

Kingdom Economics: Assuming Responsibilities

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on October 1, 2017
on Matthew 21:23-32 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

Just this week, I had an important day. I led some important meetings, I made important decisions, I read important books and wrote important words. At the end of the day, I left my office feeling pretty good and rather accomplished! I then picked my kids up from school, and went from very important to utterly powerless in a matter of minutes. The culprit? My feisty 2 year-old daughter who refused - point blank - to get into her carseat. Summoning up all the authority I could muster, I tried cajoling, bribing, sweet-talking, commanding, even rather firmly wrangling her in, and Annabelle was just not having it! I'm sweating and yelling, she's sweating and screaming, Silas is crying, Liam is holding his ears, stressed at all the ruckus! So what's a mama to do in such a moment? Grab my phone, of course, and FaceTime her daddy, who quickly proceeds to get my girl in her carseat in mere moments and have her laughing in just a few more! So much for all that importance!

Jesus is up to it again today, pressing on questions of power and authority in the very center of Jewish life at the temple. We meet him in Jerusalem, roiled in turmoil, where he has ridden in atop a donkey to cries of "Hosanna" by the adoring crowds that journeyed with him there. His eyes are trained towards the cross; he knows what lies ahead. But on the way there, he rages with anger in the Temple at institutional abuses,

flipping tables and driving out merchants therein. He's healed the sick and scorched a random fig tree, both to the consternation of onlookers, both in response to louder, more aggressive questions about his role in the midst of it all. So when he entered the temple again, it surely didn't surprise Jesus that he would be cornered and questioned by those whose actions he'd condemned. *"By what authority are you doing these things,"* the chief priests and the elders of the people say to him. Subtext of course — *who do you think you are?*

I recognize the great irony in talking about power and authority as the pastor of our beloved church. Centuries of Christian tradition have ascribed a great amount of both power and authority to Christian leaders. For many, ministers are thought to speak on behalf of God differently than non-ministers do: calling out sin and brokenness as God would, clarifying God's will or dreams for this world, mediating God's compassion and justice, assigning meaning to the events and actions of our days, and offering some word of absolution, forgiveness, or grace from the actions that diminish our relationships with each other and deprive us of life. Even the physical layout of our houses of worship indicate this very distinction. Like so many other preachers around the world this morning, I am — literally though not figuratively — raised above you, set apart from you, protected from you, clothed differently from you, and given a microphone, a platform, and 15-20 minutes of your attention!

Andy Crouch wrote a book on power not too long ago, and in it, he defines power in a deceptively simple fashion: "power is the ability to make something of the world."¹ Powerlessness," then, "is being cut off from the world-making, and deeper — being cut off from making meaning of the world."² Authority, on the other hand as Ron Heifetz defines it, is "conferred power to perform a service."³ But let's remember: power is not the same thing as authority. Power is obtained; authority is earned. I may *have power* right this moment because I have the microphone, but in order to trust that you're listening, I must continually *earn authority* from you.

This difference between power and authority is precisely why the chief priests and elders were so stressed about Jesus. They had heard about him and knew that he possessed some special orientation in the realm of God. But he was acting on it, and people were listening! And only naturally, they felt threatened. It was *their* role to act on behalf of God, *their* institution that held the authority to do just that. So *who does he think he is* to respond like that?

I know the power and privilege this grants me, and I speak as honestly as I know how to when I say it is a power I hold with fear and trembling each day, praying continuously that I use it for good! But I also know that this is a power that can too easily corrupt — affecting any

¹ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, p17.

² Crouch, p18.

³ Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p57.

person or group of people — for we have only to look around us to see how the authority vested within countless institutions have crumbled in the public's perception, a betrayal as deep as the misuse or abuse of power by individuals within it.

What authority remains for our government and elected leaders when scandal upon scandal pile up to create a (Capitol) hill of a mess? Whether it's her emails or his tweets, rampant corruption or Russian collusion, we just generally assume that all politicians are compromised and nothing good can come out of Washington.

