Luke Lesson 79 (2021)

**JESUS’ AUTHORITY**

Luke 19:45-20:8

Key Verse: 20:3

“He replied, ‘I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin?’”

 Jesus’ public entry into Jerusalem, riding on the colt, displayed him as the King of Peace, humble and gentle. People cheered him, praising God, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, however, Jesus wept over it because of their willful rejection of God’s mercy, Jesus himself. People flip out quickly. At one point, they shout, “Blessed is the king!” then soon they call, “Crucify him!” That’s why Jesus never depended on popularity. According to Matthew’s account, Jesus lamented, saying, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Mt. 23:37)

When we look at Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem, we see the humility and patience of our God. He is indeed gentle and humble. But he is not weak: He is strong and courageous, like a lion king (Pic#1). In today’s passage, Jesus courageously confronted the corruption of the Jewish religious leaders by driving out merchants from the temple courts. The embarrassed leaders whose hypocrisy was exposed tried to cover it up by challenging Jesus’ authority and eventually get rid of him. We see the great danger of religious authority that killed the Messiah. It’s no wonder that many people struggle with authority, and some hate authority. But Jesus’ authority is different from religious authority. This morning, let us think about how Jesus’ authority is different from religious authority and how we should respond to it.

 Look at verses 45 and 46. “When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. ‘It is written,’ he said to them, “My house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.”’” Luke’s description of this event is relatively brief, compared to other Gospel narratives (Mt. 21:1-16, Mk.15-18, Jn. 2:13-16). It was near the Jewish Passover, so many pilgrims were gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate. The temple courts were for the Gentile pilgrims. But this place of worship turned into a huge flea market, where people were selling cattle, sheep, doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money (Jn. 2:13). Travelers needed to purchase temple-certified animals for the sacrifice-offering and exchange foreign currency for paying the temple tax. There was price-gauging. A dove was sold at a ridiculously high price. And the pilgrims had no other choice than buy them anyway and exchange currency at an unfair rate.

Behind all this was the family of the High Priests. They were **not praying** for the people, but they were **preying** on them. In actuality, they were licensed thieves, like the tax collectors. Even though they were supposed to be orthodox Jews, they were not different from cult leaders who abuse and exploit innocent people. And nobody dared to challenge their corrupt authority. Yet, Jesus challenged them and said, “It is written, my house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” Of course, John the Baptist also challenged them. It is interesting to notice that John the Baptist was the only son of the priest Zechariah (Lk. 1:5-25).

In the following verses (19:47-20:8), we see a sharp contrast between Jesus and the religious leaders and between divine authority and ecclesiastical authority. Look at verses 47-48. “Every day, he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priest, the teachers of the law, and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet, they could not find any way to do it because all the people hung on his words.” While Jesus was teaching people and preaching the good news at the temple, the religious leaders were plotting to kill Jesus. What a contrast we see between them! When Jesus taught people in the temple, he didn’t just indoctrinate them with religious rules and regulations. He taught them the truth of God and the gospel, which set people free from the bondage of sin and death and give them new and eternal life. We surely need this kind of authority to serve and set people free, not the power to control.

It reminds us of John 8:31b-32, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Jesus’ teaching had divine authority because it healed people’s sick minds, hearts, and spirits. Especially those who hung on his words experienced God’s liberation and empowerment of their soul. Jesus’ authority was not religious but the divine and spiritual authority that came from God.

However, we should pay attention to one important thing: our sins are forgiven through God’s grace and mercy. Thank God for the grace of forgiveness of our sins. However, if we want to experience true freedom from sin, we should hold on to the truth, which requires constant self-examination and repentance. That’s why Apostle Paul said to the early Christians, “Those who belong to Christ has crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal. 6:24) We see that Apostle Paul continued to struggle to hold on to the truth of God that enabled him to experience inner peace, joy, and freedom from sin. If Christians don’t live a Christian life, they will bear rotten fruits in their lives. Therefore, we should hold on to Jesus’ words. Apostle Paul continues to say in Galatians 6:7-8, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

Look at 20:1-2. “One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came to him. ‘Tell us by what authority are you doing these things,’ they said, ‘Who gave you this authority?’” Most of the chief priests belonged to the Sadducees. The teachers of the law and the elders belonged to the Pharisees. Of course, they didn’t get along. But now, they had become close allies against Jesus because Jesus exposed their shameful hypocrisy. They were united to get rid of Jesus. And while Jesus was teaching in the temple, Jesus came to Jesus and asked, “Tell us by what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” Their question seems forthright, but it was a trick. If Jesus answers that God gave him authority, they will condemn him as a blasphemer. If he says he does on his own, they will charge him for rebelling against the ecclesiastic authority they claimed to receive from God. Either way, Jesus would be convicted and be handed over to death.

