

Historic Commentary

(21st Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 22](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): After the humiliation of the Sadducees Jesus was highly regarded by the crowds. The Pharisees, filled with envy out of an immeasurable shamelessness, again were testing him, hypocritically asking if he might deliver a ruling concerning the first commandment. By doing so, perhaps Jesus would amend the commandment in a manner that might lead to an accusation against him. Now, Matthew and Luke call the person who asked the question a lawyer, while Mark calls him a teacher of the law. This does not indicate a disagreement. For they both represent the questioner as one learned in the law and as a teacher of the law who is an interpreter of the law to the people. But the Lord publicly reveals their evil. They were not coming to have him interpret the law so that they might benefit but because they were seized by envy. So Jesus teaches that one should not measure out one's devotion, loving God in part but also clinging in part to the concerns of this world. Through his teaching Jesus said that his commandment was the summary of all the commandments. The lawyer thought he could cast Jesus into danger as one who makes himself out to be God. Jesus failed to respond in the manner he expected, but he ends up praising Jesus, as Mark says.

[Origen](#): Worthy is he, confirmed in all his gifts, who exults in the wisdom of God, having a heart full of the love of God, and a soul completely enlightened by the lamp of knowledge and a mind filled with the word of God. It follows then that all such gifts truly come from God. He would understand that all the law and the prophets are in some way a part of the wisdom and knowledge of God. He would understand that all the law and the prophets depend upon and adhere to the principle of the love of the Lord God and of neighbor and

that the perfection of piety consists in love.

Cyril of Alexandria: Therefore the first commandment teaches every kind of godliness. For to love God with the whole heart is the cause of every good. The second commandment includes the righteous acts we do toward other people. The first commandment prepares the way for the second and in turn is established by the second. For the person who is grounded in the love of God clearly also loves his neighbor in all things himself. The kind of person who fulfills these two commandments experiences all the commandments.

Chrysostom: Remember how many miracles have preceded this dialogue—after how many signs, after how many questions, after how great a display of his union with the Father in deeds as well as in words—now Jesus asks his own question. After so many previous events, he is now quietly leading them to the point of confessing that he is God. He does this so that they may not be able to say that he is an adversary to the law and a foe to God, even though he has worked mighty miracles.

With his own disciples on the mount of transfiguration he had asked first what the others say and only then what they themselves say. But in this case he did not proceed in this way. For surely they would have said a deceiver and a wicked one, speaking all things without fear. So for this cause he inquires directly for the opinion of these men themselves.

For since he was now about to go on to his Passion, he sets forth the prophecy that plainly proclaims him to be Lord. It is not as if the call to confession has emerged without any precipitating occasion, or from no reasonable cause or as if he had this as his prior aim. For he had already brought the issue to their attention, and they had answered that he was a mere man, in opposition to the truth. Now he is overthrowing their mistaken opinion. This is why he introduces David into the discussion, that his true identity and divinity might be more clearly recognized. For they had supposed that he was a mere man, yet they also say that the Christ is “the Son of David.” Hence he now brings in the prophetic testimony to his being Lord, and to the genuineness of his Sonship and his equality in honor with his Father.

Augustine: Here then there is need for caution, lest Christ himself be thought to have denied that he was the Son of David. He did not deny that he was the Son of David, but he probed his detractors on the particular way this can be. You have said that Christ is the

Son of David. I do not deny it. But “if David thus calls him Lord, how is he his Son?” Tell me how he could be his son who is also his Lord? They did not answer him but were dumbfounded.

Let us then answer them by the explanation given by Christ himself. Where given? Through his apostle. By what source can we prove that Christ himself has explained it? The apostle says, “Would you receive a proof of Christ who speaks in me?” So it is through the apostle’s voice that Christ has allowed this question to be solved. In the first place, do you remember what Christ said, speaking by the apostle to Timothy? “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.”⁸ So it is easy to see that Christ is the Son of David. But how is he also David’s Lord? Let the apostle again tell us of the one who, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Acknowledge David’s Lord. If you acknowledge David’s Lord, our Lord, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord of the angels, equal with God, in the form of God, how is he David’s Son? Note what follows. The apostle shows you David’s Lord by saying, “Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” And how is he David’s Son? “But he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in human form, he humbled himself, having become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God has also highly exalted him.” Christ “of the seed of David,” the Son of David, rose again because “he emptied himself.” How did he empty himself? By taking upon himself that which he was not, not by losing that which he was. He emptied himself. He “humbled himself.” Though he was God, he appeared as a man. He was despised as he walked on earth, he who made the heaven. He was despised as though a mere man, as though of no power. He was not only despised but also killed! He was that stone that was laid aside on the ground, which the Jews stumbled against and were shaken. And what does he himself say? “He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls, it shall grind him to powder.”¹² First he was laid low, and they stumbled against him. He shall come from above, and he will “grind” them that have been shaken “to powder.”

