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KNOW YOUR LIMITS!

Today's Text: Matt. 21: 23-27

Extracts:

Now when He came into the temple, *the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"* But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." *So they answered Jesus, and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"* [Matt. 21: 23-27]

In response to escalating violence in American schools, the Christina School District in the State of Delaware introduced a zero-tolerance measure on weapons.¹ Zachary Christie, a 6-year-old first grade student in the district who recently joined the Cub Scout brought to school a new camping utensil that functions as a spoon, fork and knife. The school authorities said that he had violated the zero-tolerance code and suspended him from school. In addition, he faced 45 days in reform school. Following public outcry over the harshness of the penalty for a mere kid, the school lifted Zachary's suspension and is looking into modifying the rule to make it more "realistic." When asked by reporters what lesson he had learnt from the incident, little Zachary said, "Never take anything to school without my parents' approval."

Both Zachary and his school authorities now know what they cannot get away with. They now know their limits. We all have limits in everything we do. It can be in the way we talk or act or react. When we do not know our limits, we offend others. When we learn how to recognize our limits with human beings, then we may know our limits with God. In this week's study, the chief priests and elders questioned Christ's authority to do God's work. Did they overstep their limits? Let us find out.

¹ Based on the following sources: "Student Suspended Over Camping Tool," Oct. 12, 2009; <http://news.aol.com/article/school-suspends-first-grade-student/713568> and "Zachary Christie, first-grader suspended for scouting utensil, returns to school," by Star-Ledge guest Columnist, Oct. 14, 2009, http://www.nj.com/parenting/guest_bloggers/index.ssf/2009/10/first-grader_suspended_for_sco.html

1. Background: Boundaries or Limits?

We have said or done things that we later came to regret. We have taken positions that looked solid at the time only to later discover that we had been standing on slippery slope. Nobody wants to be embarrassed or disgraced. That is why this week's study is a very important one for most of us. Before we go into a critical analysis of the issues, let us study our Lord's encounter with the temple and political leaders of His time, over two thousand years ago.

The setting was Tuesday of the Passion Week. Recall that on Sunday of that week, after His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus had driven away those that were using the house of prayer as a den of thieves [Matt. 21: 12-13]. He had also healed the blind and the lame that met Him in the temple. That Tuesday morning, Jesus came into the temple and began to teach the people there.

The chief priests and elders confronted Jesus as He was teaching and asked Him, "By what authority are You *doing these things*? And *who gave You this authority*?" [Matt. 21: 23]. Those questions suggest that the chief priests and elders (who were supposedly versed in the Law of Moses) believed that Jesus had crossed the line. Who actually crossed the line here: Jesus who knew what He was doing or the chief priests and elders of the people who challenged His authority?

2. Was their challenge of Christ's authority legitimate?

The leaders asked Jesus for the authority for doing "these things" and who gave it to Him. We can take "these things" from the context of today's story to include being hailed as the Messiah (Son of David), cleansing the temple of traders and teaching and healing the people. We can examine their challenges in the following areas:

a) *The administrative line of authority*

From their perspective, Jesus came into the temple and had the "audacity" to "upset" the arrangements put in place by the temple authorities. After all, do you know of any place of worship where you can do what you like without the express or implied approval of the leaders there? Can you sell books, CDs and DVDs in the bookstore there without the pastor's knowledge or approval? Can any member just bring in an outsider to organize a revival service or crusade without the church leaders' knowledge or approval? In their view, Jesus was neither a priest (of the lineage of Aaron) nor a Levite (of the tribe of Levi). Therefore, He did not have any administrative authority to question the management of the temple. He had crossed the line, according to them.

However, we do know that in any organization, there are some people who hold no formal leadership positions but, on the strength of their integrity

or moral authority, they command the respect of their bosses and colleagues. Did those leaders forget that even at the age of twelve, this same Jesus came to the temple, “sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers” [Lk 2: 46-49]?

More importantly, the word of God testifies that Jesus the Christ is “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” [Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7: 1-17]. He came as “High Priest” who with His own blood entered the Most Holy Place “once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” [Heb. 9: 11-12]. Even in the Law of Moses that the chief priests revered, God explicitly told Moses, “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall come to pass that *whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him*” [Deut. 18: 18-19]. Therefore, Jesus had the administrative authority to question how the then chief priests, mere custodians of that office until the fullness of the time of Christ, were using His Father’s house. Unfortunately, they refused to accept that understanding. They were the ones who did not know their limits. Jesus knew His.

b) *The claim to divine authority*

The leaders of the people questioned the divinity of Jesus. They treated Him with disdain and contempt. To them, He was the “Teacher” [Matt. 22: 16] or “this fellow” that cast out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons [Matt. 12: 24]. Yet, they marvelled at Him, saying, “How does this Man know letters, having never studied?” [Jn 7: 15].

Even before the disciples came to know Him as the Christ [Matt. 16: 15-16], the demons that He had cast out of the sick in the temples knew Him as God. For example, one Sabbath day in the synagogue in Capernaum in Galilee where He was teaching, a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? *I know who You are- the Holy One of God!*” [Lk 4: 30-34]. Nicodemus, the Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews who came to Jesus by night said, “Rabbi, we know that You are a *teacher come from God, for no man can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him*” [Jn 3: 1-2]. When the Jews took stones to stone Jesus after He had said that He and His Father were one, they said they wanted to stone Him “not for a good work” but for blasphemy because He being a Man made Himself God [Jn 10: 30-33]. After His resurrection, Jesus Himself confirmed to His disciples that “all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and

Psalms” concerning Him [Lk 24: 44] Therefore, His divinity was never in doubt. The Jewish leaders did not know their limits. Jesus knew His.

