

WHOSE LIKENESS IS ON THIS COIN?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

By Steve Zeisler

The passage considered here begins with Mark 11, verse 27:

They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

The question, “Who gave you authority?” is a critical one. The eleventh chapter of Mark begins with an account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus entered the city as a king coming to claim David’s throne, and the crowds shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” The following day, according to Mark, Jesus drove buyers and sellers out of the temple, overturning tables and declaring that his Father’s house was to be a house of prayer for all nations, not a den of robbers. Jesus’ actions evoked fear in the chief priests and teachers of the law, and they demanded to know, “What gives you the right to do these things?”

Consider the nature of authority for a moment. What is it and where does it come from? There are two elements to genuine authority. The first element is jurisdiction to evaluate what is true or valuable, to set the standard against which other things will be judged. The second element is power to effect outcomes and shape events. Thus, the authoritative person evaluates and accomplishes. By his actions, Jesus claimed the right to set Israel straight and to speak for God. Ultimately, all authority flows from God. Jesus was claiming that authority, but his enemies defiantly challenged his claim in order to reject him.

Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’....” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

He then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest

time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

“He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

“But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven’t you read this scripture:

**“‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”**

Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Jesus’ challengers included chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders. These three groups had long-standing authority in first century Israel. The priests held religious authority, especially with reference to the temple and its sacrifices. The teachers of the law held intellectual authority. They were interpreters of scripture and tradition. The elders held social and political authority. The Sanhedrin was headed by a high priest and had religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction over the people. These groups benefited from the established social order, and they had a strong interest in maintaining the status quo. Jesus’ words and actions were rightly regarded by them as a challenge.

Jesus responded with a challenge of his own, and his enemies found themselves in a quandary. If they replied that John’s baptism was from heaven, they would have to acknowledge Jesus’ divine authority. If they said John’s baptism was from men, they would anger the people, who all believed that John was a prophet from God. If they didn’t answer Jesus’ question, he wouldn’t answer theirs. Their attempt to trap Jesus was stymied. Seeing this, Jesus told a parable that stated his point clearly, and Mark 12:12 tells us that his enemies looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them, but they were afraid of the crowd, so they went away.

The interaction here is worth noting. Jesus deliberately put his enemies into a situation where they would not answer his question because they were afraid of the popular reaction. That is a telling observation. Jesus asked questions about God, but the priests, teachers, and elders only wanted to protect their own status. “Was John sent by God to proclaim truth or wasn’t he? If he was, why didn’t you listen?” If they had listened to John, they would already know the source of Jesus’ authority. “I am the forerunner of the messiah,” said John. “I am not worthy to untie the shoe of the one who comes after me. I baptize with water; he will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.” He

pointed to Jesus and said, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” When he baptized Jesus, John saw the dove descend from heaven and heard the voice of God say, “This is my son.” John’s ministry pointed to Jesus.

In reality, then, the question Jesus asked is the answer to their question. “Do you know where my authority comes from? My authority comes from the God who appeared as a dove and spoke to me as father to son on the day of my baptism. You have to be willing to hear God’s spokesman in order to receive God’s answer.”

Why were these priests and scribes and elders so concerned about the reaction of the crowd? In short,, they were afraid of Caesar. If they could not maintain peace among the people, the Romans would be most displeased and would remove them from their positions of power and prestige. Even the decisions made at Jesus’ trial were made primarily to placate Rome. Jesus forced them to acknowledge that they were more concerned about reactions from Rome than they were about God’s plan and purpose.

Jesus then used a parable to make his point by way of a reference to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. In the parable, a vineyard was planted and cultivated, and it produced a bountiful crop, but the tenants would not pay what they owed to the one who planted the vineyard. Jesus used the imagery of the vineyard to describe Israel. Ultimately, God would send his beloved son, but the son, too, would be rejected and killed.

Now let’s take a step back from the story and ask ourselves some hard questions. Who or what has authority in our lives? To whom do we pay most attention? The question of who is in charge is critical. If we answer that our Lord Jesus is in charge, yet we find ourselves, like the scribes and chief priests, avoiding him rather than following him, the likely reason is that we have stopped listening to God’s servants. That is, we turn deaf ears to the scriptures, reject the influence of those who love us, and harden ourselves to what God wants us to hear.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of Christ. The law declares the character of God in Christ. The psalms sing of the glory of God in Christ. If the priests and scribes had looked carefully at the humble, glorious, loving character of Jesus, they should not have found it difficult to be persuaded that he had been sent from God. God’s very heart beat in Jesus. Matthew 26:59 tells us that the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin desired to find evidence against Jesus, but they could not. It is not difficult to see Jesus’ authority if we are willing to see it, but if we love our place in this world too much, if we are more concerned about Rome than we are about God, we become blind to the things of God.

Now look at verse 13:

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

Having failed in their attack against Jesus, the priests and scribes sent Pharisees and Herodians in another attempt to trap him. The Pharisees were a holy society. They were not rich or socially

prominent, but they were so zealous in keeping the Law and had grown so self-impressed that they looked upon others with contempt. The Herodians were supporters of Herod's family; they took Roman payoffs and loved all things Roman. Like the scribes and Sadducees, the Pharisees and Herodians had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. In every other setting, Pharisees and Herodians were natural enemies, but they joined together to challenge Jesus. Obsequiously, they approached the Lord. "We know you are a man of integrity because you always tell the truth, and we have a dilemma. Should we pay our taxes or shouldn't we?" Jesus, however, was well aware of their duplicitous motives, as we read in verse 15:

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

Governments exist because God permits them to, and they have the right to make certain demands on their citizens. We live in a fallen world, and governmental authority is preferable to anarchy. However, there is a greater authority than any government. The things of God are always greater than the things of government. In order to understand what belongs to Caesar, we must first answer the more profound question, "What belongs to God?" Jesus asked, "Whose likeness is on the coin?" A likeness of the face of the Roman emperor was stamped on the coins used in his empire, so the answer, of course, was "Caesar's." What Jesus was asking by implication is, "In what place is God's likeness to be found?" The answer to that question defines where governments legitimately begin and end.

So where is God's image? What matters to him? What has he claimed for himself?

Every human being, each child of Adam, is made in the image of God. Our souls have his divine imprint on them. We should render to God what belongs to him—our very lives. He has the right to receive our obedience in thought and action as that which is rightfully due him..

The problem with those who were questioning Jesus is that, because they feared the crowds, loved their place in life, and wanted the security their status provided, they had learned to fear Rome so much that they wouldn't hear a new word from God. They had become so accustomed to honoring Caesar and believing in the world system, that God became kind of an afterthought to them. They began to believe that he was a distant deity and that the real world consisted solely of Caesar and what Caesar could do. Everywhere they looked, they saw Roman soldiers, Roman flags, and the image of Caesar on coins, and when they paid homage to Caesar, they paid absolute homage. They would rather kill prophets sent from God than contradict the world system.

Jesus continues to speak with authority and his commandment is clear: Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (respect government operating in its rightful sphere) and to God what belongs to God. He intends to have our entire lives: thoughts and actions, heart and soul and mind and

strength. Have we yielded to Jesus' lordship or are we, like his enemies, dazzled by the powers of the world?

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