

By Whose Authority?
Mark 11:27-33
ABC 2/25/24

What is authority? **Authority** is commonly understood as the legitimate power of a person or group over others;¹ the right to give commands & make decisions. Imagine you're in a store buying something. Just as you hand over your money, a man bursts in, waves a gun, and screams for the attendant to empty the cash register. Two policemen enter, see the hold-up, and draw their guns. Who is threatened by them? You? No! The attendant? No. It's the bad guy. It's always the guy that's wrong that's threatened by authority. Our text today is about authority & connects closely to both what comes before & what follows. As we saw last week, Jesus had demonstrated remarkable authority in cursing the fig tree & clearing the temple (11:12–17). We might expect Jesus to go into hiding, as the Jewish leaders would be watching Him. But He doesn't. Instead, He returns to *the scene of the crime* & is confronted by Israel's religious leaders, who challenge Him about the authority by which He took this action. Our text connects with what follows as the beginning of a series of controversies between Jesus & the religious leaders (11:27-12:44). In these disputes Jesus demonstrates great wisdom & incomparable authority as He exposes the religious leaders as self-centered, deceitful, hypocritical, & unworthy to lead God's people (12:38–40). It recalls the confrontations during Jesus' earlier ministry in Galilee (2:1–3:6). Just as those ended with a plot on Jesus' life (3:6), these begin with one. As we read in vs 18, **The chief priests & the scribes heard this, & began seeking how to destroy Him**. Open to Mk 11:27-33. Here we see that the day following the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders about the source of His authority. Knowing this was an attempt to trap Him, He counters by asking whether John the Baptist's authority was from God or from man. The leaders' unwillingness to answer reveals Jesus' authority & exposes them as hypocrites & false leaders. **27-33**

There's no question, this passage is about authority. The word **authority** is used 4x in these verses, and it means the rightful power to act & the right to control. Because Jesus possesses divine authority, He never asked anyone for permission to do His & the Father's will. Jesus repeatedly

¹ Frank Bealey, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science: A User's Guide to Its Terms*, pp 22–23

affirmed His authority. In Mt 28:18 He declared, **All authority has been given to Me in heaven & on earth.** Earlier in Mathew, He said, **All things have been handed over to Me by My Father** (Mt 11:27). In Jn 3:35 He added, **The Father loves the Son & has given all things into His hand.** The writers of the NT epistles also asserted Jesus' absolute authority over everything (1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:21–22; Phil 2:9–11; Heb 1:2; 1 Pt 3:22). Jesus' sovereign authority over all things offers clear proof of His deity. Another aspect of Jesus' authority is His right to grant eternal salvation. In the prologue to his gospel, John wrote, **But as many as received Him (Jesus), to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name** (Jn 1:12). The extent of Jesus' authority is also revealed by the Father's granting Him the right to be the ultimate Judge. **For not even the Father judges anyone, Jesus declared, but He has given all judgment to the Son ... & He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man** (Jn 5:22, 27). & then, Jesus has full authority over life & death. In Jn 10:18 He said, **No one has taken My life away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, & I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.** In Rev 1:18 He added, **I am the living One; & I was dead, & behold, I am alive forevermore, & I have the keys of death & of Hades.** Although Jesus' authority is infinite & absolute, it's always exercised in perfect agreement with the will of the Father.²

1. Leaders' Questions 27-28

Jesus returns to Jerusalem & to the temple. Here He encounters the 3 groups mentioned in His 1st passion prediction in Mk 8:31 (cf 10:33) & they show up to question Him. Earlier, as we've seen, the Pharisees & Herodians have already **began conspiring ... as to how they might destroy Him** (3:6). The 3 groups mentioned now made up the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The **chief priests**, probably Pharisees, & the **scribes**, the experts in the law, have appeared just before this (11:18), plotting Jesus' death. The **elders** were wealthy & influential lay leaders in the Sanhedrin. Although these 3 groups disagreed on many things, they were in full agreement that Jesus had to be eliminated. These elite Jewish leaders in Jerusalem come together to challenge the authority of

