

Matthew 21:23-27

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The chief priests confront Jesus in the temple and interrogate Him about His authority. They publicly ask Him a framing question hoping to entrap Him. Jesus promises to answer their question if they will answer His alternatively framed question about John the Baptist's authority. When they decline to answer His question, Jesus declines to answer theirs.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 11:27-33 and Luke 20:1-8.

When Jesus returned to Jerusalem, He entered the temple.

The temple was the center of Jewish activity in Jerusalem. Its expansive courtyards and the portico surrounding *the temple* complex made it a natural gathering place for the Passover worshipers who were in town for the annual holy day. During the five days between *Jesus's* triumphal entry and His betrayal, *He* repeatedly went into *the temple* to teach (Luke 20:1; Mark 14:49). His *teaching* drew crowds, who were amazed at what *Jesus* taught them (Mark 11:18). ([See Map.](#))

Jesus's presence in *the temple* also caught the ire of *the chief priest and elders of the people*. They perceived *Jesus* as a threat to their *authority*. They recalled how *He* caused a great disturbance when *He* had driven out their money changers and merchants (Matthew 21:12-14) and humiliated *them* when they had previously confronted Him about this (Matthew 21:14-16).

When they saw Jesus while He was teaching in the temple, the chief priest and elders confronted Him once again. They asked *Jesus* two questions. The first question was: *By what authority are You doing these things?* Their second question was related to the first: *who gave You this authority?*

They were bothered by His authoritative manner of *teaching* and the inexplicable power behind His miracles of healing. But the foremost of *these things* that *the priests and elders* likely had in mind was *Jesus's* driving the money changers out of *the temple*, which He did at least once within the last two days and possibly twice. (See commentary for Matthew 21:12-13) .

There were probably two functional answers *the priests and elders* anticipated *Jesus* could give *them* when *they* questioned the source of His *authority*. They were prepared to use either response to discredit or destroy Him.

The first basic answer *Jesus* could give *them* was that His *authority* was from man. *Jesus* could say that *He* was acting on His own *authority*. This would have been a truthful response because *Jesus* was acting on His own divine *authority*. *The temple* really was His Father's House (Matthew 17:24-27; 21:13; John 2:16). But *the priests and elders* were not interested in the truth. They could have twisted this answer to brand *Jesus* as a fraud or lunatic—because no mere human had *the authority* to behave as *Jesus* had behaved in God's *temple*.

The second basic answer *the priests and elders* might have anticipated was that *Jesus* could say that His *authority* was from God in *heaven*. This also was true. But if *He* responded with this truth, they could have instantly charged *Jesus* with blasphemy without considering that the claim might be true. His divine miracles that He performed in *the temple* (Matthew 21:14) clearly demonstrated that His *authority* was from God, and that *He* ought to be listened to. But like the Pharisees before *them* (Matthew 14:14), the Sadducees *and* the *elders* refused to see what God was doing. They were blind to the reality that *Jesus* was God.

Instead of answering their question directly, *Jesus* shrewdly avoided their trap. He recognized that reacting to their framing would be a losing proposition. So, He swatted it aside, by saying *I will also ask you one thing*. Then *Jesus* proposed an alternative framing, that created an even greater problem for them. He promised that *if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things*. *Jesus* respectfully told them that *He* would give *them* an answer to their question if *they* would first answer His question. This reframed the entire conversation.

Jesus did not change the subject. *Jesus's* question *also* concerned *authority*—the *authority* of *John* the Baptist. *Jesus* asked them to tell Him if *the baptism of John was from heaven or from men*. The framing *Jesus* proposes will put the *priests and elders* in a situation where they will have to choose the type of loss they will suffer. This exchange is between two extremely shrewd political debaters. But of course, *Jesus* is by far the shrewdest.

John the Baptist was an eccentric preacher who shared his message in the wilderness of Judea (Matthew 3:1). His message was the same as *Jesus's*—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). *John* baptized those who repented. God also saw fit for *Jesus* to be baptized by *John* at the beginning of His earthly ministry as a testimony and sign of obedience (Matthew 3:13-17). *John's* role was to prepare the way for *Jesus* as the coming Messiah (Matthew 3:3, 11:10; 11:14; 17:10-13; John 1:19-34; 3:22-36). King Herod had *John* imprisoned for speaking out against his unlawful marriage to his sister-in-law, and later beheaded him at the behest of his vengeful wife (Matthew 14:1-12).

Jesus's phrase, *the baptism of John*, referred to *John* and his ministry. Despite the fact that *John* preached in remote locations, he drew large crowds (Matthew 3:5; 11:7-9). Many believed his message, repented, and were baptized by *John*. He was popular among the people.

But *John* did not flatter the religious establishment. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to investigate *him*, *John* called them a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7). It was possible that some of *the chief priests and elders of the people* who now questioned *Jesus's* *authority* were among those Pharisees and Sadducees who were called out by *John* in the Judean wilderness. The Pharisees and Sadducees largely rejected *John's* message and baptism. *They* were probably much relieved when Herod imprisoned *John*, ridding *them* of his bothersome preaching.

And now here was someone more bothersome than *John*, who behaved and taught *things* in *the temple* they found strange, and threatening. *The priest and elders* sought to trap *Jesus* by revealing the authority in which He did and taught *these things*, so that they could label Him either as a blasphemer or an insurrectionist. *Jesus* replies that He will answer their question *after*

they publicly declare where they thought the source of John's authority came from: from heaven or from men?

The priests and elders instantly saw how Jesus had flipped their own trap against them. They began reasoning among themselves how it would look if they answered Jesus's question one way and then the other. Matthew gives us here a small seminar in political discourse. The leading Jews understood how to frame arguments, and that how arguments are framed determines who wins them.

First, they reasoned: If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' The Sadducees knew that they did not believe John. Few, if any, of the chief priest and elders repented and were baptized by John. They also likely realized that if they lied to Jesus and claimed that they thought John did come from heaven, then Jesus would point out the obvious but condemning fact that they did not follow John. Their naked hypocrisy would reflect poorly upon them.

It is interesting that the chief priests and elders considered lying to Jesus about what they thought of John. It is revealing that their instinct was to simply figure out how to answer the argument such that they gained political advantage. Some might say that this seems quite reminiscent of many current politicians. As Solomon noted, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

Next, they reasoned: But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet. The Sadducees were afraid to tell the truth about what they thought of John because their honest assessment would cause them to lose a measure of respect from the people, who regarded John as a prophet from heaven.

Either response they chose would entrap them in a losing posture. And so they pled ignorance. They said 'We do not know what the source of John's ministry was.'

Jesus responded to the priests and elders: 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.' If you refuse to answer my question about John's authority, then I refuse to answer your question about My authority.

Jesus's tactic demonstrated that He was more cunning than even the politically-shrewd Jewish leaders. Jesus was better at framing issues than they were. Jesus stood for the truth and told only what was true, while also exceeding the Jewish leaders in the skill of political discourse. As is typical with politicians, the Jewish leaders were primarily concerned with gaining political influence, and increasing their own power. As we will soon see, the most powerful person who ever walked the face of the earth will lay down His life as a ransom for the human race. In doing so, He will demonstrate what He has taught His disciples many times, that the greatest are those who serve.

Biblical Text

21:23-27 When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.” And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.