

“Truth, Power, and Malarkey”
Mark 11:27-33
January 25, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, with Jesus in Jerusalem.

Last week we read about Jesus clearing the Temple, in an act of symbolic judgment. This week, Jesus is questioned about those actions.

With that in mind, let’s turn now to our text: Mark 11:27-33.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{11:27} And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, ²⁸ and they said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” ²⁹ Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰ Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.” ³¹ And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ³² But shall we say, ‘From man?’”—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. ³³ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we gather this morning because we love your Word.
We know that your revelation to us
offers more wisdom than the wise of the world,
it gives us more understanding than the great thinkers of the world,
it gives us deeper understanding than the old and experienced of the world.
It holds us back from evil,
and keeps us from straying from you.
Through it we gain understanding,

and we learn to reject every false way.
Teach us now from your word, we ask.
In Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:97-104]

Introduction

We enter a new section of Mark's gospel this morning, which stretches to the end of chapter 12, and contains seven different conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. [Edwards, 349]

The Sanhedrin was an influential judicial body that dominated Jewish life, made up of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders – the same three groups that approach Jesus in verse 27. And so, what we have here was likely a delegation of the Sanhedrin. And as they approach Jesus, they come as those with power and authority in Jerusalem. [Edwards, 350]

But there's a problem in how they approach Jesus, which is exposed in this interaction. And Mark records it for us here both because we need to consider the significance of the Sanhedrin's error in our own world and our own lives, and also because this passage teaches us something important about Jesus.

When we look closely at this passage, what we see here is that proper authority and commitment to truth are meant to be bound together, but the powers of this world often sever them in self-serving ways. Jesus exposes this, and calls us to reject it, and instead to place our hope in him, because he is both the power of God and the truth of God.

Let me say that again: Proper authority and commitment to truth are meant to be bound together, but the powers of this world often sever them in self-serving ways. Jesus exposes this, and calls us to reject it, and instead to place our hope in him, because he is both the power of God and the truth of God.

Let's break that down together.

Proper Authority & Commitment to Truth are Meant to Be Bound Together

First, Jesus reminds us here that proper authority and a commitment to truth are meant to be bound together.

The text opens with the theme of authority. Those in authority – the Sanhedrin – come to Jesus asking by what authority he had recently cleared the Temple, disrupting the sacrificial system, and symbolically declaring it under God's judgment. They ask Jesus who gave him the authority to do all that.

And with this question, the Sanhedrin are setting a trap for Jesus. This isn't just a question they have out of curiosity or confusion. It's put together in a way that's quite crafty. Because if Jesus

answers by saying that he’s acting by human authority, Jesus will undermine himself. But if he says he’s acting on divine authority, they can accuse him of blasphemy. [Leithart, *Matthew*, 152]

And this trap wasn’t just rhetorical. Later rabbinic law called for the death penalty for those who appeal to a false authority in religious matters, and it’s likely that serious judicial penalties were in place in Jesus’s day too. [Edwards, 351] So the stakes here are high.

But even though the question is a trap, there’s also a surface-level implication in such a question that the Sanhedrin are concerned for the truth – there’s an implication that they care about the truth.

And the fact that they imply this – the fact that they give the impression of being concerned with the truth – is evidence that even they, flawed and very human authorities that they are, recognize that proper authority and commitment to the truth are meant to be bound together. Leaders are supposed to lead based on truth. They’re supposed to evaluate other people based on true facts. They’re supposed to render judgments that seek the truth. They know this. And so even though Jesus has offended them, they don’t just come out and condemn him on the grounds of their authority alone. They know they need at least the appearance of some sort of truth by which they’re condemning him. And they seem to assume that that “truth” can either be Jesus admitting he’s overstepped his authority, or Jesus speaking in a way that they can characterize as blasphemy.

The representatives from the Sanhedrin know that as those in authority, they’re supposed to be committed to the truth.

But Jesus’s response, in verses 29 and 30, is really, in many ways, a way of saying “But are you really committed to the truth?”

