaching them, they could never get enough of truth, because truth converts their soul; Psalm 19, truth revives the soul, it enlightens the eyes, it gives them hope, it sparks faith in them. They need the truth, but they also need practical burdens lifted. And so he was there to lift burdens.

So as he's always done now he comes here and does the same thing in Jerusalem. And it says in Luke 19:48, all the people were hanging on his words. All those people remember Jerusalem is swelled with numbers because of the feast. They're captivated. They are spellbound. And remember, this is feast time in Israel. In Jerusalem, the city is packed with people. Jewish pilgrims have traveled from the far reaches of the Roman Empire to celebrate Passover at the temple and that means that many of these people from different parts of the Roman Empire,

they are hearing Jesus teach, Jesus preach for the very first time. Their minds are being blown as they're hearing this.

Two days earlier quite a stir was caused when Jesus came into the city and he's riding on the, the donkey's colt and they can see this is, this is like Scripture lived out in front of me; fulfillment of messianic prophecy created this massive excitement. There's this anticipation that God is here to overthrow the Roman occupying force, restore Israel to a rightful place. Man I'm sticking around. I can't wait to see this happen. So all these pilgrims that are there from different parts of the empire, they're learn, they're, they're learning from Jesus, but they're also seeing what's happening, this, this electric excitement is flowing through the crowds.

And remember the locals, those who are, whether they're from Galilee or from Judea and living in Jerusalem or Bethany, places like that all of those locals are there to tell the visitors what Jesus had done, to tell about his significance, to kind of interpret him to them. We read this over in John chapter 12, verse 17 that the crowd that had been with him when he had called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead,

they continued to bear witness. Remember this raising of Lazarus from the dead that the Pharisees and the scribes wanted to suppress.

In fact they hoped to just kill Lazarus. But remember, Jesus might just raise him from the dead again. So that's a bad plan. But they had been with Jesus when he had called Lazarus out of the tomb, raised him from the dead. They're there. They're there to explain to all the people. You haven't seen anything. You think this isn't, you think clearing the temple. I'll tell you what, raising the dead, I was there. And the reason why the crowd went out to meet him was that they had heard that he'd done this sign. And so the Pharisees said to one another, you see that you were gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him. The whole world has gone after him. Just to show the Pharisees are not exaggerating their concern about the world going after Jesus.

John writes this next in John 12 verse 20 just to help us see, this is no hyperbole on their part. This isn't an exaggeration. "Now among those who went up to the worship at the feast were some Greeks." They've come a long way, traveled from

Greece over to Jerusalem to worship at the feast. "So these came to Phillip, who was from Bethsaida and Galilee," and more of a Greek speaking place, "and asked him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'"

Greeks are just some of the pilgrims who would attend to the Passover feast fifty days later at the feast of weeks or also known as Pentecost. We read this list of pilgrims in Acts 2:9, they were there at that time: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya, visitors from Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretins and Arabians.

Pharisees are not wrong. They are not exaggerating. The whole world is, according to what they're seeing in front of them, going after Jesus. He's got an appeal with people who speak every kind of language, come from every kind of a culture. Why? Because the truth cuts down beneath every culture, beneath every society; doesn't matter what language, what time, what place, the word of Jesus Christ gets to the heart of the human condition. Luke tells us that they were hanging on his every word, all those people. Now you would think that this would be a

cause for joy and celebration in the temple. Messiah has come and the world is listening to him. This is the very purpose of Israel, is it not?

God intended Israel to be an evangelistic nation. We were singing some of those songs just earlier. God intended Israel to be an evangelistic nation, to call the nations of the earth, call them to come to the light. Isaiah says this. "I am the Lord." Speaking to the Messiah, he says, "I've called you in righteousness." "I've called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and I will keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the," pit, "prisoners from the dungeon, and from the prison those who sit in darkness."

All those sayings are metaphors for the effect of sin. Sin blinds the eyes. Sin makes us prisoners in the devil's dungeon. Sin puts us in darkness. We need light, which is a metaphor for salvation, life. Isaiah 49:6 says, "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And now Messiah has come. Israel, look, the Messiah has come. Malachi 3:1, "The Lord whom you seek, he's suddenly come

into his temple" and it's a day for joy and for rejoicing and celebration. The kids got it.

They were running around singing Hosanna, Hosanna as he's clearing the temple. And that is just twisting the knife for these religious leaders. Why? Because they are false. Instead of them rejoicing, we read in Luke 20 verse 1, and here's where you can cue the Darth Vader Imperial March theme. It says, "The chief priests and the scribes of the elders came up" in verse 2 they said to him, 'Tell us," They're commanding him, "tell us by what authority you do these things, or who is it that gave you this authority."