Thus you have heard that Christ is both David’s Son and David’s Lord: David’s Lord always, David’s Son in time. David’s Lord, born of the substance of his Father; David’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Let us hold fast both. The one of them will be our eternal habitation; the other is our deliverance from our present exile.

Jerome: The Pharisees and Sadducees had been looking for an opportunity for deceiving him, looking to find some word that might be taken advantage of by the plotters. Yet they had been totally confounded in their conversations. So they asked nothing further. What did they do then? All they could do was turn him over to the custody of the Roman authorities. From this we learn that the faults of the jealous are indeed able to be overcome but are difficult to put to rest.

John Calvin: Let us now see what was the occasion that led this scribe to put a question to Christ. It is because, being an expounder of the Law, he is offended at the doctrine of the gospel, by which he supposes the authority of Moses to be diminished. At the same time, he is not so much influenced by zeal for the Law, as by displeasure at losing some part of the honor of his teaching. He therefore inquires at Christ, if he wishes to profess any thing more perfect than the Law; for, though he does not say this in words, yet his question is ensnaring, for the purpose of exposing Christ to the hatred of the people. Matthew and Mark do not attribute this stratagem to one man only, but show that it was done by mutual arrangement, and that out of the whole sect one person was chosen who was thought to excel the rest in ability and learning. In the form of the question, too, Luke differs somewhat from Matthew and Mark; for, according to him, the scribe inquires what men must do to obtain eternal life, but according to the other two Evangelists, he inquires what is the chief commandment in the law. But the design is the same, for he makes a deceitful attack on Christ, that, if he can draw anything from his lips that is at variance with the law, he may exclaim against him as an apostate and a promoter of ungodly revolt.

Matthew 22:37. Thou shalt love the Lord thou God.

According to Mark, the preface is inserted, that Jehovah alone is the God of Israel; by which words God supports the authority of his law in two ways. For, first, it ought to be a powerful excitement to the worship of God, when we are fully convinced that we worship the actual Creator of heaven and earth, because indifference is naturally produced by doubt; and, secondly, because it is a pleasing inducement to love him, when he freely adopts us as his people. So then, that they may not hesitate, as usually happens in cases of uncertainty, the Jews are informed that the rule of life is prescribed to them by the true and only God; and, on the other hand, that they may not be kept back by distrust, God approaches to them in a familiar manner, and reminds them of his gracious covenant with them. And yet there is no reason to doubt that the Lord distinguishes himself from all

idols, that the Jews may not be drawn aside from him, but may adhere to the pure worship of God himself. Now if uncertainty does not keep back the wretched worshippers of idols from being carried away to the love of them by impetuous zeal, what excuse is left for the hearers of the Law, if they remain indifferent, after that God has revealed himself to them?

What follows is an abridgment of the Law, which is also found in the writings of Moses, (Deuteronomy 6:5.) For, though it is divided into two tables, the first of which relates to the worship of God, and the second to charity, Moses properly and wisely draws up this summary, that the Jews may perceive what is the will of God in each of the commandments. And although we ought to love God far more than men, yet most properly does God, instead of worship or honor, require love from us, because in this way he declares that no other worship is pleasing to Him than what is voluntary; for no man will actually obey God but he who loves Him. But as the wicked and sinful inclinations of the flesh draw us aside from what is right, Moses shows that our life will not be regulated aright till the love of God fill all our senses. Let us therefore learn, that the commencement of godliness is the love of God, because God disdains the forced services of men, and chooses to be worshipped freely and willingly; and let us also learn, that under the love of God is included the reverence due to him.

Moses does not add the mind, but mentions only the heart, and the soul, and the strength; and though the present division into four clauses is more full, yet it does not alter the sense. For while Moses intends to teach generally that God ought to be perfectly loved, and that whatever powers belong to men ought to be devoted to this object, he reckoned it enough, after mentioning the soul and the heart, to add the strength, that he might not leave any part of us uninfluenced by the love of God; and we know also that under the word heart the Hebrews sometimes include the mind, particularly when it is joined to the word soul. What is the difference between the mind and the heart, both in this passage and in Matthew, I do not trouble myself to inquire, except that I consider the mind to denote the loftier abode of reason, from which all our thoughts and deliberations flow.

It now appears from this summary that, in the commandments of the Law, God does not look at what men can do, but at what they ought to do; since in this infirmity of the flesh it is impossible that perfect love can obtain dominion, for we know how strongly all the senses of our soul are disposed to vanity. Lastly, we learn from this, that God does not

rest satisfied with the outward appearance of works, but chiefly demands the inward feelings, that from a good root good fruits may grow.

