

Settling the Authority Issue

Mark 11:27-33

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I want to begin with a few questions. Feel free to shout out the answer.

Q: An electric train is moving north at 100 mph and a wind is blowing to the west at 10 mph. Which way does the smoke blow?

A: **There is no smoke with an electric train.**

Q: If there are 6 apples and you take away 4, how many do you have?

A: **The 4 you took.**

Q: How far can you walk into the woods?

A: **Half way. After that you are walking out of the woods.**

Q: How many times can you subtract 10 from 100?

A: **Once. The next time you would be subtracting 10 from 90.**

We could categorize these as trick questions. There were times when Jesus was asked trick questions and there were many other times He used questions to confound and convict His listeners.

On 25 occasions, Jesus was asked a direct question that required a simple answer. Interestingly, He only gave a direct response to four of these inquiries. The other 21 times, he answered questions with a counter-question.

This week I read ahead in Mark 12 and circled seven questions that Jesus asked! In an article called, *Let Me Ask You Something*, Becky Brodin suggests that there are at least three types of questions that Jesus asked in the Gospel of Mark.

1. **Probing Questions.** These kinds of questions cause the listener to think. An example is found in Mark 3:4: ***“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”***
2. **Personal Questions.** Instead of just drawing out more information, personal questions help people reveal their personal feelings and beliefs. In Mark 8, Jesus asked his disciples who people say that He is. They answered by

saying John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. But then Jesus personalized the question in verse 29: “**But who do you say that I am?**”

3. **Provocative Questions.** A third kind of question creates conversation and discussion and can also put people on their heels. That’s what we’re going to see in our passage today.

Please stand and listen for the questions as I read Mark 11:27-32. Also take note of the four times the word “**authority**” is used: “*And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, ‘By what **authority** are you doing these things, or who gave you this **authority** to do them?’ Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what **authority** I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.’ And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From man’?—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what **authority** I do these things.’”*

Here’s a sentence that summarizes this section of Scripture: *Those who accept Christ must live under His authority.*

I see three ways Jesus utilized questions that we can put into practice as well.

1. **Absorb Questions.** We learned last weekend that after cursing the fig tree and cleansing the temple, Jesus went back to Bethany to spend the night. Mark 11:27 tells us what happened the very next day: “*And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him.*” Jesus was using His Temple as a classroom to teach those seeking truth. It was common for teachers to walk and talk as they taught. Luke 20:1 mentions that Jesus was “*teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel.*”

Jesus had predicted earlier in Mark 8:31 that these three groups of religious leaders would turn on Him: “*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes...*” These three groups were representatives of the 70-member Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

- **Chief priests.** These priests made up the upper echelon, including Caiaphas the high priest.
- **Scribes.** These lawyers were charged with interpreting the Law of Moses. It was also their duty to hand copy the Scriptures.
- **Elders.** These lay leaders were representatives of the major tribes and families of Israel.

We see in verse 28 that they come with a two-part question that is both blunt and bold: ***“By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”*** How sad that they don’t want the truth taught in the temple! Their question reveals that the ultimate issue in life is *authority*. They want to know *what* He is doing and *who* it is that gave Him the right to do it. They’re basically saying, *“Who do you think you are?”* In one sense, this is a legitimate question and was part of their job but they were actually personally threatened by everything Jesus was doing and teaching.

That reminds me of two elderly women from the south who were sitting in the front pew listening to a fiery preacher. When the preacher condemned the sin of stealing, they shouted out, *“AMEN, BROTHER!”* When he preached against the sin of lust, they yelled, *“PREACH IT, REVEREND.”* And when He condemned the sin of lying, they jumped up and screamed, *“RIGHT ON, BROTHER! TELL IT LIKE IT IS...AMEN!”* But when the preacher condemned the sin of gossip, the two got very quiet, and one turned to the other and said, *“He’s quit preaching and now he’s gone to meddlin’.”*

Jesus was certainly meddlin’ with the religious leaders. The phrase ***“these things”*** refers to what He did the day before when He tore up the temple by disbursing the moneychangers, knocking over the tables of those selling pigeons and preventing people from using the temple as a short cut. It also refers to His preaching and His teaching and is no doubt linked to Palm Sunday when the people were giving Him hosannas as the Son of David.

