

“What Powers our Purposes?”
Psalm 25:1-10; Philippians 2:1-13;
Matthew 21:23-32

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Sometimes I find that reading scripture brings up things for me I wish I could have ignored. There are words and ideas that I have to reassess. Today is one of those days for me, as the chief priests and elders ask Jesus by what authority he is coming. I'm one of those people who reacts to that word “authority.”

It feels like we are in a day and age where we are questioning authority. After all, isn't that what the '60s told us? There was a bumper sticker that said, “Question Authority.” We are trying to figure out who should be the authority, or is there any authority, or am I the authority, or are we each our own authority? Some of us seem to be allergic to that word “authority.” Yet here it is.

The word in Greek has the sense of power behind it. If you look at the definition of authority, it basically is the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior. If we think about that idea, it has the power to change who we are, to change our minds, to direct our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. It is a pretty impressive word. So when they are asking Jesus what authority he has to teach, we think about it like that. As we think about that idea of authority, I think about what I give authority to. Who are our authorities today?

I think of somebody having authority because they have experience, or because they have knowledge. When I get on an airplane, I give the pilot a fair amount of authority to be able to fly the plane because he has the experience and the training that is necessary. That's one element of authority: the idea that somebody has knowledge, has training.

As we think about the idea of authority, I'm struck by the question of how I decide who I give authority to. Who should I give authority to in my life? That's why this question that the chief priests and elders of the people ask Jesus is so important. “By what authority do you teach?”

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't simply say, “By the authority of God.” Our Philippians passage invites us to remember that we have given Jesus authority because we see him as the Son of God. But he doesn't claim that in this moment. It's the same reason I don't always give somebody who says, “God told me to do this,” authority just because they said so. We know that sometimes there's a little more to it. People can

sometimes be mistaken or use that phrase to try to influence others and give themselves power. We weren't there. We didn't hear God speak to them.

It's interesting to me that Jesus doesn't say, "By God's authority; that's where my authority comes from." We might know that, but he doesn't say it here. He gives them something that is really important. He begins to talk about by what authority. He does so by inviting them to think about what gives somebody authority.

So, what do we think gives somebody authority? I already mentioned a few things: training, experience. There are other things. Status, birth. Why do we give somebody authority? By what means? Because they say they are an authority? It feels like a hard thing to struggle with, in my mind. I have struggled with this a lot of my life. Who do I give authority in my life?

Jesus is working on this with them. Towards the end of this passage, I think what he says is that there's another way of seeing authority. Just to introduce that idea, I am reminded to a seminary professor I had. He was in a wheelchair, so he couldn't stand and be tall and imposing in that way, because sometimes we look to that as someone who has authority. He wasn't one who spoke with the most erudite language of all my professors. He wasn't the one that held up his intellect as the most important thing. But when you were in his presence, you knew you were cared for. You were loved. You were appreciated and were held by his attention and by his grace. Through that, he had a kind of authority that was all his own.

It's interesting to me that Jesus is asking them why they didn't pay attention to John. What was his authority? He came in righteousness, by way of righteousness. I think Jesus is beginning to help us see how we might want to look at what is an authority in our lives. Sure, we need the expertise of someone who can help us understand something like this pandemic. We need the people who study and understand different areas of life and have particular authority in those areas. We need people who understand how my car works so it can be fixed when it breaks, because I certainly don't always understand all of that.

There is a way we have to figure out how to use the information that we get from these experts and to figure out how to live in this world together. What it feels like Jesus is saying is to look for the way of righteousness. If one comes in the way of righteousness, they might be worth listening to. John came in the way of righteousness and therefore is one who is worth listening to. There was something about coming in the way of righteousness that means he came as one speaking for God, and that you could see this way of righteousness.

By implication, Jesus is coming in the way of righteousness as well. That's great. I think it's a wonderful beginning, but I have to think about, then, what righteousness means. Righteousness is the state of being in which one is as they ought to be. That doesn't quite finish it off, because I want to know what that means. Another way of thinking about being where we ought to be is human behavior in harmony with God's will and being pleasing to God. So that's the idea of righteousness, as well. It's the idea of human behavior that is in keeping with what God's will is and being well-pleasing to God.

Well, OK. I need to take another step. What is God's will for us? If we listen to the one God sent to teach us what God's will is, he starts by saying it's to love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes when we talk about righteousness, I talk about it as being in right relationship. The whole idea of righteousness comes out of this idea that because God is in a relationship with us, it matters what God wills. What God wills, then, is righteousness, being in right relationship with God and with one another, loving God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. We are given this idea that there's a way to think about the world that is right, and that it involves the love of God and love of neighbor as ourselves. Jesus said those are the greatest commandments, so they are core principles and behaviors. It is the foundational piece to what it means to do God's will, to appreciate and care for God's will. So, if we see someone who is living in the way of righteousness, we should be able to see how the love of God and the love of neighbor is evident in their life.