² John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 153

Jesus. These are the very ones Jesus predicted would conspire to kill Him (8:31). Perhaps they're an official fact-finding delegation from the Sanhedrin, perhaps not. It doesn't say. The Sanhedrin saw themselves as licensed by heaven to rule over God's temple & they now fear losing control of the crowds to this upstart Rabbi from Galilee. Jesus, an outsider, is usurping their power. Obviously, they hadn't barred Him from the temple area & He shows no fear of them & of returning to it. As a matter of fact, He's in charge of all that goes on. They ask Jesus 2 questions that weren't prompted by curiosity. It was actually an attack. The word translated **confronted** in Luke's account (20:1) can also be translated *attacked* (Acts 17:5).³ The leaders ask 2 questions, the 2nd clarifying the 1st. **By what authority are You doing this?** meaning, **Who gave You this authority to do these things?** For the Sanhedrin the issue isn't simply what Jesus did, but His right to do it. They ask by what authority does Jesus act within the temple. Is it a right deriving from His own authority or by one grounded in the commission given to Him by another? In essence, they're asking for His credentials. They were concerned to learn why Jesus performed what appeared to be an official act if He had no official status. Jesus had never said openly that He was the Messiah or even a prophet.⁴ The **these things** refer to Jesus' actions in the temple & perhaps even His kingly entrance into Jerusalem. The question, **who gave You this authority to do these things?** acknowledges that no one possesses authority on his own to do what Jesus does. Such authority could only come from God. The purpose of their questions is to try to trap Him & gather evidence for messianic claims to authority or opposition to the temple. Why do I say that? Because it's these accusations that will be brought against Him at His trial & crucifixion (14:58, 61; 15:29, 32). The Romans didn't look favorably on would-be insurrectionists & false prophets could be executed under Jewish law (Dt 13:1-5; 18:20). They think they've got Jesus in between a rock & a hard place. They know they haven't given Him authority. If He says His authority is from God they'll charge Him with blasphemy. If He says it's His own authority they'll accuse Him of pride & being a false prophet.

³ John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, p 156

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p 413

2. Jesus' Question It's interesting that in Mark, those who approach Jesus with hostility never receive direct answers or undeniable proof from Him. How does Jesus answer here? **29-30**

Jesus turns the tables on them by asking a counterquestion that presents a problem & challenges the sincerity of their question. Jesus makes His answer depend entirely on theirs. Jesus' counterquestion about John is often taken as a diversionary tactic. It's not, & ironically, it contains the seed of the truth the Sanhedrin hopes to learn, because it was at His baptism by John that the heavens were parted, the Spirit of power descended on Him (1:10), & the voice from heaven declared Him God's Son. The baptism of Jesus, in other words, was the event that inaugurated His authority. But this question isn't limited just to John's baptism. The phrase **baptism of John** includes his entire ministry; his preaching, his teaching, his calling of the people to repentance, & most importantly, his declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus is challenging them to declare whether they believed John's ministry was of divine or human origin. John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that bypassed the temple (1:4). It was free; no sacrifice was required except that of a repentant heart & no money exchanged hands. Jesus aligns Himself with the ministry of John & asks if John's ministry was from God or from man. By answering their question with His question, Jesus wasn't being rude or evasive. This way was an accepted rabbinic practice, designed to force the questioner to consider the issue at a deeper level. Here, Jesus' question creates a conundrum for these guys, forcing them toward an answer they don't want to accept.⁵ The truth is, they don't care if someone is commissioned by God or not; they'll do as they please & ignore him. John the Baptist was widely regarded by the people as a true prophet of God. If they accept the divine authority behind John's ministry, they must also accept Jesus' as well. **Heaven** is a common substitute for **God**,⁶ so **from heaven** means divinely ordained. Out of reverence for God, Jews avoided using the divine name & Jesus follows the custom here, substituting **heaven** in its place.

⁵ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 504

⁶ Dan 4:26; 1 Macc 4:10, 24; Lk 15:18, 21, & Matthew frequently replacea *kingdom of God* with *kingdom of heaven* (3:2; 4:17; 5:3; etc)

From men carries a derogatory sense; it means arising from error & destined to fail. The repetition of the command, **Answer Me** (29-30), at the end emphasizes Jesus' authority. Perhaps Jesus repeats the command because there's a pause or their speechless after He asks the question. With confidence, the Prophet & Rabbi from Galilee demands an answer from Israel's religious elite.

