

Authority Used And Abused

Luke 20:9-19

May 25, 2014

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Authority is the lawful right to govern and rule on behalf of God. Tyranny is the abuse and misuse of lawful authority. It is to go beyond the God-ordained limitations placed upon lawful authority. For absolute authority resides only with God. Therefore, all lawful authority exercised by man (in whatever sphere—the home, the church, or the state) is not absolute, but is rather limited and delegated by God to man. That is why submission in the home, in the church, or in the state is always submission “in the Lord” (according to Ephesians 6:1 and Colossian 3:18—i.e. a submission that is agreeable to the revealed will of the Lord). No mere human being (or assembly of human beings) can lawfully command obedience except it be agreeable to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Even the Apostle Paul stated, “For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth” (2 Corinthians 13:8).

Dear ones, our conscience belongs not to any man, but to God alone, “for God alone is lord of the conscience” (1 Corinthians 7:23; 2 Corinthians 1:24). The use of authority may either be a blessing or a curse, depending upon how it is used (whether to glorify God or man, whether to edify or to destroy, whether used in love or in pride, whether used in submission to the will of God or in exaltation of the will of man). Abuse of authority leads ministers to think they can take sexual advantage of young women in the church, leads husbands to think they can treat their wives as mere doormats within the home, and leads civil leaders to think they can impose whatever wicked laws they choose.

Our sinful hearts certainly need no reason to resist lawful authority in our lives (for we resist God’s authority and all lawful authority by nature), but

when authority is abused, people are even more likely to despise and malign all lawful authority by casting it off altogether (which is simply a sin in the opposite extreme). But dear ones, let us not cast away the rightful submission to lawful authority just because we have experienced the unjust use of authority in our lives (remember Korah's rebellion). God would yet have us to see the use of lawful authority from God to be for our good and to be for God's glory.

The Lord hates tyranny within His Church, for tyranny usurps His rightful place as the only Head of the Church. To abuse Christ's authority within the Church, even when it is intended to promote some perceived good end (as for example the celebration of Christ's birth, and yet without His authorization), is to usurp and unseat Christ from His throne. For if Christ in His Word has not delegated to us the authority to celebrate His birth each year, by whose authority do we do so? Man's authority. So likewise must we carefully evaluate all that we do within Christ's Church, lest we fall into the tyranny and judgment that befell the priests and Levitical ministers of the Jewish Church. The main points from our text in Luke 20:9-19 are the following: (1) Lawful Authority Delegated (Luke 20:9); (2) Lawful Authority Abused (Luke 20:10-15); and (3) Abused Authority Judged (Luke 20:16-19).

I. Lawful Authority Delegated (Luke 20:9).

A. This parable of the wicked tenants that rented a vineyard from a certain landowner is given by the Lord just three days before the Jewish Sanhedrin used their authority to wickedly and unlawfully condemn the Lord Jesus to death. As a parable, it not only depicted events that were past and present to the time of Christ, but also predicted events that were yet to occur within that generation.

B. The Lord had ridden into Jerusalem on the first day of this week (in which he was to be crucified) to the shouts of the people, declaring Him to be the Messianic King. On the second day of the week, the Lord had driven out of the temple the money changers, healed the sick and taught those gathered in the temple. Now on the third day of the week, the chief priests and the scribes seek to entrap the Lord by asking Him which ecclesiastical court of the Jews had ordained or commissioned Him in Luke 20:2: “Tell us, by what authority doest thou these things? or who is he that gave thee this authority?”

1. Since they were no match in debating Jesus or in performing miracles, they sought to discredit Him by showing He had not been ordained by their Church courts. The Lord again silenced them and demonstrated that His calling was (like that of John the Baptist’s) immediately and extraordinarily given by God the Father. In fact, if they accepted John’s divine commission to preach and to baptize, they must likewise accept His. For John was the human instrument who ordained Christ, and John was the forerunner of Christ.