The word ***“authority”*** means, *“to have the right and might to do anything; to possess permission and unimpeded power to act.”* It was His self-evident authority that left a mark on people as seen in Mark 1:22: ***“And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”*** Rabbis commonly quoted other rabbis when they taught; Jesus didn’t need to quote anyone. Seventy-five times in the gospels, Jesus declared, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you...”***

Notice that the religious leaders don't ask *why* He cleansed the temple because they knew they were guilty of fleecing the flock instead of feeding the flock. All this merchandising prevented them from living out their mission to take the good news to the gentiles. They're basically asking Jesus for His credentials and for the source of His authority. It's noteworthy that this same group asks Peter and John a strikingly similar question in the temple after a beggar is healed in Acts 4:7: "***By what power or by what name did you do this?***"

Those who accept Christ must live under His authority.

2. Answer with Questions. I love how Jesus quickly demonstrates His authority by not answering their question! Just as he turned the tables over the day before, now He turns the tables on them in verse 29: "***I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.***" Jesus is demonstrating the truth of Proverbs 26:4: "***Do not answer a fool according to His folly.***"

Jesus is not evading or ignoring their question but is rather revealing what is really in their heart when He asks in verse 30: "***Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.***"

Did you catch that two times Jesus says, "***Answer me***"? This itself is a demonstration of authority because He's demanding an answer. This phrase is sharp and direct.

They are "between a rock and hard place" and on the "horns of a dilemma." This phrase refers to being impaled on one of the two horns of a charging bull. However they answered they were going to be gored. They don't see a good answer to His question in verses 31-32: "***And they discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man'?'—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.***"

The word, "***discuss***" means, "*to debate, calculate, to deliberate, and to reckon through.*" No matter how they answer they are going to be through. To say John's from heaven is to believe him but to say he's from men is to betray the people. In Luke 20:6 we read that they were "***afraid of getting stoned.***" They're more

concerned with what people think than with what the truth is. Anyone else struggle with that?

Since John pointed people to Christ, if they affirmed John, they'd have to accept Jesus. Recall what John said about Jesus in John 1:29: "***Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!***" If they discounted John they could face condemnation. John MacArthur writes, "*It's a package deal. You can't take John without Jesus. And you can't throw away Jesus without throwing away John.*"

We learn from Jesus that after absorbing questions we're in position to ask questions. That leads to the third step.

3. Apply the Conclusion. Instead of answering, they "tap out" in verse 33: "***We do not know.***" *And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'*" This answer from the religious authorities makes them seem unofficial and uncertain. Actually, it's not that they didn't know the answer; it's that they didn't have the courage to put the answer into words. They don't want to acknowledge the authority of Jesus because *those who accept Christ must live under His authority.*

Jesus is done talking to them. That's a terrible spot to be in, to have Jesus no longer answering you. Because they don't honestly answer His question, He's not going to answer their question. They don't really want to know, so Jesus doesn't engage them any longer. If you refuse to believe the teachings of Jesus, there's a point when no further teachings will be given. God's grace has its limits.

To summarize, let's...

- **Absorb questions**
- **Answer with questions**
- **Apply the conclusions**

Let's transition now and focus on some practical applications from this passage because *those who accept Christ must live under His authority.*

1. Practice Questioning Evangelism. Shortly before Jesus ascended into heaven, He commissioned His followers to GO with the gospel. Most of us are familiar with Matthew 28:19: "***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...***" But let's back up and listen carefully to verse 18: "***And Jesus came and said to them,***

‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...’ The key to accomplishing the Great Commission is to be surrendered to His authority.

I often hear people say that they don’t share their faith because they don’t have the gift of evangelism. I hear others say that they haven’t been trained to do it. I’ve also heard people say that they don’t share their faith because they’re afraid they won’t have the answers to the questions people are asking.

Here’s what I say to all that. First of all, it’s not a gifting issue; it’s a going issue. We’re called to go and make disciples in the authority of Jesus Christ. Secondly, training is good but you don’t need training to ask questions. Thirdly, you don’t have to have all the answers, just ask questions!

Rebecca Pippert, in her book *Out of the Salt Shaker*, says that good evangelism is 60% asking questions, 30% building intrigue, and 10% sharing.

I’ve been reading a book this past week called, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did* by Randy Newman. I highly recommend it. It’s so helpful that we posted chapter one on the Sermon Extras Tab at edgewoodbaptist.net.

