

Jesus said to them: "You will know them by their fruits...every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven...and when Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority."

Authority. Jesus had it and he used it. He commanded the storm to be still, he commanded the sick to be made well, he commanded the dead to rise. He had authority over nature, over life and over death. He forgave sins. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." Jesus said that he is the final authority for things in heaven and things on earth. That is both comforting and frightening.

When you hear the word "authority" how do you react? Many people, perhaps most people, react negatively. As Americans we chafe under authority. We are free people and we relish our freedom. We define freedom as the right to choose, to do our own thing, and to not be under anyone's thumb, and in a perverse way, to not be accountable either. Gerhard Forde wrote on the issue of freedom, "Freedom to do as we please usually ends up in bondage to the lusts of the day.... Americans rarely have the original modesty to think they have the right to pursue happiness, but rather that they have the absolute right to possess it – no matter at whose expense." (Gerhard Forde, The Preached God, p. 195-196.)

Freedom, as our selfish nature describes it, is license to run rampant. Freedom is defined as a lack of responsibility or accountability. "Do your own thing" often ends up not as freedom but a kind of personal anarchy, in bondage to the lusts of the day.

Along with this notion of personal freedom comes a resistance to authority. We all resist authority if it is foisted upon us without our approval.

The demands of God can exact a certain amount of obedience from us by threats of punishment. But the demands of God are not able to win our hearts. The law is effective in terms of outward obedience, but it is helpless in changing the heart. The demand to bear good fruit remains impossible if the tree is bad. A good tree bears good fruit.

To obey the demands of Jesus without a change of heart is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is defined as “the homage vice pays to virtue.” Jesus says that when the heart is changed then a person bears good fruit. Just as good tree bears good fruit, authentic faith translates into obedience. A person does good works because that person has a good heart.

Still, these words of Jesus are not our favorite words. We are not attracted to those who command us to do as we are told. We are much more interested in hearing words that tell us how much God loves us and how much He has done for us. So when we hear Jesus speak these words of command we are quick to look for ways to soften the demands.

The text for today says that Jesus spoke with authority. To say we believe in Jesus and to disobey his word is like saying "I obey my parents" but then do whatever we please regardless of what our parents have taught us.

And how do we know the will of God? We know it thru scripture and the teaching of Jesus. So for Xians the Bible has the highest authority for a person's life and actions. To hear Jesus' word is to act on it, to change the way we operate to coincide with his will. We become a new person, obedient to him. We give Jesus authority over our lives and we strive to obey his teaching.

But sin is an objective power that holds us in bondage. We cannot free ourselves from its grasp. We will not always do the will of God. Freedom for the Xian is found only in Jesus. Apart from Jesus we find that we are not free but rather we are slaves to sin. We find that we are slaves to personal selfishness rather than being free. We find that the sin which clings so closely to us is our master. Therefore even though we would want to do that which is self-less and loving we continually stumble over our own selfishness. And we find that we lack the ability to control our sinful inclinations. **"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."** We think we have freedom but what we discover is that we are slaves. We lack the personal or interior authority to control the sin which infects our lives.

Enter Jesus. He is the one with authority. He uses his authority over the law to forgive and to set you free from your bondage to sin. By his authority Jesus declares that your sins are forgiven. By his authority Jesus frees you from sin and death and the power of the devil. By his authority Jesus calls you to new obedience, the obedience grounded in faith. By his authority Jesus wipes the slate clean and says "Now follow me".

As followers of Jesus we submit to his authority and to his word by faith alone that trusts in what he says he has done and will do for us. Only then does the miracle happen...the miracle of obedience not by the coercion of the law but by the power of the gospel. When Jesus says "**Love one another**" we are empowered by his Spirit to find ways to be loving. When Jesus says "**Do good to those who persecute you**" we are empowered by his Spirit to be peacemakers. When Jesus says "**Forgive 70 x 7**" we are empowered by his Spirit to forgive and not harbor resentment and bear grudges and look for revenge. When Jesus says "**Don't be anxious about tomorrow**" we are empowered by the Spirit not to grasp and claw to secure our future but to trust in God to provide.

What God demands he gives. He gives us the ability to do what he commands. When he says "bear good fruit" he forgives and makes us new and that new self bears good fruit. When he says do the will of God he fills us with the desire and ability to do just that. But this gift comes from outside ourselves. By ourselves we are not able to obey. But Jesus changes us. He makes us over into the kind of people God wants us to be. Jesus does this work, which we call sanctification, thru the Holy Spirit who lives in us teaching and empowering us to obey. So in truth we have to say that it is not we who do this but it is Christ in us who does the will of God thru us.

God has shared some of his authority with us. He has given us limited authority on things beneath us in creation. We exercise that authority in the world and in our relationships with others.

There are 3 kinds of authority. The first is self-authority. Psychologists call this ego strength. You need to develop a certain amount of self-authority to be healthy mentally or you will end up being manipulated by everyone and every situation. Being made in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus is what gives us self worth. This self worth comes from outside ourselves. It is a gift from God.

I believe that Satan would have us misuse our self authority or not to believe we had any at all. He steals a person's self confidence and makes a person feel inferior. A person for whom Christ died! A prince or princess in the Kingdom of heaven! Yet we all develop differing amounts of this self-authority. Some have it in spades, self confidence, assertive personalities, goal directed lives. Others have less of this self-authority and are more retiring in their relationships with others.

There is danger in this first kind of authority. The danger is in pride and stiff-necked self-will that runs roughshod over others. The self is always for the self and will use manipulative means to get its selfish will done.

The second kind of authority is earned. We give authority to some person or institution out of respect and trust. In doing so we give up some of our freedom to this person or institution. This kind of authority is based on persuasion and integrity. It is the kind of authority that the church has.

The third kind of authority is supported by coercion. Authority that is backed up by power or threat of violence or depravation. This kind of authority is given by the community to police and judges to control evil. In doing so we also give up some of our freedom. We do this because it is necessary for us to restrict our individual freedom for the good of the community. This kind of authority is also used by parents to control the behavior of their children.

The Bible links obedience to authority with the will of God when it says "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and your mother."(Eph. 6:1ff) Romans says to all Xians "Be subject to governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Rom 13:1ff). And again in Titus 3:1ff it says "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good." We show love for God by obeying his commands.