

Who's in Charge?

Luke 20:1-26

I was born in 1958. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s was a time of great change. My generation, born after World War II, was rapidly rejecting the social mores of earlier generations. It was known as the “ME” generation.

The focus wasn't on what's right and what I should do to benefit society. Now the focus was on the individual; what do I want and how I can get it. The rallying cry was “I've got to be me.” In order to find out who I am, I must experiment with all kinds of behaviors, regardless of whether illegal, immoral, or whatever. I must experience things for myself so I can decide.

Another aspect of this time was the large-scale assault on authority. In fact, there was a bumper sticker that said “Question Authority.” What that really meant was, reject authority; civil, social, and religious. Nothing was sacred; nothing was off-limits for rebellion.

I must say, this wasn't a new problem. It was just the manifestation of an old problem; a problem that began with our first parents, way back in the Garden of Eden. Ever since Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, every human being is born with the desire to go his or her own way, to decide for him or herself who will chart their path in life.

As we'll see in today's study this was a problem during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the first twenty-six verses of this chapter the subject of authority appears again and again. We'll see authority mentioned in the spiritual (or religious) sphere, in the social sphere, and in the civic (or government) sphere. And Jesus has clear instructions and warnings for His listeners, and for us, about how to have a proper understanding of authority. I've titled our study “Who's in Charge?”

So, I turn now to our text, **Luke 20:1 to 26**. Listen as I read the Word of God to us.

This text records essential **FACTS** about the subject of authority and our relationship to it.

The First **FACT** is,

The Source of Authority

Just prior to the opening of our text, Jesus had cast the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple. He accused them of making it a hideout for thieves! That definitely wasn't going to make Him popular with the religious leaders.

You see, the chief priests (the Sadducees) and scribes (Pharisees) were in league with the Romans. The Roman governor had a say in who served as the High Priest, and because he had input in that decision, he had a certain amount of leverage or control. These leaders believed THEY had the authority to set policy for what went on in God's house. They were the guardians of God's house, so they reacted to Jesus' intervention.

They had a very lucrative financial system in place, exchanging money (at a profit, of course), and buying and selling acceptable sacrifices to pilgrims who traveled a long distance. Naturally, when Jesus cleansed the Temple they were upset. They saw Him as meddling in their affairs. Who did this traveling rabbi think he was to come in and upset the status quo?

As Jesus is teaching in the Temple the religious leaders suddenly confronted Him. Picture Jesus teaching and all-of-a-sudden these leaders stand up and interrupt Him. They're going to make their "official" inquiry. We need to know there was a universally understood principle firmly established in Judaism; all *authoritative* teaching required previous authorization. In other words, your authority rested on the authority of your Teacher or on a decree of the Sanhedrin.

Now you can understand why they asked Him; "by what authority are you doing these things; or who is it that gave you this authority?" The word authority, as used here, means executive authority. It contains the idea of both right, that's authorization to make the decisions, and might; the ability to enforce those decisions. We could simplify their question like this; "Who are you and who do you represent?"

Jesus' reply to the leaders was typical of rabbinic discussions; answering a question by asking a question. He said, "I also will ask you one word, and answer me." It's implied that if they don't answer Him, He won't be obligated to answer them. So, He said "the baptism of John - was it from heaven (from God) or was it of human origin?"

According to Luke 3:3, and other texts, John's baptism of repentance was a major portion of his ministry. The religious leaders had opposed John because he had gained a sizeable following. He also introduced Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The ministries of both John and Jesus threatened their control as the religious gatekeepers.

Picture these men, who had stepped forward to confront Jesus, now going off to the side, huddling together to figure out how to answer Jesus' question. They were in a difficult spot! If they said John's baptism originated from God, they knew Jesus would say "why didn't you believe (or accept) his ministry?" By extension, that also meant John's testimony about Jesus!

On the other hand, if they said John's ministry originated from men, they were sure the people would stone them; because the people were persuaded John was a prophet - he spoke with Divine authority. The grammar here indicates the people had a long-standing and settled persuasion about the authenticity of John's ministry.

Why did these leaders speak about stoning? Well, the penalty for being a false prophet was stoning. These men feared that if they rejected a genuine prophet of God, the people would stone them to death.

