
"What right do you have to tell me what to do?" That question is being asked more and more in our society these days by adults, teenagers and children alike. Human authority is being challenged as never before at almost every level of our society. While teenagers have always been known to question the values of their parents at one point or another as they become adults themselves, young children are going one step farther these days by confronting their parents and other adults with defiant attitudes which challenge parental rights and responsibilities. Adults, likewise, seem to feel that they should be free to do their own thing in whatever way seems right in their eyes. Thus morality, both public and private, is being stripped of any absolutes and becoming a matter of individual choice. For example, in our public schools nowadays, children are no longer taught right from wrong but rather the importance of making good choices for themselves based on their own feelings and what they perceive to be the right thing to do. Is it surprising, then, that some children should feel that it's okay to murder an abusive father or mother or to get even with another child by shooting him like they do in the movies?

Unfortunately this lack of respect for authority has also crept into the church so that today we find people who claim to be Christians challenging and even defying the authority of God's Word. This situation, however, is not new or unique to our day and age. Jesus faced a very similar reaction from the people of his hometown when he applied an Old Testament prophecy to himself as the promised Messiah. They refused to accept the authority of his Word because they thought they knew better. For them and for us as well, it all boiled down to A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY.

It's obvious from our text, that whenever Jesus spoke, he did so as one who had authority. Jesus knew what he was talking about because he was and is the only-begotten Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh, who came into this world as the Christ to fulfill God's plan for our salvation. His words were the words of God himself. Thus whenever he spoke, he did so with certainty. He didn't preface his comments with statements like "This is what I think . . .," or "It seems to me . . .," or "In my opinion . . ." He didn't have to waste time sifting through the opinions of what other rabbis had said. He didn't have to appeal to previous religious authorities to back up his statements. Instead he spoke the truth as one who knew the truth and had come to proclaim that truth to others forcefully and unambiguously with no waffling or hedging. His words carried the full power and authority of God himself, a fact that was readily recognized by almost everyone who heard him speak, even the uneducated.

Time and again we read in the Scriptures how the people "were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority." The people in Capernaum certainly felt that way, and it would seem that at least initially, the people of Nazareth likewise reacted positively to the words which Jesus spoke, for Luke tells us that "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." They liked what they heard. It sounded like Jesus had something wonderful to offer them, but then they began to think to themselves, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" From where does he get this authority? Can an unschooled son of a carpenter be a rabbi, much less the Messiah? How could he possibly be the promised Savior foretold by the prophet Isaiah? Thus they let what they saw and knew about Jesus get in the way of the words that they heard him speak.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, which is why he goes on to say: "READ VERSES 23-24." The people in Nazareth had obviously heard about the miracles that Jesus had performed in Capernaum. Thus they were no doubt thinking: "If you want us to believe your words, then first prove yourself by doing here a mighty work similar to what you did in Capernaum. Then we will believe you and accept the authority of your word." Jesus knew, however, that even if he performed such miracles, they still would not accept him as the promised Messiah because of his local roots so to speak. As a matter of fact, their very unbelief and rejection stood in the way of such signs, just as the unbelief of the Israelites in Old Testament times led the Lord to send his prophets and bestow his blessings upon Gentiles like the widow of Zarephath or the Naaman the Syrian. Even though they were strangers who had no prior promises from God in which they could trust, they still believed the words which God's prophets spoke to them, and as a result they experienced the blessings of some very special miracles. That's the point Jesus was making for the people of Nazareth, namely that his Word, like the words of the prophets, should be trusted without any miraculous signs. Thus no special signs or miracles would be done among them until they accepted the authority of his Word. Unfortunately, Jesus criticism of their unbelief provoked a swift and angry response. "READ VERSES 28-30."

