

A Rabbinical Debate -- Mark 11:27-33

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, may our hearts be drawn out towards our Savior Jesus Christ. May we see Him like we've never seen Him before. May we love Him like never before. And may we leave here committed to following Him with all of our hearts. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Probably some of the most well-known debates in our country are the presidential debates. The first general election presidential debate was held on September 26, 1960, between U.S. Senator, John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee, and Vice President Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee. This debate took place in Chicago at the studios of CBS WBBM-TV. Over 66 million Americans watched this debate from their living rooms (over 1/3 of the US population at that time). It remains as one of the most-watched broadcasts in U.S. television history.

The impact of presidential debates was also demonstrated in the 1976 debates between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Carter initially held a large lead in the polls. And yet by the time of the first debate, Ford had taken away a lot of Carter's lead. After leaving the first debate, being viewed as winner, Ford enjoyed an equal popularity with Carter in the polls. However, in the second debate Ford made what was widely viewed as a major blunder when he said, "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration." After this second debate, Ford's momentum stalled. Carter ended up winning the election.

A third significant presidential debate took place in 1980 between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Carter went into the debate having a narrow lead over Reagan. With years of experience in front of a camera as an actor, Reagan performed much better than Carter. As a result Reagan won the election in a landslide victory.

We'll discover in our story today Someone who was a more skilled debater than even Reagan.

Let's now consider a summary of our story from the book of Mark:

When Jesus once again returned to Jerusalem, He was confronted by the religious leaders in the temple. They demanded to know who had given Him His authority. Jesus agreed to answer their question if they would first tell Him whether the source of John the Baptist's ministry was himself or God. When the religious leaders refused to say where John's authority came from, Jesus refused to declare the source of His own authority.

We'll now turn our attention to what Jesus experienced in this narrative. The story is found in Mark 11:27-33. I encourage you to follow along in your own Bibles. First of all, Jesus experienced returning to Jerusalem. This was the third consecutive day that Jesus entered Jerusalem. In Mark 11:11 Jesus is described as entering Jerusalem Sunday morning after the Triumphal Entry. That same verse also describes Jesus returning to Bethany in the evening. Mark 11:15 says that Jesus returned once again to Jerusalem on Monday morning. And verse 19 reveals how Jesus left Jerusalem again that evening. So when Mark 11:27 describes Jesus as coming again to Jerusalem, it is the third consecutive day. It is now Tuesday morning. There are only three days until Jesus' crucifixion.

Second, Jesus experienced being challenged. Mark 11:27 describes Jesus as "walking in the temple". Matthew helps fill in the picture in chapter 21 and verse 23 of his gospel account. He mentions that Jesus was in the temple teaching. He was feeding the people's spirits – a job that the religious leaders at that time had really been failing in. Mark describes the religious leaders as coming to Jesus with a challenge. The first group was the high priests. According to God's plan given in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, the high priest was the top religious person in all Israel. He was chosen as a descendant of Aaron and remained high priest as long as

he lived. However, in Jesus' day a lot had changed. Herod now chose the high priest. He could choose a new one as often as he wanted. And it had little to do with spirituality or lineage, but rather wealth and politics.

The second group, the scribes, in Jesus' day was perhaps the most influential among the common people. They were the experts in interpreting the Law. They were seen as very devout and pious. Most of them were Pharisees. The third group was the elders. They were older, respected rabbis. In Mark 11:28 these three groups come to Jesus with a question. A contemporary translation might be, "Who ordained you?" Or "Who gave you your credentials?" And the implied insinuation was, "It wasn't us!" Someone didn't have to have credentials from the religious leaders in order to teach, but it sure helped in legitimizing your ministry. This was clearly an attempt to humiliate Jesus in front of all these people whom Jesus was teaching. The day before this Jesus had cleared out the temple with surprising authority. There was no question as to whether He had authority. It was only a matter of the source of this authority.

Last of all Jesus experienced entering into a debate. There are several ways Jesus could have answered this challenge. He could have given them a direct answer, such as, "My authority is from heaven." And it would have been the bold, plain truth. But the religious leaders probably would have responded, "Says who? Name one religious leader who has testified to this!" A second possible answer would have been, "I'm not going to say." And you know as well as I do that wouldn't have gone over well. "Well, why not? You don't know? What are you trying to hide?" A third possible response might have been, "That's your job to determine. You're the experts. You've seen what I've done. As the religious leaders of Israel, make your judgment." At the very best, though, this would probably have been seen as disrespectful.

Notice how Jesus did respond to this challenge. He engaged these men as fellow rabbis. He was not afraid of them. He did not try to avoid them. He held no hatred in His heart for them, even though He knew they were His most avowed enemies. In Mark 11:29 Jesus established the ground rules for a common form of debate. In a very respectful, non-offensive way He took control of the situation. He proposed a second question, which, when answered, would point towards the answer to the first question. Jesus' counter question is found in Mark 11:30 - "The baptism of (THE) John – was it from heaven or from men?" Baptism was the defining mark of John's ministry. Hence, his name, "John the Baptist". He was probably the most significant person in the Jew's recent history. He was almost revered by the people now that he was dead. We will read about this shortly in Mark 11:32. He was an icon for the Jewish people – a true, noble hero.

