

*“The Lord lifts up the humble,”* our Introit begins, *“He casts the wicked to the ground.”* Which of these two describes the men who approach Jesus in the temple? These men are supposedly the spiritual leaders. They are the influencers and example setters. These are the chief priests and elders of the people. They refuse to be taught by Jesus, instead interrupting Him as He teaches the people. They openly challenge Him. They question His authority.

These men would have gained a large following in the 1960s. *Question Authority* became a motto of the hippie, counter-culture movement. And that same motto is alive and well today. For the chief priests and elders it wasn't just *question authority*. They resisted Jesus' authority. Their goal was to entirely defeat it.

This is hardly the mark of the humble, but it describes well the wicked. It's what their fathers did resisting the prophets of God in the Old Testament. It's what they did to John the Baptist, rejecting his baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. And now it's what they do to Jesus. *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority!”* They know full well the answer to their question. No one could do the miracles Jesus did unless God was with him. This they themselves admitted. But they approach Jesus not in humble faith. They approach Him as the devil approached Eve in the Garden: By whose authority are you not to eat of this fruit?

All around us we see God's authority being challenged in government and in the church; on the street, in homes, and in schools. Ours is not a humble society but is becoming more and more defiant. And it is easy for us to go along with the world in this. Even Christians like us know how to despise authority, be it parents, officials in government, or elders and servants in the church.

The world encourages such behavior, but God condemns it. *“There is no authority except from God”* writes His apostle. In the world its purpose is to maintain law and order, but in the church its purpose is one of mercy.

Jesus' mission was, and is, one of mercy. Compare with me these chief priests and elders with all those to whom Jesus showed mercy. Think of all who came to Jesus with sickness. After healing them, did they demand of Him, *“By what authority do you do this? And who gave you the authority to heal me of my sickness?”* Think of the blind who came to Him for sight. The lame He made to walk. The demon-possessed whom He freed of their nightmarish hell. The dead He raised to life. Did any of these demand to know by what authority He did these things? How absurd to even suggest such a question. All to whom Jesus showed mercy were grateful that He had this authority. It was His enemies who were not.

The devil has no authority from God. But he does have power. Not always the same thing as authority. When people rise up against their elected officials, they might have the power to overthrow them, but they have no authority to do so. False prophets are empowered by the devil to do great signs and wonders and to gain large followings, but they have no authority from God, for they pervert the truth of His Word.

The chief priests and elders resented Jesus' authority for they cared not at all about the mercy of God. They were about power. But authority is about mercy. You know this. This is why you bring your little ones to Jesus in Holy Baptism. You do not demand, "What authority does the church have to baptize!" Rather, you hear Jesus say, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Going, therefore, baptize...and teach.*" When your pastor absolves you of your sins, you do not challenge the word delivered to you, but you see Jesus' mercy toward you in the words, "*In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ...and by His authority...I forgive you all your sins.*"

It is because "*the Lord lifts up the humble.*" It is His mercy that lifts you up. For in mercy your Lord was uplifted on a cross. Jesus showed mercy to you by submitting to those in power. He did not angrily shout, "By what authority do you nail Me to this cross!" He humbled Himself to their authority. Yes, truly it was by God's own authority that His Son was crucified. For it was expedient that one man die for all the people...die for you. God authorized it. And because He did, Jesus is authorized to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation. The devil strives with all his power to prevent you from receiving these holy treasures. But Jesus has all authority. Even over the devil. Even over the power of your sin.

And so believe the merciful truth that you are forgiven. Not one of you is left out. Your baptism testifies to this. Your baptism, just like John's baptism, is from heaven. It is not man's idea or work. It is not what you do for God. It is from heaven. It is God's mercy toward you. The chief priests and elders had no use for John's baptism just as they had no use for Jesus. It's because the two go together: baptism and Jesus, along with mercy, life, forgiveness, salvation. All of this is from heaven. And all of this is for you. and by all of these holy gifts "*The Lord lifts up the humble.*" He lifts you up. Amen.