And with that implied question, Jesus makes overt what the Sanhedrin had only implied. Because Jesus seems to be saying: You want to talk about authority. Okay. Let’s talk about authority. But we can’t separate that discussion from a discussion of the truth. So first, let me see just how committed to the truth you really are.

And with that kind of response, Jesus makes it clear that proper authority and commitment to the truth are meant to be bound together.

And we all know this. We all hate being lied to by those in authority over us. There’s something especially frustrating and upsetting when we know those in authority over us, whether at work, or at school, or in the government, or in law-enforcement, or at home, or in the Church – there’s something especially distressing when those in authority over us are not really committed to the truth as they exercise that authority. At a gut level, we know that that’s not the way it’s supposed to be. We know that proper authority and commitment to the truth are meant to be bound together.

And Jesus agrees. That’s the first thing we see here.

The Powers of This World Often Sever Authority and Truth in Self-Serving Ways

The next thing we see here is that the powers of this world often sever authority and truth in self-serving ways.

And we see that play out in our text, starting in verse 31. Mark writes of the leaders: “And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’” But shall we say, “From man?”—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’”

The problem here is not their answer, in and of itself. The problem is the reason they give that answer. And Mark draws our attention to it.

In response to Jesus’s question of whether John’s baptism was from God or from man, the leaders don’t huddle up and say “Ok ... well, here are some good reasons to think it was from heaven ... but here are some reasons to think it was from man ... which do we think is more likely to be true?” They don’t discuss truth at all. Rather, they discuss how giving different answers will affect them and their goals. The way they approach their response is not about truth, but about rhetorical strategy and public relations. In the end, they say “We don’t know.” But Mark makes it clear that the reason they gave that answer was not because it was true but because it was good strategy. And that shows us something important about them. [Edwards, 352-353]

These leaders don’t prioritize speaking the truth. They’re also not aiming at lying, exactly. Instead, they seem to be indifferent to the truth. And that, one philosopher argues, is actually far worse.

In 2005, Harry Frankfurt, a philosopher at Princeton University, published an essay in book format titled *On Bull[manure]*. Well ... he actually used a different, much less “pulpit-friendly” word than that.

Frankfurt gives some other terms that get at a similar idea. [Frankfurt, 5] To keep this sermon family-friendly, I’ll use the word “malarkey” for the concept Frankfurt is trying to describe, and I’ll substitute that when he uses the less PG term. I know “malarkey” is now associated with one of our former presidents. But I grew up hearing that word in my house long before that, and it’s a word worth retaining, setting aside any partisan associations.

In the essay, “Frankfurt notes that there has been a lot of philosophical attention [paid] to truth and lying, but very little to [malarkey – to “bull manure”], even though our society is awash in it.” [Leithart]

But one key thing we need to understand is that “malarkey” is different from lying. As one author summarizes it: “Both the truth-teller and the liar have it in common that they care about the truth. The person who aims at the truth tries to figure out what the world is like and to communicate that to others; the liar attempts to deceive. But by his very attempt to mislead others, the liar betrays his own concern, however perverse, with how things are. As Frankfurt puts it, the truth-teller and the liar are playing opposite sides of the same game.” [Lear]

But, the one who speaks malarkey, is playing “a different game altogether.” [Lear]

Because “malarkey” is “unconnected to a concern with the truth.” [Frankfurt, 30, 33] Therefore, malarkey – bull manure – has as its essence “indifference to how things really are” – indifference to the truth. [Frankfurt, 34]

And so, the odd thing is that malarkey can be true ... but even if it is, it’s still malarkey ... because the person saying it isn’t saying it because it is true, they’re saying it because it gets them what they want. They would be just as likely to say the same thing if it were false. The truth or falsehood of the statement is irrelevant to the person making the statement – and that’s what makes it malarkey. [Frankfurt, 47-48]

The truth teller wants to communicate the truth. The liar wants to know what’s true himself, but to deceive someone else about it. But the one who speaks malarkey – who engages in bull manure – doesn’t care what’s true. They’re unconcerned with truth. They say what they need to say to get what they want. And whether their words are true or false are of no significance to them at all. Often they don’t even bother to find out.

