

**What Do You Know?**  
Matthew 21:23-32  
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You know the old light bulb joke, right? I first heard it back in 1977. Thought it was hilarious the first time I heard it. My brother was a freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. VCU! I didn't know much about Richmond at the time, but apparently it had the reputation of finding it very hard to change. Thus, the old light bulb joke. My brother was giggling the first time he told it to me on the phone. How many Richmonders does it take to change a light bulb? You know the answer. 4. 1 to put in the new bulb. 3 to stand around and talk about how great the old bulb was.

These days that joke is as sad as it used to be funny. I tremble now when I think of it. I think of things like race and racism. I think of poverty and the gargantuan divide that is exploding between the rich and the poor. I think of violence against women. I think of children caught up in broken education systems. I think of people who, when faced with change, murmur defiantly, we don't do it that way here. I think of things we all know we ought to change and yet for some reason we can't find the energy or the resolve to change them. Somewhere around 1990, I think, people stopped laughing at the light bulb joke because it became more social commentary than humor. The joke reminds us how we become so enamored of the old, even when the old was destructive, that we flail furiously against the new. The joke reminds us how we remember the old as such a golden space of comfort and security, that we fear the new as a wild frontier, unchartered, unknown, teeming with chaos. The joke reminds us that because we whisper ever so gratefully about a past where people knew their place, we fret about a future where people are shaking our place up.

That is precisely what is happening in the scripture text we read from the Gospel of Matthew just now. Jesus has been shaking the Palestinian place up. He started in the north, in Galilee. Now, it's Jerusalem, the very capital of the people's religion and politics, that he is

twisting into turmoil. Jesus is changing the light bulb. And he's making people mad. Because he doesn't wait for the old bulb to go bad before he rips it out and screws in a new, brighter bulb that lights up and lays bare all the destructive, dark places.

Something new is happening here. The way Jesus was going about his ministry was deeply troubling to the people who were in leadership in his land. The chief priests and the elders. Jesus spent his ministry challenging their interpretation of the sacred traditions. Old, ancient, venerable traditions that had given guidance and stability to his people for generations upon generations. In his sermon on the mount, he reversed those old human expectations. God, he said, valued not the proud, but the poor in spirit, not the powerful, but the meek, not the people who allow injustice to exist, but those who hunger and thirst for righteous change, not the militaristic hawks, but the peacemaking doves, not the people who sit in silence while injustice runs rampant, but those who stand up and speak out, no matter the cost. He touches untouchables, like lepers. He socializes with the shameful, like tax collectors and sex workers. He speaks for those who have been denied a voice, like women and children. He breaks the law, when its decrees protect the powerful and punish the powerless, like those who are hungry and those who are sick. He comes into the very heart of the people's religion and politics, the Jerusalem Temple, and starts wrecking the place that he believes has wrecked the people's relationship with God. And the people respond. At least the people who are weak and broken and lost—they find in him power and wholeness and direction. They find in his new light warmth and vision. But the chief priests and the elders? They represent the old ways, the old traditions. They see what Jesus is doing and how Jesus is representing the inbreaking of God's intentions for God's people and God's world, and they want to stop *his* act before he shuts down *theirs*.

So, right after he storms in to the temple, a one man riot of righteousness, he drives out those who were selling and buying, and knocks over the tables of the money changers and dove sellers. Then, right after he cries out like some sidewalk preacher yelling out of a bull horn that they have turned God's house of prayer into a cave of violent, thieving bandits, they fire back,

“who the hell do you think you are?” Well, that’s what they meant. What they actually say is, “on what authority are you doing this?”

The point of the question is to make him confess that he doesn’t have any authority. At least not the right authority. Unless he has forged himself a really good fake resume, he’s got nothing. He has no college degree. He hasn’t been to seminary. Where is his doctor of ministry? Doesn’t have one. He can produce no diploma, certificate, license, or letter of reference. No one has voted him into any office. No one has graduated him from any academy. No one has mentored him in any leadership capacity. He’s just some rogue, wandering, wanna be prophet spouting nonsense to the naive and fooling the foolish. The way to get people to see it is to ask him to show his credentials because they know he can’t produce any. How do they know for sure he won’t be able to produce any credentials? How can they be so certain? ***Because they are the ones who give out the credentials.*** They are the organization behind their organized religion. They are the chief priests who control the worker priests, they are the religious elders who control the religious youngsters. This is their show. They licence the actors and they have not licensed Jesus. And everybody knows if you don’t have a licence you can’t be driving, at least not legally. And Jesus has been driving all over Palestine, going the wrong way, his way, on their one way, do it our way religious streets. No matter how spectacular his work has been, his work has been unauthorized. By them. And everybody knows they speak for God.

