

Authority Issues

Mark 11:27-12:12

Pastor Bryan Clark

A lion who was caught up with mastery of the jungle decided to make sure all the other animals knew he was king of the jungle. He was so confident that he bypassed the smaller animals and went straight to the bear. “Who is the king of the jungle?” the lion demanded. The bear replied, “Why you are, of course.” The lion gave a mighty roar of approval. Next, he went to the tiger. “Who is the king of the jungle?” he roared. The tiger quickly responded, “Everyone knows that YOU are, O mighty lion.” The lion swelled with pride. Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and leveled his question: “Who is king of the jungle?” he challenged. The elephant grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him in the air five or six times and slammed him against a tree. Then he pounded him on the ground several times, sat on him once, dipped him in the lake, and dumped him out on the shore. The lion, battered and bruised, struggled to his feet, peered at the elephant through his good eye, and said, “Look, just because you don’t know the answer is no reason to get mean about it.”

-Max Anders, *30 Days to Understanding the Bible in 15 Minutes a Day* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 83

I think about how funny that lion is. He has made up his mind and he has his opinion. Because of that, when evidence to the contrary is presented to him, the only way he can process it is, *The elephant didn’t know the answer*—and he just got upset about it.

What I think is funny about that is that we can become so much like that lion. We become so convinced that our opinions and our positions are right that when confronted with evidence to the contrary, it is as if we are determined now not to let the facts get in the way of our opinion, and we hold our ground.

We certainly have had a classic example of that in our culture in the last months and weeks through the life of Terri Schiavo. It really is a tragic story, but clearly in the last months and weeks the truth became irrelevant. It became a battle over ideology. It became a political war. It became a power struggle. And somewhere along the way the truth became irrelevant, and a life was taken.

When we talk about people that are closed-minded, people that are so entrenched in their own opinions that they will not listen, we always think in terms of “those people.” But the reality is that highly-opinionated, rigid, entrenched person lies within us all. We can become just like those Pharisees—that no matter what the evidence, they were simply unwilling to rethink their position.

I want us to wrestle with this a little bit as we look at Mark chapter 11. We have been working our way through the Gospel of Mark, and then we took a week off for Easter. We are up to Mark 11:27.

The beginning of chapter 11 was Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where He declares Himself to be King. This is what we often refer to as Palm Sunday. This was the Sunday before the crucifixion, so we are now inside the last week of Jesus’ life. He comes in and declares Himself to be King. Sunday night He goes out to Bethany, which was just a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem. Monday morning He is coming into town and sees the fig tree, curses it, and goes on into Jerusalem. He cleanses the temple and spends the day there, and Monday night

goes back out to Bethany. Tuesday morning He passes the fig tree. They have a conversation about the fig tree, which is now withered and has died. They move into Jerusalem, back to the temple. This is now Tuesday in the temple where we pick up the story in verse 27.

They came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?” And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.” They began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’”—they were afraid of the people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet. Answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Mark 11:27-33, *NASB)

Jesus enters back into the temple. You would have to imagine it was more than a little tense there that day. And out come the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. These are the three groups that made up what they called the Sanhedrin, which was a group of 71 that basically functioned as we would think of the Supreme Court. They were the highest authority in the nation of Israel. These were the heavy hitters. This was the top of the food chain. They bring out the first string and they confront Jesus. They ask what is a legitimate question: “Just exactly who gave You authority to do this?”

Before we go on, I want us to think about that question for a minute. I think it is interesting. Jesus came in the day before to the temple and the courtyard, and He confronted them. He flipped over tables and He really disrupted things dramatically. He quoted from the Scriptures saying, “This is supposed to be a place of prayer. This is supposed to be a place where people come to seek after God, and you have made it into a den of thieves.” That is a very strong accusation.

I would like to think if somebody came in and totally disrupted what we were doing and quoted Scripture that confronted what we were doing, that we would be able to turn around and have some sort of a biblical response to that. In other words, I hope we could biblically defend what we are doing. But you notice the Sanhedrin made no attempt to defend themselves at all, because frankly, they were busted. They had no defense and they knew that. They knew that what they were doing was contrary to the Old Testament Scriptures. They had no defense, and when you have no defense, what do you do? You deflect. You figure out a way to change the subject.