So, these crooked, cringing hypocrites "copped out." They said "we don't know the origins of John's ministry. Now wait a minute! These men are the religious authorities. They're responsible to evaluate the claims of anyone who professes to be a prophet; that's why they approached Jesus in the first place. They were the gatekeepers of the religion. But they knew if they acknowledged the Divine origins of John's ministry, they'd have to accept those same Divine origins of Jesus' ministry too. They weren't prepared to do that.

The question for you and me, then, is this; "by what authority do you and I live?" As those who profess to follow Jesus, are the Scriptures our guide for our daily choices? Are we looking in the Scriptures to see how to God wants us to live? Or, are we following some man-made rules and regulations that supposedly give us standing with God?

That's what the religious leaders of Jesus' day had. They took the commands of God and added their own extra-biblical requirements. Jesus said they'd made the rules so overwhelming that people gave up trying to keep them. In fact, Jesus said by their own rules they nullified the commandments of God! Wow; that's a pretty serious charge.

It seems today we have two extremes in the church. One extreme ignores the clear teaching of Scripture and accepts people into the local fellowship who are living in open sin. They allow each individual to be their own authority; so they do what they want. These people reject God's authority by just ignoring the parts of Scripture they don't like.

The other extreme creates all kinds of extra-biblical rules you have to follow before you can be a member of the local congregation. There is a sense in which both of them reject God as the source of authority and reserve that right of authority for themselves. And both are wrong!

Let this point be clear; God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the source of authority, all others have delegated authority. Later in the text we'll see what happens to those who reject God's authority.

The Second FACT (about the subject of authority) is,

The Significance of Authority

Verse 9 informs us that Jesus is giving a parable. Remember, parables were stories the people could easily understand. The parable is about a man who planted a vineyard. As the owner of the vineyard, he has the authority to do with the vineyard whatever he chooses.

The metaphor of Israel as God's vineyard is well known to the people Jesus was speaking to. It appears prominently in Isaiah, especially in chapter 5. In fact, Matthew's record of this incident is clearly taken from Isaiah 5. The vineyard is also mentioned in the Psalms and in the book of Jeremiah. The end of the parable shows just how clearly the people understood the metaphor Jesus was using.

It was common in that time period for a wealthy person to buy a productive property as an investment and lease it out to tenants. The tenants were known as husbandmen or vinedressers. The tenants were given authority (by the owner) to maintain the property and till the land. The landowner would receive a certain percentage of the crops as payment of the lease.

In keeping with the idea of Israel as God's vineyard, He must be the owner. He has entrusted the management of the vineyard to earthly representatives; the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings. In this case, the religious leaders of the day were the managers. It was expected, at the time of harvest, for the owner, who had been absent for a long time, to send a trusted servant to the tenants to collect his share of the produce. This servant was *authorized* by the owner to collect the payment.

But look what happened. When the owner's servant arrived to collect the rent, the tenants beat him up and sent him home empty-handed. The prophet, Jeremiah, was treated like this. So, the owner authorized another servant to go collect what was rightfully His. This one they beat up, and if that wasn't enough they humiliated him. What they did we don't know, but the idea is

that of making a person infamous. In other words, what they did to the servant would never be forgotten by those who heard about it.

This reminds me of an incident in Second Samuel. David was the king of Israel and he wanted to comfort the Ammonite king, Hanun, after the death of his father. But Hanun's servants put a different spin on the purpose of the delegation that came to convey David's condolences. They convinced their king that David had sent his servants to spy out the city to overthrow it. So instead of receiving David's sympathy, Hanun took David's servants and humiliated them. He shaved off half of each man's beard and cut off their garments at their buttocks. Then he sent them home!

When David heard what happened he sent men out to meet those who had been shamed. He told them to stay in seclusion until their beards grew back so they wouldn't appear in public and be further humiliated. Second Samuel 10:5 tells us the men were greatly ashamed. Nobody who heard about what happened would ever forget what was done to them! And the Ammonites paid for their insult with their lives.

Don't forget, in the pages of Luke's gospel we're dealing with a culture that operates on the basis of honor and shame. Dishonoring the owner's servant was dishonoring the owner. That honor would need to be restored later at a high price.

Jesus told them the owner sent a third servant. This one they wounded, literally, traumatized him (something that leaves permanent scars – physical or emotional), and then threw him off the property. Oh, the patience and forbearance of our Heavenly Father for His wayward children! How slow He was and is to bring judgment.

