

Asking The Right Question

by Steve Zeisler

In recent weeks we have been considering the ministry of Jesus to individuals who loved him, who respected him and followed him. Today we are going to look at his ministry to those who hated him, to those who were his enemies.

If we were to look up this subject in heaven's library, we would probably find it under the heading, "Tough Love." This love is not a distant sentiment, it is not pronouncements of blessings made from behind a barrier. It is love with muscle, aggressive love, love that goes out and makes itself heard to people who do not want to hear.

Let us realize too that the enemies of Christ are not just those "out there." They are not merely the violent, fleshly, destructive people of the world, but in many cases they are members of the Christian community. Jesus' most virulent enemies in the first century were religious people. I would suggest to you that it is possible even for those of us who are genuine Christians to go through periods where we resist him, when we serve in subtle ways the cause of unrighteousness. So on occasion even Christians can act like his enemies, and we will find that the Lord ministers to those Christians in the same way he ministers to his enemies in the passage we will look at today, Mark 11:27-33:

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?" And Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me." And they began reasoning with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven.' He will say, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From men?'"—they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet indeed. And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them. "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

The question asked of Jesus by the priests, the members of the Sanhedrin and the scribes is perhaps the most profound question that human beings in any age can ask: "Who gave you the authority to do these things?"

Let us look, first, at how the question came to be asked. We will understand the Lord's ministry more clearly if we see what brought about the question. In the verses just preceding the ones I read, Jesus is operating as the "Hound of Heaven," deliberately, self-consciously backing his enemies into a corner, making them ask a question about the Lordship of Christ they would just as soon not have asked.

It has become clearer to me in my recent studies in the New Testament that the enemies of Christ would much rather have not crucified him. It would have been much more in their interest had he quietly gone away. But he forced them. He went after them. He grabbed them by the throat, as it were, and made them pay attention to his message. He was fully aware of what it meant to ride a colt through the Eastern gate of the city of Jerusalem and receive the worship of the people. He knew well the prediction that Messiah would enter Jerusalem that way. He knew that he was fulfilling scripture and proclaiming himself Messiah by so doing. He declared himself to be the Lord over the natural world—telling fig trees they should produce fruit when he was there, saying they were cursed if they did not; telling his followers that if they had faith in him they had power to cast mountains into the sea. By doing these things he proclaimed that he was in charge of the natural world, the physical world around.

But most devastatingly of all from the point of view of his enemies, perhaps, Jesus strode into the temple, overturned the tables of those who were changing money there, halted the worship, halted the sacrificial system,

calling the temple a "den of robbers," rather than a "house of prayer." He went after his enemies. He made his points more and more sharply, finally insisting that his enemies confront the fact that he was Lord. They had to deal with that issue. In effect, he wrung from them this question, "Who gave you the authority to do these things? Who gave you the right to say what God wants and what he does not want in terms of worship in this temple? Who made you Lord of the natural world, Lord over death itself? Who proclaimed you the fountainhead of all righteousness, the champion of humanity against Satan and his minions?" If we were to put this question in modern vernacular, they are asking, "Who the hell do you think you are? Who gave YOU the right to go around as if you were in charge?"

That question has never gone away. It is as important today as it was then. I am 31 years old. I have lived a very privileged and sheltered life, by and large. I have been outside the United States twice in my life, and then only briefly. I can speak only one language. My attempts at education have resulted in a bachelor's degree, nothing more. Yet I have, on more than one occasion, told men as old as my father that they have no business divorcing their wives and running their lives the way they wanted to. I have told people that the way they spoke and thought about God was blasphemy. I have counseled students to not believe the studied conclusions of eminent Ph.D's. who were their professors, men of renown who knew their subject better than anyone. Now the only conceivable basis for my saying those things is that Jesus said so first. It is his authority I am quoting. He is the One who has described life as it really is. On the basis of what he said, therefore, such statements can be made.