I have found over the years that when people are confronted with their sin, there is simply one of three answers. One is that people receive it, they repent, and they respond. Sadly that seems to be more the exception than the rule. More often, if people are busted and they know they are busted, they tend to do one of two things. Sometimes they play the victim. They somehow change the subject and they are suddenly the victim. That becomes the discussion and it is diverted from the real issue. If they don't do that, the other thing they tend to do is turn on the confronter. They see themselves as the victim and it is somebody else's fault, and they begin to blame the accuser. That is the strategy of the political world today. Rather than talking about issues, we just try to discredit the opponent. And it is done on both sides of the aisle.

That is the strategy of the religious leaders. They know they can't defend their behavior, so they have turned it around and they are trying to discredit Jesus as their accuser. So they say, "Who is that who gave you authority to come in and do this?" Jesus responds by saying, "I will answer that question, but you first have to answer My question."

One of the things we have learned in the Gospel of Mark is how wise Jesus was in responding to people's questions. A legitimate question always deserves a legitimate answer. But oftentimes questions are not questions; they are just a desire to argue. Jesus obviously was aware of that. These religious leaders were not really asking a question, expecting an answer that would somehow satisfy. There was nothing Jesus could say that would have satisfied them, and He knew that. So as He has often done, He is going to expose their heart. He poses a question to them. He asks them in essence, "Was John the Baptist from God or not?"

The group of religious men gathered together and they started to reason. What they did *not* say was: "You know, that is a good question. We have been pondering that ourselves. There are a lot of things that went on with John the Baptist that are hard to explain. We are not sure either." They had no interest in processing the truth. What they were looking for was the most politically savvy answer they could give. This was not now about truth. This was about public relations. This was about manipulating the information to come off as good as possible.

So they began to reason among themselves. "If we say 'from heaven' [*in other words, from God*] He will say, 'Then why did you not believe him?' " So they can't say that because then Jesus would say, "Then why didn't you believe him? He announced Me as the Messiah." That is the first section of the Gospel of Mark in chapter 1—that is John the Baptist's announcement that Jesus is the Christ; He is the Messiah. The religious men said, "We can't say that! But shall we say, 'From men'?" And then the sentence just stops. We would put three dots after it: "But if we say that He is from men...?"

They just stop and shake their heads, all of them knowing, *We are really in trouble because this crowd thinks John the Baptist was from God. They think he was a prophet.* Of course, the fact that he got his head cut off simply raised his status as a prophet all the more. They know they would be in the midst of a public relations disaster if they said that. So they are stuck. They are backed into a corner. There is nowhere to go. They are no longer processing truth.

When you are processing truth there is always somewhere to go. But when you are trying to play to the crowd, when you are trying to give the most politically savvy answer, you eventually get backed into a corner where you have no comment. Have you ever heard that?—"No comment."

I am guessing this took place in front of thousands of people. This is Passover, so the temple courtyard would have been packed. In this moment of truth, the best this group of wise, religious, discerning men can say is, "We don't know." You have to believe that was incredibly embarrassing. These men were the spiritual elite. These were the most spiritually discerning men in all of Israel according to the nation. All they can say to Jesus' simple question is: "We don't know." At that moment Jesus has exposed their heart. He says to them, "Then I am not going to answer your questions."

What is going on here? Somewhere along the way, these religious leaders stopped pursuing truth and became more interested in simply defending their position. They were more interested in entrenching their opinion. They had dug themselves into such a hole that they had nowhere to go.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Mark, describes this better than I can. He says:

The whole story is a vivid example of what happens to men who will not face the truth. They have to twist and wriggle and in the end get themselves into a position in which they are so helplessly involved that they have nothing to say. The man who faces the truth may have the humiliation of saying that he was wrong, or the peril of standing by it, but at least the future for him is strong and bright. The man who will not face the truth has nothing but the prospect of deeper and deeper involvement in the situation which renders him helpless and ineffective.

