

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 4 - REVERSAL

TEXT: MARK 11:27-33 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
September 28, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Tuesday Morning

The aim of this series is to examine the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry leading up to His arrest. We began with Palm Sunday, with Jesus riding into Jerusalem like a King before going back to Bethany. Then we saw Him enter the city again on Monday, but not before cursing a fig tree to illustrate Israel's fruitlessness. From there He went to the temple where He turned over the money-changers tables. He then stayed, teaching and healing before going back to Bethany again, where He was staying. Today's text occurs on Tuesday as Jesus returns again to the temple. Now the tension is rising.

One of the great benefits of studying scripture as we are here is we're given an opportunity to see that the events surrounding Jesus' life are not a mish-mash of random parables, clever proverbs and stand-alone exchanges. Jesus' life took place in real time and space, among real people with whom He had real conversations and confrontations. He cannot be reduced merely to a mythic dispenser of wisdom and miracles.

This, of course, is so beneficial because we needed Him to do more than simply speak wisdom and overcome infirmity. We needed Him to *accomplish* our salvation by dying our death and rising victorious over the grave, giving that life to us by His grace. Today's text takes us deeper into how He accomplished our salvation for us—how He ended up on the cross. It centers around a confrontation the temple authorities initiate the day after Jesus drove the money-changers from the temple courts.

Mark 11:27-33

²⁷They came again to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, ²⁸and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?"

²⁹Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me."

³¹And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ³²But shall we say, 'From man'?"— they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.

³³So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Confrontation in the Temple

This text depicts a confrontation. The Sanhedrin—consisting of the chief priests, the teachers of the law (or Pharisees) and the elders (or lay leaders)—come to Jesus wanting to know who gave Him authority to do "these things." What things?

The context of the Gospels leave little doubt they were referring to Jesus' behavior over the past couple of days—specifically the day before when He entered the temple and turned over the money-changer's tables, declaring that the temple had become a den of thieves. When He did this, Jesus assumed a posture of authority over the people, and did so without asking the Sanhedrin's permission. They were the gatekeepers over authority and leadership in the temple. It was their job to grant leaders' credentials and watch their ministry.

Notice what their question implies. They're not asking *why* He did what He did directly. They're asking who gave Him authority to act the way He did. We should take this to mean, "We're the Sanhedrin, the keepers of the civil and religious affairs of this city, and you didn't get permission from us to descend like a whirlwind on the Court of the Gentiles yesterday. So who did give you authority to act like that?" It was another way of asking Jesus if He presumed to appeal to a higher authority than the Sanhedrin when it came to matters of religion in Jerusalem. They were likely baiting Him to say His authority was from God, in which case they could arrest Him for blasphemy right then and there.

There was a sense of urgency here because Jesus' actions brought unwanted consequences. Many were taking to the idea that maybe Jesus was the Messiah. And for some, there was no *maybe* about it. He was! So what gives? There was a way things were done, channels to go through. So with strength in numbers, they confronted Him by questioning the source of His authority.

Challenging Presumptions

Jesus responds with a question of His own—a common method of debate. His question was a profoundly appropriately counter to the Sanhedrin's. As R.T. France said, this wasn't "a 'clever' trick question irrelevant to the issue, for the authority of Jesus was closely bound up with that of John, who had spoken of the 'one to come,' and whose mission Jesus had publicly endorsed." Yesterday Jesus portrayed what the prophet Malachi prophesied—"the Lord suddenly come to His temple." (Mal 3:1-2) John the Baptist proclaimed Him to be God's Messiah, the one and only Savior of the people, calling the people to repent. If the Sanhedrin didn't see John was from God, they certainly wouldn't see Jesus was either. And if they did see John as one sent from God, why did they oppose the One whose coming John heralded?

Jesus' question, at its core, was asking this: If His actions were judged to be out of line in God's temple among God's people, could the temple authorities demonstrate that they could tell the difference between something that was from God as opposed to something merely contrived by man.

It was brilliant, because it cut to the heart of their divide. On the one hand, you've got the Sanhedrin who presumed since Jesus hadn't gone through their channels, He wasn't from God. On the other hand, you have Jesus who has made some direct statements of His own that the ministry of the Sanhedrin was not of God, but was a soulless, methodical mirage of what was meant to be an intimate pursuit of the Maker and Lover of the souls of God's people. (Lk 11:37-52, also later, Mt 23:1-36) By His actions, Jesus insisted *He* knew the difference between what was of God versus what was of man. If the Sanhedrin presumed He wasn't of God, could they demonstrate they knew the difference?

When the Sanhedrin demanded Jesus tell them where He got the authority to behave as He did, they presumed it was *they* who granted such authority. Behind this was the presumption that since they oversaw the temple, their work was God's work. Jesus' two-option question challenged these presumptions. His method is good to keep in mind when your faith is challenged. Usually when people challenge Christianity, they're working off some foundational presumptions. Before you try to answer to their objection, test the validity of their presumptions first. Sometimes objections exist not because of a defect in the thing being objected to, but because of faulty presumptions about it.