3. Why we often exceed our limits

From the forgoing, we can draw the following conclusions as to why we may not know our limits with respect to other people:

a) *We have limited understanding of the issue(s) at stake*²

In their encounter with Jesus, the chief priests and scribes used their human understanding to process heavenly matters that they could not even visualize. This is well illustrated in an earlier dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the people that had come to Him at night. When Jesus told him that one had to be born again to see or enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus replied, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” After using the analogy of the wind to try to explain it to him, Jesus added, “We speak what we know and testify what We have seen and you do not receive our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” [Jn 3: 1-12].

We have the tendency to parade partial knowledge as expertise! We believe that occupying a leadership position gives us the authority to pronounce on every issue, no matter how tangentially related to that position. We question everything and everybody who opposes our point of view even when their arguments are superior to ours!

Do you realize that it was Adam who named everything that God created [Gen. 2: 19]? Yet, at the very first temptation from the devil, he fell. Where was his vast knowledge of life? Take also the case of the Philistine giant, Goliath, who came boasting of his strength against the might of the armies of Israel. He did not know that his enemy was not Israel but their God. So, the Spirit of God in the pebble of a teenager, David, that was not even qualified as yet to enter military service, was all it took to kill the boastful giant [1 Sam. 17: 4-7; 44]! So, when you criticize or disrespect positions or persons that you do not understand, you do not know your limits.

b) *It may be out of envy*

The kind of crowds that this 33-year-old Man called Jesus was attracting, the power of His words and deeds and His self-confidence did not sit

² This section is based in part on “Watch That Big Mouth!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2, No. 12: 6 May 2001; pp 4-5; http://bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Watchthatmybigmouth.pdf

down well with the Jewish leaders. The only solution was to get rid of Him at all costs. Therefore, there was nothing that He said or did that they would not question or reject. Even Pontius Pilate noticed the envy after observing the conduct of the Jewish leaders during the Lord's trial. Based on the evidence presented before him, Jesus was innocent, Pilate "knew that they had handed Him over because of envy" [Matt. 27: 18]. Even after His resurrection, the Jewish leaders bribed the Roman guards to change the story to say that while they slept, His disciples came to remove His body [Matt. 28: 11-15]!

For a good number of us, the only good thing we want to hear about those we envy is bad news! When they achieve, there has to be an explanation for it, such as chance or luck or race or nepotism, etc. No matter how good may be their views or suggestions, they are not acceptable! Envious people never know their limits. That is why envy has been likened to a bone cancer [Prov. 14: 30]!

c) *It may be an attempt to blow our trumpets*

Since Jesus came triumphantly into Jerusalem, every person of substance would try to ask Him questions for their own self-importance. For example, when the Pharisees heard how Jesus had silenced the chief priests and elders who had questioned His authority, they themselves "went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk." They asked Him about paying taxes to Caesar [Matt. 22: 15-17]. The Sadducees would not be left out. So, they came to ask Him questions about resurrection, their own pet subject [vv. 23-28]. You can imagine how their press agents would get such encounters with Jesus reported the following day in the then Jerusalem media! But they were going off limits because they did not even know what they were talking about.

Take the case of the young Amalekite who brought the crown of Israel to David after Saul had died in the battle with the Philistines. He told David a tall story of his own gallantry- how king Saul begged him to stand over him and kill him because the king had been mortally wounded. He concluded his report as follows, "I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the crown that was on his head and the bracelet that was on his arm, and have brought them here to my lord." David said to him, "How was it you were not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" So, instead of a reward, the young man was executed [2 Sam. 1: 7-15]. He lied about his killing Saul because the king had committed suicide. [1 Sam. 31: 4].

A good number of us are name-droppers and influence-peddlers. We seem to have deep knowledge of confidential discussions in high places. Some of such people are the "anonymous sources" quoted in media reports. The

truth is that those who do such things are going beyond their limits. Sooner than later, the truth about them will surface and they will be discredited.

4. Conclusion: Time to watch your limits!

Jesus did not bother to answer the questions raised by the elders. Instead, He asked them a question concerning the authority of John to baptize people. After all, before him, there is no record of baptism in the Scripture. It was a trap. If they said that the power came from God, that would belie their resistance to Christ's earthly ministry. People would ask them why they did not believe John who explicitly drew the nation of Israel's attention to Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" [Jn 1: 29]. If they said John's authority came from man, they feared that the people would stone them to death. So, they told Jesus they could not tell Him. In turn, He told them He would likewise not tell them by which power He did "these things" [Matt. 21: 25-27]. Jesus knew His limits; His critics did not know theirs. How about you?

Just as you are entitled to your space, physical, emotional or spiritual, so does everyone else. However, in order to enjoy yours, you have to take the initiative to impose self-restraint and to respect others' views, feelings and needs. In that context, you will find the following ideas quite helpful to operate within limits:

- Be an *active listener*. Cultivate empathy [Phil. 2: 4]. Speak only on cues or by invitation. When you speak, do not inflate your achievements or importance just to impress your listeners [Lk 18: 10-14]; Do not give away information about yourself or your family than people have asked for [Is. 39: 1-1-8] because only God can give us increase [1 Cor. 3: 6]
- Do not underrate or undermine other people's efforts or achievement, largely out of envy [Num. 12: 1-9]. Instead, *recognise and commend other people's contribution to your success or theirs* [Rom. 16: 1-2].
- *Learn to take full responsibility for your actions*. Do not lie or shift the blame to get out of a bad situation. [Gen. 3: 11-13]
- *Success is unsafe at any speed*. Therefore, learn to apply brakes where appropriate. Remain humble and forgiving. Manage your anger [Eph. 4: 26]. Abstain from sexual immorality [1 Thes. 4: 3-4] or the love of money [1 Tim. 6: 10].

Learn self-restraint from Jesus. Know your limits!