- William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, (The Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 280

In other words, what he is saying is that when the first word came about Jesus, these religious leaders formed an opinion. They got defensive. Pretty soon somebody pushed back and said, "But He is doing this and this and this." At that moment they could have said, "Then we had better pursue this and see what is going on." But instead they dug a little deeper; and then more evidence and they dug a little deeper. Soon this was not about truth anymore. This was just simply about winning. This was about entrenching their opinion. This was about not losing face. They eventually dug themselves in so deep they had nowhere to go.

I have seen this over and over again. I have seen it in marriages. I have seen it in the marketplace. I have seen it over and over and over again in the church. People form an opinion. Along comes some evidence to the contrary and that is the moment of truth: *Am I teachable? Am I open to receive that?* But instead they dig in their heels and they dig a little deeper. Then comes a little bit more evidence, and they dig a little deeper. Now it is not about truth anymore. Now it is not about accurate information. Now it is just about winning. It is about saving face. Now it is about my pride. Pretty soon I dig myself in deeper and deeper and deeper, until I have backed myself in a corner. I have dug myself in such a hole, I have nowhere to go. I have created my own prison.

Sometimes in a marriage something will come up and there is a conflict that could have been quite easily resolved. But instead both partners dig in. And pretty soon they dig in a little deeper. Then we are talking about sides. It goes deeper and deeper, and all of a sudden what could have been a relatively simple thing has now created a major divide.

If you manage people in the marketplace, you see this all the time. Somebody that you manage has an issue, a problem, or something that needs to be dealt with. It could be dealt with fairly simply, straightforwardly. But rather than responding to the truth and making some change, they dig in. They defend themselves. Pretty soon they have dug themselves in a little deeper. Now it is not about truth anymore. Now it is about being right. It is about defending. Now it is about pride. Now it is about saving face. Soon they have dug themselves in such a hole that it has become a major issue. You look at them and say, "It didn't have to be this way."

I see it in the church all the time. The reality is that we can become so opinionated, so rigid and so unteachable that the truth seems to become irrelevant somewhere along the way, and it then becomes about being right, holding ground and saving face.

Three of the most humiliating, embarrassing but yet freeing words in the English language are the words, "I was wrong." Is that humiliating? Yes, it is. Is that embarrassing? Yes, it is. But it absolutely sets you free. What Barclay is saying is that at that moment you have a future. At

that moment you have a hope. You have a new direction. But if you cannot get those words out you are stuck, and you are just going to dig yourself deeper and deeper and deeper until you are in a prison of your own making.

Do you remember the video from last week when Greg and Ane told their story? One of the things that Ane said is that when they determined they needed God in their life, they started reading their Bibles. All of a sudden they started noticing that what the Bible teaches did not line up with what they believed. It did not line up with what they had always been taught. That was a critical moment in their lives. At that moment they could have dug in, defended their opinion, and defended what they had always believed. Or at that moment they could have said, “We were wrong.” Thank God at that moment that is what they said: “What we had believed, what we had been taught was wrong.” Was that hard? It was very hard. Was that embarrassing? Yes, it was. But it absolutely set them free. At that moment they had a future. At that moment they had hope. At that moment it set their lives on a completely new pathway.

There are many of you who grew up in various belief systems, in various religions, believing certain things. But somewhere along the way you were confronted with the truth of the Scriptures and that was a pivotal moment in your life. You had the choice to dig in, hold ground and reject the truth, or to respond to the truth and say, in essence, “We have been wrong”—and to set a new course for your life. Think where your life would be, had you not been willing to acknowledge that your belief system was wrong and respond to a new course based on the truth.

The reality is that cannot just be true at the moment of salvation. We must always be a teachable, responsive people if we are going to become like Jesus. Somewhere along the way we tend to get rigid. We tend to become unteachable. We tend to dig in and we stop learning; we stop growing. We become more like these Pharisees than we want to admit.

I am guessing these Pharisees wanted to just slip back into the crowd and disappear. I am guessing at this moment they were very embarrassed. But Jesus is not going to let them go quite that easily. Mark 12:1:

And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT, AND DUG A VAT UNDER THE WINE PRESS AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some and killing others. He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those vine-growers said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!’ They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER STONE; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’?”