Today people still respond to the authority of God's Word much like the people of Nazareth. Some get angry when they are confronted by what God has to say about their particular lifestyle. Others distort the Savior of the Scriptures according to their own whims and wishes. Some see in Jesus a great teacher and a good example, but they can't see how he could be the Son of God who came into the world to redeem all sinners. Others want Jesus to be like a genie in a bottle, granting our every
wish. They want to name and claim what they want as if God were some kind of a slave to us rather than the Lord with all "authority." And if we’re honest with ourselves, haven't we felt at one time or another that the one who saved us from our sins should somehow keep all trial and tribulation from our home? Haven't we too, in our weaker moments, wanted more than words, wanted at least one miraculous answer to prayer to sort of validate our faith?

But what do the Scriptures say? "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31) God's Word is sure and certain and the only source of absolute truth. We do not need signs and wonders to validate the truth of God's Word because all the promises of God are secured for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very one speaking to us here and now through his Word. Here God has given us the answer to the most important question of our life: "What must I do to be saved?"

In answer to that question, the Muslim replies: "Repeat the words 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet;' pray five times daily; give alms to beggars, keep the fasts; read the Koran; and make a pilgrimage to Mecca." The Hindu priest replies: "Observe the rules of the caste; worship the monkey and the cow . . . bathe in the Ganges; erect a temple to one of the million divinities." The Buddhist replies: "Forget that you have a body; become indifferent to pleasure and pain and you may attain to Nirvana." The Confucian scholar replies: "Study the sacred classics and learn the rules of righteousness . . . You must save yourself." In contrast, God's own message, spoken by his apostle Paul, is simply this: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." He alone is the way, the truth and the life. He is the promised Messiah, and no one comes to the Father except through him. (cf. John 14:6)

Those words, however, are being challenged today by many people who would argue that Christians can't claim to be the only one's who are right. Certainly there is an element of truth in all of the major religions of the world. One can not say who is right and who is wrong. Instead they would argue that we need to listen to what others have to say, to sort of sift for the truth ourselves and then on hold on to whatever seems to be right in our own eyes. Basically, however, it all boils down to a question of authority. Are we going to accept the authority of God's Word or are we going to subject his word to our own thoughts and ideas thereby placing our human reason above divine revelation.

The fact that the unbelieving world does not accept the authority of God's Word should not come as much of a shock to us, for as Paul writes, "The man without the Spirit (in other words an unbeliever) does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) What is somewhat shocking these days is the way in which many Christians are questioning and even challenging the authority of God's Word. On the one hand they claim to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but on the other hand, they want to modify God's word according to the standards of our society. Some argue that the times have changed, that the words of Scripture are culturally conditioned and no longer applicable in the same way to our day and age. Others claim that much of the New Testament represents the traditions of the early church rather than the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and since traditions change with the times, we need to separate such traditions from the thread of truth that is woven through them.

For the average Christian, however, the authority of God's Word is really being undermined by the authority of "self" coupled with the influence of society. As a result, many no longer feel bound by the Word of God. Instead of asking what does God say and then humbly submitting to his will, they ask, does this make sense to me, is it something I can live with or does it sound like something that needs to be changed of modified these days because it differs sharply from contemporary views. It seems to make no difference whether the subject is living together before marriage or abortion or the different roles of men and women. It still comes down to a question of authority: Are we willing to accept the authority of God's Word or are we going to sit in judgment on that authority like the people of Nazareth? They in unbelief rejected what Jesus had to say about himself. And that's what we're really dealing with these days, a type of unbelief that makes man rather than God the measure of all things.

When you think about it, it's really the same clever temptation that Satan used to deceive Eve back in the Garden of Eden. Remember how he first began his little deception by saying, "Did God really say?" And after Eve correctly stated what God had said, the devil flatly contradicted God's Word with the statement, "You will not surely die." His tactics haven't changed much over the years. He knows that the basic question is still a question of authority, and he's going to do everything in his power to discredit the authority of God's Word, which is the only sure foundation for our faith and our life of faith. As Christians, then, we need to put Satan in his place by listening carefully to everything that God has told in his Word because his Word is not only our great heritage, it's also our only certainty in an uncertain world. Amen.