

The 30th President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge (**picture**), was known for his great wit. When Coolidge was the Vice President and presiding over the Senate, two Senators got into a verbal slugfest. One lost it and angrily told the other that he could go “straight to hell.” Realize, this was a century ago when politicians were much more civil. The offended Senator complained to Coolidge, as the presiding officer. The Vice President looked up from the book that he'd been leafing through while listening to the fight. “I've been looking through the rule book. You don't have to go.”

It was a question of authority. Because of depravity all of us have authority issues to some degree. The question all must answer is: Who's in charge? Is God in charge? Or, are we in charge? **Who's the boss?** It's the question in our text today. Is Jesus Lord, or do we bow the knee to someone/something else? Am I in charge or is Jesus in charge?

Being a Christian is fundamentally about being someone who's surrendered to Christ's authority. Disciples of Jesus follow Him. They obey everything He commands. So, what about you? Are you the master of your own fate? In the driver's seat of your life? Or, have you surrendered your life to Christ?

In our passage in Luke the Jewish religious leaders challenge Jesus' authority. Jesus establishes His authority and warns them that if they won't submit to His authority, they'll be judged. Turn to Luke 20:1-8 (p. 879).

The problem these religious leaders faced is the same problem every person who encounters Jesus faces: *His authority confronts my authority*. Maybe it's an irritating sermon that makes you uncomfortable. You don't like it, but brush it aside and continue with your own agenda. Then, you have another encounter with Jesus: a passage in the Bible steps on your toes. Your level of discomfort goes up a notch. You realize that if He takes over your life, it will demand radical changes. You're not sure you want to give up control. So, you scramble to dodge the implications of who Jesus is. Maybe you raise some intellectual questions so you don't have to face the fact that Jesus is Lord. But He keeps knocking on the door of your soul, confronting your authority to run your own life. Sooner or later, you come to a crisis point where you must deal with the question that these religious leaders asked: “*By what authority does Jesus say and do these things?*”

The bottom line is: If Jesus is acting by God's authority, we must submit to Him. He's not only Savior, He's Lord. Luke 20 brings out **Three Realities** about authority that each of us must work through. If you're taking notes...

Reality #1: Authority is a fundamental question of life: Who has authority? Last time we worked through Jesus' cleansing of the temple. When Jesus threw out the moneychangers, for the Jewish leadership, He threw down the gauntlet. The temple was their place of authority. Then, Jesus had the audacity to make the temple His headquarters for teaching. That just angered them more.

So the Sanhedrin, made up of these three groups, the chief priests, scribes and elders decide to question Him. The chief priests claimed their authority from Moses. Mosaic Law set aside the tribe of Levi to serve as the priests and to govern the temple. Scribes were students of the Law. Basically, they're religious lawyers. The elders were leaders of the ruling families and clans. All three of these groups were vested and confident of their authority. The three groups are frequently mentioned together in the New Testament. Though they disagreed on other matters, in Jesus they have a common enemy. Jesus challenges the established order. They're so confident of their authority, that they don't blink an eye at confronting this uneducated usurper.

Jesus is teaching in the temple, acting as God incarnate, which of course, He was. His proclamation is met by a delegation coming for an interrogation. What they receive is an unexpected explanation followed by a pointed illustration. Unbeknownst to them, the true temple had come to their temple.

They ask Jesus a question they believe will trap Him and then can be rid of Him, “*Tell us by what authority You do these things, or who it is that gave You this authority.*” It was a carefully, thought out trap.

They hoped to push Jesus into a dilemma, so no matter how He answered, He'd be in trouble. If He said He had *no* authority, He'd be in trouble with the Jews for acting as a prophet. If He dared to say His authority came from God, He'd be in trouble with the Romans who were always on alert for would-be Messiahs, particularly during Passover. Obviously, they hoped Jesus would say He was the Messiah, then they'd either stone Him for blasphemy or have the Romans take Him out for challenging Rome. At the very least Jesus would look ignorant and it'd discredit Him with the people.

Though the source is evil, it's actually a good question! We should want to know the authority behind truth assertions. When we hear a controversial story in the media, we want to know if the source is trustworthy. Was it a “highly placed government source” or just some guy in a coffee shop giving his opinion? Our world is woefully gullible. If a politician, reporter, author, talk-radio host or even a preacher makes a statement, we tend to accept it as fact without examining the *authority* behind the statement.

