

“Authority Issues—Get Under It”

Muhammad Ali had just won another boxing title. He got on the jet to go home and sat in the first class section. As people walked by and recognized him he would give his famous line, “I am the greatest!” He said it over and over again as people got on the flight. The flight attendant just stood there and listened. At first she thought it was amusing and then it got on her nerves. After everybody was on the plane the pilot announced that they were ready for takeoff and should fasten their seatbelts. Muhammad Ali ignored it completely. The flight attendant noticed that he didn’t fasten his seat belt and went up to him and said, “You need to fasten your seat belt.” Ali looked her in the eye and with all seriousness said, “Superman don’t need no seat belt.” Without missing a beat the flight attendant said, “And Superman don’t need no airplane either; please fasten your seatbelt.” He did.

Today we continue this message series we started last week. It’s called “Authority Issues” and lots of us struggle with this. Our mantra is: You’re not the boss of me. I’m my own man. Don’t tell me what to do.

Some key points in this series are that God has put authority figures and authority structures in our lives. The Apostle Paul goes so far as to say that if we have a problem with authority, we have a problem with God.

Last week I talked about how authority takes lots of different forms in our lives—mundane forms. Our boss at work, the hostess at the restaurant, the coach of our kid’s soccer team, our parents, the church. And when we look at how we respond to authority in all those situations, we can get a glimpse of how we view God.

Oh, and I hope you guys have been thinking about the umbrella this week. We talked about the umbrella last time. I don’t like to carry them around that much, as I told you, but they’re very, very important—especially in this new series. I actually used one a lot last week. If you didn’t you got pelted with hail, and soaked with ice cold rain.

Last week we talked about how we have to get under what God has put over us so we can get over the things he’s put under us. And most of us live our entire lives without ever understanding or processing or realizing the incredible stuff that God wants to put under us. But for us to get above the stuff, we need to get under God’s authority.

Another key to this series on authority is that God set all this up and it’s not some power trip, it’s not about dominance, it’s about his love for us, his protection of us. It’s about the fact that God wants to help us live out the best possible version of our lives. How is the rest of your life going to unfold? There is a best version of that, and God’s authority is there to help us live it.

I said last week that I’m a why guy. I want to know why. And I’ve been asking myself why so many of us have a problem with authority. “I want to do it my way. You’re not the boss of me!” One big part of this is the issue of pride. Let’s talk about pride. Of course there’s a good sense of pride. To have a sense of joyful confidence in our kids, or our parents, or our church, or our business. There’s a pride that gives credit to others, and gives credit to God, and gives credit to a sense of cooperation. I’m proud of the team that pulled together our faith at work lunch on Tuesday. We had around 140 people here for that lunch and it went so well. The people on the team each did their part and it was wonderful. I’m proud of them and their work. That’s a good sense of pride.

But it’s easy to slip into a sinful sense of pride. This dark side of pride is destructive. It’s that belief we cultivate inside of ourselves that we’re somehow better than someone else, because of our education, or experiences, or wealth, or personality, or looks, or whatever. “My kids are smarter than yours and better behaved. Our church is stronger and more vibrant than yours. I know more about the Bible than you do. Therefore I’m more valuable, or more important.” That’s dark pride.

It’s the belief that we deserve something better than someone else. That’s destructive pride. And it’s dangerous when it comes to authority in our lives because we can begin to tell ourselves that we’re too good to submit to anyone else’s authority. “I know better than my boss. I know better than my kid’s soccer coach. Or my doctor. Or the hostess at the restaurant.” Or whomever happens to be in authority in a given situation. I’m better. Oh really? You **better** be careful!

The Bible has a whole lot to say about the destructiveness of this kind of pride. **“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2, NIV).** And **“A person’s pride**

will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor” (Proverbs 29:23, NRSV). That’s a theme you find over and over again. God humbles the proud, over and over. Why? Because they’re saying they don’t need the authority of God in their lives. “I don’t need you, I’ve got it all, I’m self-sufficient.” Paul wrote this in Romans, **“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (Romans 12:3, NIV).**

So the challenge in all of this is identify those places of dark pride, those places where we take something good we have and use it as a way to put ourselves above someone else. That’s an illusion any way. It’s an illusion! The challenge is to humbly step back under the umbrella of God’s authority.

I want to say this at this point. Something that’s bothered me throughout this series that I didn’t get a handle on until this week is this: I don’t like all this authority talk personally because it can sound like forced conformity. It can sound like, “Do like everybody else, get in line, follow the crowd, don’t be an individual, don’t be creative, don’t stand out. Be vanilla.”

But I don’t want to get in line; I don’t want to follow the crowd; I don’t want to be vanilla! I want to be rocky road, I want to be Neapolitan. I want to be an individual and creative, and unique. Don’t you?

