

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

‘By what authority are you doing these things?’

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The Pharisees now have come to face an unpleasant truth: this Jesus is no longer someone who can be ignored. A time of deciding has come. An answer is demanded of them: is this the Christ, or merely false prophet.

For a long time now, they have tolerated Jesus, and for the most part quietly followed Him. They merely watched, trying to figure out exactly who or what this most unusual character was. The Pharisees were not wrong in doing this, for after all, they were the teachers of Israel, and how shall they teach the people what to think about this Jesus if they do not understand Him themselves?

Therefore the Pharisees do no wrong in listening to the Lord’s preaching, asking Him questions, and watching His often strange actions. In fact, they have been so kind as to allow the Christ to preach regularly in their own synagogues. They are simply doing their job. They are fulfilling their vocation.

We often think that the wickedness of the Pharisees lies in some deep, underlying malevolence that they have against Jesus, as if they were plotting His death from the moment Jesus sat down on the mount to teach. But this is not true. For the most part, they were interested in Him, or more than that confused with fascination.

Their sin lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that of all people, these scribes and Pharisees, these scholars of the Law and the Prophets, these, above all others, should have known.

Yet it is the plebian and commoner, the sinner and the foreigner that recognize Christ’s true identity. The Pharisees cannot bring themselves to do so, those who should have known.

Why is this? It is because regardless of the conclusion they come to, they only have something to lose. If they proclaim Him the Messiah, the Son of David, the King of the Jews, they deprive themselves of their own authority and sentence themselves to what is rapidly becoming obvious as the only fate of Jesus: His death at the hands of heathen soldiers.

If they say He is a false prophet, first, they lie to themselves, and bring divine judgment upon themselves, and this they know. Secondly, the people will turn against them, and they will be lucky to make it out of Judea with their tassels still attached.

It is always the easiest thing to remain neutral during a controversy, but God does not demand neutrality. Rather *he takes pleasure in the death of no man. Therefore turn, and live.* He demands a decision, for before all *lies the way of death, and the way of life. Choose life.*

Yet such is too dangerous for them. So they seek to outsource their decision to Jesus Himself, asking Him, *'By what authority do you do these things?'*

They know by what authority, but they are too afraid to confess it, and be bound to the destiny implied by that confession.

This the Lord knows, and He is not impressed with their double-mindedness. So He asks them to make a very similar wager, except this time easier; He does not demand that they confess that Jesus is Lord, and therefore potentially be punished with sedition or blasphemy. Rather they are asked simply to answer whether John's baptism is from heaven or from men. This is nothing more than an opinion, what is the risk?

Yet even here, the Pharisees see risk, and are paralyzed by the fear of the consequences of having purity of heart, or choosing truth against falsehood.

'And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."'

'And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."'

They know whence John's baptism came, but will not answer out of the fear of men.

Christ knows by what authority He does all He does, but will not answer, out of fear of God.

For the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but the fear of men is idolatry.

The Christian walks upon the way of life; the atheists in the way of idols; but the double minded man returns neither to the wealth of Egypt with her images of stone, nor to the milk and honey of the Promised Land with its single Temple of the One True God. He remains in Sinai forever, and dies where he stands, forsaken by the powers of this world, and judged by the God of heaven.

Jesus now turns in this hour to every human soul. He looks deep within every man's being, and asks:

'I also will ask you one question....'

'Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18; Matthew 21:23-27.