

“By What Authority? Because I said So” based on Leviticus 19:15-18, Matthew 22:34-46
Delivered on October 25, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Do you remember at some point in your life arguing with your parents? One of those situations where you might have been asked to do something when you were a kid, and you questioned that command with a one-word response: Why?

I remember as the youngest of six, times when my father ran out of chores, and so, after my brothers were all given meaningful work, my job was to sweep the road. Yes, the public street alongside our house. I'd be out there with a push broom, pushing gravel to the end, still in the road. This was despite the fact that the street sweeper came once a month or more through our village. I remember asking my father, 'Why?' His response of course, 'Because I said so.'

I think we have all had our 'Because I said so' moments with our parents. And for those of us who have become our parents, since, we've had 'because I said so' moments with our kids. I know I have used this appeal too. It's called an appeal to authority, parental authority. There is no logical reason or valid argument, nor a desire to have a valid argument. Usually there is no more will to defend or excuse the command, only a wish to see the command carried out.

Of course, the only natural response to this command is: 'Who made you the king? Who made you God?' In other words, we might rephrase it: How do you have this authority? If you recall, this was the first question asked of Jesus after he began teaching in the temple. Writing to a Jewish audience, Matthew's gospel cares a lot about the authority of Jesus. He is making the case that Jesus is not only the Messiah in his gospel, but also, making the case to the early Jewish believers, that worship of Jesus is not idolatrous, worship of another God, because Jesus is one with the God of Israel. That this is where his authority comes from.

But Matthew does not come out and say bluntly that Jesus is God like John's gospel does. I believe it is because he knows the sensitive nature of this topic with his audience. He is leading his audience to come to that conclusion gradually, because Matthew does not want us to believe in Jesus on Matthew's authority. There is no gain in this. Rather, Matthew wants people to come to recognize on their own the authority of God that is in Jesus the Messiah.

What Matthew does state bluntly is that Jesus is the Messiah. In the first line of Matthew's gospel, he says this, this is the genealogy or genesis of Jesus the Messiah, or Christ, Son of David, meaning that he is a rightful king, and son of Abraham, showing he is chosen. This gives Jesus legitimacy to have possibly been the Messiah, but it really says little about his divinity.

But it is at Jesus's birth that Matthew equates the name Jesus with Emmanuel. He says that Mary conceived of the Holy Spirit to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, that the virgin would conceive and they would call the child, 'God with us,' and then Joseph names the child Jesus. To the Aramaic audience, they would know this name means 'The Lord (YHWH) saves.' What Matthew has

done is equate the two names, so that the one who is 'God with us' is named 'The Lord saves.' But as you reflect on today's readings you might ask, 'Why does all of this matter?'

Well, the kings of Ancient Israel were supposed to defer to God's authority. The law which governed the nations of Israel and Judah was from God, not the King. And the authority of interpreting that law was shared by the king with prophets and priests. But the picture Matthew paints of Jesus centers on Jesus's authority, not as just a king, or even just a prophet, or even just a priest, but the singular authority of all three in one, the authority of God.

When Jesus completed the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:29), the people were amazed because he taught, "as one having authority." And so Jesus enters Jerusalem like King David on a donkey, and turns over the moneychanger's tables, and they question Jesus's authority. Jesus sidesteps the question at first and goes toe-to-toe in a series of arguments with Judean leaders.

Yes, after the high priests and elders questioned his authority, the Pharisees and Herodians try to make Jesus question Rome's authority by asking about tribute to the emperor. Then in a passage we passed over, the Sadducees take another jab, and they try to get Jesus to question the authority of Scripture, with a question about the resurrection of the dead, but Jesus shows them that they do not understand the very texts they claim to be experts on. So, now today, the Pharisees take a second try at getting Jesus to undermine scripture. Because ultimately, if Jesus contradicts the Word of God, then they can say he is not from God.

The Pharisees and Sadducees didn't agree on scripture, namely, what writings in what we call the Old Testament are completely authoritative. Sadducees held that only the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – were completely authoritative. Other texts were good and valuable, like the Psalms, but do not hold the same weight. The Pharisees recognize those first five books, known as the Torah, or law, along with the Prophets (history) and the Writings (wisdom), including the Psalms. They believe these share the same divine inspiration and so the same authority.

The Pharisees ask a question from common ground with the Sadducees, when they ask what the greatest commandment is in the law, or Torah. If Jesus draws from the Prophets or the Writings, he will lose the Sadducees. And if Jesus makes one part of the law more important, he loses them all, because the challenge of keeping the law is keeping ALL of the Law.

Jesus stays within the Torah and quotes Deuteronomy 6:5. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being (soul, life, being, identity), and with all your mind.' This is the most dominant command in all the law, so his comment is safe here, because this is the 'Shema,' coming from the Hebrew word for 'Hear.' This is the command that faithful Jews recite as a prayer each day, "*Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord, with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your might.*"

Deuteronomy says that this should be the first thing kids learn. It says that it should be bound to their hands, worn on their heads, and inscribed on every home's doorposts. And so, children were taught to write this, taught to memorize this passage, and it was posted on every home. This command requires that we give our everything to God – heart, being, might and mind. To love with all our heart means that all our love should be directed first to God. To love with all our being, or soul, or life, is to find these things, meaning our identity in God. To love with all our mind is to use all our rational strength, and to love with all our strength, is to use all our strength of will to love God first and foremost in our lives.

This is a good summary commandment, but in truth, it covers only the first half of commands, primarily those about not worshiping other gods and how to properly worship the Lord. The other half the commandments are about people and sharing our lives with others. These commands require or prohibit certain actions to have a just society.