"Who gave him the right?" Think about some of the things he said to people like us. As the Leader of our church he said that some of the kindest, gentlest, most generous things we have ever done may be utterly rejected if our motives were wrong. He does not merely want good actions, he wants good motives. He expects us to worship him without hesitation, to fall on our knees and praise him as the Lord God. He reserves the right to say of our proudest accomplishment, "That is worth burning," and at the same time to say of the least important, humblest act of faith, "That is glorious." He has said that people who seek to provide themselves with security are foolish, and yet that kind of an unseeing faith in him to protect us is wisdom itself. He expects us to be hospitable, to love unpleasant people, to be righteous in our sexual lives, to be self-forgettingly generous, to be joyful in the midst of suffering. Who gave him the right to say those things? Who made him Lord anyway? Where does he get off demanding and facing us with these kinds of issues? It is tough love that seeks out enemies, that backs them into a corner and makes them face the greatest issue of all. And that is that Christ is Lord. He makes them face it though they would prefer not to. That is how he treats his enemies. He goes after them and he makes them ask the question, "Who gave you the right to be in charge of everything?"

For a long time I misunderstood Jesus' answer to this question. I used to think that his bringing up the ministry of John the Baptist was a way of brushing off these leaders, of unmasking their hypocrisy and leaving them in a puddle while he strode out of the room, having embarrassed them in front of the whole crowd. Now his answer did unmask their hypocrisy, but I do not think that was his intent. Jesus was trying to answer their question. He was making a gentle and beautiful attempt, really, to give them insight as to why he was Lord, as to the basis for his authority.

The reason for John the Baptist's ministry on earth was to awaken people to the fact that Jesus was coming, to identify him when he came, and to prepare people for his ministry. Jesus' question to these leaders, therefore, was, "Was John a prophet? Was he a man of God? Was his message from the Lord? If the answer is yes, then you have an answer to your question, because John pointed at me. If John was from God then the ministry I have is from God, and that is the basis for my authority." John's preaching—and his baptism in particular, which the Lord raises here—was in preparation for the coming of Christ. "I baptize you with water," John said, "but there is One coming after me whom I can point out to you, Jesus of Nazareth, who will baptize you with the Spirit and with fire." If John was from God, therefore, that would answer the question as to where Jesus' authority came from.

It is important for us to see also that his answer was really helpful to the audience who asked it. He was speaking to them of something they could believe. He was using as evidence for his authority an issue that should have been clear to them. These priests, these scribes knew the Scripture. They were steeped in Judaism. They should have been able to recognize when a prophet of God was present. That was their area of expertise. Jesus was not

asking them to believe something that they did not know anything about. He could have said, "The evidence for my authority is the remarkable miracles I have accomplished," but most of the miracles took place in Galilee, so it is very possible that these men saw none of them. He could have said, "The evidence for my authority is my virgin birth," but again, these men might have been skeptical. They could not have had first-hand information about that. What he does say to them is, "You know what a prophet is like. You ought to be able to recognize one, and so I ask you to consider, 'Was John a prophet?'" He is giving them the greatest chance possible to believe in him.

When I became a Christian I knew almost nothing about the Bible, the Christian message, or the church. I was an expert in loneliness, though. I was very competent at being miserable and feeling sorry for myself. So when the Spirit of God brought the gospel home to me he did so in the form of people, of friends I knew who had passed from darkness into light, whose lives were substantially different and who had friendships I wanted to have. He said to me, in effect, "I am the Lord Jesus. I want you to believe that because of what I have done in the lives of people just like you." That was the evidence he offered me. It was something I could believe; it was an area I knew something about. The light was shown to me in such a way that I could respond to it.

Since then he has gone on to teach me some things about the Bible—light responded to leads to more light. It is so gracious of this Lord of ours who seeks us out to face us with something we can believe in the beginning. In my case, for instance, if someone had proved to me that Jesus' life was the fulfillment of 238 Old Testament prophecies I would not have known what to make of it because I knew nothing about Old Testament prophecies then. If someone had given me an in-depth insight into the theology of Jesus as the second Adam overcoming the fall of the first Adam it would have zipped right by me. I was not ready for those things then. But he did not do that. He asked me to believe him on the basis of something I could believe. That is another characteristic of Jesus' love for his enemies, for those who oppose him. He will chase us down. He will back us into a corner. He will make us ask the question, "How is it that you are in charge of everything?" Then he will answer in a way that we can believe him, in an area that we can understand, with evidence that will make sense to us.

