

A Question of Authority

Wayne Waibel – 10/04/20

This week's parable is the second of three offered by Jesus in answer to the question by what authority do you do these things. That question was posed by the Chief Priests and elders after Jesus had driven out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers.

It's interesting to note that Jesus just keeps hammering away at the elite of Israel. He answers their question with a parable and as if to say, "and another thing," launches right into a second and then a third parable to make His point. Despite the abundance of clarity, the only real response generated by the ruling elders and Chief Priests was indignation. They were even more determined to put this troublemaker to death.

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The foundational text for today's gospel comes from Exodus 20; better known as the Ten Commandments. This Decalogue contains not only the basis for the covenantal relationship between God and His chosen people, it also maintains enough ambiguity to allow for re-interpretation as each age examines it through the lens of its time.

In first century Palestine, the Chief Priests and the elders were functioning in their capacities as keepers of the law when they challenged Christ's authority. Their failing was not in the challenge they issued, but in their reaction to the way in which Jesus addressed the challenge. The suffering, impoverished, and illiterate common people rightly acclaim Jesus; their educated leaders do not.

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Even in our time, this parable has been used to justify the often held, yet horrendously inaccurate assumption that Jews are the bad tenants and Christians will be the nation to whom the vineyard will be given. Here Jesus draws a line within Judaism, not between Jews and Christians.

He is referring to the ruling elite as the bad tenants – the simple, common folk will tend to the vineyard faithfully and therefore inherit the kingdom. Pretty easy for the temple rulers to figure out which side they come down on. Still – they can't help but be outraged instead of ashamed.

One need only look to recent events for clarification. It was with great sadness that I witnessed the obvious glee some were demonstrating at the news of our President's positive COVID-19 diagnosis. While I'm not inclined to generate admonishment for such thoughtless behavior, I am none-the-less disheartened that our collective conscience has fallen to such a shameful depth.

More and more this pandemic is exposing some of the truly regrettable fibers that have been woven into the American fabric. My real concern is that it has gone largely unnoticed. But then – it can certainly be said that as Christians, we are not of this world. It can also be argued that as Christians – we have a fundamental responsibility to do something about this.

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Not being an accomplished student of the Greek rhetorical art form often employed most ably by the Apostle Paul in his writings, much of what he has to say escapes my understanding unless and until a deep dive is conducted. What resonates from today's Epistle is that Jesus leads us to attain what we could never have achieved. Essentially, we become more ourselves as we become His.

And what Christ calls us to engage in is nothing short of a shift from our initiative to God's. And that is the perspective embraced by the common folk of Jesus' time, while rejected by the ruling elite. Hence – as we learned last week – tax collectors and harlots will gain the kingdom of God before the Chief Priests and the elders.

Over and over again the marginalized and outcast of society in any age are elevated by virtue of their steadfast love of God to the abundant life promised to all who embrace rather than reject Jesus Christ as Lord.

We reject God when we reject His work as creator and sustainer of the universe. We also reject Him when we reject some of His people for being “different.” And Jesus is very clear on this. He doesn’t rewrite the law; He fulfills the law and renders it consistent with His time and our time and all time.

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According to Paul, in Christ – God has prepared everything we need for fruitful living. As Americans – one of the most difficult concepts for us to embrace is, “nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done.” We are so driven to achieve that to accept an attainment feels like laziness to us.

Just as God chose to free our brethren of antiquity from Egyptian bondage, we too are on the receiving end of countless blessings. That is the nature of our God, who asks only that we put no others before Him. Not Twitter – not Facebook – not Instagram – not Hollywood – not the NFL – not AT&T – not Exxon – not Apple or Google – not even the U.S.A.

We need to channel the energy we would normally expend to further our own lofty pursuits and instead lose ourselves in the drive to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Not to achieve, but to attain.

Some things we don't need to question, but others do present in such a way that we must think critically and intentionally. For instance – we don't need to question the authority of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We must, however, take a closer look at the pilot lights within ourselves and do our level best to extinguish the one that repeatedly blinks, "What's in it for me?" Amen.