2. Now in Luke 20:9-19, Christ continues with that same theme of ecclesiastical authority and speaks against the abuse of authority by the very ones (the rulers of the Jews) who self-righteously judged His authority (Luke 20:19).

C. We need to ask some questions about the key characters represented in this parable.

1. Who is the man who planted the vineyard (“A certain man planted a vineyard”)? This is God the Father who planted and owns the vineyard. He it is that has absolute authority over the vineyard.

2. Who are the husbandmen or farmers to whom the landowner “lets” (or rents) out the vineyard (“and let it forth [i.e. rented it—GLP] to husbandmen”)? These are the priests and Levitical leaders to whom authority was lawfully delegated to care for the vineyard (by God

in the Old Testament).

3. What is the vineyard that was delegated by God to the care of the priests and Levitical leaders? It is Israel, the Church of God in the Old Testament, which the Lord established by means of His Covenant of Grace and settled by means of the ministry and outward ordinances given through Moses. The divine interpretation of the vineyard is given to us in Isaiah 5:7. And yet this same vineyard (God's Church) was taken away from the Jewish priests and Levites (due to the wicked and unlawful use of their authority) and was given to other ministers—Christian ministers (Luke 20:16). Two inferences follow from this.

a. Here we see the essential unity and continuity of God's Church from the Old Testament Church to the New Testament Church. The outward administration of the Church of God did change (from the Old Testament to the New Testament), as illustrated by the change of ministers (or husbandmen in Luke 20:16), but the essential unity of the Church from the Old Testament to the New Testament has not changed, for it is the same vineyard that is given to new husbandmen to care for on behalf of God (Luke 20:16)—one church, not two churches.

b. And if children were included in the vineyard or Church of God in the Old Testament (as indicated by their receiving the sign and seal of circumcision), where do we find any indication that children were excommunicated from the vineyard or the Church of God in the New Testament? Rather than being excommunicated from the Church of God, Christ rather confirms that infants are yet a part of the Kingdom of God or the Church of God when He says concerning the infants He held in His arms and blessed: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such (literally, "for of such ones") is the kingdom of God" Luke 18:16.

D. In this parable then we see how the Lord established and settled His Church in the Old Testament by delegating His authority to His

ministers (the priests and Levites). Furthermore, the Lord loved and cared for His covenanted people of Israel by giving to them His ordinances (e.g. His gospel and His commandments, His covenant, His sacrifices, His Sabbath and holy days, circumcision, etc.), which in the parable (see Matthew 21:33) are likely compared to **a hedge** (a thorny hedge to protect them from the enemies of their souls), **a winepress** (which collected the wine and represented the joy to be found in using the ordinances to the praise of God), and **a tower** (which signified the oversight to be exercised by lawful priests and ministers who were commissioned by the Lord to love and watch over the souls of God's people).

1. In like manner **sound doctrine** is a hedge to us to protect us from enemies that would lead us away from Christ, **pure worship** is a winepress of joy to us when offered out of love to a God who first loved us, and **lawful church government** is a blessed watchtower to us, helping us to walk that narrow path of truth and righteousness.

2. Dear ones, circumcision, the commandments of the Lord, the sacrificial system, the appointed feasts and festivals etc. were intended to drive God's people to Christ and away from the corrupt doctrine, worship, and government of the nations. To the husbandmen or priestly ministers, God rented out or delegated His authority to administer His ordinances for the protection and care of His vineyard or Church.

a. His laws were a gracious rule of righteousness for His people (as God's people who were awaiting the coming Messiah) and not a covenant of works (like that given to Adam in the Garden of Eden). The Covenant made with Israel at Mt. Sinai was an expression of the Covenant of Grace not of the Covenant of Works (contrary to the views of those hold to the Republication Theory of the Covenant of Works).

b. The Preface to the Ten Commandments makes this clear (Exodus 20:2). The Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes

the Preface to the Ten Commandments as follows (Question 44):

The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us, That because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.