They're so much like us. We resist authority. Isn't that what's going on in our culture today? *Who does the President think he is? Who does the Governor think he is?* Isn't that also true in the church? We love the Pastor, we love the leaders...as long as they don't exercise any authority over us. Yes, there are abusive spiritual leaders and churches, but that's not usually the issue. Even in the Church, we're so contaminated by a rebellious culture, we resent it when a church leader acts like a leader in their God-given role. Hebrews 13:17 commands the local church, *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."* Yet, nearly every church has an undermining minority who cause much "groaning" for their spiritual leaders.

Like these leaders, we resist anyone who challenges our right to govern our own lives. We assume we know what's best for our own happiness. "Who does this intruder Jesus think He is, coming into our world and overturning the tables of how we do things?" **Reality #1: Authority is a fundamental question of life: Who has authority?**

Reality #2: Authority isn't a casual question. It's known as the Socratic method, an argumentative dialogue that asks and answers questions to stimulate critical thinking. Jesus as the Creator of the intellect is the One who gave it to Socrates (**picture**). Socrates asked lots of questions. Here Jesus does that, answering a question with a question. *"I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven," He will say, "Why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "From man," all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things'."* Seeking to trap Jesus they find themselves trapped. The hound has become the fox. They didn't answer for the same reason we're evasive – fear and pride.

Jesus unmasks their hypocrisy. They knew where Jesus claimed His authority came from. He's always been upfront that He's from God, the Messiah. They're not looking for information. They want Him to claim this publicly so they can get rid of Him, which they later do in a "safer" setting. For Jesus to tell them again is *"casting pearls before swine"* (Matt. 7:6). They'd already rejected Him. Not every question is worthy of an answer.

If they acknowledged that John's baptism was from God, since John baptized Jesus and affirmed He was the Messiah, they'd be acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah. If John's ministry originated with God because he endorsed Jesus, Jesus' ministry also originated with God. Discussion over.

The people believed John had divine authority. To deny it in public would enrage the crowd who loved John and could get them stoned. They're cowards and liars. They didn't believe it was from God but weren't going to admit that publicly. But if they truly believed Jesus was a false prophet, as the spiritual leaders of Israel, didn't they have an obligation to call Him out to protect the people? This has little to do with truth. It's about power. Jesus messed with their comfortable power structure.

There are only two sources of authority. Heaven which is a Jewish way of saying, **God**; and the authority of **men**. Sinful men are under Satan's domain and in rebellion against God, though most acting under Satan's domain are not aware of that fact. They simply act on their own authority, out from under God's authority. But if you're not knowingly obedient to God and His Word, you're not under His authority.

All authority either comes from God or from some illegitimate source. It's either from the Creator or the created. It's finite man versus an infinite God. The Jewish leaders weren't under God's authority or they'd have followed John and the One to whom John pointed, Jesus.

Like most politicians, their authority wasn't secure. They didn't like what John taught, but knew their constituency liked John, so they walked carefully. Their question, turned back against them, is one we all must answer: *Who is our final authority? Who determines what's right or wrong?* Mark 11:30 records that Jesus pressed them: *"Answer Me."* He demands that we also answer this same question.

Have you answered it for your life? Who's your final authority? Maybe you say, "My **conscience** is my guide." Some have a "Jiminy Cricket syndrome" (**picture**). But what informs your conscience? "Well, I just feel inside what's right." Many buy into, "How can it be wrong if it feels so right?"

Maybe your authority is the **law of the land**. What about when the law says it's okay to gas Jews or mistreat minorities? Does it make it right? Do you obey the state when you don't like its laws or when they agree with you?

Maybe your authority is **reason**? Who's reason? There are proponents on both sides of most moral questions. By what authority do you live your life?

Our society once generally agreed that Judeo-Christian standards of the Bible were moral absolutes, but we've rejected that moral base and our entire judicial system is in crisis. The conventional wisdom says, "You can't legislate morality." Really? Aren't rape, murder, sex trafficking and racial discrimination moral issues? The crucial question is, how do we determine whose morals we're going to legislate and use in our legal system.