Chief priest, scribes, elders, those are three component parts of the Sanhedrin. So this is a delegation from the ruling body of the Jews, which is the Council of seventy, the Sanhedrin. Many of them are Pharisees, but some of them are Sadducees. The Sanhedrin is presided over by the top guy who will break a tie in case of a tie vote. It's the Chief Priest, Caiaphas in this case. This is a delegation from the Sanhedrin and as we said from the beginning, the question that they asked about authority, it's actually not the wrong question. Yeah,

it's said in the wrong spirit, but it is a right question to ask. They are the duly appointed authority, the Sanhedrin, and they have the right and the duty. They've got a God-given responsibility actually to examine leadership, and examine influence, and examine teachers teaching.

They have seen many of these would be messiahs come and go, and they stir up the people to action and turn them into rebels and zealots that eventually are put down by the Romans and killed, but all the while bringing a lot of bloodshed on all the people. So it is part of their job to examine teachers and their teaching, to see what they're saying, to see what their influence is. So the problem is not with the question itself, the problem is not in the intent to examine, the problem, frankly, in a word, is them. They are the problem.

They use their God given, divinely delegated authority in a dishonest and insincere and hypocritical way. How is that? It's to protect their interests, selfish interests. We know from Luke 19:47, we can see very clearly there, these men want him dead. It's not righteous. They can't simply arrest him though. They can't drag him off to prison, have him executed. They can't have

him assassinated. Such actions would really undermine the appearance of legitimacy that they had before all the people, and they need to keep up appearances.

The chief priest refers to a group or an order that worked for and represent the interest of the current ruling high priest, who is Caiaphas, his high priestly family, dignitaries that are connected to the priesthood. As we said last time, these chief priests, the high priestly family, all theological liberals, they're morally corrupt. They're driven by greed, love for money, but they are the custodians of the temple and as the custodians of the temple, they're not too happy about what Jesus did the previous day.

It's really messing up all their business connections. It's really putting all their, the contracts that they've created with those who sell the animals and change the money, put all those contracts in jeopardy of them being out of contract. The scribes, many of these are Pharisees, but others are Sadducees or others just neutral, if there is such a thing. But they're academics. They're the legal theological scholars. They have studied the Bible. They've interpreted the Law of Moses. They

know the Scripture. They're, they advise those whom they work for in matters of law, matters of policy and procedure. But the scribes are there, and especially accompanied, accompanying the chief priest.

They are there to provide legal cover, biblical cover, for their, their duties. They're like backup and they assure the people, they assure everyone that the traditions of the Pharisees, the policies, the priesthood, the policies of the temple, all those are biblically justified. We can find chapter and verse for everything that we do. So scribes assure everyone God is on the side of these religious authorities. You need to listen to them because the Bible says so.

In reality, they are just there to legitimize whatever the chief priests paid them to legitimize. The elders, these elders were respected lay leaders in the community. In Israel's history, the elders are tribal heads who exercised oversight. They judged the different tribes of Israel, Simeon, Benjamin, Judah, Issachar, all those different tribes of Israel they exercised authority in, in those cities and towns. They had

roles of giving judgment, deciding cases; whether in the synagogue or sitting at the city gates.

But in Jerusalem, this is the big stage. This is like you got the lower courts, but this is like the Supreme Court. These guys, well respected, accomplished, studied, informed, and these men sat on the Sanhedrin to provide judicial oversight for the whole nation. Now the matter of concern for the chief priest, the scribes, the elders. What is it? Verse 2, "these things," "these things." It's intentionally broad, but these things in context refers to everything Jesus has been doing over the past couple days.

I mean, talking about his procession into Jerusalem. He's made quite a stir, meddling in temple affairs, more to the point, though, he had driven away the vendors of the temple. He's even gone further than that. Not just, not just with this zealot impulse of purity or whatever that is, but he has taken up a teaching position. He started to speak things that are very much in contrast with what everybody else has been saying. He is an unvetted nonresident teacher and he's taken up residency in the temple. He started teaching the people. He is there without

prior authorization. And here's the problem, without prior authorization from them.

Now they would say if we're to make their case for them the chief priest, they're simply trying to serve the people. We just want to care for the people. We want to help them obtain their lambs for sacrifice and oxen; want to make the pigeons available too, because of all the poor that just don't have the means, they need to worship God too.