So, how did Jesus answer? Let’s read verses 3 and 4. “He replied, ‘I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin!’” We find in the Gospel narratives that whenever somebody asked Jesus trick questions, he didn’t answer directly. Instead, he would step aside and asked his opponents a question, which would expose their cunning schemes. John’s baptism was the baptism of repentance, which stirred up the entire nation. John was considered a prophet from God. Some Pharisees and priests recognized John the Baptist as God’s prophet even though they wouldn’t publicly endorse John. Of course, Herod put him in prison and executed him. Yet, John’s baptism was from heaven. And it was evident that the source of authority for John the Baptist and Jesus was identical and from heaven.

How did the religious leaders answer Jesus’ question? Look at verses 5-7. “They discussed it among themselves and said, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will ask, “Why didn’t you believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin,” all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that Joh was a prophet. So they answered, ‘We don’t know where it was from.’” Indeed, Jesus’ question put these religious leaders into a big dilemma. They said that they didn’t know from where John’s baptism was. Wait a minute! Is it true that they didn’t know John’s baptism was from heaven?

Of course not. They knew John’s baptism was from heaven. But to keep their leadership position and to cover up their hypocrisy, they lied. They were pathological liars. They lied to God, to others, and themselves. Jesus said that Satan is a liar and the father of lies. It means the devil not only lies but also spreads lies. 1 John 1:10 states, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him (God) to be a liar, and his word is not in us.” Jesus is patient with us, but if we keep lying to him, he could do nothing for us.

Look at verse 8. “Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’” How tragic it is that these religious leaders who were supposed to be God’s chosen people turn into such liars for their benefit. That’s not all. Soon, they would arrest Jesus, condemn him as a blasphemer, and hand him over to the Roman governor who would crucify him. It is shocking and disturbing.

But this kind of irony was not an isolated incident. It’s sad, but history proves that the religious and ecclesiastic authorities, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, had committed the worst and most violent crimes. They killed many innocent people and justified their evil and violent actions by using God’s name. We are tired of hearing so many religious leaders’ scandals.

So, should we not join any established religion? I have seen people who say that they don’t want to be involved with religion because they don’t trust any established religion. Many people say that they are not religious, but they are spiritual. I understand their struggle. But the more painful, heartbreaking, and undeniable fact is that such a vicious cycle repeats on interpersonal, group, and international levels. We are not entirely innocent of the same sin. This vicious cycle is repeated over and over in our world.

However, who and what can end this vicious cycle of sin? It’s our Lord Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. Even though Jesus is God, he didn’t use his power to control or manipulate people. Instead, he lived as a humble servant for all people. Jesus is the most genuine, humble, and hardworking person who ever lived in history. He gave himself as the ultimate sacrifice for us. He said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk. 10:45) Through his sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus not only took away our sins, but he also demonstrated God’s unchanging love for sinners and how we, as his disciples, should live our lives. He didn’t remain dead, but he rose from the dead and will come back to finalize God’s salvation.

There is a clear difference between Jesus’ authority and religious authority. The Jewish religious leaders represent the ecclesiastical authority, and Jesus represents the divine authority. We must be aware that any religious authorities or organizations that act as if they represent God without submitting to God’s supreme authority lack accountability and transparency as God’s instrument. Their influence is dangerous and toxic. We should have discernment through prayerful examination and critical thinking based on the truth of God.

Jesus’ authority, however, is the divine authority that brings us peace, joy, freedom, love, everlasting life, and the kingdom of God. Jesus didn’t come to crush us with his power but save us and make us fully alive and wholesome. He said to his disciples, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” Jesus is God who became a man. He is fully divine and fully human. He is the merciful God, but he is not weak. He courageously challenged the corrupt religious leaders and drove out all those who came to the temple to make money. In his broken heart, Jesus rebuked the religious people by saying, “It is written, my house will be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” Our hearts are God’s temple. We should clean our hearts through the blood of Jesus. Even though he is humble and gentle, his authority is above all authority and dominion in heaven and earth. And his divine power saves us, sets us free, and makes us wholesome. Even though religious, political, and worldly authorities seem powerful, they will fall someday, but only God’s domain will last permanently.

We are aware that today’s world is fast-changing, and we don’t understand many things, including the rise of violence, pandemic, global warming, wildfires, flood, natural disasters, etc. We feel unsafe living in today’s world, and our life seems increasingly unpredictable than ever.

So what shall we do? People become anxious more than ever. Many people, including Christians, are experiencing mental breakdowns. Shall we remain in fear and anxiety? No. As disciples of Jesus, we must remember and believe that Jesus, our Lord, holds the future. Even if heaven falls, his words will not. God will fulfill what he intended in the end. Therefore, we need faith in the divine authority of Jesus Christ moment-by-moment. We must hold on to God’s truth, acknowledging that Jesus, who holds the future, also holds our hands (pic#2). Isaiah 41:13 states, “For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and say to you. Do not fear; I will help you.” May we give the hands of our trust in him in all circumstances. And as we learn to trust in Christ’s divine authority, we not only experience God’s peace in us but also our day-to-day life can be a new adventure and a time of growth. May the Lord bless us to trust in the Lordship of Christ Jesus.