I think that what Jesus is doing is giving us a way to think about authority. Who should be in authority in our lives? Well, the one who comes in the way of righteousness, who invites us into or engages us somehow in the loving of God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength or loving our neighbor as ourselves. Doing God's will, doing the good that God would have us do, and caring for our neighbor.

I think that what Jesus is inviting us to recognize is we do have a way to have a lens to look at whether the authority is useful in our lives and how that authority should be used in our lives. Can we see that in some ways that authority can help us love God or love our neighbors? Is there a way that works its way through this authority? I don't think this is just in one on one situations. It's not just personal. It's about groups. It's about communities. It's about nations. It's about the world. It's about how things might work if we look for our authority in one who would help us love God better and love our neighbor. Really, when we look for our authority, it's one who not only comes in the way of righteousness, but teaches us the way of righteousness.

Jesus, here, is in this interesting interchange with these leaders, inviting us to think about who the authority in our lives is. Why is that so important? Why think about the authority in our lives? Because it's about the power that influences our thoughts, our opinions, our feelings, our behaviors, how we live our lives. Jesus is inviting us to think about how we live our lives, and so when I titled this sermon, I called it "What Powers our Purposes" because we almost always live our lives with some level of purpose. I don't go into the kitchen to make food just because I want to cook something, it's because I want to eat it. I have a goal in mind. I think most of what we do has some level of goal in mind. What kinds of goals do we have? What kinds of purposes in our lives? What is the purpose of my actions? Is it just to feel better? To be entertained? To be excited? What is the purpose of my actions? Is it to have more power? To be more important? What is the purpose of my actions? Is it to be more loving? To show more grace? To understand God's goodness? To express God's goodness in my relationships? And if I have a purpose, a goal, if I hear one coming in the way of righteousness, inviting me into the way of righteousness, I begin to have a purpose that God has given me. That is, to live in the way of righteousness. To live that way, I have to have that input. I've got to have one that helps me see, shows me the way.

We recognize that Jesus is the one who clearly comes from God in the way of righteousness and leads us into righteousness. But it is in our lives, as we try to figure out each day, make a decision, it invites us to ask, "When I face this particular problem, how is it loving God or loving neighbor? How is it in the way of righteousness?" When I think about how I deal with larger issues like economic issues, is this way of doing things beneficial for everybody or is it good for just a few? Does it increase some people's standing and push others aside? What is the way of righteousness? When I look for a leader, does that leader show a way of righteousness or lead me into a way of righteousness? If I look to a way of learning, does it help lead me into a way of righteousness?

I cannot help but think of a particular example that we are all faced with today. It comes up in all kinds of our daily activities. That example we all have to deal with today is simply wearing a mask. Why do we wear a mask? Well, the experts, the people who have studied the way diseases work, say that there is a danger. Now, if there's a danger to people, if I care about people, and if I'm called to love my neighbor, then I want to pay attention to what is the best way to act to help protect my neighbor. A simple inconvenience of a mask seems to be what we are invited to do. To me, that seems to be a way of saying the righteousness of God is in recognizing what is the will of God: to love God and neighbor. It seems like a simple inconvenience is a great way

to be able to do that. After all, Jesus invites us not to put ourselves first, but to prioritize others. To care and to walk in that way of righteousness.

There's one last piece to this way of righteousness. It's one thing to talk about it, to say, "I think that's a great idea. We should look about the way somebody comes to us in the way of righteousness." But in some ways what Jesus is saying is that when somebody comes to us in the way of righteousness, if God is speaking through them there's a way that God is inviting us to be like the two sons. He's inviting us to work in the vineyard, in his world, with his people. We can say, "Yeah, that's a great idea! I'll do it!" But if we don't do it, are we doing the will of God? Are we walking in the way of righteousness? Some of us struggle when we first hear something to try to understand. We may not be as quick to say yes. We may realize we have already said no some way in our life before, but we can now say yes and actually get to work doing the will of God.

As Jesus says, when we see someone coming to us in the way of righteousness, as we hear John, as we see Jesus, as we see somebody today, can we hear God's word to us and also want to walk in the way of righteousness? Do we look for the authority that helps us and empowers us to walk in the way of righteousness?

I am thankful that we have a God who engages us and invites us to recognize there is a way to look at the world, there is a lens to use, there is a way to make decisions about whether it helps us love God more, whether it helps us love our neighbor more, and whether it helps us truly walk in the way of righteousness. Amen.