Under Whose Authority?

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Before we get started let me ask you a quick question. What gives you the right? What gives you the audacity to think that you can tell me what to do? Now perhaps you’ve found yourself asking these types of questions. Whether you’ve been confronted by someone or perhaps these questions have been asked to you. These are questions that have to do with authority. After all with authority comes power and responsibility, but we are always seeking a way of undermining certain authority. I remember when I was younger how upset I would get at the prospect of having to do chores or my homework. Perhaps you can relate to this in some manner. After all, asking your kids to do chores around the house or telling them the forbidden word, no, can cause all manner of tantrums. I remember many a time from my own experience where I would get short with my parents because they told me I wasn’t allowed to play video games. Instead they wanted me to read a book. One time I actually caused such a fuss, and you can ask my parents the next time they are here and they will confirm that this story is true, because they wouldn’t let me play my playstation, that my dad, having just finished painting the bathroom, put a stool down and told me that if I was so bored I could sit there and watch the paint dry. That really happened. But in all manner of seriousness I was infuriated. After all what gives this guy the right to embarrass me like that? I know he’s my dad but seriously, I felt like I wasn’t being respected. Certainly there is a moment in your own childhood that you can think of where you back talked or felt as though “This person doesn’t have the right to tell me what to do.” If not in your childhood then perhaps it happened in your life as a professional. The one thing that always amazes me, and I put myself into this category, is that the workers always seem to know better than the boss. “If I was in charge our profits would go through the roof!” or whatever the case may be. Certainly we all have questioned the authority of those seated above us. Just look at how we treat the office of the president. It doesn’t matter which side is in office, people are unhappy. They feel as though their side can do it better.

Now I want to remind you that it was not God’s idea nor was it his desire to institute earthly rulers. In 1 Samuel chapter 8 we find this, **“Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, ‘Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.’ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’”** First I think that it is important to state that at this time in history it is often that the king was regarded as a god. So in a sense, and certainly in the eyes of Samuel, these people were asking for another god. Continuing, **“And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.’”** Now I think it is important to note again that God is upset about the fact that the people do not want him to be their king and he cites a pattern of behavior that demonstrate as such. After all, right after God had delivered them out of the hands of their Egyptian oppressors, Moses came down from Sinai to find them worshipping a golden idol! So God decides that he’s going to give the people what they want. He will allow them to rule themselves. Now this is just an excerpt from the warning that Samuel gave to the people. He says, **“…He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants…He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”** So to summarize, these people want a new god. They want to raise someone up from among themselves to lead them because they did not feel as though God was doing a good enough job. After all, life was difficult, it wasn’t easy. They weren’t living in paradise so maybe a change of leadership was in order. And it’s not as if Samuel didn’t give them a stern warning, after all it seems as though he describes behavior that could be attributed to our own leaders and to leaders around the world. But in the end Samuel tells them that they will cry out because their king has mistreated them, and on that day God will remind them that they have chosen this leader for themselves.

It is no mystery that authority is something that can corrupt. After all the saying goes that “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Throughout history we can recall the names of leaders that have done terrible things to their people, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Queen “Bloody” Mary, just to name but a few. It’s no mystery that we have even become aware of this fact and have started giving authority to ourselves. We are the ones who can define whether or not an unborn baby is a human being or not. We can define, by our own subjective standards, what is good speech and what is hate speech. We can define, again by our own subjective standards, what correct behavior is and what is behavior in need of correction. We have taken it upon ourselves to constantly amend and change our language in order to fit our sinful needs and our own narratives. The word authority is one that is used twice in our Gospel lesson to describe Jesus. In fact authority is a common thread between all of our readings for today. Deuteronomy states, **“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.”** Moses is describing the source of the authority that future prophets and eventually the Son of God himself will have. It will come from God. Paul states, **“For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.”** Paul speaks of our knowledge of God and Christ Jesus as an authority, and that we should be careful in which manner we show that authority, for it can lead people astray. We should be good examples as those who fall under the authority of God.

And in our Gospel lesson we see this authority on full display. In fact the unclean spirit itself recognizes the authority that Jesus has. It says, “I know who you are – the Holy One of God.” This is not an earthly authority. This is something more. After all, if earthly authority had any real power, wouldn’t the scribes have been able to cast the demon out of this man? They were part of the upper crust, a group of people who could read and write. A group of people who essentially could lie about what God says and no one would’ve known any differently. As I’m sure you know Jesus does not come with earthly authority but with one that is higher. This is the authority that Jesus unleashed upon the whole world, the authority to not only forgive sin, but to defeat death. This is an authority that you all have! For as we know death is not an end for us, but the beginning of our everlasting life in the presence of God. Jesus took the authority, the real authority, that Satan has over this world and spat on it. And as he spits on sin and death through the forgiveness of sins, so we do also. That is what real power is. It isn’t having a majority in congress or access to state police that break down doors, it is the power over death, a power that all of God’s people have been given. In just a few short weeks we will celebrate this victory as Jesus demonstrates his rule over death and the devil by defeating them both and rising again, setting the example for us of what true authority looks like. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.