For example, when someone rejects the church on the grounds that it is filled with hypocrites, what do they presume? Do they expect Christians to be sinless? If so, is this a presumption consistent with Christianity? People don't profess true faith in Jesus because they believe they are better than everyone else. They look to Christ because they *know* they are broken and deeply flawed—separated from God because of their sin. The common ground for every true Christian is a recognition of their need for a Savior to do for them what they cannot do on their own—make them right with God. So to judge the church as hypocritical based on the presence sinful people in it is to misunderstand why there are there in the first place.

Also, is it fair to equivocate sin with hypocrisy? To say a Christian sinning is hypocrisy presumes that Christian asserts he *doesn't* sin. There is a huge difference between hypocrisy and struggle. Of course Christians are filled with hypocrisy—I know I am. But hypocrisy is a *kind* of sin—a subset. It is not *all* sin. It is the sin of doing what's wrong while pretending you're doing what's right. On the other hand, there are many deep, personal struggles Christians deal with which they are very open and repentant about—and this is *not* hypocrisy. The presence of sin does not equal hypocrisy—the denial of it does.

If you're tempted to dismiss the church because you have judged its members to be hypocrites, do you presume hypocrisy nullifies the validity of a Christian's faith? This is crucial, because if hypocrisy *does* nullify the validity of the church, you're right to dismiss the church altogether on these grounds: the church *is* full of hypocrites. It is, always has been, and until Jesus returns, always will be. Anyone who says otherwise is lying or naïve.

But in this respect, the church is no different than the rest of the world. Everyone has places where they present themselves as whole when in fact they are broken, or healthy when in fact they are hurting, or right when in fact they are wrong. Real Christians admit it, looking to Jesus to overcome the power of this sin in their lives, which I find to be refreshingly honest.

Don't Know or Won't Say?

When Jesus answers the Sanhedrin with a question of His own, the most unexpected thing happens. All at once, the Sanhedrin can't find the authority to answer. Mark says they "*discussed it with one another*"—conjuring an image of the Sanhedrin saying, "*Uh, give us a minute, will you?*" as they excused themselves.

Already, this is a little embarrassing for the Sanhedrin because it wasn't a complicated question. It was either option A or B—was John's baptism from God or from man? As soon as Jesus asked it, they knew He'd just done a number on them. If John's baptism was from God, why weren't they baptized? More importantly, why weren't they following Jesus, whom John proclaimed as the Christ? But if they said John's baptism was contrived by man and not from God, this wouldn't sit well with those looking on.

John was beloved by the people, and to speak ill of his memory was not advisable with all the Passover pilgrims around. He was a martyred Jew, head served on a platter by Herod himself. So their conference was not to discuss what they *believed*, but rather which answer would be the best to give at the moment. Neither answer seemed to be diplomatically beneficial. So they offered a lame, "*We don't know,*" but in so doing stripped themselves of the authority to demand an answer from Jesus. It wasn't that Jesus wouldn't answer because they didn't. It was that the answer they gave was a lie, and everyone knew it—and why should Jesus yield to the agenda of man-fearing liars?

Their answer showed their collapse of integrity. Could they tell the difference between something that was from God versus something that was from man? Either they couldn't or they weren't saying. They showed they weren't really after the truth, but after a certain desired outcome. If they weren't seeking the truth, what was the basis for their presumed authority? Seeing they were more interested in using His answer against Him than actually considering its validity, Jesus declined to give it.

A Reversal of Power

This entire confrontation was an attempt to put Jesus in His place, which they presumed was as one who had to answer to the Sanhedrin. But the Sanhedrin were passing a judgment on Jesus that made less and less sense as each day went by. He increasingly seemed to ask smarter questions and give clearer answers than His opponents. They tried to discredit His ministry, but there were people in the temple who walked there on their own, when the day before they were lame or blind. And don't forget about Lazarus. His resurrection was as indisputable as his death which had him four days in the grave.

They would question His motives, and He would expose theirs. They would chastise His failure to yield to their authority, and He would expose them as liars yielded to a fear of man. When Jesus overturned the money-changer's tables the day before, this must have appeared to many of the temple leaders as a case of a visiting teacher stepping out of line. They would correct Him, explain how things were to be done, and Jesus would then know what He could and could not do around there. In this scenario, they presumed they have authority over Him.

But when they demanded He give an account of Himself and He refused, this marked a reversal of power Jesus wouldn't back away from. And it resulted in His going to the cross. He quite literally turned the tables on them yesterday, but now He was doing it again, only with much further reaching implications. The temple leaders held no authority over Him. He's making this clear. If they're committed to curbing His influence among the people, it will have to be through more than warnings and bravado. They will have to remove Him. He will not yield.

The theme of the past few days has centered on Jesus revealing His identity and claiming authority over every aspect of the people of God. Jesus knows it will ultimately be His own people, not the Romans, who will kill their own Messiah. And what's more, He knows this is only a glimpse into the darkness of their hearts—of how far they are from God. Call it irony, but what Jesus was doing then was addressing a condition we still retain to this day. We want to kill the God who tells us our best efforts aren't sufficient, yet it is only when we actually succeed in this that we find redemption from the blasphemy of works-based righteousness. No one took Jesus' life from Him. He laid it down of His own accord, but not before challenging any presumption we might have that we don't need Him.