And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away. (Mk. 12: 1-12)

Jesus again speaks in a parable. This parable is about as close to an allegory as a parable is going to get—meaning several pieces of the parable have a direct relationship to something else. The story begins with the reality that the owner of the vineyard set up the vine-growers to succeed. He gave them everything that they needed. It was very common in the first century for an owner of a vineyard to leave, to go on trips and not even live in the area. He would simply hire someone to (what we would call) manage the vineyard. Every year a percentage of the produce would go back to the owner.

But if over a period of five years no produce went back to the owner, the managers assumed ownership of the vineyard. This was put in place in case an owner went on a trip and died. They did not have all the communication we have today. After five years it would be evident that he was not coming back, and they would take over ownership of the vineyard. Besides the concern of the owner forgetting his share, he keeps sending slaves—because if he did not get his share, he would lose the vineyard. This would have been a very common scene that Jesus uses.

The vineyard is the nation of Israel, and they would have easily understood that, because this was common Old Testament imagery. The owner, of course, is God. The slaves would have been the prophets. We are told that God basically did everything necessary to set up the vineyard to succeed. The religious leaders were the managers, but somewhere along the way the managers decided they wanted to be the owners. They took over the vineyard. Over and over again, God would send his prophets to warn them and to bring them back home. Rather than responding to them, they would beat them. They would even kill them. Prophet after prophet after prophet was sent and rejected.

Now just thinking about the story, if this owner sends slave after slave and they are beaten and some of them are killed, at some point you would say, “Stop sending slaves. That just seems careless; it seems reckless. It seems like there is no value to human life here. You are sending them into this terrible situation.” That is why we are so shocked when the storyteller tells us that he had one more person to send, and that is his beloved son. Now if you didn’t know this story, at that moment you would be shocked. It is bad enough that the owner keeps sending these slaves in to be rejected, beaten, and some of them killed. But why would he turn around and send his beloved son into that environment? There is not a parent in this room who would have done that. It was sure disaster. It seems reckless. It seems scandalous. It seems careless. Of course, we understand it is grace.

In Mark chapter 1, at Jesus’ baptism, God the Father identifies Jesus as his beloved Son. In chapter 9 at the transfiguration of Jesus, God the Father identifies Jesus as his beloved Son. For those religions which hold that Jesus was just another prophet, this is absolute clarity that Jesus identified Himself in a different category than the prophets. There were the prophets, and then there was the beloved Son. And God sent His own beloved Son, knowing that He would be rejected and despised and ultimately crucified by the religious leaders of Israel.

It raises the question: What should the owner do? By this time, the crowd is incensed. They are on the owner’s side. They are angry at the vine-growers. Jesus says, “What will the owner do?” The owner would say, “Boy, that was too bad. I think I’ll just walk away.” No, that is not what he says. He says, “The owner is going to come and he will reject and he will judge and he will condemn those who have rejected his son.”

Do you remember in chapter 11 that on the triumphant entry people quoted from Psalm 118: “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD”? Jesus pulls out His own quote from

Psalm 118: “Don’t you know that ‘THE STONE THAT THE BUILDERS REJECTED BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER STONE’?” He is saying, “This very Son that you are rejecting will become the cornerstone of the new temple, of the New Covenant—of a whole new way of life.”

You would think after such a powerful story that the religious leaders would back up and say, “We need to rethink this a little bit.” But their response is to think, *We have to get this guy; we have got to seize Him.* The only reason they didn’t was because of the crowd. As soon as they have an opportunity they are going to take Him out. Isn’t it amazing that these religious men had become so defensive, so entrenched in their opinions and in their religious system that they were absolutely resistant to even the slightest consideration of the truth?

I want to close by skipping ahead a couple of months to Acts 4. This would have been just a number of weeks after the resurrection of Jesus. This is happening in Jerusalem, where all of these events took place. I think it would be fair to say that many of the religious leaders in Acts chapter 4 would have been the same religious leaders from the discussion a couple of months before in the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 3, Peter and John heal a lame beggar in front of the crowd. Everybody knows it; everybody confirms it. Then chapter 4:

As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. (Acts 4:1-4)

Listen to what is being said here. Peter and John (just a matter of weeks after the resurrection of Jesus) are in Jerusalem proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. The evidence is so overwhelming. The ability to dispute that is absolutely zero—to the extent that from this one sermon about 5,000 men believed. That is just men, so when you add in women and children, conservatively you have 7-8,000 people who are able to process the truth and say, “That has got to be true” and they respond.