A decision about John is a decision about Jesus. Why did Jesus ask this question? Because it put them in a dilemma in regard to John the Baptist. Whether or not they'd actively opposed John's ministry, His arrest & execution meant they no longer had to deal with His call for repentance & baptism. Now, however, Jesus puts them on the spot by asking whether John was truly sent from God (Jn 1:6). An affirmative answer would open them up to the charge of rejecting God's messenger: **Then why did you not believe Him?** But a negative answer would place them in opposition to the people, who revered John & believed he was God's prophet. If they say John's ministry is from God then why didn't they see Jesus' ministry the same way? If they say it was from men the people they supposedly lead will rise up against them. How do they respond?

3. Leaders' Consultation 31-33a

Jesus' question creates a dilemma for them & they huddle to discuss it. **They began reasoning** or *discussing* how to respond. This word appears 7x in Mark, always in the context of people trying to evade the force of Jesus' word or claim on them. If John's baptism was **from heaven**, that is, from God, as the crowds believed & as the Sanhedrin feared, then Jesus' authority is far greater than mere human authority & must be explained by the authority of God.⁷ If they **say, 'from men'** & then Mark leaves the consequences unstated. We don't have to guess what those consequences were. Both Matthew & Luke understood the sentence in this way, smoothing Mark's construction by adding an *if* & then finishing the statement. Matthew with **we fear the people** (Mt 21:26). Luke records that they said, **if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet** (Lk 20:6). To reject God's true prophet was the same as rejecting & blaspheming God Himself. Mark leaves it unsaid but it's clearly understood. Their hypocrisy is clear in that their deliberations are motivated not by what is true about John, but by

⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p 352

the potential repercussions from Jesus or the crowds. If they were to accept the legitimacy of John's ministry, that he was truly from God, they should also accept the authority of Jesus, since John was the forerunner who pointed to Jesus (1:2–8; Mt 3:11–12; Lk 3:15–18; Jn 1:15, 24–31, 35–36; Acts 1:5; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24–25). But they really don't care if someone is commissioned by God or not. They certainly have some suspicions about who Jesus is, & they might learn more if they'd enter an honest dialogue with Him. But they don't because they're unwilling to know.

This question of authority was a point of contention throughout Jesus' ministry. In His 1st public appearance in Mark, Jesus astounds the synagogue congregation by His supremacy over both Torah experts & the demonic world (1:21–28). He presumes to forgive sins (2:10); He claims authority over the Torah & the Sabbath (2:23–3:6); Jesus binds Satan, **the strong man** (3:27); & replaces the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God meets humanity (15:38–39).⁸ He said, **I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment *as to what to say & what to speak*** (Jn 12:49). Of course, this wasn't just a question for 1st-century scribes & Pharisees. It's the supreme question we all face even today. Perhaps you haven't yet submitted to Jesus because you doubt His authority. You're thinking in your heart, *I want control of my own life. Who is Jesus to tell me what to do?* Simply put, He's the eternal Son of God & He speaks & acts by the authority that has been given to Him by His Father, Almighty God.⁹

The only **way** out of their dilemma is for these religious leaders to claim ignorance about John's authority. That's what they do. They punt on 2nd down & say, **we do not know**. That's an absolute lie. Of course, they know where John's ministry came from. They just don't want to admit it because it will mean acknowledging the authority of Jesus. If they deny it they face opposition from the people they lead. The truth is staring them in the face & they refuse to see it. Their answer is a humiliating loss for them. Their inability to discern spiritual matters regarding John invalidates their claim to be leaders over God's people. How can they shepherd God's flock if they can't discern His

⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, p 350

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 294

will? Furthermore, in a culture of shame & honor, to admit ignorance signals humiliation & loss of face. From the perspective of Mark's readers, the leaders' discussion reveals they're hypocrites since they know but refuse to acknowledge John's status as a prophet. Their pride & self-interest outweighs their submission to the will of God. Mark's comment that **they were afraid of the people** (32) reveals that their authority comes from humans because they don't fear God. These leaders dread losing face before the crowds & will ultimately lose their souls. They may evade Jesus' question, but they can't evade God's judgment. Their answer reveals they have no understanding of God's working & consequently no authority. They're admitting they can't tell the difference between what is from God & what is from men, or, for that matter, from Satan (3:20–21).¹⁰ Still, they refused to give up on their plan to trap Jesus into discrediting Himself publicly with the hope that it would lead to support for killing Him. Knowing in the past He'd claimed that His authority had come directly from God, they assumed He'd do so again. They could then accuse Him of blasphemy & call for His execution. However, they were the blasphemers not Him (Lk 22:65).