Vs 39. And the second is like it.

He assigns the second place to mutual kindness among men, for the worship of God is first in order. The commandment to love our neighbors, he tells us, is like the first, because it depends upon it. For, since every man is devoted to himself, there will never be true charity towards neighbors, unless where the love of God reigns; for it is a mercenary love which the children of the world entertain for each other, because every one of them has regard to his own advantage. On the other hand, it is impossible for the love of God to reign without producing brotherly kindness among men.

Again, when Moses commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he did not intend to put the love of ourselves in the first place, so that a man may first love himself and then love his neighbors; as the sophists of the Sorbonne are wont to cavil, that a rule must always go before what it regulates. But as we are too much devoted to ourselves, Moses, in correcting this fault, places our neighbors in an equal rank with us; thus forbidding every man to pay so much attention to himself as to disregard others, because kindness unites all in one body. And by correcting the self-love (*φιλαυτίαν*) which separates some persons from others, he brings each of them into a common union, and—as it were—into a mutual embrace. Hence we conclude, that charity is justly pronounced by Paul to be the bond of perfection, (Colossians 3:14,) and, in another passage, the fulfilling of the law, (Romans 13:10;) for all the commandments of the second table must be referred to it.

Matthew 22:40. On these two commandments.

I now return to Matthew, where Christ says that all the Law and the prophets depend on these two commandments; not that he intends to limit to them all the doctrine of Scripture, but because all that is anywhere taught as to the manner of living a holy and righteous life must be referred to these two leading points. For Christ does not treat generally of what the Law and the Prophets contain, but, in drawing up his reply, states that nothing else is required in the Law and the prophets than that every man should love God and his neighbors; as if he had said, that the sum of a holy and upright life consists in the worship of God and in charity to men, as Paul states that charity is the fulfilling of the law, (Romans 13:10.)

And therefore some ill-informed persons are mistaken in interpreting this saying of Christ, as if we ought to seek nothing higher in the Law and the Prophets. For as a distinction ought to be made between the promises and the commandments, so in this passage Christ does not state generally what we ought to learn from the word of God, but explains, in a manner suited to the occasion, the end to which all the commandments are directed. Yet the free forgiveness of sins, by which we are reconciled to God, – confidence in calling on God, which is the earnest of the future inheritance, – and all the other parts of faith, though they hold the first rank in the Law, do not depend on these two commandments; for it is one thing to demand what we owe, and another thing to offer what we do not possess. The same thing is expressed in other words by Mark, that there is no other commandment greater than these.

Matthew 22:42. What think you of Christ?

Mark and Luke express more clearly the reason why Christ put this question. It was because there prevailed among the scribes an erroneous opinion, that the promised Redeemer would be one of David's sons and successors, who would bring along with him nothing more elevated than human nature. For from the very commencement Satan endeavored, by all the arts which he could devise, to put forward some pretended Christ, who was not the true Mediator between God and men. God having so frequently promised that Christ would proceed from the seed, or from the loins of David, this conviction was so deeply rooted in their minds, that they could not endure to have him stripped of human nature. Satan therefore permitted Christ to be acknowledged as a true man and a son of David, for he would in vain have attempted to overturn this article of faith; but—what was worse—he stripped him of his Divinity, as if he had been only one of the ordinary descendants of Adam. But in this manner the hope of future and eternal life, as well as spiritual righteousness, was abolished. And ever since Christ was manifested to the world, heretics have attempted by various contrivances—and as it were under ground—to overturn sometimes his human, and sometimes his Divine nature, that either he might not have full power to save us, or we might not have ready access to him. Now as the hour of his death was already approaching, the Lord himself intended to attest his divinity, that all the godly might boldly rely on him; for if he had been only man, we would have had no right either to glory in him, or to expect salvation from him.

We now perceive his design, which was, to assert that he was the Son of God, not so much on his own account, as to make our faith rest on his heavenly power. For as the weakness of the flesh, by which he approached to us, gives us confidence, that we may not hesitate to draw near to him, so if that weakness alone were before our eyes, it would rather fill us with fear and despair than excite proper confidence. Yet it must be observed, that the scribes are not reprov'd for teaching that Christ would be the Son of David, but for imagining that he was a mere man, who would come from heaven, to assume the nature and person of a man. Nor does our Lord make a direct assertion about himself, but simply shows that the scribes hold a wicked error in expecting that the Redeemer will proceed only from the earth and from human lineage. But though this doctrine was well known to be held by them, we learn from *Matthew*, that he interrogated them in presence of the people what their sentiments were.

Vs 43. How then does David by the Spirit call him Lord.