Luke now records the owner's (or God's) thoughts as though He's talking to himself. I take the liberty to paraphrase. "OK, this hasn't worked; what shall I do? I have an only son, my well-beloved son. I will send him. They'll probably respect him when they see him!"

But what happens? When the tenants saw the son, they got together for a conference. "This son is the heir. If we kill him and conceal the murder, the owner may turn the vineyard over to us because he has no other heir." So, they would go from being mere *servants* and they would become *lords*. This is the deep aim of every unregenerate heart – to be my OWN authority, my own boss! So, they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now the crucial question. "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those men who refused to give him the fruits of righteousness He so desired?" Matthew 21:41 records the

religious leaders as issuing the verdict, but here, Jesus gives it. “He will come and destroy those tenants and turn the vineyard over to others.”

There’s no mistaking Jesus’ meaning. The people caught it. We know that from their response; “May it never be so!” The King James says, “God forbid,” but the original text doesn’t mention God. It’s still a very emphatic response as the magnitude and meaning of the pronouncement bursts into their consciousness. We might say “horror of horrors!”

Those listening knew what Jesus was saying. That’s why they responded the way they did. They couldn’t fathom the privileged position they enjoyed as the children of Abraham being taken from them and given to others. But that’s exactly what Jesus meant. Earlier, in the ending of Luke chapter 11 Jesus spoke these words: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.”

When the people responded in horror to Jesus prediction about the vineyard being given to others, Jesus looked directly at them. I can only imagine the penetrating gaze of the Lord. By doing this He had their undivided attention. He wasn’t finished yet. It’s almost as though He’d plunged the knife into their expectations, and now He’s giving it a final twist.

“If you think it’s impossible that the vineyard should be taken from you and given to others, what then does this scripture mean?” He quotes Psalm 118:22; “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” This living stone, this stumbling stone, this rock of offense, deemed unsuitable by the religious leaders for inclusion in the physical Temple is now become the foundation stone of the new spiritual temple! This new temple would be built - but Jesus’ antagonists would NOT be part of it.

In the final verse of this section Jesus makes a very sobering statement. It was aimed at the skeptics who confronted Him, but it is applicable to you and me today. He said, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be shattered, broken to pieces; but when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” Herein, my friend lays the significance of authority. We have a choice; we either submit voluntarily or are crushed.

Let’s unpack this. Jesus said “whoever falls on this stone will be broken to pieces.” There are a couple of possible meanings here. First, the religious leaders were “falling” or stumbling

over Jesus and sustaining great spiritual injury. This view would fit with Isaiah 8:13 to 15 which are in the context of threats from Assyria and Damascus.

“The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow; *Let Him be your fear and let Him be your dread.* He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. (Now listen) **And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken.**”

In our text, the breaking of the Jewish nation and its leaders was only a few decades in the future. They would lose their earthly Temple and the daily sacrifices; and many of them would lose their lives when Jerusalem was destroyed.

I believe there’s another possible meaning. What about those who voluntarily “fall” on this cornerstone in repentance? They will be broken, it’s true, but it will be a brokenness that leads to healing and wholeness. If those tenants who had so abused God’s servants had repented at the coming of the Son, the heir, don’t you think the Lord would’ve forgiven them? Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they refused to accept Him and sealed their fate.

The same is true for you and me. When we fall in repentance upon Jesus, knowing full well that we deserve God’s judgment, we receive forgiveness and healing. The breaking is painful to our pride and self-will, but the result is life as God meant us to live – coram deo – before God’s face. That means He has the authority to challenge all my thoughts and choices. He really is in charge!

But you say “oh, but that’s scary to live that way.” OK, what’s the alternative? I’ll tell you what it is; it’s the second part of Jesus’ statement here in verse 18. “On whoever this stone falls it will crush him.” A. T. Robertson says the English wording doesn’t quite capture the idea Jesus was trying to convey. The word literally means “to winnow.” That’s reminiscent of Psalm 1:5 and 6. “The ungodly are like the chaff which the wind drives away; therefore, they will not stand in the judgment...”

This is the significance of authority; God’s authority. You submit voluntarily and receive His blessing; or you resist, and ultimately you will be crushed by His judgment. Those are the only two choices available.