But the chief priests and the elders also know that Jesus thinks that he speaks for God. They just want him to say it. Out loud. That is the trap behind the question. If we didn’t authorize you to do the crazy new things you’re doing, Jesus, who did? Say it, Jesus. Say it! Say what you believe. Say ***God*** authorized you! Tell everybody loudly and clearly that you think you are working for God.

That’s the trap behind the question. It’s a perfectly reasonable question. And he’s gotta answer. Otherwise, he looks foolish. But he can’t avoid it. He has only two options for an answer and both will make him look like the fool they know he is. He’ll have to say, well, I

don't have human authorization because I didn't go to any human school or have any human instruction. Or he'll have to say, God authorized me. The first answer makes him look uneducated. The second answer makes him look like a nut. Yeah, right, you talk to God. You! You couldn't even get admitted to a proper school and you're telling me God admitted you into God's confidence. Sure, right. Get outta here!

In our day, that's embarrassing. In Jesus' day? In our day, you say you speak for God, people mock you. In Jesus' day, you say you speak for God? They kill you.

It's called blasphemy. They just want Jesus to tell the truth. They know he believes he is the Son of God. The crowd knows he believes he is the Son of God. They just need him to answer the question and go on the public record so they can make the appropriate public response. And they figure he'll go on the record because they've been watching him. They know he is strong enough, courageous enough, defiant enough to declare what he believes, because what he believes is more important to him than his popularity and even his own safety. So, this is like a softball question. Everybody already knows the answer. He can't possibly get the question wrong. His disciples believe he is authorized by God. The people believe he is authorized by God. The chief priests and elders don't for a minute believe that he is authorized by God, but they know HE believes he is authorized by God. So, just say it. Just say it out loud, Jesus. You want to say it. The people want to hear it. So, just answer the question, truthfully.

Isn't this ironic? They want him to answer truthfully so they can use the truth against him. Turn the truth into a knife they'll use to stab him. Amazing how we twist and turn the truth, isn't it? Depressing how we use the truth, isn't it? Alarming how we manipulate the truth, isn't it? Amazing, depressing, alarming, all of that is what is happening when they literally beg Jesus to tell the truth about himself so they can use that truth to kill him.

He's not ready yet, is what I figure. If he says it, his ministry will be ripped out of his control, and his ministry is not yet finished. There are still things to do, so he really can't answer the question now. At 26:63, the high priest, the chief of the chief priests, will ask him

this same question, using different words, Are you the Messiah, the Son of God? In other words, have you done all you have done by God's authority as God's son. His answer: "you say so. And I tell you this, you will see the son of man seated on the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." Since he'd always referred to himself as the son of man, and since the seating on the right hand of power was the seating for the Messiah of God, the question was pretty much answered. And so was the charge in response. At 26:65, the high priest makes a show of things and rips his clothes and cries out, "Blasphemy. He has blasphemed." And right then and there they judged him worthy to be sentenced to death.

That is what is at stake when they ask him, "by whose authority do you do these things?" They want the truthful answer. Because they know they will use the truth to kill him. Jesus and everyone around him knows the truthful answer. But Jesus also knows his ministry isn't ready to be terminated, not just yet. So, Jesus makes an unanticipated move. Instead of answering with an answer, he answers with a question, a question that requires a truthful response from them! He conversationally ambushes those who had intended to ambush him.

Out of nowhere, he brings up John the Baptist. John, like Jesus, was considered a religious kook by the religious establishment. Out there yelling at the Jordan river, wearing that outrageous camel hair robe with that leather belt around his waist, snacking on locusts and wild honey like some animal. Baptizing people without a religious licence. They hated the guy. But the people, the people loved him! Among the people, John the Baptist was a revered figure. A folk hero.

So, Jesus asks, was John commissioned by God or was John just one more super charismatic, self promoting, wanna be prophet? Well, we can't say God commissioned him because we didn't listen to him, we mocked him. But we also can't say he was the fool we thought he was because this crowd who adored him will go crazy on us.