And it’s for that reason that Frankfurt argues that malarkey – bull manure – is far more dangerous to healthy public debate, and to an individual’s ability to speak and value truth, than outright lying is.

Because pervasive malarkey teaches a society that public debate is meaningless – nothing but showmanship, disconnected from facts or sincere truth claims. [Frankfurt, 56] And for the individual who “excessively indulges” in malarkey – who repeatedly makes assertions without concern for their truthfulness, but only with an eye to what claims will help their cause ... that person runs the risk of losing touch with the very idea of truth. Instead, they will weaken or maybe even lose that normal human habit of actually observing, and attending to, and respecting the way things actually are in reality. [Frankfurt, 60] This is how malarkey corrodes a society’s and an individual’s relationship to truth.

And so, Frankfurt concludes, “[Malarkey – bull manure], is, in the end, “a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” [Frankfurt, 61]

And more often than not malarkey is used as a method of impression control, or image management – of shaping how other people think of you or your cause. [Frankfurt, 18, 47, 54]

And that’s exactly what we see in our text. As one commentator puts it: “Mark has made it clear that [the Sanhedrin’s] interest was not in knowing the actual truth, but in discovering an answer which would save their political face.” [Wright, *Mark*, 156] And in our text we also see how this can especially be a tendency for those in leadership – those in authority, as the Sanhedrin were. [Witherington, 318, 319]

And what was true in Jesus’s day, is true in ours. Frankfurt begins his essay by saying “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much [malarkey – so much bull manure]. Everyone knows this.” he writes. [Frankfurt, 1]

And of course he’s right.

There's a lot of malarkey in our culture.

The problem is we're often much more willing to see it and point it out in our opponents than we are in ourselves or in our allies.

We're quick to call something out as nonsense or bull manure when it's said by someone we're having an argument with, or someone opposing us at work, or someone who frustrates us at church, or someone we disagree with culturally, or someone who is on the opposite side of the aisle politically.

But when it comes to ourselves, in the heat of a disagreement we grab at an argument without stopping to ask "Is what I'm about to say really true?" We nod our heads at gossip, and we repeat it to others, even when a voice in the back of our minds says to us "You don't really know if that's true." Or "That's probably not the full story." We repeat the talking point we hear online, speaking ill of one person, or vindicating another, even as we know somewhere in our gut that the truth is probably more complicated than that. We hear a leader we like say something, and we know it's nonsense ... but we shrug off their willingness to say it, we don't hold it against them, we chalk it up to a necessity of public life.

And this tendency to overlook malarkey or to engage in it ourselves is especially notable when it intersects with issues of authority – as it does with the Sanhedrin here, thus severing issues of authority from a commitment to the truth. Whether it's to defend ourselves as parents, or to attack the authority of our parents, whether it's to defend our church leadership or to critique our church leadership, whether it's to defend a public Christian figure we appreciate, or to attack a public figure we oppose, whether it's to defend a politician or a political movement we like, or to attack one we don't like, whether it has to do with police or with protestors, with those in power or the opposition, we are each tempted to lay hold of arguments, and claims, and assertions that are self-serving, rather than commit ourselves first and foremost to seeking the truth.

And this passage is a call for us to examine our own hearts. What are situations where we are like the Sanhedrin here ... more concerned with winning ... or with image ... than with truth?

Now ... by asking that, I'm not relativizing the different sides of these conflicts, as if all each side is equally right if we all just stuck to the truth. That's not my contention at all. In most situations there's right and there's wrong. In many situations one side is more just, and one is more unjust. In most situations there are facts that can vindicate some and implicate others.

Though, of course, we may disagree about which facts are more reliable, and which arguments are truly valid, and which conclusions are truly wise.

But the point is that as followers of Jesus, even when we disagree, we all need to be committed to seeking truth – not arguments of convenience. We need to be committed to facts, and honest reasoning, and we need to resist the temptation to just grab onto whichever position, whichever perspective, whichever narrative, fits with our assumptions, makes us most comfortable, and serves our preferred outlook on life. Because that's malarkey. That's adopting a perspective with indifference to whether or not it's actually true.

