

Our Lord Foils an Attempt by Jewish Leaders to Trap Him

Mark 11:27-33

Mark 11:27-33 – *“Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. ²⁸ And they said to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?”*

²⁹ But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: ³⁰ The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.”

³¹ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ³² But if we say, ‘From men’—they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. ³³ So they answered and said to Jesus, “We do not know.”

And Jesus answered and said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.””

Background Notes

This was our Lord’s last week on this earth. He had already made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He had already cleansed the Temple. During these final days, He and His disciples would spend the day in the city of Jerusalem and the nights in Bethany, east of Jerusalem. The Lord’s good friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, who lived in Bethany, likely provided lodging for the Lord and His disciples. He would spend the night in Bethany and come again into Jerusalem during the day. So in verse 27 the Lord and His disciples were coming again from Bethany into Jerusalem.

He was walking in the Temple courts. These were the courts that He had cleansed of the moneychangers the day before. In these courts the Lord would sit and teach the people. Now the chief priests, the Scribes and the elders came to Him. These men would have been members of the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews. The Sanhedrin met in a building that was part of the Temple complex.

These men attempted to trap Jesus in His words. *“And they said to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?”(v28).* By “these things” they were specifically referring to the events of the previous day when the Lord cleansed the Temple by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and casting them out of the Temple courts.

These members of the Sanhedrin wanted to know the source of the Lord’s authority to have done this. Was His authority human or divine? They were trying to trap Him in His answer. If the Lord said that His authority was from men, then they would discredit Him. If He said His authority was from God, they would accuse Him of blasphemy, and use this statement as an occasion for condemning Him to death.

The Lord foiled their attempt to trap Him by asking them a question. Using a counter question was a common Rabbinic debating technique in that day. He asked them, "*The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me*" (v30). Was the whole ministry of John the Baptist from heaven or from men? Was it derived from Heaven, from God? Or was it only human authority? The Lord turned the tables. Now the Jewish leaders were in a dilemma, and their own authority was in jeopardy.

If they answered, "From Heaven," then the obvious question would be, then why didn't you believe the message of John the Baptist? John the Baptist had announced Jesus as the Messiah. So if the men of the Sanhedrin said that John the Baptist's authority was from Heaven, then the Lord could have rightly asked, "Then why didn't you believe him?" If, on the other hand, these men answered that John the Baptist's authority was from man, then they would lose all credibility with the people. The people believed (correctly) that John the Baptist was a prophet from God. Popular opinion was very important to these religious leaders, just as it is in politics today.

Well, true to their character, these religious leaders said that they didn't know! They didn't want to answer the question. At that, the Lord said, "*Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things*" (v33).

Doctrinal Points

1. Giving creative answers to the opposition is biblical.

The Bible certainly teaches that point here in Mark 11. Many times the Lord Jesus gave creative answers to the opposition - and we should follow His example! Remember when the Pharisees asked Him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22)? There again the Pharisees were trying to trap the Lord Jesus in His words. The Lord gave a creative answer to the opposition: "Show me a penny (a denarius). Whose image is on it?" And when they showed Him the denarius with the image of Caesar engraved on it, the Lord said "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.*" What could they say? Their mouths were closed. The Lord gave a creative answer to the opposition!

Once again in Mark 11 the Lord's creative answer to the religious leaders who opposed Him turned the tables on them. Now *they* were in the dilemma! Giving creative answers to the opposition is biblical. At this point, I'm sure some of you are thinking, 'Well, that's great - if you can come up with a creative answer!' Normally when we're asked a question by the opposition, we can't come up with a creative answer on the spur of the moment. Well, there are a lot of times when we're not going to be able to come up with a creative answer, but at least we can try! We can ask the Lord for help. And we can even prepare some creative answers for the typical questions the opposition might raise.

For example, somewhere along the line the opposition is bound to ask you, "What's your evidence for the existence of God?" How will you answer that question? You may want to go into all kinds of Christian evidences and proofs - the

cosmological arguments for the existence of God, the argument from design, and so forth. But you could also give a creative answer by asking a counter question, such as, “Does life really have any meaning if there’s no God?” or “How do you find meaning to life if there’s no God?” Now you’ve turned the tables, and the skeptic has to somehow show that there can be meaning to life even though (from their evolutionary perspective) we’re only a “complex arrangement of molecules.” And it’s pretty hard to do! If we’re only a more complex arrangement of molecules than a chair, for example, it’s pretty hard to get meaning out of life. So with a creative answer, you’ve turned the tables! Giving creative answers to the opposition is definitely biblical.

2. Pointing out the inconsistencies of the opposition is biblical.

Not only did the Lord give a creative answer to the opposition, but His answer also showed their inconsistencies. That’s why they didn’t give an answer. They *couldn’t!* Any answer they gave would show that they were inconsistent. Incidentally, the Lord did answer their question. He didn’t avoid it, but He answered in a way that showed that their inconsistencies. The Lord certainly approved of John the Baptist’s ministry. In Luke 7:28 He said, “*For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.*” He simply pointed out that the ministry of John the Baptist was from God. So when the Lord asked them if the ministry of John the Baptist was from God or from men, He was indicating that His own authority was from God - because He certainly pointed out that the ministry of John the Baptist was from Heaven.

His creative answer pointed out the opposition’s inconsistency. They couldn’t answer. Even the casual observer there in the Temple courts would have seen that these religious leaders are inconsistent. Pointing out the inconsistencies of the opposition is biblical.

On more than one occasion someone who is opposed to the Bible has asked me, “Do you believe homosexuality is right or wrong?” The best way to answer that question is to show the inconsistency of the opposition. You might say something like, “What do you mean by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?” Or, “How do you define ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?” And it won’t be long before the opposition shows that their thinking is inconsistent. You have to have some moral standards to be able to talk about right and wrong! Without moral absolutes, right and wrong is just arbitrary. Pointing out the inconsistencies of the opposition is biblical.

Practical Application

Let’s be as shrewd as serpents and as harmless as doves.

That’s what the Lord told His disciples when He sent them out to preach: “*Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves*” (Matthew 10:16).

The Lord practiced this principle here in Mark 11. His creative answer to the opposition was shrewd, in that it showed their inconsistency. But it was as harmless as a dove. He didn't break any laws. He didn't incite the people to revolt. In our lives and words, we too should be as shrewd as serpents, and as innocent or harmless as doves.

Those who oppose the Lord and His Word are certainly out to get us. They will try to find fault with our conduct and trap us in our words. We need to be extremely careful in the way we answer the opposition.

Let's not give the opposition an opportunity to point out inconsistencies in our lives and testimonies. Let's not give the opposition the opportunity to accuse us of breaking laws. Let's not give the opposition the opportunity to make our Christian faith look foolish. Let's be wise and shrewd as serpents and harmless as doves.

One way in which Christians can be wise, but harmless, is to use our voting power wisely, and more shrewdly. Whether it's a school board election, a local or state issue, or a national election, Christians can vote in line with what's biblical and right - and in many cases we may control the outcome! That's being wise and shrewd as serpents, yet harmless and innocent as doves. That's the way we should deal with the opposition.

Let's be as shrewd as serpents, and as harmless as doves!