

Historic Commentary

(22nd Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 23:1-12 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 23](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Jerome](#): He is tempted by the Pharisees and surrounded by their lies. According to the psalmist, “The arrows of children are their snares.” Nevertheless, on account of the dignity of the priests and their reputation, he encourages the people to obey them, considering not their works but their teaching. What he says is this: “The scribes and Pharisees sit upon the throne of Moses,” showing this as a throne of teaching about the law. And we ought to accept this because of what is said in the psalms: “He does not sit in the seat of scoffers” and “He overturned the seats of those who sold pigeons.”

[Origen](#): Therefore up until now the scribes and Pharisees among the Jews have been sitting on the throne of Moses. I am not saying this because only scribes and Pharisees will sit on the seat of Moses. They speak but do not do anything, laying heavy and unsupportable burdens on the shoulders of men. Yet they are not even willing to lift a finger to lighten those burdens. For I judge that those who rightly understand and explain Moses according to his spiritual power are the ones who will indeed sit on the throne of Moses. But these are not the scribes and Pharisees. They are much better. They are the beloved disciples of Christ who interpret his word through the grace of God. They are able to sort out different meanings in different words. Indeed, therefore, before the coming of Christ they sat well on the throne of Moses who interpreted the sayings of Moses well and according to reason. However, after the coming of Christ, they sit on the throne of the church, which is the seat and throne of Christ.

Chrysostom: He mentions here a twofold wickedness. First they require great and extreme strictness of life, without any indulgence, from those over whom they rule. Yet they are much less stringent with themselves. This is opposite from what the truly good pastor ought to hold. He ought to be a rigorous and severe judge in things that concern himself. But in the matters of those whom he rules, he ought to be gentle and ready to make allowances. What these men do is just the opposite. For such are all they who practice self-restraint in mere words while being unforgiving and grievous to bear when they have had no experience of the difficulty in actions. This is no small fault. In no small way does Jesus increase the former charge.

Chrysostom: He then accused them of vanity, from which came their ruin. His previous charges concerned signs of harshness and laziness, but these charges accuse them of a mad desire for glory. This desire drew them away from God. It caused them to make a show in front of others who were watching and corrupted them.

Now that it has become the priest's special interest to please those who are watching, he exhibits whatever they want. If they are noble, he makes a spectacle of confronting conflicts. If they are lacking in enthusiasm and lazy, he also becomes more lackadaisical. If they delight in ridicule, he delights in ridicule, in order to please those watching. If they are earnest and practice self-restraint, he tries to be the same way, since this is the disposition of the one from whom he seeks praise.

It is not that he does some things one way and some things in another way. No, he is far more predictable. He always acts with the spectator in mind, in all things absolutely. Then, having laid bare their vanity, Jesus shows that it is not even about great and necessary things that they are vainglorious. They are vain about things without warmth or worth. These are the proofs of their baseness: the phylacteries and the fringes of their garments. "For they make broad their phylacteries and enlarge the borders of their garments."

Jerome: They called those phylacteries "little pictures" of the Decalogue, because whoever had them had his own fortification and defense. But the knowledgeable Pharisees did not have them, because these things must be carried in the heart, not the body. They may have children and treasure boxes and granaries, but they do not have knowledge of

God. Even today there are those superstitious ladies who have their “little Gospels.” In the absence of the true cross and other such things, they indeed have the zeal of God but no true knowledge of him. Even today, they too do these same kinds of things in front of us by liquefying gnats for drinking and gulping down honey. This is what some see as the small, short fringe mandated by the law. But a better case is the woman with the bloody flow who touched the fringe of the Lord’s garment. She was not motivated by the superstitious sentiments of the Pharisees. And what is more, she was healed at his touch. And so when they widened their phylacteries and lengthened their fringes, attracting the honor of the people, they were exposed in their hypocrisies, showing why they seek the first seats at dinners and the front chairs in synagogues. They point out gluttony and glory in public and are hailed by men as rabbi, which in colloquial Latin means “teacher.”

Chrysostom: Everything he accused them of was small and trifling. Yet he was dealing with the cause of all the evils: ambition, the violent seizing of the teacher’s chair, and so on. These he brings forward and corrects with diligence, confronting this strongly and earnestly charging them. His own disciples needed to be warned about these matters.

Chrysostom: “You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.” One has nothing more than another. For in respect to his knowledge he knows nothing from himself. This is why Paul says, “For who is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers?”—not masters. Again, “call no man your father.” This is said in order that they may know whom they ought to call Father in the highest sense. It is not said frivolously as if no one should ever be called father. Just as the human master is not the divine Master, so neither is the father the Father who is the cause of all, both of all masters and of all fathers.

Jerome: No one should be called teacher or father except God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is the Father, because all things are from him. He alone is the teacher, because through him are made all things and through him all things are reconciled to God.

But one might ask, “Is it against this precept when the apostle calls himself the teacher of the Gentiles? Or when, as in colloquial speech widely found in the monasteries of Egypt and Palestine, they call each other Father?” Remember this distinction. It is one thing to be a father or a teacher by nature, another to be so by generosity. For when we call a man

father and reserve the honor of his age, we may thereby be failing to honor the Author of our own lives. One is rightly called a teacher only from his association with the true Teacher. I repeat: The fact that we have one God and one Son of God through nature does not prevent others from being understood as sons of God by adoption. Similarly this does not make the terms father and teacher useless or prevent others from being called father.

Chrysostom: Previously when he had asked, “What do you think of the Christ?” it is worth noting that he did not say, “What do you think of me?” So it is here that he says you have one master, and he does not make this subjective by saying “me” but “the Christ.”

Yet note that this passage repeatedly speaks of the one master, the one teacher, repeatedly applying the term one. Does this term apply to the Father alone so as to reject the only begotten Son? Is the Father guide? All would agree, and none would challenge it. And yet “one,” he says, “is your guide, even Christ.” For just as Christ, being called the one guide, does not cast out the Father from being guide, even so the Father, being called Master, does not cast out the Son from being Master. For the expression one is spoken in contradistinction to the human way of speaking and within the rest of the creation.

For nothing is as crucial as the practice of modesty. This is why he is continually reminding them of this virtue, both when he brought the children into the midst and now. Even when he was preaching on the mount, beginning the Beatitudes, this is where he began. And in this passage he plucks up pride by the roots, saying, “Whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

See how he draws off the hearer right over to the contrary thing. For not only does he forbid him to set his heart upon the first place but also requires him to follow after the last. For so shall you obtain your desire, he says. So one who pursues his own desire for the first must follow after in the last place: “Whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

And where will we find this humility? Go to the city of virtue, to the tents of the holy men, to the mountains, to the groves. There you may see this height of humility. For these persons, some illustrious from their rank in the world, some having had wealth, in every way put themselves down, by their vesture, by their dwelling, by those to whom they minister. As if they were written characters, they throughout all things are writing the story of humility.

Cyril of Alexandria: Since those who have arrived teaching new beliefs for the most part do so from conceit and arrogance, I will say something concerning the value of the teaching. The Lord cuts short this opinion and way as leading to destruction. He says, “You love glory and the places of first importance.” Meanwhile he desires the servant’s role and cultivates humility.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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