Notice the response of the chief priests and the scribes. They were so enraged by what Jesus had said, how He had revealed their hypocrisy, how He had spoken directly about them, that they would have forced the climax of their hate at this very moment. Only one thing

prevented them from doing it; they feared the people. Yet they were not finished questioning Jesus on this issue of authority. And that leads us to our final fact.

The Final FACT (about the subject of authority) is,

The Separation of Authority

It should be obvious to even the most casual reader of Scripture that the religious leaders were out to get Jesus. Remember, these are the final days of Jesus' life we're looking at.

After He had so enraged them by informing them that the stone, they rejected, would become the chief cornerstone, they looked for additional ways to entrap Him. They watched Him with their evil intentions. They sent out men to "lie in wait" for Him. These men were like what we know today as private detectives or investigators.

They pretended to be scrupulous, just, and honorable men. But it was all a show. What they really wanted was to seize on something Jesus said. The idea here is to seize hold with the hands wherever it's possible. They wanted something they could use to deliver Him to the authority and power of the Roman governor. Here we're introduced to civil authority.

Notice how they tried to flatter Jesus, to "butter him up." "Teacher, we know you're speaking and teaching correctly. (They certainly DIDN'T believe that.) And you don't show favoritism to anyone but teach the way of God accurately (they didn't really believe that either). Tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" They were trying to set Him up; to lead Him into a trap. If He said "no" they could accuse him to the governor of insurrection; if He said "yes" the people would reject Him because they hated paying taxes to the Romans.

But Jesus is never surprised by our little attempts to outflank Him. He saw right through these pretenders. He said to them, "why do you put me to the test? Show me a denarius (a common coin of that time). Whose likeness and image is stamped on the coin? They replied, "Caesar's." To which Jesus replied "Give to Caesar the things that belong to him, (what Caesar has authority over); and give God what belongs to Him (what God has authority over). What a simple answer; and yet, how profound.

The fact that the Jews used Roman coinage was evidence they were under Roman rule. Governments are invested with the authority to promote the common good; that includes commerce and industry. By using Roman money, which was minted with the likeness of the

Caesar, these leaders were showing their subjection to Roman authority. And the implication of what Jesus said was – this is the right thing to do.

As human beings, these leaders, and all of us, bear the image of God. We are made in His likeness and image. Therefore, we are under His authority. Like these leaders, we can either accept or reject that authority. But we must remember whatever choice we make we cannot choose the consequences; they are predetermined. Even those these men couldn't trap Jesus the way they intended, they still rejected His authority. They paid a terrible price for that rejection.

Jesus' teaching here clearly delineates the two-kingdom concept. There is the kingdom of the world, and there is the kingdom of God. There is overlap in these kingdoms and we have responsibilities in both. As human beings we all live and function in a civil or political kingdom – human government; but the primary allegiance for followers of Jesus is to the kingdom of God.

When these kingdoms collide, the kingdom of God takes precedence. After Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles put this concept into words: “we must obey God, rather than men.” And Paul gave us clear teaching in Romans chapter 12 on this subject. And First Peter 2:13 and 14 state; “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”

These hypocrites could find nothing in Jesus' words they could “lay hold of.” These professional investigators failed; and their failure was evident to all the people who looked on. How humiliating that must have been! They were not able to make a case they could bring before Pilate. Jesus has slipped through their net easily. So they wisely kept their mouths shut!

So, the question I leave you with is this: who's in charge in your life? Who's the source of authority in your life, you, God, or someone else? Who sets the standard that guides your daily choices; the Scriptures, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, or your own personal preferences?

And then, what do you see as the significance of authority in your life? If you are a follower of Jesus, you are like one of the tenants in the vineyard. You have a responsibility to be faithful. How do you treat the Lord's messengers: The Word, the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual authorities God has placed in your life?

Finally, what is your relationship to civil authority? Are you giving to the civil government what belongs to them; tribute, respect, obedience? I know, in some cases, this is very hard because we feel the laws are unjust or seem to intrude into every corner of our lives.

Or we see that the laws only apply to the little people; people with little influence or connections. But we need to allow the Holy Spirit to take the commands and principles of God's Word in this area of authority and show us how to flesh them out.

Think about it; "who's in charge" in your life? Let the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and your conscience help you answer that question.