When we jettison God's absolute moral standards that we find in Scripture, we find ourselves with no moral absolutes or consistent basis for determining right or wrong. "*By what authority*" is a fundamental question each must answer. Will you live your life under God's authority or under some human authority, be it yourself or someone else?

God's authority always confronts our selfish lives. These religious leaders cherished their own place of authority. God's authority is manifested in Jesus as He confronted their self-appointed place of authority. They resented His confronting their selfishness and self-will.

God's authority is contained in His Word. When Jesus overturned tables, He backed up His actions with "*It is written,*" quoting Isaiah 56:7 that God's house is to be a house of prayer. He quotes also from Jeremiah 7:11, which charged the Jewish leaders with turning God's house into a den of robbers. If you want to know what's right or wrong, there's only one source, the Bible. One must read and obey God's Word. Scripture is the final authority.

God's authoritative Word confronts our sin. Many want to attend a church where the sermons make them feel good about themselves. When Paul wrote to Timothy about God's Word, he said Scripture is "*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*" (2 Tim. 3:16). God's Word is like a doctor who discovers disease we didn't know was there. That's because our greatest problem is a sin problem.

These men wouldn't deal honestly with Jesus' question. Confronted with the truth, they rejected His authority. "*We do not know,*" they lied. But they did know and wouldn't face their own sin. What about us? Are we honest before God and His authoritative Word?

Most Christians affirm that God's Word is their authority. But is that true? Mark Lierderbach (**picture**), a professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary shares a formula on how we can know our real beliefs. *Our stated belief minus our actual practice equals our real belief.* For example, a stated belief is that water is the best drink for your body, minus my actual practice of only drinking soda, equals the real belief that water is actually not the best drink for my body. Another stated belief is that our attitude should be Christlike. Yet, if I'm known as an angry or critical person, I don't believe I need to be Christlike. Our lives reveal what our true authority is.

Reality #3: God has the final authority because He created everything. Jesus then gives a pointed illustration making His point, vs. 9-16. This parable reflects an agrarian culture. It was common for absentee landlords to let out estates to tenant farmers in return for an agreed share of the produce. A vineyard was a long-term investment. New vines wouldn't produce a significant harvest, or profit for either owner or tenant, until the 4th year.

As an eagle is symbolic for the United States, or as a bear is symbolic for Russia, a vineyard was symbolic for Israel. Isaiah used this allegory for the nation of Israel in Isaiah 5. You'll find it again in Psalm 80.

They're God's vineyard. He brought Israel into being when He covenanted with Abraham. He'd rescued them from Egypt. All that God asked was that they give Him *fruit* by obeying His commands. So, the vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the people. The servants are the mistreated prophets. The Son is Jesus. Isaiah 5 describes God's tender care of His vineyard. He not only brought Israel into existence, He'd treated her with tender care.

Like the owner of the vineyard, God created this world. He's the owner of this vineyard called Earth and has placed us here to manage it. We don't own anything, we're tenants. The psalmist said, "*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof*" (24:1).

Because God owns everything, He has the authority to benefit from it. When Jane and I were first married, I paid a guy every month. Each month I'd send Leonard Krupnik a check. I had to. He was our landlord. No one thought it was weird. He owned the house we lived in. What would have been a problem is if I hadn't sent a check. What would he have done if I'd said, "I'm not giving you anything. You're just lucky I live here."

The landlord owned the vineyard and gave them everything. They didn't even have to plant it; the owner did that. They simply entered into his vineyard, where they could work and make a sufficient living. The owner freely entrusted the vineyard to them and let them work it as they saw fit. But for these privileges, they owed him a certain amount of fruit.

God drove out evil nations and gave Israel the land. He entrusted His people to leaders who, if they'd been faithful, would have harvested a bumper crop. Doesn't God who'd provided so abundantly have every right to expect fruit?

