

Matthew 21:23-27

The devil despises authority. He has always done so. He hates authority because he hates God, and all authority is from God. The chief priests and elders who approach Jesus in our text are only a cover. It is really the devil approaching Jesus through them.

All authority belongs to Jesus. His Father in heaven bestows this authority on Him. The devil has no authority of his own. In fact, he has nothing of his own. Whatever he has is stolen. He is a thief. He has nothing but he wants everything. And so he takes. Like a brazen thief, he takes. Whatever he takes, he possesses. But to possess is not to own. Everything in the devil's tent is not truly his, but has been stolen from God.

"By what authority are you doing these things?" the devil is speaking through the mouths of the chief priests and elders. He uses the same line today. When children oppose the authority of their parents, it is really the devil putting his words in their mouths. When rioters oppose the police, it is the devil speaking through their words and actions.

The authority of God is our security. God does not take; He gives. He gives of what is His to keep us safe from the devil. In our text Jesus is giving to the crowd of people. He is giving them His teaching. This is what He is doing when the chief priests and elders so rudely interrupt Him. *"As He was teaching,"* it says, these men *"came up to Him."* Notice that they were not sitting with the crowd at the feet of Jesus. They were not interested in what He had to give. These chief priests and elders were there to take. The devil does not give; he steals, he robs. The devil wanted to take the crowds away from Jesus. He refuses to listen to Jesus and he wants no one else to listen to Him. The devil does not want anyone to receive Jesus' teaching into their ears.

God the Holy Spirit has brought you here today to put Jesus' teaching into your ears. He first brought you to Jesus when you were baptized. The devil had taken you away from Him. You were stolen goods, possessed by the devil, yet not owned by him. By His authority, Jesus reclaimed you through those sacred waters. He repossessed you as His own.

Now if we think the devil took that lying down, we are dead wrong. The fight was on. For the rest of your life the devil seeks to take you back. His ultimate goal is to have you forever. This is why Jesus commands, in the same breath, *"All authority has been given to Me...baptize all nations...and teach them what I have commanded."*

One of the worst things a parent can do is to have their child baptized, but then refuse to have their child taught. That child becomes a sitting duck. The devil takes. He takes what God gives. He takes joy, peace, hope, faith...he takes Christ away from those who belong to God. And so Jesus continues to give. He gave the crowds His teaching in our text. He gives us His teaching today. We cannot ever have too much of Jesus' teaching, for day after day the devil takes from us what God gives to us. It's a life-long battle, and you're in it. You're the prize.

Now when the devil takes, he replaces what he took with a fraud, a lie. He is like the thief who comes in and steals rare jewels, but then leaves fake jewels behind in their place so that no one will be the wiser.

The devil does this with Christians. The rare jewels of Jesus' teaching were given to you and me as we were taught the truths of the catechism. Your pastor was authorized by Jesus to teach you these truths, to give you these precious jewels. But what the devil does is to replace these jewels with fakes. He takes away Jesus' teaching and replaces it with misbelief. You show me a Christian, a member of a church who rarely sits in the pew, who puts a very low priority on the Sacrament, and I'll show you someone who has been robbed. The devil has taken Jesus' own teaching out of that person's heart and mind and replaced it with fraudulent teaching, with a lie which that person now believes.

And he can also do this with those who faithfully sit in the pew and frequently come up to the Table. The devil bombards us with lies. His fake jewels, his lies are all around us. Turn on your TV. Get on Facebook. Converse with those in the world. Listen to your own heart. You are being taught through all these things. And so much of all this is the devil's teaching. He is trying to replace the perfect teaching of your Lord with his own lies and fakes.

And fake jewels look beautiful. They look like the real thing. We would all be fooled; led into misbelief away from the truth, were it not that Jesus battles for you against the devil.

He refused to allow the chief priests and elders in our text to box Him into a corner. He turned their loaded pistol on themselves. The devil could not win against Jesus. Not here in the temple; not anywhere; and not with you. He has no authority in your life. He invites. He tempts. But you are not obligated to listen to him, nor do what he wants for you.

But here's the problem...we give him authority over us. I know you do this because I do it also. We invite sin into our life. We know what is right, but we authorize evil to have power over us. That's like giving a robber the keys to our house. And we do it on a daily basis. No wonder our lives are full of trouble; troubles that we bring upon ourselves by turning God's authority over to the devil.

Oh how desperately we need Jesus! We need Him to fight for us. We need Him to forgive us. Friend, He does both. You are His treasured possession. He bought you with His own blood spilled out on the cross for you. He called you His own in the water of your baptism. He has authority over you. You may give the keys to your heart and soul to the devil, but Jesus stands in the door and prevents him from coming in. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit. You are protected by God's holy angels.

Jesus' authority is your security. He places you within His holy wounds out of harm's way. "*By what authority,*" snarls the devil, "*are you doing this!*" But Jesus will not answer him. He does not need to. All authority belongs to Him. He is the biggest dog in the fight, and He fights for you.

And friend, He forgives you. He forgives you for giving your keys to the robber. He forgives you for inviting sin into your life. And He tells you, "Don't do this anymore. I forgive you, and now stop chasing after sin. Don't give the evil one an opportunity. Don't turn away from My perfect teaching. Your past is forgiven. Start fresh in the cleansing waters of your baptism to live how I want you to live."

Only those who believe they are forgiven can live in this way. And so believe it. Your pastor is authorized by Jesus Himself to announce to you that your sins are forgiven. They have no authority in your life. Do not, therefore, give them a place in your mind and heart. That place belongs to Jesus today, and always. Amen.