So, Jesus adds the second half of a command from Leviticus, saying it is 'like the first,' meaning to obey it is to obey the first, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The Pharisees have no response because Jesus has answered the question, without undermining the authority of the law's completeness. His answer addresses the 600+ commands in the Torah. Love God with all that you value, every fiber of your being, your whole will, and show love for God, by loving your neighbor as yourself.

What I love about this passage is how Jesus's words after the commands parallels the Leviticus command. Notice the verbal punctuation in Leviticus today: 'I am the Lord.' Throughout the book of Leviticus, commands are emphasized in this way, that these commands do not just come from the mind of Moses, but they are the commands that God has given for the people. It is the ultimate, response of God as Israel's parent, "Love your neighbor, because I said so!"

So, it is interesting to me that Jesus finally answers the question from earlier. The priests, elders and other Sadducees may have left by now, but finally, Jesus answers their question, 'By whose authority do you do and say these things?' And Jesus uses the Psalms, declaring them to be authoritative, by saying that David wrote Psalm 110 by the Spirit of God. Jesus questions their interpretation of what it says. He says, "Then how is it that David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, called the Messiah 'Lord,' when he said, 'The Lord said to my lord, sit at my right side until I turn your enemies into your footstool'? If David calls him Lord, how can he be David's son?"

Now, this riddle is not a proof, but it is a sly answer to that question of authority. You see, Jesus interprets this scripture to be about a Messiah who appears as a human being, like in Daniel, called to sit at the right side of God – a metaphor for the power of God – and called to rest His feet on his enemies – a symbol for sitting in God's throne. In Jewish mysticism, the One at the right hand of God is One with God because they are God's power. One in the throne of God, like the Messiah in Daniel, shares the identity of God.

What's more, if David is calling this one Lord, then the Messiah is greater than Israel's top king. And Jesus has just entered the city like David, like the top king, to be seen as the Messiah.

To put it simply, this is Jesus twisting the Pharisees up in scripture to make one point, *'Here's my authority: I am the Israel's Messiah, or anointed King and I am One with God.'* We'll see it next week, but after this revelation Jesus goes on the offensive. It says no one dared ask him any more questions, but it's probably because he didn't give anyone room to speak. There will be no more entertaining of the Pharisees or Sadducees questions, only a prophetic indictment of the power-seeking ways of these leaders. It leads to them plotting to have Jesus silenced, by charging him with blasphemy and insurrection, for claiming to be God (an offense to them) and claiming to be a King (an offense to Rome).

This is the heart of Jesus's message and the heart of the Good News that he proclaimed, namely that in him, the One God of Israel, had come down to us, the people, to share in our humanity, to live as we live, and die on Rome's cross for our sins. And by Jesus's resurrection, God shows us that sin and death are defeated.

By this incredible miracle, like the holy place in the temple that was cleansed by blood to be the resting place of God's presence, we are cleansed, our sins are covered over, to make us temples for God's Holy Spirit, as individuals and as a church. It is into this place that the Spirit pours the fullness of God's love, so that with it, we might love God and neighbor, following those two commands, not to earn God's favor or grace, but as a response to it.

Jesus appeals to his own authority here, like a parent saying, 'listen to me because I said so.' And Matthew wants the reader to see it, so that if we might ask, 'Who made you God?' Then the answer is simply, 'God did, because God became a human being, our King.'

I want you to hold on to this, because the world into which Jesus came, is the same world in which we live today. I have emphasized a lot over the last few weeks the division among the leaders of Judea who questioned Jesus, and their battle with the power-hungry Roman empire. This is very much like our world today, except that back then it wasn't just one virus, the coronavirus, that threatened the lives of the people, but just about any virus or disease, was a threat to human life. It was a dangerous time to live. Life was treated cheaply, and power was the number one aim. We've gotten better in some ways, but we still face the same issues.

This is the world into which Jesus came and it is the world into which Jesus remains, for when we believe what Jesus said, that he is one with God the Creator, then we can trust when Jesus says, 'I am that King. I am with you. I am your God.'

We can trust that by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit in us as temples cleansed by Christ's death, that Jesus is with us. This is our comfort in trying times.

We may rebel often against the 'Because I said so' statements, but in this one, let it be a comfort, because this is the same authority, which Jesus proclaims at the end of Matthew's gospel, when he says go into the world making others disciples, teaching them what I have commanded – love God, love neighbor – and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Triune God, so they will be part of your church communities.

And remember, *'I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'* No matter what you are feeling right now, take comfort in this, because I want you to know and always remember that you are loved, and the One who loves you most, our God, your Father, your brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, is with you always, now and forever. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***

(Matthew 22:34-46 CEB) When the Pharisees ***heard*** that ***Jesus*** had ***left*** the ***Sadducees speechless***, they ***met*** together. One of them, a ***legal expert***, ***tested*** him. “***Teacher***, what is the greatest commandment in the ***Law?***” He replied, “You must love the Lord your ***God*** with all your ***heart***, with all your being, and with all your ***mind***. This is the first and ***greatest*** commandment. And the second is like it: You must ***love*** your ***neighbor*** as you love yourself. All the Law and the ***Prophets depend*** on these two commands.” Now as the ***Pharisees*** were ***gathering***, Jesus ***asked*** them, “What do you think about the ***Christ?*** Whose son is he?” “David’s son,” they ***replied***. He said, “Then how is it that David, ***inspired*** by the ***Holy Spirit***, called him Lord when he said, ‘The ***Lord*** said to my lord, ‘***Sit*** at my right ***side*** until I ***turn*** your enemies into your ***footstool?*** If ***David*** calls him Lord, how can he be David’s ***son?***” Nobody was able to ***answer*** him. And from that ***day forward*** nobody ***dared*** to ask him anything.