Jesus confronts a basic problem among Christians. 1 Corinthians 6:20 says, "*you were bought with a price.*" Since God purchased us from the slave market of sin, how can a Christian not be a giver? How can a believer rationalize not serving or giving? God didn't save you so you could sit in a church and think you've given Him something. I wonder what God thinks when a Christian is asked to serve, "And they moan and groan...can't you find somebody else? I'm so busy." Each of us needs to ask, "How is God benefitting from my life?" Like these tenants, the more time that passes when God isn't benefitting from our life, the most distant God becomes to us. We're either living selfishly or we're living to bear fruit for the Lord Jesus. The irony is we find the most pleasure when we live to bear fruit for Christ, not when we live for ourselves. A self-oriented Christian is miserable.

Though God has the authority to benefit from His possessions, He's very patient. This illustrates the insidious nature of sin. With every rejection, they get worse and become more violent. Elijah had to run for his life. Isaiah was cut in half. Stephen was stoned. Sin always grows. Unresolved anger becomes bitterness, and eventually hatred. Sin never improves.

Jesus is showing the unreasonable, illogical, supra-human patience of a gracious God. The longsuffering landlord shows how patient God is in waiting for us to repent. If you've been a Christian any length of time, you can look back at God's extravagant patience in His dealings with you. That should motivate us to serve Him more zealously. Even though we stray again and again, God keeps sending His messengers to get us back on track! Some of you are away from the Lord today. Maybe you think you've gotten away with it. No, God is just being patient with you. But the greatest motivation to fruitful, accountable living is His final messenger.

Though God has the right to punish them, in His grace He sends His only Son. As a parent, this next part is beyond comprehension. *"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son.'"* God the Father sent Jesus as His last appeal. There are echoes here with, *"my beloved son."* We hear Genesis when Abraham offers up his only son, Isaac. We hear Jesus' baptism when the Father spoke from heaven, *"You are my beloved Son."* Jesus stands apart from the servants. They're servants; He's the beloved Son, intimately related in a way no one else is. Jesus is God incarnate, God in human flesh.

When the son showed up the tenants assumed the owner was dead. Under Jewish law, property not claimed by an heir within a specified time could be claimed by the first party to do so. They greedily assume if they get rid of the son, the property is theirs. They didn't kill the son because of mistaken identity, but precisely because they recognized who he was. They didn't want to submit to the authority of God and His rightful ownership. It reveals the shocking truth of the evil in the human heart. The tenants didn't kill the owner's son in some spontaneous heat of emotion. It's a calculated decision.

That's what so amazing about God's love. We're sinners by nature and choice, but God still loves us in spite of our sin. It's amazing love that God sent His Son to a world as corrupt as ours for us! He loves you enough that He sent His only Son to die for you. *"God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8).

No wonder Spurgeon (**picture**) said, *"If you reject Him, He answers you with tears; if you wound Him, He bleeds out cleansing; if you kill Him, He dies to redeem; if you bury Him, He rises up again to bring resurrection. Jesus is loved made manifest."* The owner of the vineyard was good, patient, and loving, but he couldn't allow the wickedness of the tenants to go unnoticed or unpunished. Notice one final shocking truth about God.

Because of God's authority, He ultimately holds those who reject Him accountable. After Jesus spoke of the tenants murdering the owner's son, He paused, then asked, *"What will the owner of the vineyard do then?"* Before the listeners had a chance to respond, He answers His own question, *"He will come and kill them and give the vineyard to someone else."*

Please don't confuse God's love with syrupy sentimentality. Because He's holy, He can't tolerate sin. God's kindness is seen in His sending far more servants to rebellious Israel than she deserved. His severity is seen when these wicked tenant farmers killed His Son. Jesus is God's final messenger. Reject Him and there's no further remedy. Only judgment lies ahead.

There's an application for us here. We miss the point if we think this parable was only given to unbelievers. It was given to those who professed to know God. They wrongly thought they owned the vineyard and were entitled to use it for their own selfish purposes. They rejected Jesus' rightful place as the owner of the vineyard. If He allows us to work in His vineyard, we're blessed. Any work we do is not for us; it's for the owner. We need to be careful, because it's easy to start enjoying the grapes of the vineyard. That's fine as long as you remember it's His vineyard and that all that you do is for Him. God expects fruit from His people.