Jesus, who does conversation the way a grand master plays chess, seems to be several moves ahead of the chief priests and elders. By answering their question with this particular

question, he completely hijacks the conversation. The chief priests and elders were in control. Now, they're out of control, because they've got this confounding question about John the Baptist sitting out there in front of them. And Jesus has said that he'll answer their question if they answer his. But his question is really hard. In fact, his question is even better at manipulation than their manipulating question was. There is no way they can answer it and come out looking good. Just like their earlier question, Jesus' question is not meant to elicit an answer. It's meant to discredit. But his question has one other thing going for it. If they answer it, no matter how they answer it, they are going to look bad. But if they don't answer it, they're also going to look bad. And they can't answer the question with a question, because he's already done that. If they try to do that, they'll just end up looking silly. So, they can't answer without looking bad. If they answer they look bad. And if they try to do what he did, answer the question with a question, they will look bad.

How did he do this?

Then, as if the John the Baptist trap wasn't conversationally lethal enough, Jesus piles on with a parable. A parable directed squarely at them. The first son in the parable certainly represents the chief priests and the elders. He promises to do what God asks him to do, but then doesn't do it. Because, like the first son, chief priests and elders care more about themselves than they do their Father's wishes. They promised to follow God's commands, live up to God's expectations but when God revealed God's command for their lives and God's expectation for how they were to shape and care for the lives of God's people, they went their own way, did what they wanted to do. They refused to hear what God was saying through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The second son in the parable would be like those filthy tax collectors and those disgusting sex workers. They have lived all their lives in direct contradiction of God's expectations as written down in the commandments and codes of God's people. The way they live their lives is a rejection of God's claim upon their lives. And yet, even though they rejected

the ways of God publicly and demonstrably, when they heard John the Baptist and when they see and hear Jesus they believe and they follow.

They change! Because of what they see. Because of this new thing that God is doing.

But the chief priests and elders, they don't change. They stay stuck where they are because they are committed to the tradition, so committed to the tradition, that they can't see the new light that God is breaking into their world.

I wonder today about our resistance to believe things that we are seeing, the new light that God is shining out for us, to adjust our behavior as a result of it. I worry about things like creation. We can see the data about the earth warming. We can see the polar ice caps melting. We can see the indications that the sea levels are rising. We can see the ozone warnings. But even after we see the data, see the devastation caused by super storms that are one clear, demonstrable effect, we do not change our minds. We do not believe. We see the data about racial inequity in the United States and around the world. The median net worth of white households, \$171,000 is 10 times that of black households, \$17,600, a gap that stems from lower rates of home ownership and smaller inheritances among blacks, that goes back in to situations where loans were not made available, the GI Bill was not an opportunity, and on and on. The unemployment rate difference between blacks and whites has been significant for decades. The pandemic exacerbated it. The pandemic also exacerbated the health risks of African Americans, a majority of whom work disproportionately in essential job roles like public transit, trucking, warehouse and postal service, health care and grocery, convenience and drug stores. As a result, the pandemic impacted blacks disproportionately. While blacks make up 13% of the population, they have made up 23% of Covid-19 deaths. A larger share of black population lives in poverty, 20.8% compare to 8.1% for whites. A larger share of black Americans lack health insurance compared to whites. Then, of course, there is the widely disseminated data about the dramatically higher percentage of traffic stops, arrests, imprisonments, and in custody deaths of African Americans. One hears Jesus's words reverberating as one reads these statistics, even after you saw it, you did not change. Be like the tax collectors and the sex workers. Don't be

like the chief priests and the elders. When the old ways go dark, change out the bulb, allow God to bring in the new, through you.

Don't be like the chief priests and the elders. When the opportunity of following the new way in Christ or holding onto the old way of tradition presented itself, their response in the end was, "We do not know."

"We don't know" is the lazy answer of students who haven't studied and believers who are afraid. The chief priests and the elders are afraid. They know the answer, they just don't want to give the answer. They treated John like a fool because they thought John was a fool, but they are afraid to give that answer in the circumstance they find themselves. They don't have the courage of their convictions. "We don't know," is the answer of people who don't have the courage of their convictions.

There is racism in this country, systemic racism in this country. The events of this past summer revealed that in a powerful way. When someone asks, what is the new thing the church going to do about this old problem? The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

There is the bedeviling problem of gender discrimination in this country. When someone asks, what is the new thing the church is going to do about this old problem? The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

Young people are crying out for us older people to do something about climate change so as to protect the world they are even now inheriting from us. When someone asks, what is the new thing the church going to do about this old problem? The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

There are people seeking a new way of following and understanding God in and also outside of the institutional church. When someone asks, what is the new thing the church going to do about this old problem? The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

What we **DO** know is that God is even now switching out the light bulbs of human history. God's change is on the move in the blowing of the Holy Spirit moving like a whirlwind

in our churches and in our world. We don't want to get caught so religiously worshipping the old that we can't reveal the new.

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?