But if that fails, if we reject him at that point, his ministry to us is one of warning. Look at Mark 12:1-12:

And he began to speak to them (the same group of people) in parables: "A man planted a vineyard, and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some, and killing others. He had one more to send; a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' And they took him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. Have you not even read this scripture:

**'The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the chief corner stone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes.'**?

And they were seeking to seize Him; and yet they feared the multitude; for they understood that He had spoken the parable against them. And so they left Him, and went away.

The owner and planter of this vineyard is God himself. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, and the tenant growers are the leadership of Israel's people, those who have responsibility to bring about fruitfulness in the nation. The servants who are sent continually, who get beaten and killed, are the men and women God sent to his nation, generation after generation throughout their long history, the judges, prophets and kings who spoke the word of

God in truth, who ministered and who were rejected. Finally, the beloved Son sent at the end is Jesus himself.

The story is very frightening in one sense, but it has at its heart a message of mercy and compassion and patience. Time after time God reached out to this people, and yet they wanted no part of him. We can see in this parable a parallel to the way he treats us as individuals, and the way he treats the world we live in. God is still patient, he is still merciful, he is still communicative, he is still reaching out, and any of us who are resisting him have no right to do so. It is not his fault if you and I are in a period of rebellion. It is not that he could have done more and that we have a right to shake our fist at him.

The warning comes in Mark 12:9. Having made clear that God has done all that he can, Jesus asks a very searching question, "What now will the owner of the vineyard do? What options are left? If you want nothing to do with God's mercy, if his patience is objectionable to you, if his outreach is treated with violence, what options does he have left? The answer is rejection. That is the only option he has left." This warning is important for us to hear, because it too is part of the "tough love" of Jesus.

Let us consider the steps again. Jesus hounded down his enemies. He backed them into a corner. He made them face the issue of his Lordship, making them ask the question they would have preferred not to have asked: "Who gave you the authority that you take to yourself?" He answered their question clearly, helpfully and lovingly, in a way they could understand and respond to. Finally, when that accomplished nothing, when that created only more rejection, he gave them a very serious warning.

Now it is interesting to me that in Luke 12:12 we are told that the leaders who heard him, "understood that he spoke the parable against them." It strikes me that if they had been willing to hear him there was never a statement by Jesus that was more for them than this parable, because the story is not over yet. Jesus talked about prophets coming and being beaten and killed. Finally, he said that the beloved son came and he was killed and thrown out of the vineyard. But Jesus had not yet been killed when he told this parable. The people who were standing there still had a chance to respond. Some of them, at least, could still have listened to the mercy of God and said, "Yes, I need to repent of my sin." This story in some ways reminds me of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Scrooge has a visit from the ghost of Christmas Future. He gets to see the end before it happens; he gets to see what is going to become of him, so he has an opportunity to do something about it before the end. Jesus had not yet been killed. This warning, therefore, was the most pertinent thing he could possibly have said.

As we examine the Lord's steps in reaching out to his enemies—and we are among them when we are in rebellion against him—this passage is very helpful to us. He is going to come after us, he is going to face us with his Lordship, he is going to teach us in a way we can understand and respond to, and he is going to warn us if we do not. That is a very helpful way to remember this passage and make use of it.

If you want a simpler outline though, notice that the passage begins and ends with a question. "Who gave you the authority to do these things?" is the first question. That is the most important question human beings can ask. Jesus is the defendant; we are the prosecuting attorney. "Who do you think you are? Who put you in charge?" And he will graciously answer us. He will teach us. He will be merciful with us. He will open our eyes, if we let him, to see exactly why it is he is in charge. But he will not remain a defendant forever.

There is a second question at the end of the paragraph, and that is God's question to us: "What will the owner of the vineyard do then?" If we do not listen to the answers of God to our question we are going to have to answer his. It is important for us to realize that the warnings of God are serious. They are meant to turn us from rebellion, from resistance. In the same way he was reaching out to these men, when we encounter these things he is trying to reach us before it is too late, to get us to stop our rebellion. We cannot take lightly the ministry and the warnings of God to us.

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