Mark 11:31 mentions that these religious leaders "reasoned among themselves". They formed a huddle. There were at least six of them, as each of the three groups is mentioned in the plural. In this circle they worked to come up with a unified answer. But the longer they took to answer, the more confusion and uncertainty they revealed. Jesus had struck on an issue that seemed obvious and simple to the people, but presented a major problem for these religious leaders. Mark 11:31 says that they knew what would happen if they said John's baptism was from heaven. There was one glaring truth that John taught that they had not accepted. I invite you to turn with me to John 1:29, 34. (Read) The religious leaders knew that if they confessed John's baptism and ministry as being from heaven, they would also have to confess Jesus as the Son of God. They would answer their own question as to where His authority came from. And this was something they absolutely refused to do. Their hatred for Him simply would not allow for that. Mark 11:32 explains why they could not confess that John's baptism was from men. They were in a real pickle either way they went, because "they feared the people". All the people were convinced that John was a prophet, indeed. If they said that John made up everything himself and had not been sent by God, they would be at odds with the people. They were unwilling to place themselves in this position either. They simply could not bear the thought of losing their influence, reputation, and respect with the people. So, the answer for them was not a matter of the truth, but the results.

And so in Mark 11:33 they respond to Jesus' question by saying, "We do not know." They chose, "none of the above". They bailed out of the debate. It was a futile, desperate attempt to escape unharmed. Perhaps they tried to hide their fear and embarrassment with some sarcasm: "We know where you're headed with this question, Jesus. Sorry. We're not going there. See you later." Well, Jesus sticks to the ground rules and refuses to answer their question either. So who won the debate? Well, let's just say that Jesus left these

religious leaders in the tangled mess they had created. By stating that they couldn't figure out whether John was self-appointed or sent from God, they disqualified themselves from being in authority over God's people. They revealed an inability to determine divine credentials. And as such, they were unfit to be the spiritual leaders of Israel. They left probably kicking themselves for having ever asked Jesus this question.

Now that we have considered what Jesus experienced in this story, let's take a look at our own experiences. Let's take a look inside and honestly evaluate how healthy we are as Christians. The good news is that we don't have to be confused about what it means to be a healthy Christian. Jesus has answered that question for us. Jesus is revealed in this story as our Example. First of all, He is revealed as our example in that He was willing to give confrontation. Let's first define what I mean by confrontation. Here is our working definition:

"Pointing out an observation or a discrepancy perhaps unknown to the person being addressed."

There's no hostility. It can be either a compliment or a critique. Now if we took the time to read from Matthew chapter 3, we would probably all come to the conclusion that the religious leaders who challenged Jesus actually professed to follow John. It was a way of keeping the respect of the people. So, Jesus confronts them on this: "On one hand you say you believe John was from God. But on the other hand you don't accept Me." This was a discrepancy that they had tried to hide. But Jesus brought it out into the open. It could have been an opportunity to remove this discrepancy from their lives, but unfortunately they were unwilling to do this.

Jesus, though, reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who engages in confrontation. A few weeks ago I shared during personal ministries time some of my experience taking CPE as an intern chaplain. Part of the requirements for the class is choosing personal learning goals. One of my learning goals was to effectively give and receive confrontation. My first session with the supervisor I received a confrontation. Near the end of our hour-long session he said, "I've found this session really quite boring." On one hand, those words hurt. And it took a while for me to work through things. On the other hand, what he said was very valuable. Although blunt, he was honest: "This is what this session has been like for me." Well, I'm glad he said something. That's not how I want to come across to people. And I can take that observation and by God's grace become a better communicator and more engaging.

Do we care enough to confront? If so, let us confront in a way that shows we care. And use discretion. Confrontation needs to be used with people who can benefit from it, if you know what I mean.

Jesus is also revealed as our example in this story in that He did not try to rescue the religious leaders from their mess. Notice in Mark 11:33 that Jesus stuck with the ground rules and refused to answer their original question. He didn't try to smooth things over. He didn't try to find a way to publically complement or coddle them. He let them suffer the results of their own actions and choices.

And He is our example in this. He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who teaches responsibility. It's someone who cares enough to say, "If you do this, here's what will happen," without trying to intervene. As a parent it is often hard to do this. It's hard to let children learn that when rules are broken, there are consequences. It's a lot easier to just keep reminding them and telling them over and over what the rules are without enforcing them in a loving and calm way.

If you have an adult friend or family member who is prone to make poor choices, it can be hard sometimes to let them experience the consequences of their decisions. There are consequences for driving while intoxicated. There are consequences for spending money you don't have.

In our story today, there is no doubt in my mind that Jesus loved those men. As they walked away that day, His heart went out to them. He didn't gain satisfaction from their dilemma. No doubt He hoped that experiencing the consequences of their choices would turn their hearts back to Him. As we allow those we love to experience consequences of their choices, we will be doing Jesus' work. When I realize I can't fix the mess I've made, I feel a need for a Savior.

In closing I would like to consider once again the religious leaders in our story today. I feel sorry for these men trying so hard to preserve their reputation. Thousands of people all through the land of Israel admired and respected them. Most people at that time could only dream of ever being as rich, intelligent and educated as they were. These religious leaders were so scared of losing this status. They went to great lengths to preserve it. In our story they showed that the truth really didn't matter to them anymore. All that mattered was their reputation. Jesus was calling them to accept Him as the Messiah – the only One who really deserved the respect they had built for themselves. How sad that they let go of Jesus in order to keep holding on to their reputation.

What's pulling you away today? What are you holding on to that is suffocating your Christian experience? Jesus is pulling you toward Himself. And you're holding on to this over here. You wonder why you feel so far from God. Being a Christian has become hard and stressful. You're not growing or winning people to Christ. Maybe there's something you need to let go of. If you don't know what it is, ask God to show you. I promise you, He will. So what are you holding on to - pleasure, possessions, or popularity? If you want to say, "Take the world, but give me Jesus," I invite you to stand with me as we sing our closing hymn.