We need to admit that we ourselves, and even those we like and support – both we and they – can also be tempted to, and can even give in to, indifference towards the truth.

We see that in the leaders in Jerusalem, here in this text. Where do you see it in your life? And where do you tend to give it a pass when you see it in others?

What we see in the Sanhedrin is that the powers of this world often sever authority and truth in self-serving ways.

Christ Exposes This Severing, and Calls Us to Reject It

But the next thing we see here is that Jesus exposes that severing of power and truth, and he calls us to reject indifference to the truth, regardless of who does it.

We said a moment ago that it's not just our cultural opponents and personal adversaries who are prone to malarkey – prone to severing authority and truth – but also our cultural allies, and even we ourselves, are guilty of this.

And Jesus makes it clear here that someone being our ally, or being less bad than the alternative, does not give them a pass to disregard truth. Regardless of who it is that disregards the truth – who severs it from the use of power – Jesus exposes them here, and calls us to reject their approach.

And we see a little bit of this in Jesus's exposing the malarkey of the Sanhedrin here.

There was, of course, a lot to critique about the Sanhedrin.

But remember, Israel was an occupied land in Jesus's day. And the Romans were far worse than the Sanhedrin. And so, as imperfect as the Sanhedrin might have been ... you could also imagine a first-century Jew in Jerusalem saying "Okay ... the Sanhedrin may have problems ... but they are so much better than the brutal, pagan, godless Romans. They're the lesser of two evils. And so we Jews should probably support the Sanhedrin rather than criticize them." You could certainly imagine someone saying that ... but that's not what Jesus says.

Jesus calls them out. Jesus exposes that they have lost their commitment to the truth. Jesus shows others how the Sanhedrin has severed proper authority from a commitment to the truth. And Jesus, by his example, calls on his followers to reject that severing just as he does.

Whether in matters personal or public, whether in the Church or in politics, Christians are to be firmly committed to truth, and to reject any approach that is indifferent to the truth – any attempt at malarkey or bull manure.

Now, to be clear, a call to truth is not a call to speak that truth unseasonably or unkindly – it doesn't mean being harsh or blunt. There is a time to be blunt. There's also a time to be restrained. We see Jesus act in both ways at the appropriate time.

Being deeply committed to the truth doesn't mean that we're to be harsh or uncaring in how we speak – quite the opposite, actually. It means we ourselves refuse to massage or manipulate the truth to serve our own ends. It means we refuse to pass on gossip about other people, that we got second or third hand, and that we don't really know is true. (Which can be a problem here, by the way.) Being committed to the truth means we don't repeat a talking point from some pundit when we know, deep down, it's probably at least bit deceptive. Being committed to the truth means we're committed to acknowledging and maybe even bringing to light truths that might hurt our own personal goals, or our own social standing, or our own political party. Being committed to the truth means we're committed to exposing half-truths, or un-truths, or unsubstantiated truth claims, even if those half-truths, un-truths, and unsubstantiated claims might have advanced our cause.

Rejecting malarky and being committed to the truth is a profoundly counter-cultural thing. If you do it – and if you do it consistently – you will shock your opponents, and you will anger your allies.

But most importantly, you will please your Lord, who deeply loves the truth.

Which brings us to our final point.

Christ Calls Us to Place Our Trust in Him, Because He Is Both the Power of God and the Truth of God

We've seen proper authority and commitment to truth are meant to be bound together, that the powers of this world often sever them in self-serving ways, and that Jesus exposes this, and calls us to reject the severing of truth and power.

But the final thing we see is that Jesus calls us to place our hope in him, because he is both the power of God and the truth of God.

And we see this in how Jesus answers the question from the Sanhedrin.

At a first read, it can seem like Jesus is dodging the question in verses 29 and 30. But he's not.