On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; [This is just weeks later from the discussion in Mark; these are the same people.] and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED BY YOU, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER STONE. [Where do you suppose Peter got that answer?] And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:5-12)

That was a pretty good answer.

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize

them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. (Acts 4:13-14)

Does that sound familiar?

But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.” (Acts 4:15-17)

Isn't that remarkable! We are now a few weeks after the discussion in the Gospel of Mark. These are the same men. Now the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus have taken place. The evidence is so overwhelming that thousands upon thousands of people are turning to Jesus. These religious leaders confer together and say the fact that these men did a miracle is unmistakable: “Everybody knows it; we cannot deny it.” In other words, there is no question this is true. At that point what we would like to hear is: “We were wrong.” But what do they say? “We must shut them up so no one else will know.”

The sad reality, according to Jesus, is that if these men were unwilling to consider the truth to their grave, they will be condemned forever. The other reality is that there were thousands upon thousands of people who believed the religious leaders. They were caught up in the emotion of the event. They were probably in the crowd crying for Jesus' crucifixion. But a matter of weeks and months later, they realized that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and His miraculous power was so overwhelming that they were willing to say, “We've been wrong. What we thought was true and what we believed was not true.” Was that embarrassing? I am sure it was. Was that humiliating? Yes, I am sure it was. But that changed their lives forever.

I do not know where you are in your spiritual journey. You may be a seeker who is still trying to figure it out. You may be a very mature Christian. Wherever we are on that spectrum, one thing that must be true of us is that we must remain teachable. We must be open to what is true. We must be willing to think. If we are open to what is true and we continue to affirm what is true, we will continue to grow and become like Jesus.

My prayer is that each of us would be so teachable and responsive to truth that, when necessary, we are willing to say, “You know, I was wrong.” Because if we are unwilling to get those words out, we are going to dig in and dig a hole deeper and deeper and deeper. We will dig ourselves into a hole so deep that we will dwell in a prison of our own making—with no future, no hope, and no effectiveness for the kingdom.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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Study Questions

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

Authority Issues

Mark 11:27-12:12

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What would you consider to be characteristics of someone who is teachable?

What would you consider to be characteristics of someone who is *not* teachable?
2. How do people become unteachable?
3. Can you think of a time when you were more passionate about defending your position than you were about learning what is true? What was the result?

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 11:27-33. What are the religious leaders referring to when they refer to “these things” in verse 28?
2. Jesus confronts the behavior and practices of the religious leaders in the temple. Do they respond by examining their practices according to the Scripture Jesus quotes, or do they simply seek to discredit Jesus as the whistle blower?

What does this tell you about the hearts of the religious leaders?
3. Why does Jesus not answer the religious leaders’ question directly? What do we learn from this?
4. What prevented the religious leaders from an honest answer to Jesus’ question? What did they fear most?
5. Read Mark 12:1-12. Compare this passage with Isaiah 5:1-7. What is the analogy Jesus is making?
6. What does this passage in Mark teach us about the grace and patience of God?

Doesn't the vineyard owner seem almost careless to send his beloved son into such an environment?

7. Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-29 related to the cornerstone. Notice this is also the psalm the people quoted as He entered Jerusalem two days before. Read Acts 4:1-12 and I Peter 2:7 for more on this idea of Jesus as the chief cornerstone.

How do these passages conflict with the popular belief (known as pluralism) that all roads lead to God?

Application

1. What can we do to make sure that our hearts remain teachable as we continue to be pursuers of truth, rather than simply defending our opinions, behaviors and attitudes?
2. Clearly from Mark 11:32 and 12:12 the religious people feared their popularity with the people more than they feared God. What can you do together as a LifeGroup to make sure everyone is more committed to pleasing God rather than pleasing people?
3. How might this text help us to be more strategic in reaching religious people in our sphere of influence?

Discuss what might work and what will not work to reach people saturated in religion?