

Matthew 21: 23-32

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Lesson: Authority

"Steady erosion can eventually undermine a foundation, resulting in destruction. In the same way, erosion of respect for authority can undermine an institution, a business, a government, or a country. Authority is the right to influence or command another. The weight of authority is eroding in our society. Fewer and fewer people respect or even recognize authority. Many even actively reject established authorities."

Explore The Bible, Spring 2026

Q: Are you familiar with the term "High-trust societies"?

This phrase describes areas of the U.S., Japan and Northern Europe where people don't need to lock their homes, you see self-service roadside stands for people to buy eggs or produce and just leave the money in a jar.

As immigrants arrive from other countries, there is clash of incompatible cultures. On social media we see immigrants and even US natives videoing themselves stealing from such stands apparently without any display of guilt. Low-trust behaviors are often celebrated today.

We see people opening ice cream containers in grocery stores, licking them, and putting them back into the freezer for someone else to buy as if this is a joke.

The erosion of trust and the erosion of authority go hand in hand. When there is no fear of punishment there is no authority.

Society declines without a basic agreement on authority. Stores in high-theft areas first lock up expensive items, then less expensive items, and then close those locations altogether.

Matthew 21: 23-27

23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?

24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

26 But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

It seems disrespectful for the chief priests to interrupt Jesus' teaching with questions, but apparently this was common and more of a sign that people are actively listening and engaged than that they are being disrespectful.

"Cooperative overlapping": Cultural observers note that interrupting (or talking over someone) in Jewish conversational style often signals engagement and interest, not rudeness. This "high-involvement" style shows you're paying attention and building on the idea, rather than disengaging with silence.

Q: Jesus' teaching was different wasn't it?

<Pause for responses.>

Mark 1:22

"And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes."

Luke 4:32

"And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power."

Q: The religious leaders had the Old Testament, was Jesus' teaching different only because He understood it better?

<Pause for responses.>

Jesus understood more because He was the living Word.

John 1:1

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John 1:14

"And the **Word was made flesh**, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

Jesus also understood God's Word better because, like us – He had the Holy Spirit to provide insight into God.

After John the Baptist baptized Jesus, God's Holy Spirit descended upon Him.

Luke 3:21-22

21 Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened,

22 And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.

Luke 4:14

14 And Jesus returned [in the power of the Spirit](#) into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about.

Q: Jesus spoke with authority because He was the Son of God, because He was the Word itself and because He was full of the Holy Spirit.

There was another reason that Jesus sounded so different from the religious leaders. It was an important reason in Jesus' day, and an important difference in ours.

Could someone read Mark 8:35?

"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."

This is another difference between Jesus and the religious leaders. They loved their earthly pleasures. They loved being elevated above other people, loved scholarly endeavors instead of digging for crops and hard work.

And this is another difference that everyone could sense or outright see in the reactions of the religious leaders. Jesus of course saw this and He used it against them.

Matthew 21: 24-27

24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

26 But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

They surely came believing that they had a question that would bring Him down, and He responded by telling them that He would in fact **give** them the very answer they'd hoped would convict Him, but only if they could answer His question first.

It's interesting to imagine the religious leaders' reaction to Jesus' turning the question back to them. They must have stood sneaking glances at each other, hopefully looking for any indication that someone could come up with a response.

In school, we had different kinds of questions. The hardest questions were the fill-in-the-blank questions. For those, you had to know the answer. The next easiest were the multiple-choice questions – those at least gave you the answer, if you could eliminate the wrong ones. But the best kind of question to answer is a True-False question. Those give you the best possible odds.

Jesus gave them a True-False question. Either John's baptism of Jesus was from God, or it wasn't.

But that question was still hard because either answer meant putting their earthly pleasures at risk, and that was how easy it was for Jesus to stand them up in front of everyone and to show their secret hidden truth.

Mark 8:35

"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."

Jesus had come to earth specifically to give up His life. He would hold nothing back from God's great plan of salvation.

We are living in a world where people are afraid even to speak the truth for the same reasons that the religious leaders were afraid.

Here are some questions people cannot answer today.

Q: What is a woman?

Q: When does life begin?

Q: Are there two genders?

We have all watched as people refused to answer those simple questions. They refused to answer for the exact reasons that the religious leaders refused. They value the approval of others who will cast them out of their social circles for answering those questions. They are identical, identical – to the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

"If you are too cowardly to say what is right what does it matter if you're right or wrong?"

Tom Deaderick, APR 25, 2026

Matthew 21:28-32 (KJV)

28 But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard.

29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.

30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.

31 Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

The Bible is poetry. It is truly the physical embodiment of God's own words. It speaks in a consistent way whether you read a single verse or all 66 books.

It is like a mineral. Minerals are homogeneous. Every piece of mineral is physically and chemically identical to the whole. If you break a quartz, every fragment is a quartz with the same hardness and hexagonal crystal structure. Math formulas, snowflakes and the leaf patterns of ferns share this same characteristic. They look the same in the details as they look at full view.

28 But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard.

29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.

These two verses are God's plan, embedded in 66 books, but clear for anyone to understand.

God asks us to obey Him.

We do not want to obey at first. It isn't what we want.

We repent and change our mind and obey.

That's the story of all that God created in two verses.

Matthew 21:30-32 (KJV)

30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.

31 Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

And there are many who pretend to obey because wide is the gate that God made for them that leads to their destruction. There are many who pretend to be upright and hide horrible evil in their heart. They pretend to obey.

Genesis 4:8-9

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

Acts 5:1-11

1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,

2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

3 But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

5 And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

6 And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

7 And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.

8 And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.

9 Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.

10 Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

11 And great **fear** came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

There are more examples than we have the time to hear about. Judas, and example after example of recent people who pretend to be good, but hide evil in their heart.

Matthew 21:31-32 (KJV)

31 Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

It was the pride and the love of earthly pleasures that stood in the way of the religious leaders. Jesus said that the ego of the publicans and harlots stood in their way less than the religious leaders and when the religious leaders had the chance to repent, they chose to hold onto their earthly treasures instead.