So we're providing them a service. We provide a currency exchange. So none of that godless foreign money that are all stamped with pagan idols. None of that makes it into the temple coffers and pollutes the coffer and purity of the temple. We don't wanna allow any of those foreign coins with lower silver content to rob the temple of God; we got a temple to maintain. We got to keep up the beauty. We got to keep up the experience for all of you. We just care.

That's certainly what they said. That's certainly how they were able to sleep at night with their actions. But no one, not

the common man. None of them were fooled by their sanctimonious, pious words of justification. They could see right through it. Everyone knew what was going on in the temple was robbery. They complained. There's a lot of records of complaint of the exorbitant rates that they charged. This approved vendors list that everybody had to use for getting their animals from the chief priest. They charge outrageous prices, exchange rates for foreign currency, also outrageous. All of it's a scam and people know it.

So when Jesus comes in and throws out the scam and the scammers, man, he is the people's man. Certainly they do like Jesus. They're hanging on all his words. But we know that just because they're hanging on his words, it doesn't mean it's always for the right reason, right? Few days later, they're gonna say "crucify him." Truth didn't go very deep with them.

But back to the chief priests. They had their own business interests to protect. They're obligated by contract to provide booth space for temple vendors so they could sell their animals, so they exchange currency without any molestation from zealots, like this man, without fear of rioting or uprisings from among

the people. These chief priests had contractual obligations to uphold, and all of that kept the money flowing. It lined their pockets by keeping their business partners happy, content. So concerned about protecting their interests, they got to deal with this Jesus problem.

They can't kill him, can't have them assassinated, can't have the appearance of an unlawful arrest. But they can try to undermine him in public. They can try to delegitimize him, expose his lack of credentials, his lack of authorization, show everyone he's got no authority to do what he's been doing, to teach what he's been teaching. And what they want to say, we're in charge here, and you failed to get our permission. But that sounds a little bit too wagging the finger in the face like the school marm, right?

I'll bet, in fact, that if Jesus had rode in on Sunday, parked his donkey in front of the temple's business office, and obtained a permit or signed a contract on a booth, I'll bet the chief priest would have cut him a pretty good deal. They knew about him. He was no mystery to them. They'd love to be able to put their stamp of authority and their imprimatur on his

ministry, because in that case, his entire messianic claim, the whole messianic movements would come under the ages of their authority. He'd be beholden to them. For a price they'd be willing to grant him their support.

But listen, we know this. He'd never do that. The thought never crossed his mind. And you say, well, Travis, why did it cross your mind? Well, because I'm sinful and I think of what sinners do. He'd never do that. The thought to seek their permission, come under their authority never crossed his mind. How could it? How could the one who commands the wind in the waves, who banishes sickness and disease, who cast demons out with a word. How could he seek permission from men? How could the one who has power of life, creates eyesight, can, heals congenital birth defects, creates food for thousands, overcome death by raising the dead? How could he put himself under any lesser power, any a lesser authority?

Would such a thought ever cross his mind to seek their permission? It is his temple, not theirs. It belongs to his Father. He is the custodian of the temple, not them. And he's come to take charge of his Father's house. We read this from

Psalm 62, verse 9 earlier. But listen to it again, and this time from the CSB, the Christian Standard Bible. "Men are only a vapor; exalted men only an illusion." The men aren't the illusion, right? It's their exaltation above anybody else.

That's the illusion. And that's how Jesus sees all these important men as they stroll through the temple dressed in their long, flowing fancy robes. Going from dinner party to dinner party. Moving through the temple courts according to pecking order like little ducks arranged in order of importance, title, human authority. Just a bunch of men playing dress up, puffing out their chest, acting important. And as they approach him with somber faces, he's thinking, weight in the scales and they go up and together. All these guys, less than a vapor.

That's what's strikingly apparent in their challenge, when they say in verse 2, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who is it gave you this authority." You know what they're acknowledging tacitly? His authority. They can't help it. They're compelled to acknowledge his authority. Why? Because there is no one like this man. There's no one who speaks like him. There's no one who acts like him. There's no one who flexes

his power like him. One man driving out thousands from the temple complex. Never seen anything like this. When Jesus forgave the paralytic early in his ministry, restored his ability to walk as well. The crowd saw it. Says they were afraid.

In Matthew 9:8, "they glorified God." Why? Because he had given such authority to men. They identified the source of that authority. It's divine. This is otherworldly. This is an alien invasion of a different authority than I've ever seen. When he cast out demons, Luke 4:36 says, "They were all amazed and said to one another, 'What is this word? For with authority and power he commands demons and they come out!'" "The crowds marveled," Matthew 9:33, "saying, 'never was anything like this seen in Israel.'"