3. Note that God in this parable did not sell the vineyard to the husbandmen (so that He relinquished all rights of ownership or authority to the vineyard), but rather rented it out. Therefore, God retains all authority over the vineyard, which is His Church.

E. In what way did the Lord go into a far country after having established the ministry of priests and Levites through Moses (“and went into a far country for a long time” Luke 20:9)? This may refer to God’s withdrawing His face to face revelation to Moses after having settled the state of the Church in the Old Testament and having delegated thereafter to the priests and Levites the care of the Church, God’s beloved vineyard, until the face to face revelation of Jesus Christ, who was made flesh and dwelt among us.

II. Lawful Authority Abused (Luke 20:10-15).

A. In this next section of the parable, we see how these wicked husbandmen refused to recognize the absolute authority of the landowner over his own vineyard, and rather assumed that authority to themselves. For when the appointed time to collect the rent came (i.e. to show forth the fruit of their obedience to the Lord), the husbandmen not only refused to pay the rent, but they also beat, stoned, and killed the servants of the landowner—even to the point of killing his son, who was the rightful heir to the vineyard.

B. Who are the servants that are sent by the owner? These are

the faithful prophets and ministers of the Lord who were divinely commissioned by God to testify against the backsliding priests and Levites who had abused God's authority by trampling upon the ordinances of God, and by denying God's people the care and food to be spiritually protected and preserved. For the religious leaders of Israel had allowed **the hedge of sound doctrine** to fall into disrepair (Malachi 2:7-8). They had polluted **the joyful winepress of God's ordinances** with their own will-worship (Amos 5:21-23; Amos 6:3-6). They had tyrannized the people of God, rather than caring for their souls (Jeremiah 12:10). The faithful prophets of God were persecuted and killed by the religious leaders of Israel (Matthew 23:29-31; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). Consider Matthew 23:37-38 which further confirms the tyranny and abuse of authority by the religious leaders of Israel ("and ye would not" is an expression of their tyranny).

C. Thus, we see from this parable that the tyranny and unlawful authority of unfaithful ministers is manifested in two ways: (1) in not acknowledging by thought, word, and deed God's absolute authority over His Church (i.e. going beyond God's authority by introducing doctrine, worship, and government into the Church which is not revealed in God's Word); and (2) in persecuting by word or deed those who faithfully stand for God's revealed truth and who faithfully walk in the righteous paths of the true witnesses and martyrs of Christ.

1. Both of these abuses of authority are especially manifested by the Romish antichrist who usurps the lawful authority of Christ in imposing the doctrines, worship, and government of man upon the Church of Christ, and who makes war with the saints of God (2 Thessalonians 2:4; Daniel 7:25). For example, just recently, there appeared an article in the Christian Post (May 15, 2004) wherein the Pope was quoted as saying during a Mass,

Our Christian identity is belonging to a people: the Church. Without this, we are not Christians.

Fourth Lateran Council (1215):

There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved.

Pope Boniface VIII, Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302):

We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.

Pope Pius IX (1846–1878), Encyclical *Singulari Quidem* March 17, 1856:

Outside of the Church, nobody can hope for life or salvation unless he is excused through ignorance beyond his control.

2. How ministers and elders are herein warned and cautioned by this parable to use Christ's delegated authority (the keys of the kingdom) only within the limited parameters given in Scripture (rather than according to one's own mind), only for the truth of Christ (not against the truth of Christ), and only for the spiritual profit and benefit of Christ's Church (rather than for one's own profit).

E. Of course, the most extreme and heinous tyranny and abuse of authority against God and His vineyard was manifested when the ecclesiastical leaders of Israel conspired together to kill the Son of the owner of the vineyard—the Lord Jesus Christ. The parable seems to infer that these religious leaders knew in their heart of hearts that Christ was the Son of God (Luke 20:14). They wanted control of the vineyard and would not submit to the authority of God who sent the prophets and His own Son unto them.