And here’s what I’ve come to understand: I can live under authority, under the protection of God’s authority and still be an individual. I can live under God’s authority and not give in to conformity! This church, Saint Paul’s, is unique. It’s one of a kind. It has not conformed to what most main line churches are doing. And so many of them are dying. I love this church because of that lack of conformity. I’m that kind of pastor. We do all kinds of crazy things around here, we’ll try just about anything. But we **still** submit to authority. I do my best to submit to the authority my boss, the District Superintendent, and the Bishop. Do I always agree with what happens at that level in our denomination? No. But rebelling against that will only bring trouble. Within that system we have a lot of freedom to be us, to be unique to be rocky road. In fact I just read an article by our Bishop who was encouraging that. Encouraging new ideas, new and creative ways for churches to live out their mission.

I think about this in terms of being a parent too. As Janet and I raise our girls. We want them to submit to our authority because we want to protect them, and help them live out the best possible version of their lives. But at the same time I want them to be absolutely unique, to be individuals, to be creative. I have loved watching Zoe do just this. Watching her sense of humor develop, her musical ability, her artistic ability. I really want her to be an individual, but I also want her to be under my authority.

God created you to be an individual, to be creative, to be whatever flavor you’re created to be. Our challenge individually is to carefully discern how we do both. How we practice the art of submission, and at the same time flourish as individuals. And it can be done.

So what are some of the negative consequences of our rebellion against the authority figures and authority structures in our lives? God puts authority figures and structures in our lives to guide us, and shape us, but we risk being wounded when we rebel. **“Negative consequences of rebellion: We get wounded.”** We see a great picture of this in our name’s sake, the Apostle Paul. God had wanted to use him for some great things. God had been nudging him, guiding him, but Paul had another agenda. God’s agenda for Paul was that he lead the early church in some powerful directions. Paul’s agenda was to eliminate the early church. A little bit of a rub there! Finally God and Paul intersected. Paul was temporarily blinded by that meeting, but it helped him understand. Paul wrote this about his experience of God that day: **“We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’” (Acts 26:14, NIV).**

Did you catch that part about kicking against the goads? What’s a goad? It’s a pointed stick a farmer would use to guide a team of oxen. That goad was used to help them know the direction they should go as the plowed or worked a field. But if the oxen kicked at that goad, that sharp stick, it hurt, it could even wound them. Would it be the farmer’s intention to hurt the oxen? No! Without the oxen the farmer couldn’t do what he needed to do. The farmer wants the best for his oxen, but when they kick against the goad it could wound them.

God wants to guide us and shape us and he uses authority figures and structures in our lives to do that. When we rebel, we risk wounding ourselves. We risk hurting the very things God wants to do through us.

So one of the negative consequences of stepping out from under God's authority is we get wounded. **Another negative consequence is we lose credibility.** If you buck against authority figures and structures often enough, not even other rebels will want to be around you. Because you're unpredictable, erratic, and can't be trusted. People see you go Gabriel, rebel, undermine authority often enough and they will shut you out. Do it often enough and they will beat the doors down to get away from you. You lose credibility. You end up looking like a fool.

There are some major negative consequences to stepping out from under God's authority. But there are also some major positive consequences. I love thinking about these. When you practice the fine art of submission to God's authority and the authority figures and structures he puts in your life, the results are awesome. Like I said last week, you're under God's protection. **"Positive consequences of submission: God's protection."** That's what authority is all about. Not dominance, but protection. Bad stuff is still going happen, it just does, but you'll reduce it to trickle by standing under God's protection.

Then there's trust. As you submit to authority, others begin to trust you. They see that you're not going to undermine authority, that you are who you are, you're not trying to deceive or manipulate, or whatever. Then they begin to trust you.

I remember having a test of this not long after I got here to Saint Paul's 13 years ago. I fought a small battle over donuts here at the church. This was back when we worshipped in the Family Life Center. The church was small back then and we didn't come close to filling up that room, even on our best days—not even half. And every Sunday we had a continental breakfast back in one of the farthest classrooms—donuts, coffee, goodies.

I'm the new guy, I'm bringing some wacky new ideas. I thought, "Hey let's move the continental breakfast out that far away classroom and put it at the back of the Family Life Center and that way we'll fill up some of this empty space and our guests and visitors will feel more comfortable taking part and socializing a little.

Back then, a change like that was a huge deal. And quite a few people didn't want to change. "We've never done it that way before. We don't want to stain the carpet." Our leadership discussed it and said, "OK, we'll try it for 30 days and see how it goes." I thought it went great. It filled up that space, people had more room to gather, our guests felt more comfortable. And after 30 days, they voted to stop doing and put it back the way it was. I couldn't believe it! It seemed like going backward!

