

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WAS IT FROM HEAVEN OR FROM MEN

Mark 11:27-33

The religious leadership of Israel did not like Jesus. They often tried to trap Him with trick questions. In our text today, they asked for His credentials and demanded that He tell them what was the basis of His authority. Accosting Jesus before the people, they were hoping to shame Him publicly by casting doubt on His person. Let's read this passage. Mark 11:27-33.

Mark 11:27. Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him.

28 And they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?"

29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things:

30 "The baptism of John-- was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me."

31 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

32 "But if we say, 'From men'"-- they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed.

33 So they answered and said to Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Jesus' authority

Jesus was approached by three groups of religious leaders: the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. These three groups made up the Sanhedrin, the highest level of Jewish authority. They were obviously not very happy with Jesus and they confronted Him with this question: 'By what authority do you do these things?' What things? Well, the things He had just done. The previous section dealt with the cleansing of the temple. Jesus drove out the money lenders. He overturned their tables. He prevented the merchants from carrying goods through the temple. In other words, He took upon Himself the authority to cleanse the temple of its commercial activity, where godliness was exploited for financial gain.

This action offended particularly the chief priests because the temple area was under their authority. They were the guardians, the earthly guardians of the temple, and they felt that Jesus had crossed their sphere of authority. 'The temple is my business,' the chief priest would say. And here Jesus comes in and does this kind of thing in the temple. So they wanted to know what right He had to interfere with their area of responsibility.

They challenged Him with this twofold question. 'By what authority do You do these things?' 'Who gave you this kind of authority?'

This is a question that probes into the very nature of Jesus. What was His authority? Who sent Him? Who empowered Him? Who gave Him the right to do as He was doing? Where had He come from? Just who was He?

But these religious leaders already knew who Jesus was claiming to be. In the context of this passage, their question implied that they rejected His claim and refused to believe. They were basically saying, 'Who do You think you are that You do this kind of things? You don't have the right to do that!'

The question was also a trap. Much like the trap in the question about the lawfulness of paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22), the question here was designed to get Jesus to make a statement that will either incriminate Him politically with Rome or discredit him religiously with the people.

There were three possible answers to the religious leaders' question. Jesus could have said that He did what He did,

1. by the authority of one of the temple leaders
2. by the authority of Himself
3. by the authority of God

If He were to say that His authority came from the rulers of the temple, that would have been a lie. Those who questioned Him knew very well that no temple authority had given Him authorization to do what He did.

He could have claimed to act by His own authority. He could have said that the power was His own. This would have made Him an ego-maniac or a sort of fanatic. The leaders would have been able to discredit Him immediately and to arrest Him for causing all that disorder. And the people would have probably turned away from Him.

Or, Jesus could have answered that His authority came from God. Actually Jesus did make such a claim time and again in the past. But if He had made it at that time in front of the authorities, they would have arrested Him right away for blasphemy and brought Him to trial (blasphemy carried the death penalty - Leviticus 24:10-23). They would have declared that God would never have given orders to cause such turmoil in the temple.

John the Baptist's authority

But Jesus would not let Himself be caught. He knew that these leaders were plotting against Him. So instead of giving them a direct answer, Jesus asked them a question, implicitly suggesting that He will somehow build His answer to their question on their answer to His question.

'Let Me ask you a question, and you answer Me. And when you have answered My question, I will answer your question. Because My answer depends on your answer. So you answer Me first and then I will answer you. The baptism of John, the ministry of John the Baptist, where did it come from? By what authority did he exercise his ministry in the wilderness? Was it by man's authority or by God's authority?'

Jesus asked His questioners to answer in connection with the now dead John the Baptist something like the question that they have just put to him, except that in Jesus' question the options have been set in a distinctive manner: did John's baptism come from God or was it merely a human matter?

The question is crucial because John the Baptist pointed to the office Jesus claimed. He said in Luke 3:16, *As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* Jesus also pointed to John and accepted baptism from him (Luke 7:28; 3:21-22). Their ministries were fundamentally linked. And since they were linked, the answer to Jesus' question is the answer to the leaders' question.

The fear of the multitude

Jesus' question put the leaders on the defensive. They considered their options.

V. 31: *If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'* They could not confess that John's authority came from God because they had never accepted John's baptism. The fact that they did not agree with John is explicitly stated in Matthew 21:32: *For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him.* A positive reply would have raised the issue of their rejection of John's baptism - they would have incriminated themselves. Also, it would have forced them to recognize that Jesus derived His authority from the same heavenly source as did John. They certainly did not want to put themselves in a situation like that.

V. 32: *But shall we say, 'From men ' '-- they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed.* There is no doubt that they would have liked to say that John's authority was from men. That was what they believed. But that answer was impossible for them to give publicly because people were convinced that John was a prophet from God. They feared the reaction of the crowd. Luke mentions that they were afraid of being stoned (Luke 20:6). The fact that the crowd held John the Baptist to be a person sent by God was responsible for Herod's fear of killing John. A similar fear, according to Matthew 21:46, prevented the Jewish authorities from seizing Jesus (*But when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet.*)

What we see here looks like a game of daring. The religious leaders were trying to trip up Jesus with a question involving His credentials. Who gave Him the authority to clear the temple? In God's plan, official training is not required for Jesus. What is needed is God's commission. John the Baptist is an example of a person who had such credentials without any official position. His authority was so clear that people in general recognized it. Because the leaders did not believe it, Jesus' question put them on the horns of a dilemma. They must either admit that John's message was from God (which means that they failed to respond to God's message) or they must reject John's authority publically (leaving them to face the people's ire).

