

Who is in Charge of Your Life?

Mark 11:12-12:9

By Bryn MacPhail

I wonder if the title of today's sermon startles you. "Who is in charge of your life?". What do you mean, "Who is in charge of my life?"--nobody is in charge of my life! I am in charge of my life!

But are we really in charge of our life?

Who would you say is "in charge" of this church? Is it the minister? The elders? The congregation? Who is in charge of your home? Is it the husband? Or is it the wife? Or is the authority equally shared?

I realize that the topic of "authority" can be a thorny issue, but if we expect the Bible to be our guide for life we cannot avoid the issue. *We cannot avoid the issue of authority because it is central to Christianity.*

As you might expect then, the text I have chosen for today says a great deal about authority, about who has it, AND who thinks they have it.

Today's text begins with perhaps one of the strangest stories involving Jesus in the entire New Testament. In fact, this entire section depicts Jesus in a very different light than what we are used to. "Meek and mild" Jesus, is seen here, not blessing or healing, but with a temper--rebuking and condemning the religious authorities, causing them, in turn, to ask Jesus, "what authority do you have?".

Our journey through this text begins in verse 12 of chapter 11 with Mark telling us that as Jesus departed Bethany for Jerusalem, he became hungry. Seeing a fig tree in the distance, Jesus approached it, but it had nothing but leaves on it. And in what appears to be a childish fit of rage, Jesus exclaims, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!".

What makes this cursing of the tree even more interesting is that Mark writes that it was not even the season for figs(v.13). Surely, Jesus, being a native of Palestine, would have known this. How could He have expected a fig tree to bear fruit out of season? And what kind of response is cursing the tree, but a childish one?

Our only clue to what Jesus was doing comes at the end of verse 14 where Mark writes that the "disciples were listening". Perhaps Jesus was trying to teach the disciples something through His actions.

The scene suddenly shifts back to Jerusalem where Jesus enters the temple, and again, Jesus acts in an extraordinary way--in a manner not typical for his ministry. Mark describes how Jesus clears the temple. John describes it with even more detail--how Jesus made a whip and drove out the merchants, who were selling animals in the temple. He flipped tables, he poured all the money on the floor shouting, "Stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise!" (Jn.2:14-16).

Jesus, "meek and mild", with a whip, flipping tables, and yelling at merchants. That is two fits of rage in a row. What is going on here? First the fig tree, now the temple. What point is Jesus trying to make?

Evening came, and Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem--probably for their own safety since the temple authorities wanted Jesus killed at this point. They came again to the fig tree that Jesus had cursed, it had "withered from the roots up".

The next morning, Jesus and His disciples came again to Jerusalem where they were approached by the temple authorities. Likely still fuming about yesterday's fiasco in the temple, they demanded that Jesus tell them, "By what authority are You doing these things?", and, "Who gave you this authority?".

Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus answers their question with a question, "Was the baptism of John[the Baptist] from heaven, or from men?".

The temple authorities were in a bind. If they were to say that John's baptism was "from heaven", Jesus will have a case for His authority coming from heaven. If they were to say that John's baptism was "from men", they will risk a riot, for the multitude present considered John to have been a prophet.

The temple authorities were in a no-win situation, so they responded, "We do not know". And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things".

Jesus refuses to answer their question, "Neither will I tell you", he says. But let me suggest to you that Jesus does indeed answer their question, "By what authority" was He doing these things. Jesus answers the temple authorities in the manner he usually does--in the form of a parable--the Parable of the Vine-growers, Mk.12:1-9.

The cursed fig tree, the clearing of the temple. *the authority by which Jesus does these things, are all answered in the parable of the vine-growers.*

We have heard this parable read: a man plants a vineyard and rents it out to vine-growers and goes on a journey. At harvest time, the owner sends a servant to collect some of the produce from the vine-growers. The vine-growers, however, beat up the servant and send him away empty-handed. The owner continues to send one servant after another, some are beaten and some are even killed. Finally, the owner had only one more to send, his "beloved son", thinking they would respect him.

Instead of respecting the son, however, the vine-growers said to one another, "Here comes the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!". Then they took the son and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

Jesus then asks, "What will the owner of the vineyard do?". Answering His own question, Jesus says that the owner will "come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others".

The allegory here is straightforward: The owner of the vineyard is God. The vineyard represents the people of Israel, and the vine-growers are the religious leaders. The servants sent by the owner are the prophets, and the son, of course, is Jesus.