The assertion made by Christ, that David spoke by the Spirit, is emphatic; for he contrasts the prediction of a future event with the testimony of a present event. By this phrase he anticipates the sophistry by which the Jews of the present day attempt to escape. They allege that this prediction celebrates the reign of David, as if, representing God to be the Author of his reign, David would rise above the mad attempts of his enemies, and affirmed that they would gain nothing by opposing the will of God. That the scribes might not shelter themselves under such an objection, Christ began with stating that the psalm was not composed in reference to the person of David, but was dictated by the prophetic Spirit to describe the future reign of Christ; as it may easily be learned even from the passage itself, that what we read there does not apply either to David, or to any other earthly king; for there David introduces a king clothed with a new priesthood, by which the ancient shadows of the Law must be abolished, (*Psalm 110:4*)

We must now see how he proves that Christ will hold a higher rank than to be merely descended from the seed of David. It is because David, who was king and head of the people, calls him Lord; from which it follows, that there is something in him greater than man. But the argument appears to be feeble and inconclusive; for it may be objected that, when David gave the psalm to the people to sing, without having any view to his own person, he assigned to Christ dominion over others. But to this I reply that, as he was one of the members of the Church, nothing would have been more improper than to shut himself out from the common doctrine. Here he enjoins all the children of God to boast,

as with one voice, that they are safe through the protection of a heavenly and invincible King. If he be separated from the body of the Church, he will not partake of the salvation promised through Christ. If this were the voice of a few persons, the dominion of Christ would not extend even to David. But now neither he, nor any other person, can be excluded from subjection to him, without cutting himself off from the hope of eternal salvation. Since then there was nothing better for David than to be included in the Church, it was not less for himself than for the rest of the people that David composed this psalm. In short, by this title Christ is pronounced to be supreme and sole King, who holds the preeminence among all believers; and no exception ought to be allowed to ranking all in one class, when he is appointed to be the Redeemer of the Church. There can be no doubt, therefore, that David represents himself also as a subject of his government, so as to be reckoned one of the number of the people of God.

But now another question arises: Might not God have raised up one whom he appointed from among mankind to be a Redeemer, so as to be David's Lord, though he was his son? For here it is not the essential name of God, but only Adonai 83 that is employed, and this term is frequently applied to men. I reply: Christ takes for granted that he who is taken out of the number of men, and raised to such a rank of honor, as to be the supreme Head of the whole Church, is not a mere man, but possesses also the majesty of God. For the eternal God, who by an oath makes this claim for himself, that before him every knee shall bow, (Isaiah 45:23,) at the same time swears that he will not give his glory to another, (Isaiah 42:8.)

But, according to the testimony of Paul, when Christ was raised to kingly power, there was given to him a name which is above every name, that before him every knee should bow, (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:9.)

And though Paul had never said this, yet such is the fact, that Christ is above David and other holy kings, because he also ranks higher than angels; which would not apply to a created man, unless he were also God manifested in the flesh, (1 Timothy 3:16.) I do acknowledge that his divine essence is not expressed directly and in so many words; but it may easily be inferred that He is God, who is placed above all creatures.

Vs 44. The Lord said to my Lord.

Here the Holy Spirit puts into the mouth of all the godly a song of triumph, that they may boldly defy Satan and all the ungodly, and mock at their rage, when they endeavor to drive Christ from his throne. That they may not hesitate or tremble, when they perceive great emotions produced in the earth, they are commanded to place the holy and inviolable decree of God in opposition to all the exertions of adversaries. The meaning therefore is: whatever may be the madness of men, all that they shall dare to contrive will be of no avail for destroying the kingdom of Christ, which has been set up, not by the will of men, but by the appointment of God, and therefore is supported by everlasting strength. Whenever this kingdom is violently attacked, let us call to remembrance this revelation from heaven; for undoubtedly this promise was put into the hand of Christ, that every believer may apply it to his own use. But God never changes or deceives, so as to retract what has once gone out of his mouth.

Sit at my right hand. This phrase is used metaphorically for the second or next rank, which is occupied by God's deputy. And therefore it signifies, to hold the highest government and power in the name of God, as we know that God has committed his authority to his only-begotten Son, so as to govern his Church by his agency. This mode of expression, therefore, does not denote any particular place, but, on the contrary, embraces heaven and earth under the government of Christ. And God declares that Christ will sit till his enemies be subdued, in order to inform us that his kingdom will remain invincible against every attack; not that, when his enemies have been subdued, he will be deprived of the power which had been granted to him, but that, while the whole multitude of his enemies shall be laid low, his power will remain for ever unimpaired. In the meantime, it points out that condition of his kingdom which we perceive in the present day, that we may not be uneasy when we see it attacked on all sides.