But that was a critical juncture for me as the pastor of this church. What I could have done is disregard the authority of the leaders in this church, gone around them, gotten a few folks who agreed with me to do it the way I wanted it, and it would have been done. I could have done that. But I didn't. I submitted to the authority of the leadership body. I wasn't happy about it but I submitted.

I practiced the art of submission. And I think that's why I'm still the pastor here today 13 years later. After that the leadership of the church at that time knew that I would not undermine them, that I would not contradict their decisions, that I would not go around the barn and try to get my will done, that I wouldn't snipe at them, or pout, or throw a hissy-fit. I think in that simple event, I established a huge amount of trust with the leaders of the church. And that trust built from there. That mutual trust has helped us to flourish and grow, and be about the mission of this church—which, by the way, has nothing to do with donuts. And eventually as we grew, we had to move the donuts to the back of the Family Life Center because we needed that room for a class.

Building the trust of others is huge in living out the best possible version of your life. And a huge part of that, is submitting to authority.

Another benefit of submission is sincerity. People begin to see that you are who you are, that you are real and not fake, that your "yes" means "yes", and your "no" means "no". Your word is your bond and that you really care. That goes a long way in living the best possible version of your life.

Leadership is another positive consequence of submitting to authority. We'll focus on this one next week. But as you submit to authority you will find yourself being placed in authority over others, over other situations.

A similar consequence is the loyalty of others. When they see you being loyal to authority in your lives, others are drawn to you and are willing to be loyal to you, to trust you, to be sincere to you.

And a big, huge, awesome consequence, positive consequence, of living under God's authority, is power. **You become powerful.** And this is power that is used in productive, positive, life-affirming ways. This is power that changes the world, and changes lives wonderfully. And when this happens, look out world! Powerful people make a difference.

Listen, we pray such weak prayers so much of the time. We pray for God to keep us safe. "Keep me safe from evil, safe from harm, safe from suffering." But I don't want to pray safe prayers anymore. I don't want to have a safe Christianity any more. Here's what I've recently started praying for myself and for you, "God make me strong, make us powerful, make us dangerous!"

I want to live under God's authority, and I want you to live under God's authority because this world needs more dangerous Christians. Yes! Things happen when Christians become powerful in a positive way and dangerous in a positive way: poverty is attacked, hopelessness cowers, evil runs, despair has nowhere to hide. I want you to be that kind of powerful and it happens when you submit to authority!

In the Old Testament David, who is the young man tapped to become the next king of Israel is being hunted down by the current king Saul. Saul is jealous of David and wants him dead. David is on the run, but a couple of times he has the chance to kill King Saul. One time David and one of his soldiers find King Saul asleep and his soldier wants to kill Saul. But David stops him and says, **"Don't destroy him, for who can lift a hand against the Lord's anointed and be blameless?" David added, 'As the LORD lives, the LORD will certainly strike him down: either his day will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. However, because of the LORD, I will never lift my hand against the Lord's anointed.'**" (1 Samuel 26:9-11, HCS).

Because of the Lord, David said, I'll never lift my hand against the Lord's anointed. "But, Aaron, my teacher's unfair." Submit. Why? Because of the Lord.

"Well you don't know this cop...." Submit. Because of the Lord.

"Well you don't know my situation at work." Submit. Because of the Lord.

"Well my parents are saying this...." Submit. Because of the Lord.

"Well, they're telling me to do this...." Submit. Because of the Lord.

"Well man, I don't respect the leader." Too bad.

Watch this: Most of the people in authority are people we're not going to respect. And if we wait to respect and love their personality and then say, "Okay, now I love you. Now I'll submit," that's not submission. That's not submitting ourselves to authority.

Saul was trying to kill David, yet David submitted to him. He understood authority. David got under the stuff that God was over. And because of that, David was over the stuff that God put under him. David became the greatest king of Israel, a true warrior, a true man of God. Why did he do it? Because of the Lord. Why do we submit to authority? Because of the Lord.

Do you have authority issues? Do you? We all do. God wants us to get under the stuff he's over so he can mold us and shape us into the kind of people that he wants us to be, so we'll be protected. So, positionally, we can be in a place to be blessed, to understand our uniqueness, to hit on all cylinders, and to mark the lives of others. That's what is at stake.

Don't put it off. Don't wait four or five decades and look back on your life and go, "You know, man, I should have lived under God's authority. I bucked God's authority at every interchange, at every turn and I missed what God had for me."

Based on God's word and his truth, I beg you, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, to get under the stuff that God is over. So he, in his sovereignty and in his will, will put you over the stuff that needs to be beneath you. And once we understand that, we begin to really live the best possible version of our lives. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.