

Historic Commentary

(17th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 21:23-32 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 21](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): Prior to this, the Pharisees had seen many things more worthy to be called great miracles, but now they were deeply troubled and asked Jesus to identify the authority by which he performed these works. The great mystery of the future is included in the consequences of present deeds. They felt the urge for special questioning, then, because the prefiguration of every danger was made known in this event. The Lord replied that he would tell them by what authority he did these works if only they would also reply to his question about whether they considered John the Baptist to have come from heaven or from man. They hesitated while pondering the dangers of responding. If they confessed John to have come from heaven, they would be convicted by that very confession for not believing in the authority of a heavenly witness. They were afraid to say that he was merely from man, however, because of the large crowd of people who believed John to be a prophet. So they answered that they did not know (they did in fact know him to be from heaven) because they feared that they might be convinced by the truth of their own confession. But they told the truth about themselves, even though it was their intention to deceive; it was only through their infidelity that they did not know John the Baptist to be from heaven. And they could not have known that John the Baptist was from man, because he was not.

[Jerome](#): In answering Jesus that they did not know, the chief priests and elders lied. Consequently it would have been appropriate for the Lord to respond by saying, "Neither do I know." The truth cannot lie, however, so he replied instead, "Neither will I tell you." By this he shows both that they knew the answer but were unwilling to say it and that he

also knows the answer but will not speak it because they remained silent. Immediately, then, he tells a parable designed to convince them of their own sinfulness and of the necessity that the kingdom of God be transferred to the Gentiles.

Chrysostom: Therefore he adds also another accusation: “John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him.” John came “to you,” he says, not to them. You cannot find fault with him, as if he were some careless person of no value. His life was irreprehensible. His care for you was great, and yet you did not pay attention to him.

Chrysostom: The word “they go into the kingdom before you” is not meant to emphasize that some were following but as having a hope, if they were willing. For nothing so much as jealousy rouses our passions. Therefore he is forever saying things like “the first shall be last and the last first.” Thus he mentioned here both harlots and publicans that they might provoke them to jealousy. Taken together these two represent chief sins engendered by violent lust: the one of sexual desire, the other of the desire of money.

Chrysostom: And with this there is also still another charge. The publicans were attentive and repented, but even after the publicans and harlots had believed, you did not believe. You should have repented long before they did. But you did not do it. So you are deprived of all excuses. How unspeakable was both the praise of the one and the charge against the other: He came to you, and you did not receive him. He did not come to them, and they received him! And you did not even learn from their example. Note in how many ways he shows that some are to be commended and others charged, but in surprising ways, reversing expectations. To you he came first, not to them. You did not believe. They were not offended. They believed. This did not profit you at all.

John Calvin: *Matthew 21:23. By what authority doest thou these things.*

As the other schemes and open attempts to attack Christ had not succeeded, the priests and scribes now attempt, by indirect methods, if they may possibly cause him to desist from the practice of teaching. They do not debate with him as to the doctrine itself, whether it was true or not—for already had they often enough attacked him in vain on that question—but they raise a dispute as to his calling and commission. And, indeed, there were plausible grounds; for since a man ought not, of his own accord, to intermeddle either with the honor of priesthood, or with the prophetic office, but ought to wait for the calling of God, much less would any man be at liberty to claim for himself the title of

Messiah, unless it were evident that he had been chosen by God; for he must have been appointed, not only by the voice of God, but likewise by an oath, as it is written, (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7:21.)

But when the divine majesty of Christ had been attested by so many miracles, they act maliciously and wickedly in inquiring whence he came, as if they had been ignorant of all that he had done. For what could be more unreasonable than that., after seeing the hand of God openly displayed in curing the lame and blind, they should doubt if he were a private individual who had rashly assumed this authority? Besides, more than enough of evidence had been already laid before them., that Christ was sent from heaven., so that nothing was farther from their wish than to approve of the performances of Christ, after having learned that God was the Author of them. They therefore insist on this., that he is not a lawful minister of God, because he had not been chosen by their votes, as if the power had dwelt solely with them. But though they had been the lawful guardians of the Church, still it was monstrous to rise up against God. We now understand why Christ did not make a direct reply to them. It was because they wickedly and shamelessly interrogated him about a matter which was well known.

Vs 25 Whence was the baptism of John?

Christ interrogates them about the baptism of John, not only to show that they were unworthy of any authority, because they had despised a holy prophet of God, but also to convict them, by their own reply, of having impudently pretended ignorance of a matter with which they were well acquainted. For we must bear in mind why John was sent, what was his commission, and on what subject he most of all insisted. He had been sent as Christ's herald.

In short, he had pointed out Christ with the finger, and had declared him to be the only Son of God. From what source then do the scribes mean that the new authority of Christ should be proved, since it had been fully attested by the preaching of John?