We are now finally ready to piece this very complicated puzzle together. Let me tell you first, that the two most commonly used metaphors in the Old Testament to represent Israel are figs and grapes. If I wanted to completely bore you, I could direct you to more than a dozen Old Testament texts where Israel is represented by figs and grapes.

What is Jesus doing when He curses the fig tree? Is there more to this than a boyish frustration at not being fed? It seems clear to me, that *what Jesus is doing in cursing the fig tree is He is acting out a prophecy.*

Like many of the ancient prophets who presented their prophecies through eccentric actions, Jesus too acts out His prophecy. By cursing the fig tree, and causing its subsequent withering, Jesus communicated that God was going to judge Israel. The parable affirms this in Mk.12, verse 9, "[the owner] will come and destroy the vine-growers".

It has been said that the vine-growers represent the leaders of Israel, but if we limit our interpretation to Israel we will lose OUR application for this text. While we are certain that Jesus curses the fig tree and tells this parable in condemnation of the disbelieving Jewish people, we must not limit this text to mean only that.

It is not that the Jewish people of 1st century were exceptionally evil people, the Pharisees, in particular, were quite moral--they were pillars in their communities. The fact of the matter is, however, that Jesus condemned them. And the reason

this passage applies to us equally today as it does to the Jewish people of the first century is that we, as the church, are often guilty of the exact same sin as the Jewish leaders were.

The key to this parable comes in verse 7, "Here comes the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!".

The sin of the first century Jews, and the sin of many in the church today is the same--*we were put in the vineyard as TENANTS, but we often insist on being OWNERS instead.* We forget that God is the owner of everything, and that we are only tenants. Like an incompetent actor who wants to play Hamlet, we too, often want to play the role of God. We insist on the highest position, but the role is too big for us.

This was the attitude of the Jewish leaders, "What authority do you have, Jesus, in coming here and ransacking our temple?".

Jesus does indeed answer their question. The temple is not theirs--it is God's. They are only tenants. God has sent His Son to the vineyard--the temple, He turns over tables in disgust. His Father's house has been turned into a "den of thieves". The tenants have forgotten who the owner is. Jesus, by the unique authority He has as God's Son, rebukes them, but they do not recognize His authority--in fact they question His authority and eventually kill Him for articulating that authority.

What authority did Jesus have in dismantling the merchandising in the Temple? He had the authority of being God's only Son.

What authority did Jesus have to harshly rebuke and condemn the temple leaders in His parable? He had the authority of being God's "beloved Son".

If you have your Bible's open, look at the last sentence in chapter 12, verse 9. Who are the vine-growers now? The text says that the owner will come and "give the vineyard to others". That would be us--the Church. And who is in charge of the Church? Is it the church leaders, the new vine-growers? No, we are tenants, not owners.

Verse 10 tells us plainly who is in charge of the Church--the rejected Son has become "the chief corner stone".

Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God is in charge of the Church.

That's easier to say than it is to apply. Is Christ's will our fundamental concern in this church, or do we have our own agendas? If we are completely honest, we must admit that we do have our own agendas, and to a degree, that is okay. But we must remember that we are tenants here, not owners. We must make sure

our agendas are formed by paying close attention to the authority of Christ found in the Scriptures.

Who is in charge of your life though?

How would you respond if your spouse told you to "obey" their "commands"? Personally, I would be quite insulted at such a statement. And if I were the one doing the telling, my wife, would likely laugh at me. What would you do if your employer insisted that you obey their every command? You would probably be tempted to look for a new job, wouldn't you? Besides, obedience is for dogs, commands are for military officers--aren't they?

Well, not exactly. Obedience is also for Christians. Not obedience to the institution of the church, not obedience to your minister the vine-grower, but obedience to the unique authority of the Son of God.

If those words, "obedience" and "commands" leave a sour taste in your mouth, just remember what kind of Authority Jesus is. Jesus, our Authority, loves us. Jesus, our Authority, hung on a tree, nails pierced His hands and feet, he hung until He could breathe no more--for us. For us, Jesus died.

It may be difficult for us to respect authority, be it our parents or our employer. But how difficult can it be to place your life in the care of a loving Authority--a God who bore our flesh, and died for our sins?

Surely, this is a God we can put in charge of our lives. Amen.

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