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Mark 11:27-12:12
Who's In Charge Here?

Who do you think you are? The question is one of authority. Perhaps the fundamental issue that keeps people away from, or at least dilute, the gospel is the issue of authority. Who is Jesus? Who is in control? Where do I fit in this puzzle?

The narrative opens with a look at **The Villains** (11:27-33). Following Jesus's cleansing of the Temple, he was confronted by the religious elites who questioned his authority. "You can't just walk in here and act like you're the boss," they argued. "We all graduated from Princeton and Harvard!" The issue of authority had lied under the surface in Mark's Gospel (see, for example, Mark 1:22, 27, 2:10-13) only to be brought center state here. Who does Jesus think he is? Its inverse is equally valid. Who do I think I am?

The great debate of our time is over the same issue. Americans believe there is no legitimate authority outside of the self and those I approve. So, when Jesus comes along and demands complete submission, we hesitate to accept him. In Scripture, there is no concept of redemption apart from surrender. We cannot enjoy grace without first sacrificing the self.

The rise of moralism in America should concern us. Although there are signs of a renewed appreciation for Christianity there remains an unwillingness to submit to Christ. What we want are the benefits of Christianity (equality, human rights, strong marriages, loving neighborhoods, racial cohesion, functional families, etc.) without the Christ of Christianity. In essence, we are unwilling to fully submit to Christ.

Jesus responds by calling the bluff of the religious leaders by exposing their cowardice. Jesus answers their question with a simple multiple-choice question. Was John the Baptist sent from heaven or from man? Remember that John claimed to be a prophet of God foretelling of the imminent arrival of the Messiah and then publicly identified Jesus as that Messiah. This is a dilemma for the religious elites. If they say, John is "from heaven," they'll be proven frauds because they rejected him. If they say he was "from earth" they'll run the risk of proverbially dipping in the polls. In the end, they decided not to answer the question leading to their public embarrassment and anger. But Jesus doesn't just embarrass them, he warns them.

This leads to the story of **The Vineyard** (12:1-12). There is nothing unique about the setting of this story. The vineyard owner buys the property, plants the vineyard, builds a fence, digs a pit for the winepress, and constructs a tower. He does all of this himself. He then leases it out to workers while he is away. This, too, would have been common practice. Large tracts of land were often foreign owned. This required them to lease the property and collect the profits from their farm. The owner, then, is not surrendering his rights of ownership, but entrusting it to tenants.

Shockingly, the caretakers turn hostile. At the appropriate time, the vineyard owner sends servants to collect from the vineyard. Despite hiring these tenants and paying their wages, they turn greedy. They beat the first servant and send him away empty-handed. They strike the second servant in the head and treat him shamefully only to finally kill the third servant The owner decides to send his only son believing they will respect him. As the heir, he has a unique authority and enjoys a special relationship with the owner. Yet the opposite happens. Perhaps the tenants assumed that the arrival of the son meant his father, the owner, was dead. Thus, once the son was no more, the land would then go to the workers as was the custom of the time.

Clearly this is a warning to Israel and her leaders. Jesus is the rejected stone which will become the chief cornerstone. To their credit, the religious elites know this parable was about them.

The parable, then, is a warning to those rejecting Jesus and his authority. Jesus warns us about where rejection leads knowing it will not be a silent one. They will crucify their Messiah because no authority can trump their own. No one, even today, rejects Jesus with indifference. Most Americans reject Buddha, but don't get worked up about it. The same could be said regarding Joseph Smith, Mohammed, Confucius, and countless other religious leaders. Yet no one gets too worked up about it. Tell a sinner to repent and follow Christ and see what happens.

There is no greater authority in American than the Self. Consider how this manifests itself culturally. The first is *Self-Fulfillment*. In our search for self-fulfillment, life becomes a quest, and the self becomes a project. We must "find ourselves" and cut out "toxic people" who prevent us from being "our true self." This is why so many are turning to psychology rather than faith.

The second is *Self-Definition* wherein we define who we are even if it contradicts reality. In a Christian world, our personal feelings and emotions must conform to reality. Now, however, the opposite is true. Such Gnosticism had radically transformed every aspect of our lives and experience. It is worth noting, however, that in the self-definition project, no one ever identifies as a sinner in need of a Savior.

The third is *Self-Transcendence*. People are spiritual but not religious for the simple reason that spirituality is vague enough that it can be molded to satisfy the self. Religion, on the other hand, is too rigid to reshape into my image.

All of this makes evangelism difficult. How does one address sin in a world where selfishness is a virtue? How does one address repentance in a culture of victims? How does one preach faith in a post-truth world where the feelings of spirituality trump the reality of doctrinal fidelity?

We began with the question, "who do you think we are?" The question was directed at Jesus, but maybe we should direct it at ourselves. Who do I think I am? Throughout Scripture, when people stood before a holy God, they were in awe of his beauty, power, and authority. They were simultaneously confronted with their sin, shame, and guilt. Despite that, God came down to be one of us to rescue us. Who am I? I am but a sinner saved by the grace of God. All I want is to be like him, to know his love, and to live for his glory. What about you?