We now see that Christ employed no cunning stratagem in order to escape, but fully and perfectly answered the question which had been proposed; for it was impossible to acknowledge that John was a servant of God, without acknowledging that he was Himself the Lord. He did not therefore shelter arrogant men, who without any commission, but out of their own hardihood, take upon themselves a public office; nor did he countenance, by

his example, the art of suppressing the truth, as many crafty men falsely plead his authority. I do acknowledge that, if wicked men lay snares for us, we ought not always to reply in the same way, but ought to be prudently on our guard against their malice, yet in such a manner that truth may not be left without a proper defense.

Baptism denotes here not only the sign of washing, but the whole ministry of John; for Christ intended to draw out a reply, Was John a true and lawful prophet of God, or an impostor? Yet this mode of expression contains a useful doctrine, Is the of John from God, or from men? For hence we infer, that no doctrine and no sacrament ought to be received among the godly, unless it be evident that it has come from God; and that men are not at liberty to make any invention of this nature. The discourse relates to John, whom our Lord, in another passage, raises, by a remarkable commendation, above all the prophets, (Luke 7:26, 28.) Yet Christ declares that his baptism ought not to be received, unless it had been enjoined by God. What, then, must we say of the pretended sacraments, which men of no authority have foolishly introduced without any command from God? For Christ plainly declares by these words, that the whole government of the Church depends on the will of God in such a manner, that men have no right to introduce anything from themselves.

But they thought within themselves.

Here we perceive the impiety of the priests. They do not inquire what is true, nor do they put the question to their own conscience; and they are so base as to choose rather to shuffle than to acknowledge what they know to be true, that their tyranny may not be impaired. In this manner, all wicked men, though they pretend to be desirous of learning, shut the gate of truth, if they feel it to be opposed to their wicked desires. So then Christ does not allow those men to go without a reply, but sends them away ashamed and confounded, and, by bringing forward the testimony of John, sufficiently proves that he is furnished with divine power.

This conclusion shows what is the object of the parable, when Christ prefers to the scribes and priests those who were generally accounted infamous and held in detestation; for he unmasks those hypocrites, that they may no longer boast of being the ministers of God, or hold out a pretended zeal for godliness. Though their ambition, and pride, and cruelty, and avarice, were known to all, yet they wished to be reckoned quite different persons. And when, but a little ago, they attacked Christ, they falsely alleged that they were

anxious about the order of the Church, as if they were its faithful and honest guardians. Since they attempt to practice such gross imposition on God and men, Christ rebukes their impudence by showing that they were at the greatest possible distance from what they boasted, and were so far from deserving that elevation with which they flattered themselves, that they ranked below the publicans and the harlots. For as to the profession which they made of being eminent in observing the worship of God, and of being zealots of the Law, Christ tells them that it is quite as if a son were, in words, to promise obedience to his father, but afterwards to deceive him. So far as regards the publicans and the harlots, he does not excuse their vices, but compares their dissolute life to the obstinacy of a rebellious and debauched son, who at first throws off his father's authority; but shows that they are greatly preferable to the scribes and Pharisees in this respect, that they do not continue to the end in their vices, but, on the contrary, submit gently and obediently to the yoke which they had fiercely rejected. We now perceive the design of Christ. Not only does he reproach the priests and scribes with obstinately opposing God, and not repenting, though so frequently admonished, but he strips them of the honor of which they were unworthy, because their ungodliness was worse than the lasciviousness of the harlots.

Vs 30. I, Sir.

This phrase is borrowed from the Hebrew language; for, when the Hebrews wish to offer their services, and to declare that they are ready to obey, they speak in this manner, "Here I am, Sir," It is a laudable virtue in itself, as soon as God has spoken, to yield to Him ready and cheerful obedience; and Christ does not here give the commendation to slowness. But as both are improper—to delay before doing your duty, and to promise what you do not perform—Christ shows that this hypocrisy is less to be endured than the fierceness which, in process of time, is subdued.

Vs 32. For John came.

As John was a faithful servant of God, whatever he taught Christ ascribes to God himself. It might have been more fully expressed thus: God came pointing out the way of righteousness by the mouth of John; but as John spoke in the name of God, and not as a private individual, he is most properly named instead of God. Now this passage gives no small authority to the preaching of the word, when those persons are said to have been disobedient and rebellious against God, who despised the pious and holy warnings of a teacher whom he had sent.

There are some who give a more ingenious exposition of the word righteousness, and I allow them to enjoy their own opinion; but, for my own part, I think that it means nothing more than that John's doctrine was pure and right; as if Christ had said, that they had no good reason for rejecting him. When he says that the publicans believed, he does not mean that they assented in words, but that they sincerely embraced what they had heard. Hence we infer, that faith does not consist solely in a person's giving his assent to true doctrine, but that it embraces something greater and loftier, that the hearer, renouncing himself, devotes his life wholly to God. By saying that they were not moved even by such an example, he presents an aggravated view of their malice; for it was an evidence of the lowest depravity, not even to follow the harlots and the publicans.