Understanding Authority

Text: Matthew 8:5-13

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 1 Peter 2:13-18; Matthew 8:5-13

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 99, 119:57-64, 326, 264, 319

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD39)

Theme: A believing centurion understands the authority of Christ

Proposition: Under Christ We All Have Authority

**Introduction**

Sometimes, children don’t obey their parents when asked to do or not to do something. Sometimes a wife may ignore her husband’s lead and instead figure out how to get her own way by stealth or manipulation. A citizen may cheat on a tax return, modify a building without a permit or knowingly drive a car without a valid registration or warrant. A church member may resist Biblical admonition from the eldership. An employee may not do the task assigned by his or her employer.

What is the human heart really saying in each of these examples? “*Who are You to tell ME what to do?*” “*What makes you think you have authority over Me?*” If asked the question “Who is in charge?” in such examples the answer would be “I AM, or at least I’d like to be!” Authority is the right to rule, to command, to lead**.**

On the surface, the 5th commandment seems to deal only with the authority of parents over their children: *"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12).* However, as with other commandments, the principle of children willingly obeying the rule of their parents, applies in other spheres/realm of life. The HC brings this truth out by **extending** the application of the 5th commandment to all ruling powers, stating God’s will to be: *“That I honour, love, and be loyal to my father and mother and all those in authority over me”.*

In our text from Matthew 8, there is an astonishing interaction between the Lord Jesus Christ and a centurion which instructs us about the nature of authority. We seek to rightly understand authority from the wisdom of Christ under three headings this afternoon:

1. The right to rule
2. No right to rule
3. Our need for rulers
4. **The right to rule**

In our text, the Lord Jesus Christ enters Capernaum in Galilee which was a part of Roman occupied Israel. A Gentile man approaches Jesus. He is a centurion. The word ‘centurion’ literally means ‘ruler of one hundred’. He was a professional (career) soldier in command of 60-80 men. Nominally 100. He was part of the army of occupation under Herod Antipas, a force drawn largely from Lebanon and Syria.

His first word to Jesus “Lord”, means “Sir”. In speaking this way the centurion shows that He believed that Christ had power and influence over sickness. This is clear from v8-9: *But the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."*

Had he seen or heard of healing ministry of Christ? Presumably so. He firmly believed that Jesus could simply issue the command and his servant would be healed. Here was a military man who understood clearly how the chain of command operated. He knew that had authority over His men because he was also a man under authority. In his mind, his authority came down from Tiberius Caesar, through Herod Antipas, Praefectus castorums, legatus legionis, to a cohort then to him. His right to authority camebecause He himself was under authority.

Only twice in the gospels do we read of Jesus ‘marvelling’; a strong word indicating amazement and wonder. (The other time is in Mark 6:6 when the Lord Jesus marvelled at the unbelief of the Jews in Nazareth). Why was there such a strong reaction from Jesus which resulted in him saying these astonishing words: *“Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel”.* What was it about this foreigner in the ‘backwater’ Roman occupied town of Capernaum that evoked such elevated praise from Christ?

He believed Christ had sufficient authority to miraculously heal his servant without even going to see the man. This belief, this faith, was not disappointed. Verse 13 makes this clear. *And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed that very moment.* The Gentile centurion was a man of great faith in the person and power of Christ.

Also note though that the centurion clearly understood how authority works. He understood that He had authority because he was under authority. Whereas, he had authority over about 60-80 other soldiers, Jesus had authority over sickness, blindness, deafness, paralysis, and death. In fact, being God, He has the right to authority over all.

Yet, like the centurion, Jesus, God incarnate, was also man under authority as Christ expresses this way: *"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34).* Jesus perfectly obeyed the 5th commandment in both the earthly and heavenly realms. Willingly honouring and submitting to His human parents. Willingly honouring and submitting to His heavenly Father; humbling Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Gospel writer Luke expresses the perfect obedience of Christ to the fifth commandment in these words *“And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men”* (Luke 2:52). Just as the Lord Jesus Christ, in his humanity, received authority from God, soany and all authority which human beings have also comes from God.

Authority is not a “human right”. It does not originate with us. Ultimately, all legitimate authority derives from God Himself. For example, as Paul writes to the Romans: *“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Rom 13:1).* The origin of all legitimate authority as being derived from God is an absolute fact. This is true whether or not individuals accept and acknowledge this reality. All human authority is derived, limited, restricted, qualified.

The 5th commandment expresses the scope/sphere of the authority of parents over their own children. *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise)* (Eph 6:1-2). Scripture gives us other ‘spheres’ in which Biblical authority is to be exercised: Where there is a right to authority:

* A husband over his own wife in marriage (Eph 5:22; Col 1:18).
* Parents have rule over their own children (Eph 6:1-4).
* A government over its own citizens (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14).
* An eldership over a local church (Heb 13:7; 1 Tim 5:7; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Pet 5:1-5).
* An employer over their employees (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-24).

Problems occur in life when we don’t faithfully exercise the right to authority which God has given to us.Difficulties come in life when we do not submit/obey those who have the God-given right to authority over us. When we resist rightful authority, we rebel against God. That is why the penalty for a rebellious son was so severe in the Old Testament. One who stubbornly would not listen to his parents, though they discipline him, was to be taken to the authorities over the city at that time (the elders) and then stoned to death. Children, be assured that such laws do not apply in the church, or our society today! However, we can all learn from this historical example just how seriously God views rebellion against those to whom He has given the right to have authority.

