

Matthew 21:23-27

Back in the 1960s Bobby Fuller sang, "I Fought the Law, and the Law Won." John Mellencamp followed that in the '80s with, "I Fight Authority, and Authority Always Wins." Both songs became Rock 'n Roll hits, and perhaps part of the reason for this is that people, even church-going Christians like us, can relate. We don't like it when someone exerts their authority upon us. Are you happy when the police car behind you turns on its lights? How about when you receive a letter from the IRS saying you owe them more money? And it's not just governmental authority that pushes us, causing us to push back. Most churches have a difficult time recruiting men to be Elders because members who are delinquent in worship sometimes react in a negative way to their spiritual authority.

"I Fought the Law, and the Law Won" could have been the theme song of the Chief Priests back in Jesus' day. They were always opposing Him, but they could never defeat Him. In today's story they come at Him in the temple demanding to know where His authority comes from. They thought they had Him dead to rights. If Jesus answered, "My authority is from God," they would have labeled Him a blasphemer before all the people. If He answered, "My authority is from man," they would have proven to the people that He was a fraud.

But Jesus turned the tables on them, just as He had done when He drove the moneychangers out of the temple the previous day. "If you tell Me where John the Baptist's authority came from," He responded, "I will then tell you where Mine comes from." Once again, the Law won. No matter what they gave as an answer, they would incriminate themselves. So they gave this dishonest and cowardly response, "We do not know." And Jesus trumped their last card. "Neither will I tell you."

When we hear this story in church we silently cheer. "Yes! Way to go Jesus!" We enjoy seeing Him put His critics to shame. But there are times in your life and mine when we feel the frustration and the anger of these Chief Priests; when we, like them, resent God's authority over us; when we, too, want to tell God, "What gives you the right to tell me what to do? Who made you the boss of me?"

Now unlike the Chief Priests, we admit that God has authority over us, but this does not mean that we always enjoy submitting to it. It starts when we are very young. It does not take long before children resist the authority of God placed within their parents. Not one of us kept the Fourth Commandment as children, and we still don't. We do not like it when God infringes upon our turf. We learned the Ten Commandments in Catechism Class, and we pull them out now and then mostly to show others the error of their ways, but how dare God use them against us! When His servant of the Word preaches the Law from the pulpit, at those times in the sermon we may suddenly need to dig around in our purse, or pocket for something, or check out the stained-glass windows around the building. When God pushes His authority on us, we push back, even if it's just closing our ears for a few moments and being distracted.

Yet, we are the ones who lose when we act in such ways. God does not tell us what to do just to shove His weight around. Through parents He instructs children for their own good. Through officers of the law He keeps order in society. When pastors preach His Law, God is showing us the error of our ways to turn us from our sins so we cling to His grace in Christ alone. When church Elders, with the pastor, rebuke impenitent sinners and urge those who stray to return to the flock, God is using His authority through the Word they deliver to save those who are on the road to perishing.

Even the Chief Priests in the temple should have seen that Jesus used His authority in a compassionate way. He never used it in a self-serving manner. He spoke with authority and acted

with authority against sin, sicknesses, and demons. He used it thus to call sinners to repentance, to bring lost souls into the kingdom of heaven. The Chief Priests rejected His authority just as they rejected the authority of John the Baptist. They knew the answer to the question they put to Jesus. His authority came from heaven. But they refused to live under it, and so they were refusing the compassion of God.

And those who act like them today; who despise the Fourth Commandment; who resist God's authority in the home, in society, and within His church will see, not God's compassion, but His anger. And since all of us struggle with the Fourth Commandment every day, we must repent, seeing the error of our ways, and beg for God to be merciful to us.

The Chief Priests in our story never repented like this. They kept fighting the Law again and again thinking one of these times they were going to win. And lo and behold, on a dark night in Gethsemane they fought the Law with swords and clubs, coming at Jesus with a mob of soldiers, and they finally, after all the times they failed, this time they got Him. They dragged Him to the court of Pontius Pilate. They cried out with all their anger, "Crucify Him!" until they got their way. And then they watched in triumph as the Roman soldiers raised Jesus on a cross to die. They were surely chanting to themselves: I fought the Law, and I won!

But did they really? Did they force Jesus to lose, or did He allow them to take Him by force? Here on Calvary, God's authority over sin, death, and hell appears to lose its power. It looks like God is defeated. But nothing could be further from the truth. For in giving up His rights, Jesus defeated sin for you. In giving in to the power of death, Jesus triumphed over death for you. In letting hell do its worst to Him, Jesus delivered you from those eternal flames.

Jesus did not lose on Good Friday; He won the battle for you. Every sinner, now, who trusts in what Jesus did for him, or her, on the cross, does not need to fear the authority of sin, death, and Satan. All of you who are baptized into Christ have triumphed with Christ. Every time you partake of His resurrected flesh and blood at His altar, He gives you the power to resist the power of sin in your life. Believing His words spoken with authority by your pastor--the words which declare that God forgives your sins--you do not live anymore with the fear of death and hell. You, dear sinner, you who struggles, just as I do, with keeping the Fourth Commandment, and all the Commandments, God forgives you. Jesus laid down His life for you. God is not angry with you. He has compassion on you. All your sins are forgiven. Be at peace for God is at peace with you.

And since God is for you, why should we oppose His authority over us? You see, when we fight the Law, we're really fighting the One who loves us and died for us. Why would a child want to resist his parents who love him and only want what is best for him? Rather, we who know God's mercy, and who are His forgiven children, desire gladly to submit to His authority in the home, in society, and in His church. We know that He does not ever deal with us in anger, but only through Jesus--only in love, always forgiving. There are those who fight God's authority all their lives, but this is not you, because you are one who, clinging to Jesus, knows and believes that the fight is over--He fought for you and won. Amen.