

Behind every authority figure in our lives is a question that must be answered: Why? Why should I listen to this person? Why should I obey what he says?

A police officer pulls you over: Why should you stop? Because he can arrest you. Your boss gives you an assignment: Why should you complete it? Because he can fire you. Even the youngest child in preschool has to answer that question. The teacher tells you to line up. Why should you do it? Because they can put you in time out, or take away recess, or tell your parents. Authority demands submission, but submission often raises the question of where that authority comes from.

That's exactly the question being asked of Jesus in today's Gospel reading. The chief priests and elders come to Him while He is teaching in the temple and ask, *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"*

It's a perfectly reasonable question on the surface. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, healed people, taught publicly, and acted as though He has the right to do all of these things. So they want to know: Who gave You the right? Why should we listen to you?

But there's more behind this question and Jesus knows what they're really asking. They aren't looking for an answer. They're looking for a reason to reject Him. So Jesus responds with a question of His own: *"The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"*

Now, at first glance, that might seem like a strange topic to bring up. What does John the Baptist have to do with Jesus' authority? Well, actually... a lot. Because John was not merely some eccentric preacher. John was a prophet sent by God. He came preparing the way for the Lord. And John's ministry had a very specific target: Jesus.

John stood by the Jordan River and pointed to Jesus and said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* John declared that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of God the Savior of the world. John's entire ministry existed to testify about Jesus.

So Jesus puts the chief priests and elders in a dilemma. If John's baptism was from heaven, then John was a prophet. And if John was a prophet, then his testimony about Jesus was true. And if John's testimony about Jesus was true, then Jesus really is the Christ. And if Jesus really is the Christ, then He has authority over them. There is a straight line between John's authority as a prophet and Jesus' authority as the Son of God. And that is precisely the conclusion they refuse to accept.

But they can't deny John's authority without making themselves look foolish, because the people – rightly – believed John was a prophet. So they simply refuse to answer. And so, instead of answering them, Jesus tells them a parable. The parable of the two sons.

A father tells his first son, *"Go and work in the vineyard today."* The son says, *"I will not,"* but afterward he changes his mind and goes. The father tells the second son the same thing. This son says, *"I go, sir,"* but he doesn't go. *"Which of the two did the will of his father?"* The answer is obvious. The first son. The one who actually went.

Jesus applies this parable directly to the chief priests and elders. They are like the second son. They have all the outward appearance of obedience. They're the religious leaders. They know the Scriptures. They say all the right things. But when a true prophet of the Lord comes and points them to the Christ, they refuse to believe him. They say, in effect, *"Yes, Father,"* but they don't actually do what the Father commands.

That, of course, makes the chief priests and elders very uncomfortable. But it should also make us uncomfortable. Because we're not merely spectators in this parable. The question of Christ's authority comes to us, too.

If Jesus is the Christ, then why don't we submit to Him in all things? If Jesus is our Lord, why do we so often act as though we are our own lords? We come here and confess that Jesus is Lord. We confess that He has authority over heaven and earth. We confess that His Word is true. We confess that His commandments are good. We confess that He has told us to love God and love our neighbor.

And then we go home and fail to do it. We say, "Yes, Lord," and then, very often, we do what we want. We know that Christ commands us to forgive, but we hold grudges. He commands us to speak the truth, but we lie. He commands us to love our neighbor, but we're selfish. He commands us to be content, but we covet. He commands us to serve, but we want to be served. He commands us to be humble, but we want recognition.

Our problem isn't that we don't know who Jesus is. Our problem is that we know exactly who He is and we still rebel against Him. We are, so often, the son who says, "I go, sir," but then doesn't actually go.

And yet, this is exactly where our Epistle lesson tells us something amazing. Because the answer to our disobedience isn't merely that we need to try harder to obey. The answer is that Christ has obeyed perfectly in our place. Christ Jesus, *"though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant."*

And this is what makes Christ's authority so different from the authority we normally see in this world. The powerful of this world use authority to exalt themselves. Christ uses His authority to humble Himself. The powerful demand to be served. Christ becomes a servant. The powerful protect themselves from suffering. Christ willingly suffers for us. The powerful exercise authority over others. Christ exercises His authority by giving Himself for others.

*"Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* There's the real answer to the question, *"By what authority are you doing these things?"* Jesus has the authority because He is the Christ, the Son of God. And He uses that authority to save sinners.

He is the Christ whom John proclaimed: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Son who actually does the Father's will. He is obedient where we have been disobedient. He is humble where we have been proud. He loves where we have hated. He serves where we have demanded to be served.

And He takes our disobedience upon Himself. Our sins of thought, word, and deed were placed upon Him at the cross. The punishment that belonged to us was carried by Him. The Son who perfectly obeyed the Father was treated as though He were the disobedient son, so that disobedient sons and daughters like us might be received as children of God. He doesn't come to us merely saying, "Obey me or else." He comes saying, "I have obeyed for you. I have died for you. Your sins are forgiven."

Therefore Paul says that God has *"highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow."* Christ's authority is absolute. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And at the end of the age, that will happen whether you want it to or not. Thankfully, we get the blessing of making that our joyful confession of faith right now.

And that brings us back to the two sons. This Gospel lesson doesn't teach us that obedience doesn't matter. It teaches us that genuine faith produces obedience. Having been forgiven by Christ, we now desire to live according to His will. Having received His humility, we learn to humble ourselves. Having received His service, we learn to serve. Having been loved by Christ, we learn to love our neighbor.

Because God is working in us, we now live as His children. We now make Paul's exhortation our goal: *"Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."*

The Christian life is a testimony to the authority of Christ. The world expects authority to look like power, domination, self-promotion, and getting your own way. Christ shows us another way. His authority is revealed in humility, obedience, sacrifice, and love.

And when His people live that way, we bear witness to our Lord. When we forgive instead of seeking revenge. When we serve instead of demanding to be served. When we humble ourselves instead of insisting upon our rights. When we love our neighbor, even when that neighbor is difficult to love. When we suffer faithfully rather than abandoning Christ. When we do these things, we proclaim Christ's authority.

The world asks, "By what authority does Jesus do these things?" And the Church answers: He is the Christ. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Son who obeyed His Father perfectly. He is the crucified and risen Lord. All authority belongs to Him.

And when Christ says, "Follow me," we follow him. We do as he did. Not merely because He has the power to command us. But because the One who commands us is the One who gave Himself for us. Amen.