We know that God alone has absolute authority. He alone is absolutely good, true, trustworthy and without fault. Whereas Adam and all his natural-born offspring are faulty. All of us have naturally fallen natures. The right to authority without limits in us therefore does ordinarily tend to bring tyranny and domination. God, perfectly knowing the nature of man, has defined limits to rule. Where we have no right to authority. This brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **No right to rule**

For all of us there are realms where we have no right to rule. The centurion could not command another centurion’s men. Parents do not have authority over other people’s children. Husbands do not have authority over someone else’s wife. Governments do not have authority over other nations. Elders do not have authority over other church congregations. Employers do not have authority over those employed by different businesses.

God alone has absolute unlimited authority. As we have seen, all other rule is limited. Remember that the creature Satan could afflict Job, but was not permitted by God to take Job’s life.

There are circumstances where it is not right to “honour, love and be loyal” to all those in authority over me”. When the High priest and other members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem gave Peter and the other apostles strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus, they did not submit to the Council’s authority, saying: *"We must obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29). Nobody has a right to exercise authority which undermines the authority of God. Children should not obey their parents when asked to so something which the Lord forbids. Wives should not submit to their husbands when doing so would break God’s law. Citizens should not obey government legislation if this means disobeying God e.g. smacking, same sex-legislation, prostitution, no-fault divorce.

Derived human authority is limited by God’s perfect law.When we come in repentance and faith to Christ as Lord we willingly hand over self-authority, .acknowledging that we cannot rule ourselves, but that we need the authority of Jesus in our lives By faith in Christ, we become necessarily bound, yet truly free. We yield to Christ; not fearing Him, but loving Him, knowing that we are utterly safe with Him who said: *“I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:28).*

We have no right to self-authority because we are not our own. Brothers and sisters, we belong body and soul, in life and in death to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He is King of Kings, Lord of Lords. All authority has been given to him in heaven and on earth. His authority is absolutely good, there is nothing to fear for those who willingly submit to his good rule.

He invites all to submit to Him willingly in these words: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (Matt 11:28). We all need to be ruled, for that is our nature, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Our need for rulers**

The Roman empire was a vast and powerful realm which lasted from the dictatorship of Julius Caesar (44BC) until the fall of Rome in 410AD. Authority was centralized with key decisions being made by the emperor, the senate, and others which were then distributed through provincial authorities such as Herod who ruled Galilee and Perea. Power – the “teeth” of authority was wielded through the military; the arm of the law who ‘bore the sword’. It has been estimated that in the 1st century AD that there were approximately 100,000 men in the Roman army. The centurion in Capernaum was one of them. As we have seen, he understood how rule functioned: He had authority because he was under authority. This military authority structure was necessary for the army to be effective in maintaining peace in the Roman Empire (the ‘Pax Romana’).

Without authority, human society degenerates into chaos. We know this from the book of Judges which ends with the chilling words: **“***In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).* The fall of man was fundamentally an authority issue. Satan challenged Divine authority when he tempted Eve with the question “*Did God actually say?*” (Gen 3:1). God has given authority to mankind for two reasons:

1. For the benefit of society to maintain order and justice.
2. So that the church can function within society (e.g. Rom 13:4).

The husband serves God when he loves and leads his wife. Parents serve God when they teach their children the ways of the Lord and live as examples of Christ before their offspring. Governments serve God when the promote the work of the church. Elders serve God when they willingly sacrifice their own interests, serving not under compulsion, but willingly, eagerly, being examples to the flock. Employers serve God when they provide productive work for their employees, paying them a fair and just wage, ensuring a safe workplace environment.

Christians serve God when they use the authority given to them as Christ’s ambassadors to boldly speak of their Lord making disciples of all the nations so that these disciples may be baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and taught to observe all that God’s Word commands.

God-given reasons for authority contrastwith natural man’s. The goal of authority for fallen man is self-service. Many grab authority to pursue their own honour e.g. the Scribes and Pharisees of whom Jesus said *"And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger”* (Matt 23:4). Authority exercised with selfish motive becomes “Lording it over” as Jesus described to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Matt 20:25-26).

The God-given purpose of authority is firstly service to God, and then to one another. The perfect man, Jesus Christ lived on this earthy under the authority of His heavenly Father. He humbled Himself taking on the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-8). He came not to serve, but to be served and to give His life. He was willing to submit himself to His Father’s good rule. He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Young people, be wise and see the importance of learning to submit to authority early in life. Obedience is first learned in the home. In light of the fifth commandment, we can rightly understand authority. By God’s grace in Christ we are enabled to be in right relationship with those we are ruled by and those we rule. Carefully, faithfully exercising authority within the realm we have been entrusted with. Carefully avoiding the temptation to exercise authority where we have no right to rule.

Why? So that we show the world around us that we are willingly under the authority of Christ. That we can confess with heart and mouth: *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me”* (Gal 2:20).

How would you answer this question in your life today ‘Who is in charge?’ If it’s not the Lord Jesus Christ, then you need to change, to be changed, and to come under His good authority.

AMEN