

Matthew 21:23-32

21:23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

21:24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

21:25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

21:26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

21:27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

21:28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

21:29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

21:30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

21:31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

21:32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

SERMON: Practicing without a License

[STORY]

Citizens of Raleigh recently began advocating for stoplights at an intersection in response to the tragic death of a 14 year old, who was struck by a car at the intersection. However the City of Raleigh decided that based on current traffic counts that the intersection did not require a stoplight.

But the citizens saw the housing developments that were springing up all over and were not deterred. They “then mailed a 4-page report to the...government representatives stating that the existing traffic engineering analysis should instead be based on estimated future traffic volumes.”¹ A good point, I think.

Yet, the City officials did not receive the report kindly, to say the least. In fact, the State Traffic Engineer said that the citizens’ report “qualified as “practicing traffic engineering without a license”², and has sought a misdemeanor against the citizen who prepared the report.

Trouble in the Text: The experts don’t think Jesus is from God and seek to expose him as a fraud.

Just prior to the passage I read, Jesus has done some audacious and also miraculous acts. First, he threw out a bunch of thugs—charletons who were cheating poor people out of money in the name of religion—preying on their faith in order to make a few extra bucks. Immediately after Jesus exposed them, others people came to Jesus for healing.

A blind man with a cane and a limp stumbles towards Jesus. Jesus lays his hands on him, and the man receives his sight and his hip is reset correctly. He sees the crowd gathered around Jesus, others who are sick and lame are coming, hoping to be healed.

And then a small group of men with long silver beards, official gowns and turbans walk up to Jesus and ask to see his license. They say, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gives you the right to expunge corruption, make the blind to see and the lame to walk?”

And upon seeing all these miracles the one question the chief priests want to know is whether or not Jesus is God? They want to know who is fighting for justice, healing the sick and defending the cause of the poor.

In their mind, the chief priests were certain that the power behind Jesus couldn’t be God. After all, Jesus didn’t get his credentials through THEM and besides, he was criticizing and complaining about the synagogue all the time.

Trouble in the World: People are looking for evidence to prove faith in God is credible.

Mark gave up on God a long time ago. He went to Sunday School as a child and went through confirmation as a teenager. But there were more interesting things than God--hockey, girls, music, parties. At best, God was on the periphery of Mark’s conscious as a teenager. In university, Mark let loose, tapped into creative parts he didn’t know he had and discarded the institutional forms which he felt inhibited him.

Mark found great success after university. His openness and creativity along with a strong work ethic and articulate self-presentation made him a very desirable commodity in the business world. And the distance between the world Mark experienced and believed in, and the

¹ <http://planningpool.com/2011/02/news/citizen-activist-accused-practicing-engineering-license>, accessed September 21, 2011.

² Ibid.

world of God and the church, grew farther and farther apart. For Mark, God and the church were instruments that squelched the imagination; they were social constructs which inhibited his creativity and genius. God became not just irrelevant...but a hindrance.

For most of his early career, Mark flourished in social and business settings. But things at home began to unravel. Mark's free self-expression, while desirable and advantageous in the workplace, was not so conducive at home where the responsibilities of parenthood required some sacrifice and limits to his personal freedom. His wife grew ever more irritated at his self-centered and self-aggrandizing behavior, which not only put the burden of raising children squarely on her shoulders but also made Mark less than attentive to her needs.

She resented him; he felt inhibited by her; and argument followed argument without resolution or reconciliation. Unforgiveness led to bitterness. And bitterness drove a wedge of disdain and hate between them. He saw no way out; and had no answers.

He remembered Sunday School talks about God's forgiveness and sacrifice, but he had given up on God a long time ago. How could he expect a God he didn't believe in to help him? No, he would not turn to Jesus, not until he got a satisfactory answer as to whether or not there was a God, and if Jesus was him.

Often the only question any of us can imagine to ask the church (or the Bible) is the same one the religious leaders asked Jesus, "Are you God or not?" Like Mark, we've become paralyzed by it. We won't move forward until we get an answer with enough scientific evidence behind it. However, when we do this, we confuse cognitive belief with a life of worship; we confuse our answers and God's power. When we confuse these, we squelch our imaginations.