Newman recounts two students asking him if he believed everybody who disagreed with him was going to hell. Rather than explaining the nuances of Christian theology, he asked them if they believed in hell. One of them said he did. Newman then asked if Hitler was in hell. The student replied, “Of course,” to which he responded by asking the student, “How do you think God decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? Does He grade on a curve?” This led to a deep discussion about the nature of God, the pervasiveness of sin and the offer of forgiveness. His questions made clear that hell was an issue with which everyone needs to grapple.

Newman argues that evangelism requires three skills.

1. **Declaring the gospel.** We need to clearly and concisely articulate the message of salvation. Tools like *Anchor for the Soul* are helpful.

2. **Defending the gospel.** Being able to give a logical explanation for our beliefs is very important. If you're looking to grow in this regard I recommend the Ravi Zacharias material on *RightNow Media*.
3. **Dialoguing the gospel.** This is the skill of give and take, of asking questions and bouncing things back and forth with the person you're speaking with. We need to become more engaging and less confrontational in our postmodern culture.

Newman points out that answering a question with a question has significant advantages over using direct answers. I'll list a couple of his insights and add a few of my own.

1. Asking questions bring assumptions to the surface and clarify the real issues.
2. Questions can uncover feelings behind the statements that people make so that genuine conversation can take place. We honor people when we show genuine interest in what they think and feel.
3. Questions can be used to reveal cracks in a person's thinking so the Holy Spirit can plant seeds of truth.
4. Questions can alleviate hostility and loosen people from the lies that blind them to the truth.
5. Asking a counter question can take the pressure off you.

In an effort to help us grow in our GOING value, I've compiled some examples of how you and I can use questions effectively. Before I list them, generally speaking, *why* and *how* questions are better because they are more open ended. By the way, if you want a written copy of these questions, let me remind you that you can read the full sermon manuscript on our website.

1. When an atheist asks, "*Why is there so much evil in the world?*" you could reply, "*It's perplexing isn't it? How does your atheism account for why terrible things happen?*"
2. When a co-worker declares that all religions are the same, smile and simply ask, "*How do you know that?*"
3. When someone says that churches are filled with hypocrites, I often respond this way, "*Why don't you join us and then we'll have one more?*"

4. When someone sarcastically asks, *“So I suppose you think all those sincere followers of other religions are going to hell?”* you could respond with, *“Do you believe in hell?”*
5. When you hear someone say that all people are basically good, you could simply respond with, *“Really? What about Osama bin Laden?”*
6. If you’re faced with a really difficult question, you could respond this way, *“Wow, that is a really deep question. Can you unpack that some more?”*
7. When someone makes a very bold statement about what they believe, you could say, *“Can you explain that to me? How did you come to believe that?”*
8. When you hear a classmate make a statement related to sexuality, you could say, *“That’s one way to think about it, but isn’t it possible that God has something to say about marriage?”*
9. As people are talking about the Hurricanes in Texas and Florida, you could ask, *“I heard that Christian ministries are providing more relief work than FEMA is. Why do you think that is?”*
10. Some time ago I was with someone who claimed to be a Hindu. He had just gotten in a car accident and was really angry. I didn’t really plan to say this but I blurted out this question, *“How’s your Hinduism working out for you right now?”* We’re still friends so I guess that’s good. We’ve had several gospel conversations since.
11. Once when speaking to a Buddhist about all the gods in his religion, I simply asked, *“How do you know which God to pray to?”* This made him pause before he said something about praying to his favorite one. I could tell the question unsettled him a bit.
12. Over the years I’ve developed a go-to question that often leads to a deeper conversation, *“Where would you say you are on your spiritual journey?”*
13. And it’s always good to have the questions from *Evangelism Explosion* ready to go: *“If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure that you’d go to heaven?”*

14. Here's the other one, "*When you die and are standing before God and He asks, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?*"

15. Here's one more question that I've been asking that almost always gets a positive response. When someone is expressing some sadness or sorrow or I detect some worry, I'll often ask, "*Can I pray for you right now?*" Almost everyone accepts this offer.

