

All true authority finds its source in God. So isn't it amazing that God would give up what is his for the benefit of those who have often despised his authority?

Authority is not a bad word, but its influence has changed over the years. A study was done a few years back about the number of times the word "authority" showed up in books in America. From the founding of our country until now that word has dropped dramatically in its usage in books that are published. And if you compare the frequency of the word "authority" in the New Testament to the frequency of that word used in literature today, the New Testament's usage is seven times the amount of times that word is in print today.

The significance? I suppose you could say it's becoming an old word. Or, you could say it's a concept, an abstract reality, that doesn't have the impact it once had. Yet, people are all about authority. People want to know who's in charge, and people want to be in charge. Similar to last week, when we considered that Jesus' ransom cost him his power, today's theme of costing him his authority has to do with who has the final say, the last word. Does God? Did Jesus? Or was it someone else? Whose authority will win out?

### Read Mark 15:1-15.

One thing that people will agree on in America is how we collectively react to authority. Let's start with police. Has there been a shift in our society about how we view the authority that police officers wield? Of course, there has. While there never was a time that police were universally, perfectly respected and everyone submitted instantly to the authority of the law, we'd agree that law enforcement personnel have a much more difficult job today than any time in our history.

How about other figures of authority: coaches? referees? teachers? Watch any sporting event – youth, high school, college, professional – and you see constant verbal attacks on referees, who stand as the authorities of the game. You see players disregard coaches at times; sometimes going against their direct orders, sometimes refusing to go into the game. Same thing for teachers. Same with supervisors or foremen at work. We live in a world that increasingly questions (at best) or disregards (at worst) the authority people inherently have with any position. And who of us could claim innocence when it comes to how we've treated people in authority? If it isn't complete defiance, then it's verbal ridicule, or silent disrespect.

That disrespect toward authority was certainly running rampant in the minds of the Jewish leaders when they heard the name Pontius Pilate. They despised the Romans. The feeling was mutual. The Romans loved to push their authority over the Jews. They realized they had the upper hand. The Jews, however, realized they needed Pontius Pilate if they wanted Jesus to be out of the picture.

So early on Good Friday morning – probably a little after 6:00 – the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, decided Jesus was worthy of death and brought him to Pilate. There it happened. It was a face-off of authority. The most powerful ruler there in the land of Judea and the One who had more authority, the God who stands behind all governments – Jesus. In addition to these words from Mark describing that showdown, John records this exchange: ***Pilate said, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."***

Who had the authority in this situation? Pilate did. But all that authority was given to him from above, from God himself. In Romans 13 the Apostle Paul explains that all human governments – even corrupt ones, even evil ones, even godless ones – get their authority from God. So with Jesus, the Son of God, God in human form, standing right in front of Pilate we see two kingdoms quite clearly and very distinct.

- 1) The first is God's *primary* kingdom – it's spiritual, it's eternal, it's invisible, it's about Jesus coming to earth to pay for our sins so we could be washed clean and reconciled to God. It's summed up in the word grace. We call it the "church." It's what we're all about here at Ascension – eternal souls, who need to have their sins removed in order to get to heaven. Jesus was on a mission to do that – to pay our ransom. He was willing to do it and now it was just hours away. By dying under God's judgment he would open up God's kingdom. This kingdom is about a message of God's love – the Bible calls that good news, the "gospel." That's what Jesus was all about that day.
- 2) The other kingdom is God's *secondary* kingdom – it's physical, it's temporary, it's very visible, it's about law and order and law enforcement and use of force. We call it "government" and it includes police, military, fines, jail/prison sentences, even the death penalty. This earthly authority is about protection, safety, obeying laws, and enforcing laws. All governments continue to make new and more laws and tweak the laws we already have. That's what Pontius Pilate was all about that day.

But regarding this second kingdom, the earthly one, both Jesus and Pilate had authority. Jesus had it because he is God and Pilate had it because he was a representative of God, a servant of God. And in this showdown Jesus gave up his authority, submitting himself to the unjust sentence of Pilate, who said three times, "This man has done nothing to deserve the death penalty!"

Jesus let Pilate have all the authority so something unthinkable could happen. God let Pilate make the call; God let man decide; God allowed his public servant to choose. And he chose to have Jesus executed. Do you see the irony? Jesus is handed over to his death by someone who gave him life. And Pilate had this position, had the authority to make such a judgment, by the one he condemns.

Imagine those moments for Jesus. Just like with Judas and just like with the trial in front of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, Jesus could have intervened and stepped in for his own sake. But we are so grateful that he didn't. Instead he paid a ransom that cost him his authority. What he paid for us bought us back from the times we have relished using authority over someone else. What he paid for us bought us back from the times we have not treated God's earthly representatives with the respect and honor God tells us to give them. Angry at an overzealous police officer or security guard? Disrespectful to a teacher or coach who was just trying to make you better? Or just plain bitter toward a near-sighted referee? Jesus paid our ransom that we would be forgiven of all these sins, that we would be loved perfectly as a child of God, welcomed into a heavenly kingdom already now by the King of kings and Lord of lords, and called now to use God's authority so carefully if that's what he's entrusted to you and to see God's representatives as just that, in the place of God...here in church, in court, at home, in school, even at a game.

Jesus knew all this and offered himself as the payment. When he described himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10 he said, "***I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father***" (John 10:17,18). We'll see that fulfilled in just two weeks. Jesus was in the position to do it for himself. Today he also does it for you.

Jesus has the last word, the ultimate authority, when it comes to your life. He doesn't want to crush you and me with his authority. He won't. His love for us is that great. He proved it. He was willing to part with some of his authority that Friday. He gave something up to Pilate so he could give everything to you and me. Easy? No. Worth it? Yes! The ransom Jesus paid has set us free, to be with God forever. Yes, it is amazing that God would give up what is his....all for our eternal benefit! Amen.