Because if our belief (or lack thereof) prevents our worship and our service, then we too are like the chief priests who ask Jesus to see his license, and until he does so, we won't let him practice his miracles among us.

But we don't ask someone to show us their credential before we allow them to perform the Heimlich maneuver on a choking child. So why do we ask Jesus to see his credentials before we accept the great and wonderful good--the good news--which he did and is still doing?

Now there are some who say that we can do the religious thing without God, that God is a nice addition but an inconsequential one in making the world a better place. But I am sympathetic (for social scientific reasons) with the statement Jesus said, "with humans this is impossible, but *with God* all things are possible."

There are some things I can't do. There are some dreams I can't dream. There are some possibilities that I have never thought of. There are some sacrifices and freedoms which I wouldn't know I wanted unless the-God-I-meet-in-Jesus-Christ told me that--I not only *need* the healing and peace that he gives but if I examine myself closely--I find I really *want* it.

Like the religious leaders, we often ask Jesus' authority to validate his ministry; but what if Jesus' ministry determines his authority?

If Jesus' ministry determines his authority, then what Jesus *does* is more powerful than whoever we (in our limited human knowledge) say Jesus *is*.

And the first question would not be, "by whose authority do you do these things?"

But it would be instead the question of the blind and the lame who come to Jesus and ask, "*Can you make me whole?*"

“What would the world look like if Jesus actually is God?”

Imagine the power of God we might experience in our personal lives and in our congregations when we begin to expect God to actually do something?

You see God is capable of doing something extraordinary, irrespective of our belief, if we will provide him the space to do so.

In a world where Jesus is God, our friend Mark can come to Jesus for help because what Jesus does is more powerful than what Mark thinks Jesus is.

In a world where Jesus is God, we can envision a society remade by the justice of God because God's justice is more powerful than injustice.

In a world where Jesus is God, we can ask her, “Can you make me whole?” because God's healing is more powerful than our doubt.

Grace in the Text: Jesus' ministry/work demonstrates his authority. What Jesus does tells us who he is.

In the text I read, Jesus does not accommodate to the logic of the chief priests nor does he close his practice and go home. He does not stop healing and forgiving and opening blind eyes. Jesus keeps on ministering, keeps on exposing corruption and declaring the promises of the gospel.

Regardless of what the priests thought of Jesus, they could not stop him.

Regardless of their evaluation of his healing and his good works, they could not replicate them.

Regardless of how the religious professionals explained Jesus' ministry, they could not contain it.

Jesus exploded out of their hands. They tried to squelch the movement, but the power of Jesus reverberated throughout the known world.

Grace in the World: Jesus does what no one else can do.

The chief priests were hung up on questions of authority and missed Jesus ministry. But that was nothing but a distraction from the truth they did not want to hear and the power they could not contain.

They discounted the power of Jesus because the only question they could imagine was whether or not Jesus was practising his healing power without a license.

But in spite of attempts to silence and suspend the work of Jesus in history, he is still working, moving, acting. He is telling the unwanted, that they are loved. He is healing people with life-threatening injuries and illnesses who don't even claim to be religious but who know how to have hope.

God's power is stronger than our belief.

Jesus has the power to transform and heal regardless of what we think of his authority.
God's ministry with the poor and oppressed, with the sick and the hurting is happening all around us in spite of what the experts say.

Jesus' power and ministry are happening when a university athlete [Colt McCoy] swims across a lake to save the life of a neighbour having a seizure because his imagination had been shaped by the stories of Jesus.

Jesus' power and ministry are happening in Juamave, Mexico, where one small Christian community has little to no access to adequate health services. Yet, they are praying and people are being healed.

May God grant us the grace to *join* Jesus at work in the community, even if everyone around us is at the credentialing agencies checking to see if she filed the correct paperwork.

May God grant us the grace to *expect* Jesus to do something miraculous, when others are asking to see Jesus' license.

May God grant us the grace to *ask* Jesus to do something supernatural, that we never dreamed possible, long before we see the results of the DNA tests.

God is working and *will work* on your behalf because his power is stronger than our doubt.

May God grant us the grace to receive Jesus' work among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.