A lot of times these opportunities come out of the blue. On Friday morning I was standing in line at McDonald's to get my senior coffee. An older gentleman, who arrived before I did, was in the wrong line and when he realized it, he lined up behind me. I told him to go ahead of me because he was there first. He declined and asked me a question, "*You're going to work, right? You must be in a hurry.*" I answered by saying I was a pastor and was going to grab some coffee and finish my sermon. I could tell he didn't know what to say to that so I asked, "*Do you have a church?*" He said he doesn't but he used to. I asked, "*Did you just get out of the habit?*" He responded, "*Actually, I never really went.*" I told him it's not too late to start.

Realizing I didn't have much more time I tried one last question as the news about the terrorist attack in London played in the background: "*With all that's going on in our culture, it's hard to live without God, isn't it?*" He mumbled something and shuffled away.

I found him a few minutes later sitting on the opposite side of the restaurant so I got up and gave him a gospel booklet and invited him to Edgewood. I watched him and prayed for him. He ignored the booklet for about 10 minutes and then I started praying harder as he picked it up and started reading it!

Questions are like hinges that open doors into another person's life. I should add that it's more difficult for many of us to ask questions than it is to make strong statements. Some of us would rather listen to ourselves talk than listen to someone else. Asking questions forces us to focus on the other person and to patiently listen to their answer.

Here's one last example I recently heard about. A Christian was chatting with a firmly atheistic student and was asked how he could possibly believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world. The Christian took a breath and then said,

“You really care about all the awful stuff in the world, don’t you?” The student agreed and cited some instance of famine. The Christ-follower then said, *“Can I ask you something else?”* The atheist said, *“Sure.”* The Christian smiled and asked, *“Why do you care so much?”* The atheist began to describe the innate value of human beings and how we should help those who are hurting. After listening for awhile, the Christian said, *“You sound a lot more like a Christian who believes God made people in his image than an atheist who believes we are a cosmic accident. What do you think about that?”* An hour later they were still talking and the student became a regular at Intervarsity evangelistic events!

Those who accept Christ must live under His authority. One way we do that is by practicing questioning evangelism. A second way is to give up our autonomy.

2. Give up our autonomy. It’s disheartening to realize how few Christians are living under the absolute authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of following the facts of our faith, too many of us live out the Disney movie mantra of following our hearts. Instead of submitting to the Lord’s authority some of us would rather be autonomous, picking and choosing what it is that we believe and how we behave. Remember that Satan appealed to Eve’s autonomy to get her to reject God’s authority!

George Barna recently conducted a survey that contained eight questions to determine how many born-again believers actually have a Christian worldview. Here are the questions.

1. Do absolute moral truths exist?
2. Is absolute truth defined by the Bible?
3. Did Jesus Christ live a sinless life?
4. Is God the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe, and does He still rule it today?
5. Is salvation a gift from God that cannot be earned?
6. Is Satan real?
7. Does a Christian have a responsibility to share his or her faith in Christ with other people?
8. Is the Bible accurate in all of its teachings?

Sadly, only 9 percent of born again believers answered, “yes” to all of these questions!

Here are some other findings that I found extremely troubling.

- Slightly less than half of born again adults (46%) believe in absolute moral truth.
- Almost one-quarter of practicing Christians (23%) strongly agree that, “*what is morally right or wrong depends on what an individual believes.*”
- One-third of practicing Christians (32%) strongly agree that “*if you do good, you will receive good, and if you do bad, you will receive bad.*” That’s karma, not Christianity.

Listen. A biblical worldview will impact our beliefs *and* our behavior!

It ultimately comes down to an authority issue. Listen. *If you’ve accepted Christ, you will live under His authority.*

I like what A.W. Tozer once said: “*We need preachers who preach that hell’s still hot, heaven’s still real, sin’s still wrong, the Bible is God’s Word and Jesus is the only way to salvation!*” I would add that we need people who believe this and behave accordingly.

We began with some trick questions. I want to close with some true questions. Please close your eyes.

- Are you living for yourself or for the Savior?
- Are you controlled by your feelings or by the facts of God’s Word?
- Will you commit to share Christ by asking probing questions of your family, neighbors, co-workers and classmates?
- Will you confess and repent from your self-centered autonomy and surrender to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ right now?
- What one thing will you put into practice this week to demonstrate your submission to the Savior?

Closing Song: “Surrender”

*I’m giving You my heart
And all that is within
I lay it all down
For the sake of You my King*

*I'm giving You my dreams
I'm laying down my rights
I'm giving up my pride
For the promise of new life*

New Member 8:00 – Mary Marquis