

## RESPECT MY AUTHORITY!!!

Pastor Dave Shackle  
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I begin with an apology to any fans of the T.V. show *South Park*, who saw my sermon title and expected a classic Eric Cartman rant. I also apologize to those who've never seen that irreverent program, and have no idea to what I'm referring. Eric Cartman is an animated, fifth-grade version of Archie Bunker - a cranky, egotistical bigot who loudly bellows to those around him, "**RESPECT MY AUTHORITY!**" In that regard, he's not unlike some of the *religious* "authorities" who question *Jesus'* authority, in this morning's Gospel Reading. The chief priests and elders, who feel that their own authority is being disrespected because so many people are listening to and following Jesus, confront him as he teaches in [what they consider to be] *their* Temple. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Rather than answering them directly, Jesus, does what many good rabbis do: he answers their question with a question of his own. "The authority of John the Baptist - did it come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Now, this question puts those leaders in a precarious position: They can't acknowledge that John's authority had come from God, because they had rejected it. Nor can they say that it was simply a human phenomenon, because so many people found John's baptism a meaningful, life-changing event. So they back-off, saying, "We don't know." Jesus responds, "Then neither will I tell you from where my authority comes!"

On the surface, this sounds like something fifth graders might do: "I won't tell you, unless you tell me first!" But it's actually a highly effective strategy which Jesus employs! By not answering their question, he forces those religious leaders to recognize the actual

truth for themselves: that Jesus' genuine authority, like John the Baptist's, and like any good spiritual leader, comes from *doing* good! Authentic authority to speak and act on behalf of the Holy One, comes from *being* Holy, and exhibiting Divine wholeness, compassion and grace. When people do this, their genuine authority will not only be recognized by those who follow them - it may even be begrudgingly recognized by their adversaries. So, by making the religious leaders recall the real authority that John the Baptist demonstrated, Jesus reminds them that he, too, carries that same undeniable authority. The people listen and respond to Jesus, not because he insists that they respect his authority, but because they recognize that he is the real deal!

In our first Scripture reading, Saint Paul expresses a profound insight as to how Jesus arrives at his authority; and he encourages Jesus' followers to pattern their own sense of authority - and their conduct - after Jesus' example. Paul writes, "Have this attitude among yourselves which you find in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped [or exploited]. Instead, he emptied himself, taking-on the form of a servant, accepting his humanity. And as a mortal being, he humbled himself and was obedient and faithful to the point of death - even death on a cross."

Paul reminds his readers, that though Jesus - as the Anointed Child of God - embodies a Divine authority, he willingly chooses to also embody the humble position of a Divine servant. And that's what makes Jesus so popular with the people. They know that he's special, vibrant, powerful and wise; yet he lives and moves among them as one of their own - not just telling them about the *Law* of God, but showing them the *Love* of God - something rarely done by the religious authorities around him. They [like many others in leadership positions] are so concerned

about their status and respect, that they completely neglect their responsibility to encourage, inspire, and serve their constituents. The chief priests and elders question Jesus' authority because, while they can clearly see that he is a powerful person, they just can't figure out from where his charismatic power comes. He obviously has a thorough understanding of the Law of Moses, and all the ancient Prophets. He can quote Scripture with the best of them! Yet there's one thing radically different about Jesus that truly bewilders and upsets those religious leaders: the fact that Jesus likes to hang-out with sinners! And not only does he socialize with those un-righteous individuals, he actually seems to *care* about them, to *like* them, and apparently even *love* them - to the point that it shapes his entire approach to ministry! Jesus knows all the proper and pious rules and regulations; yet he has this authoritative way of cutting through the religious red-tape, to compassionately touch the heart of each person he meets.

When he encounters an "untouchable" leper, rather than back-away, Jesus reaches out his hands to touch and embrace him. When presented with a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery, rather than condone her punishment, Jesus proclaims words of forgiveness and restoration - causing her accusers to drop their stones and walk away. When he sees *anyone* struggling with pain, brokenness, or heartache, Jesus extends to that person a Divine act of compassion, healing and peace [even if it happens to be on a Sabbath Day]! The *rules* say, 'You don't do that kind of active work on the Sabbath.' But Jesus says, 'What better day *is* there to display Divine love and grace? And that totally infuriates the chief priests and elders. For some reason that they cannot figure out, Jesus claims within himself a Divine *authority* to completely change the rules!

"The Sabbath was made to serve people," Jesus declares, "Not people to serve the Sabbath." "Love your *enemies*, and pray for those who persecute you!" "Judge not, so that you may not be

judged.” Jesus has this remarkable ability to take a complex, archaic, and burdensome religious institution, and transform it into a refreshingly simple, yet extremely powerful Way of Life. And he does so, with a genuine authority that cannot be ignored or denied. It isn’t an authority based on title or position. It’s actually grounded in Jesus’ willingness to relinquish any sense of Divine entitlement or prestige. It is anchored in his willingness to not only reach-out to the outcasts and outsiders, but to become one of them: attacked by religious power-brokers; betrayed and abandoned by close friends; despised and condemned - not for doing wrong - but for doing what was right and good.

This is why Jesus fully understands our personal suffering and struggles. This is why his life-story resonates with our own, when you and I face injustice, rejection, or crushing disappointments. This is why - after centuries - his Spirit can still encourage us in our deepest, darkest hour. In the person of Jesus Christ, we recognize that our Sacred Source truly dwells among us, and within humankind - assuring us, comforting us, walking with us throughout our entire lives, and definitely being with us in our sacred moment of dying.

Because Jesus not only “talks the talk”, but also “walks the walk”, he doesn’t have to insist: “Respect my authority!” [Which is the sign of genuine authority - walking with those people you seek to lead, and bravely facing any obstacles or dangers that they might face.] Even when faced with a horribly painful death of crucifixion, Jesus Christ doesn’t give-up his mission of showing God’s undying love for all people. The Resurrection of Easter morning reveals that Jesus is right - that Divine Love and Life cannot and will not be stopped!

So, what does this mean for you and me today? One thing it means is that you and I can face whatever Life may bring, knowing that we are not alone - because we are always connected to our Divine, Originating Source, and therefore, to one another. It also means you and I have the right and the responsibility to cut-through any religious red-tape that oppresses other people, or hinders their or our spiritual growth. It means that we can boldly and faithfully carry forward Christ's mission, with that same Spirit of humble compassion. It means that you and I never need to insist that others "respect our authority!" We simply need to love them, just like Jesus does - and leave the respect, and the results, up to God.