4. Jesus' Conclusion Mark hasn't stated the source of Jesus' authority yet. Now for the 1st time, in the temple & before the Sanhedrin, in the most authoritative place & before the most authoritative body in Israel, Jesus opens a window of understanding into His own authority. **33b**

If they won't answer Jesus' question, He won't answer theirs. This is more than just a tit-for-tat. His refusal to answer is saying if they have no discernment in the ways of God regarding John, they have no authority or ability to judge the source of His authority. So, there's no reason for Jesus to answer. Having reduced His opponents to silence, Jesus ended the discussion with condemning them. He was through communicating with them. After 3 years of teaching & performing miracles to verify His claims (Jn 5:36), He'd provided ample proof that He was the Messiah. No further information would be given them. They'd rejected the light & the light had gone out (Jn 12:35). Jesus wouldn't cast pearls before swine (Mt 7:6) & their house was left to them desolate (Mt 23:37–38). Jesus knew they were lying when they said, *we don't know*. He could have said: *Yes, you do know. You know very well that John was a prophet of God*. Perhaps He judged that the deceit of

¹⁰ David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 444

the Pharisees & scribes was exposed by their pathetic answer. But since they chose not to answer His question, **Jesus said to them, “Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things”**. The religious leaders were set in their belief that Jesus had no authority to preach & do miracles, & nothing He could say would change their minds. They will continue to try to trap Him in His words in the chapters to come.

The question of who has authority as God’s representative is at the center of this event. The religious leaders who claim to be God’s anointed leaders over the temple & the Torah turn out to be frauds. They’re unable or unwilling to identify John’s status as a true prophet from God. By contrast, Jesus, who has no official position in the temple structure or as a recognized teacher of the law, speaks & acts with God’s authority, which validates who He is & what He says. Jesus’ authority has been a major theme throughout Mark’s gospel. At His 1st synagogue appearance, the people marveled at this authority in exorcisms & teaching, which was far superior to the authority of the scribes (1:22, 27). In the chapters that follow, Jesus demonstrated remarkable authority in teaching about the kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, forgiving sins, feeding the multitudes, raising the dead, calming the sea, raising the dead, & walking on water. Jesus’ acts of forgiving sins (2:5), accepting sinners (2:15), calling tax collectors into fellowship (2:13), redefining the Sabbath (2:28), & taking an ax to the root of the oral tradition (7:1–13), the temple (11:12–20), & now the Sanhedrin, all prove His authority from God. He refutes the claim that He casts out demons by Satan’s power (3:23–29), which implies His authority is from God. Twice, at His baptism (1:11) & His transfiguration (9:7), the Father’s voice from heaven affirms His mission & declares Him to be **My beloved Son**. These passages have a clear connection to the present one, since in the passage that follows, the tenant parable (12:1–12), Jesus portrays Himself as the Son sent with authority from the Father, who’ll face opposition & rejection. Though Jesus refuses to answer the religious leaders’ question, He’s already answered it through His words & actions & He’ll continue to do so in the days ahead. Those with eyes to see & ears to hear already know the answer. Sovereignly, His authority is what leads to His death. The religious leaders feel threatened by Him & so take action against Him. This is no tragedy, however, but is exactly what He’s been

sent by His Father to accomplish. It's as the authoritative Son of Man that Jesus has come to give His life as a ransom for many (10:45). By virtue of His authority, He'll submit His will to the Father & say, **yet not what I will, but what You will** (14:36).

Amazingly, the authority that Jesus possessed to say & do what He wanted was delegated to the apostles. In Lk 9:1 He **called the 12 together, & gave them power & authority over all the demons & to heal diseases**. Having that delegated authority, they spoke the same truth & wielded the same power that Jesus did. There were unique elements of their authority but the authority to proclaim the truth has been passed down to all Christians. Paul wrote to Titus, **These things speak & exhort & reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you** (Titus 2:15). Though Titus wasn't an apostle, he was still commanded to proclaim sound doctrine with authority. We must also confidently proclaim God's revealed truth with the authority we've been given by Him. Jesus promised authority to those in His future kingdom: **He who overcomes, & he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations** (Rev 2:26). The glorious reality is that the Father has all authority, He gives it to the Son, & the Son delegates it to believers then, now, & in the future. We see this combination of authority, sacrifice, & vindication throughout the NT. In Phil 2:6–11, the Son's status of equality with God makes His incarnation & sacrifice for sins effectual for all, & it results in His exaltation to the highest place. In Col 2:13–15 Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross disarms all **rulers & authorities** & results in His triumph over everything. For Mark's readers who're undergoing suffering & persecution, the promise is that after suffering will come vindication for those willing to take up their cross & follow the Son.¹¹