1. This is the essence of unbelief. "I want control of my own

life, I will not serve another. I will trust in my own works, gifts, graces, knowledge, and possessions, and will not trust alone in Christ alone and in His righteousness alone.” Man fights and fights to the very end to maintain his own autonomy, but when Christ subdues him and captures him by His amazing grace and love, man is humbled to see that God is master and lord of all and that God’s authority is glorious, to which we desire to submit (wherever it is lawfully exercised, whether in the home, church, or state).

2. One of the genuine fruits of salvation is a cheerful submission to Christ’s absolute authority over our lives—acknowledging and living in the light of His absolute ownership of all that we possess and all that happens in our lives. This is not an ownership that intends our destruction, but rather intends our salvation and growth in Jesus Christ.

F. There is no room here for an anti-Jewish hostility. For although those who put Christ to death are indeed responsible for a very heinous sin (Acts 2:23; Acts 3:13-15; Matthew 27:25), nevertheless, let us remember the hope and salvation of Israel (as a nation and people) stated by Paul in Romans 11:26-29. Moreover, dear children of the living God, we must never forget that it was our sin that sent Him to the cross to die that shameful and agonizing death. It was our rebellion against His authority in our lives that put Him upon that cross. And it was His love for us (His elect people) that led Him willingly to submit to that cruel death in our place. Dear ones, the cross of Jesus Christ is both our humiliation and our exaltation (Galatians 6:14).

III. Abused Authority Judged (Luke 20:16-19).

A. Here the Lord indicates the judgment that will befall those wicked and tyrannical leaders of Israel (which came in 70 a.d.). He will destroy them and will delegate His authority to govern His vineyard to

other ministers (Christian ministers) to whom the Lord will give the care and protection of His precious Church.

B. Because the Lord had predicted in the parable the death of the Son, He wanted to make clear that it would be this very One who would be raised from the dead to bring judgment against these wicked and tyrannical leaders of Israel. That is the purpose of the Old Testament passage cited in Luke 20:17-18 (Psalm 118:22). This Old Testament citation moves from the theme of farming to the theme of building. The builders of the house of God are the same religious leaders, who rejected Christ (the chief corner-stone) and were condemned in the previous parable. They stumbled over Him in unbelief, and He would fall upon them in judgment (a preview of the judgment that was to befall them in 70 a.d. and ultimately depicting the judgment that would befall all who continue in rebellion against the Lord and will not believe and receive Him Savior and Lord). Let us not be proud in our own conceits and fall into the same sin as these leaders in rejecting the gracious (yet authoritative invitations) of the Lord (Romans 11:18ff). Bend the knee to the authority of Christ today and receive good news of salvation from sin and everlasting judgment in hell.

In conclusion, I would ask by way of application: Dear men, is your authority in the home a whip to simply lash out orders, or rather a hedge to teach sound doctrine, a winepress to lead your family in joyful praise to God, and a tower to look out for enemies that would attack them? Consulting with our wives and sincerely seeking their wisdom before making decisions is not relinquishing lawful authority, but is wisely using God's authority. Our wives and children will more easily submit to authority when they know it is exercised out of a self-sacrificial love (*agape*) for them and for their own good, when they see us practicing

what we preach, and going before them, saying, “Follow me as I follow Christ.”

Dear women and children, are you looking for reasons not to submit to the authority God has entrusted to your husbands and fathers. Nit-picking their leadership in the home and looking for every flaw you can find that you might use as an excuse not to submit in the Lord to him is not honoring the authority of God? Discussing with him your concerns or even taking the Scripture with you to humbly and lovingly point out errors and sins is honoring the lawful authority God has entrusted to him.

Dear ones, we all have much room in which to grow in exercising God’s authority in love and in submitting to God’s authority in love. However, let us not define the parameters of God’s lawful authority either by the world’s standards or by the abuse of authority we have witnessed, but rather by the Lord’s good, righteous, and loving authority toward us, His beloved children, as it is found in Holy Scripture. Let us not cast away the lawful authority of God even though it is exercised by weak, frail earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7). Amen.

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