God's great patience, seen in the many messengers He sends to us when we get off track, should motivate us to bear fruit. His great love seen in sending His beloved Son, should motivate us to live accountably before Him. His righteous judgment on those who reject His Son, usurping ownership of the vineyard should motivate us to live accountably to Him. Rejection of Christ always brings judgement. God wants us to turn to Him in His grace. Reject Him and Judgment Day is coming. There is no escaping or denying it. But thank God, He's warned us ahead of time. Finally...

Because of God's authority, Christ will ultimately triumph over all. *"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."* It seems like an abrupt change of subject from vineyards and sons to builders and stones. It's likely that it's a play on words. The words for *son* and *stone* are similar in Aramaic. Jesus is both the Son and stone on which the people of God are built, or the stone on His enemies are broken. He cites Psalm 118 from which *"Hosannas"* on Palm Sunday were taken, to show these evil Jewish leaders that even if they kill the Messiah, God will reverse their evil choice and make Him the chief cornerstone. Both His rejection and ultimate triumph are prophesied in this Psalm.

This statement probably refers to an unusual incident that occurred during the construction of Solomon's temple. The great stones for the temple were cut at the quarry and chiseled into the right shape before being transported to Jerusalem, where they'd be slid into place (1 Kings 5:15-18). One large stone turned out to be the wrong size and shape. When it arrived at the temple site, it couldn't be used and the workmen set it aside. It was the stone that the builders rejected. But to everyone's surprise, that unwanted stone turned out to be exactly the right size and shape to serve as the cornerstone – the keystone at the corner that squared the temple.

Jesus knew this prophecy was fulfilled in His 1st coming. He was the stone that was rejected, but it's not the end of the story. The very stone that was rejected was to become the cornerstone. The Son would be rejected, but He wouldn't be rejected forever. In Daniel 2 the stone brought judgement on Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus will bring final judgement on the nation of Israel and a rebellious world.

So authoritative is Jesus that He is the judgement stone for every person, culture and nation in all history. Whether you fall on Him or He falls on you, the end is the same – destruction. The risen Lord will return but when He comes the second time, He's not coming as Savior, but as Judge. His authority can't be ignored or avoided. We either fall before Him as our Lord or fall under Him as Judge, bringing eternal destruction upon our souls.

What a great comfort to know human sin can never thwart the sovereignty of God. This parable encourages Christ's faithful servants who get beat up and thrown out of the vineyard to persevere. God owns the vineyard. Our primary purpose as His servants is to bear fruit for Him. But this is a powerful warning for any who wrongly think that they own the vineyard, that they own their own lives – a day of reckoning is coming!

Conclusion: So, who is your authority? Are you living under God's or man's authority? To whom are you accountable? We belong to God because He made us; His image is stamped on us. As believers, we belong to God because He bought us. Our bodies are the temple of His Spirit. Each of us must answer that question: **Who's the Boss?**

During World War II William Graham Scroggie (**picture**) pastored Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London. His extensive teaching ministry took him to Bible conferences around the world. At one conference Scroggie was preaching and was approached afterwards by a young woman who'd been deeply convicted by his message on the Lordship of Christ. She struggled with who was the authority in her life. Walking up to him at the close of the service, she said, "I want Jesus Christ to be Lord of my life, but I am afraid God will send me overseas as a missionary, and I do not want to go."

Dr. Scroggie opened his Bible to Acts 10:14 and explained how absurd Peter's answer was to the Lord. God had revealed to Peter a vision in which there were all kinds of unclean animals, wild beasts, creeping things and birds of the air. Jews were forbidden to eat any of those animals under the dietary commands of the Law. But after the cross, they're now under grace. So a voice from God came to Peter saying, "*Rise, Peter, kill, and eat.*" *But Peter answered, "Not so, Lord!"*

Scroggie went on to explain, "*A servant never dictates to his master.*" Therefore, to say, "Not so, Lord!" was disrespectful. He advised this young woman to either cross out the words "*not so*" and leave the word "*Lord,*" or to cross out the word "*Lord*" and leave the words, "*not so.*" Then, he handed her his pencil and walked away.

For some time she struggled and finally, with tears in her eyes she crossed out the words "not so" and repeated affirmatively, "Lord! Lord! Lord!"

Either Jesus is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all. Which one is He for you? **Who's your boss?** Who's the authority in your life?