Of course, this wasn't just a question of Jesus' authority for 1st-century religious leaders. It's the supreme question that everyone faces today. Perhaps you haven't yet submitted to Jesus because you doubt His authority. You're thinking in your heart, *Who is Jesus to tell me what to do? Who is He to say He's the only source of salvation?* Simply put, He is the eternal Son of God & He speaks & acts by the authority that has been given to Him by God the Father.¹²

¹¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 507–508

¹² R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, 294

John Piper says this in regard to Jesus' authority. He has...

All authority over Satan & all demons & all angels, good & evil.

Authority over the natural universe: natural objects & laws & forces, like stars & galaxies & planets & meteorites.

Authority over all weather systems: winds & rains & lightning & thunder & hurricanes & tornadoes & monsoons & typhoons & cyclones, & all their effects like tidal waves & floods & fires.

All authority over molecular & atomic reality: atoms, electrons, protons, neutrons, subatomic particles, quantum physics, DNA, chromosomal reality.

All plants, all animals. Doesn't matter what size: whales, redwoods, giant squid, & giant oaks. All fish, all wild beasts, He has authority over.

All invisible animals: bacteria & viruses & parasites & germs of every kind—He has authority over.

He has authority over all the parts & functions of the human body. Every beat of your heart, every movement of the diaphragm, every little jump across a million synapses in your brain—Jesus has all authority over all those physiological phenomena in your body.

He has all authority over nations & governments & congresses & legislatures & kings & premiers & courts.

He has all authority over armies & weapons & bombs & terrorists.

All authority over industry & business & finance & currency.

All authority over entertainment & amusement & leisure & media.

All authority over education & research & science & discovery.

All authority over crime & violence & all families & all neighborhoods.

& He has authority over His body, the church.

& He has authority over every soul in the universe & every moment & every second of every life lived, now or previously or forever & ever, anywhere in the universe.¹³

In other words, Jesus has ALL authority. He has died. He has risen from the dead. He has triumphed over sin & death. The question is not whether Jesus has all authority. He does. The question is whether we will submit to His authority or whether we'll reject His authority. Phil 2:9-11 says,

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, & bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven & on earth & under the earth, & that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹³ www.desiringgod.org/interviews/sovereign-comfort-for-uncertain-times

Don't be like these arrogant religious leaders who confronted Jesus, daring to question the authority of the God who made them, daring to question the authority of Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. Don't question the authority of Him who was with God in the beginning and is God. Instead, confess the truth, trust in Christ, and be saved. How will you respond to His authority?

The reality is we're all rebels against the authority of our Creator God. We want to be our own god. We want to be our own authority. We have taken the good things of God & made them ultimate things, thus making them bad things. We have rebelliously taken what was God's & made it ours. But Rom 5:8 says that **God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.** The Son of God stood in our place. Where we rebelled against God & sought self-rule for ourselves, thus incurring the judgment of God against us in our state of rebellion, Jesus stood in our place, willingly giving Himself over to death, taking the judgment of God that was coming our way, so we could be saved. That's the good news of Jesus Christ. Many will reject this good news. Many won't respect the name of Jesus or submit to His authority. Many will know all the facts about Jesus but don't truly know Him. My prayer is that we'll see & believe & give our lives to the One with all authority who was rejected & killed, so that we could be saved. Jn 3:16-18 says,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

It's as though He's asking us, *Am I King over your finances? Am I King over your health? Am I King over your job? Am I King over your family? Am I King over how you spend your time? Am I King over your life?* How do you answer? What authority does Jesus have? He has all authority in heaven & on earth. & until we trust Him with every aspect of our lives, until we've submitted to the authority of Jesus, we really don't know Jesus. Do you know Him? Is He your King?