For one thing, responding to a question with a question was a common pattern among rabbis in Jesus's day – not a slippery way to dodge a question. [Edwards, 351; Horne, 154; Witherington, 319]

But even more important, the question Jesus asks here isn't a random one. Rather, with this question, Jesus is actually pointing the Sanhedrin towards an answer to their question. [Edwards, 352; Wright, *Mark*, 155; Leithert, *Matthew*, 152] He's pointing them towards the truth. But to receive the truth, they will first have to prove they really want it.

The Sanhedrin ask: “Who gave you this authority to do [these things]?”

Now ... there's a lot of ways Jesus could answer that. He could talk about how he is the Word, the eternal Son of God. [John 1:1-18] He could talk about how at his conception an angel declared that

God would give him the throne of David and called on him to reign over God’s kingdom. [Luke 1:32-33] He could talk about how at his birth, he was proclaimed by angels to be Christ, the Lord. [Luke 2:11] Those are all good answers to point to his divine authority.

But another good answer – and one recorded in Mark’s Gospel – would be for Jesus to point to his baptism. Because at his baptism, Mark tells us, when Jesus came up from the waters, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and God the Father declared to Jesus “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

These words of God the Father, and anointing of the Holy Spirit, were not just a statements of God’s general approval of Jesus. They were an anointing from God, and a declaration of Jesus’s kingly authority. [Edwards, 352; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 497; Wright, *Mark*, 155; Leithart, *Matthew*, 152]

The term “Son of God,” in the Old Testament was used to designate the king in Israel [e.g.: 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13, 28:6].

Who gave Jesus this authority? God the Father did. And he announced it at Jesus’s baptism. That’s the answer to the Sanhedrin’s question.

By God’s anointing, Jesus himself is the power and the authority of God.

But receiving that answer cannot be severed from a love for the truth. Because Jesus isn’t just the power of God. He’s also the truth of God.

Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the light.” [John 14:6]

Jesus told his disciples: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” [John 8:31b-32]

In the four gospels, Jesus begins a statement by saying “Truly I say to you” or some version of that, over 75 times.

Jesus spoke the truth of God. But even more than that Jesus himself is the truth of God.

He himself is the one we can place our hope in, because in Jesus proper authority and true truth come together as one.

That is good news. But it also means that we cannot have the power of Jesus in our lives if we will not accept the truth of Jesus.

If we are unwilling to accept truth, we will be unable to accept Jesus. If we devalue the truth, like the Sanhedrin did, then we are in danger of Jesus refusing to speak his truth to us – just as he did with them. [Edwards, 353]

Brothers and sisters, let us examine our own hearts, and let us not give way to such unbelief. Let us not wall our hearts and minds off from the truth just because it’s scary, just because it makes a

claim on us. But instead, let us open ourselves to the truth in every area of life, and turn to Jesus to receive both the truth of God and the power of God.

Both grace and truth have come to us in Jesus Christ. [John 1:17] We cannot have one without the other.

The truth may be scary at times. Acknowledging it and accepting it may cost us something. But if we compromise, or neglect, or ignore the truth for some meager earthly gain, we will lose something far greater. We will lose not only our integrity and our reliability. We will lose the very ground of our relationship with Jesus himself. Because he himself is the Truth. And we cannot be truly committed to him if we are not truly committed to truth.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us be the oddballs in our culture, who refuse to engage in malarkey. Let us be the perplexing people who speak truth even when it disadvantages us in this world. Let us have a commitment to truth – true truth, solid truth, confirmed truth – that is rooted in our commitment to the One who is the Truth: Jesus Christ.

Because what we will gain by committing ourselves to the truth – by committing ourselves to him – will far surpass any worldly advantages we may lose.

Because Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to God the Father except through him. And in Jesus we have peace with God, and eternal life.

In him we know the truth. And the truth will set us free.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
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- Lear, Jonathan. “Whatever.” A Review of *On Bull***** by Harry G. Frankfurt. *The New Republic*. March 20, 2005. <https://newrepublic.com/article/68113/whatever>
- Leithart, Peter J. “Bulls****” March 19, 2005. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2005/03/bulls/>
- Leithart, Peter J. *The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes; Volume One: Jesus as Israel*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017.
- Witherington, Ben III. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.