Political expediency

Having no good public answer, the leaders decided to opt out, professing ignorance. *We do not know* (v. 33), they answered. This answer was not satisfactory at all for those who were supposed to bear the nation's religious authority by possessing theological discernment. It was an indictment on them because of the office they held. Their response disqualified themselves as competent leaders. And if they were incompetent to judge John the Baptist, how could they hope to be competent to pass judgment on Jesus?

When they said, 'We do not know,' they lied. They knew perfectly well that John's baptism was from God. They were just not willing to run the risk of being ridiculed.

There is something tragic in the attitude of the leaders in this whole passage. The tragic thing is that they did not seem to be concerned at all with the truth. They were only concerned about themselves and the public consequences of their words.

Remember their initial question. 'By what authority are You doing these things?' The question was one of contempt, not of seeking. It was an attempt to discredit Jesus, not to learn the truth. It was aroused because their own position was disturbed, not because they really wanted to know if Jesus were the Messiah.

When Jesus asked the question about John's baptism, we read in v. 31 that *they began reasoning among themselves*. They discussed their answer among themselves. However they were not searching their hearts and seeking for the truth. Their minds were already made up. They were not going to set aside their preconceived ideas, not even by the truth. They were going to decide on what they were going to say on the basis of expediency. 'What is the political thing we should do in this situation? What is the best answer we can give so that we don't lose face?' So it was not a question of truth. It was about the politics of the situation.

Commitment to the truth

Notice Jesus' reaction to the leaders' political game. He said, *Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things* (v. 33). Jesus responded in kind. If they will not answer His question, He will not answer theirs. 'Since you don't speak the truth and you don't want to know the truth, I will not tell you the truth either. I will not tell you where my authority comes from.'

There is an important lesson here for each one of us. If you are not committed to the truth, God will reveal nothing to you. If you do not have a love for the truth, you will have no way in which God will reveal His truth to you. This is the heart of this passage. You must be committed to the truth. When you are prepared to be committed to the truth, Jesus guarantees that you will know the truth. He says it in those terms in Matthew 7:7: *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*. That is a promise from God. But the prerequisite is that you must be unconditionally committed to loving the truth.

When non-Christians come into contact with Christianity, they often ask, 'How do I know that Jesus is true? How do I know that He is speaking the truth?' This is a very good question because you cannot really believe in Jesus unless you know for sure that He is speaking the truth. We cannot simply say to a non-Christian, 'Jesus is true because He is THE truth,' and then quote John 14:6 where Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life*. That does not prove anything.

If you are a non-Christian and you are wondering whether Jesus is true, there is something that I would like to say to you. Always remember this. In order to become a genuine Christian, you as a non-Christian have to do something. What do you have to do? You have to make a commitment to love the truth, a commitment where you are prepared to accept the truth no matter what the consequences might be, no matter what the cost might be to you. No one who does not make that kind of commitment to the truth can ever become a real Christian. You are not a true Christian if you simply love a religion. You are not a true Christian if you simply love a certain way of thinking, a Christian way of thinking. You become a true Christian only when you are committed to love the truth.

Some might think, 'If you are asking people to commit to the truth, you have to tell them what the truth is. Otherwise how can they commit to it?' Well, if you think that you need a definition of the truth so that you can believe in it, you did not get my point. You see, the Bible is very concerned with truth, not with dogma, not with doctrine, not with religion. Truth in the Scriptures, is not something that you know by way of a definition. Truth in the Scriptures is something that God reveals to you. Unless God reveals it to you, no amount of explanation about the truth will help you to know it. That is why Jesus said to those who were not committed to the truth, 'Neither will I tell you.' 'I won't tell you who I am. I won't tell you where my authority comes from.' He refused to reveal the truth to people who did not have a commitment to it. So it is not simply a question of defining the truth, but

mostly it is a question of experiencing it, i.e., when God has revealed His truth to you, you will not only perceive it, but you will experience it.

Experiencing the truth

What do you experience then when you are committed to the truth? Let me show you three passages from the apostle John.

The first thing that happens when you are committed to the truth is that you will look at things with very different eyes. You will look at things with a new criteria, the criteria of truth. For example, when you look at yourself, you will see and admit that you are a sinner. The apostle John expresses it in this way. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the **truth** is not in us* (1John 1:8). If we say that we have no sin, the truth is not in us. You see, if the truth is in you, you would certainly acknowledge that you are a sinner.

The second point is that those who love the truth come to the light. John 3:21: *But he who does the **truth** comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.* Here again we see that truth is not an abstract idea. It is something that is lived. The result of coming to the light and living in the truth will be made manifest in the life of these people, the people who love the truth.

And the third point is that those whose hearts are open to the truth can receive the Spirit of God. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. This is how He is called in the Bible. John 16:13: *When the **Spirit of truth** comes* (when the Holy Spirit comes), *he will guide you into all the truth.* Christian life cannot begin without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And that requires the desire to seek truthfulness and to walk in truth.

So, when you come to know Christ, this is what you will experience. Then the way of truth (2Peter 2:2) will be revealed to you.