What authority remains for our sports teams and athletes when the lure of performance-enhancing drugs lures giants like Lance Armstrong and Barry Bonds, Maria Sharapova and Marion Jones; or when the coaches of college football teams like Baylor or Penn State stay silent when learning their players or fellow coaches commit heinous acts of abuse; or when Rick Pitino gambles the legacy of Louisville Cardinals basketball by funneling corporate money to woo recruits?

What authority remains for our banks and business when they're caught protecting their own interests rather than protecting the consumers? Whether it's Enron or Equifax, we demand a Main Street ethic for a Wall Street occupied firmly by greed.

What authority remains in the news media when articles are plagiarized, stories reek of each outlet's own spin, and the lines between what's fake or real are inexplicably blurred?

What authority remains for the church when priests abuse those they're commanded to love, pastors proclaim an unrealized and scripturally-unsound prosperity gospel, and small hypocrisies between word and deed build walls that keep so many from the abundant love of God?

With such a list, it should come as no surprise to anyone that the widespread authority these institutions carry diminishes practically by the day, as more and more people — regardless of age, background, life stage, or worldview — hear these stories and adopt a disposition of distrusting institutions. And it's not just an American problem; "growing distrust of institutional authority can be found among virtually all the advanced nations of the world."⁴

To those who held positions of authority and to us today, Jesus tells a story: "a man had two sons," he said. "He asked both to go and work in the vineyard. The first said no, but then changed his mind and went. The second said yes, but didn't follow through and stayed home. Which did the will of his father?," Jesus asked. And without hesitation, the chief priests and scribes said, "the first — the one who **did** actually work in the vineyard." And the kicker of the story, the twist that yet again leaves them questioning their own authority, is that Jesus implies these religious leaders are like the brother who was quick to say yes, quick to say "lord,"

⁴ Hugh Hecllo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, p13.

and absent from the vineyard where it really mattered. Who wasn't, he said, are the prostitutes and tax collectors: those who you'd never think are the ones with power or authority, those who said no but responded to the beckoning of the Father, those who may have experienced in the field the One that is the vine and from whom we branches find life.

It can become so easy to simply stand on the outside of institutions, no matter which one, and critique, throw stones, point out shortcomings in leaders, demand better from those in power, and suggest we just scrap the whole thing and start over. And often times, that's entirely appropriate! **But it's far harder to acknowledge our own power and ask ourselves what we're doing with our own authority.** Because — no doubt — each and every one of us has some form of both power and authority. That power may be as widespread as the power to lead a business or an organization, as focused as power to shape our family or influencing our friends, as unearned as power granted to us by the country of our origin or the color of our skin, as meaningful as power to bring life and abundance to places of death and scarcity. That authority might be as large as authority to change opinions of millions or as small as authority to influence the mindset of a few.

Brothers and sisters, how are you using your power? Who are you influencing doing with your authority? Are you wielding these tools like so many in our broken institutions, or are you, as Philippians describes, "doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regarding

others as better than yourselves... looking not to your own interests but to the interests of others? What story are you choosing to tell?

On a trip to Uganda, an American once found herself listening to a group of Christians there trading stories about the dark and bloody days under the dictator Idi Amin. They told story after story about persecuted believers, many of whom were killed in horrible ways in order to strike fear in the hearts of any who would oppose his rule. But she noticed something strange about the way they told the stories: they told them with a spirit of cheerfulness in their voices. She finally took her host aside and asked, "How could you talk about the ruthless power of such a heartless dictator like this? Why are these stories of martyrdom being told in such a lighthearted manner?" The man smiled as he replied to her: "You see, it's because Idi Amin didn't know the story." "The story? What story?," the woman asked? "The story of Christ," the man replied. "Whenever you kill him, he rises again. You can't kill off the body of Christ. Idi Amin thought he could, but we're laughing because he didn't know the story."

The story we tell today and every day is one of life and of the one who came that we might have life and have it abundantly. For "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

It's good that we know the end of that story! Amen.