

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

JESUS-STYLE BASEBALL

Matthew 22:34-46

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

22:34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." 41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Author's Note: Warming Up: It's October. That means baseball playoffs ("Go Brewers!"). And lo, a strange conjunction between baseball and the larger narrative this text belong to, where things happen in sets of three. The narrative relates the controversy between Jesus and the key defenders of the religious

status quo in the wake of Palm Sunday's cleansing of the temple. It starts when Jesus answers a lily-livered challenge to his authority (21:23-27) by telling three hard, sharp parables, each aimed squarely at his opponents. We heard all three of them on recent Sundays (21:28-32, 33-44, 22:1-14). After that the opponents swing back with three attempts to unmask Jesus as a rebel, rube, or charlatan (22:15-22, 23-32, 34-40). The last of these attempts comprises the first part of the present text, wherein there also lurks a baseball-style three-ness. Hence the direction the analysis will take.

DIAGNOSIS: Striking Out

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Fastball. "Gotta Love God? You Bet!"*

They've gone down swinging, first the Pharisees (22:15), then the Sadducees (22:23), leaving one and all "amazed" or "astounded" at the ease of their dispatch (22:22, 33). Now the legal expert (v. 35) steps up to the plate, doubtless brimming with confidence that he'll succeed where others did not, the aim being to extract some piece of career-destroying folly from the trouble-making upstart. A question about basic, fundamental law should do the trick. And why not? See (thinks the lawyer) what little regard this rabble-raising fellow has shown for the proprieties and conventions of temple-based enterprise (21:12). And we chiming in from across the centuries might further observe how often law-centered questions have seduced the fellow's well-intentioned adherents into saying very stupid things like "The greatest commandment? Don't drink. No playing cards." Or conversely, "Why ask? Who cares? We Spirit-led types are so beyond commandments." Etc. Be all this as it may, the lawyer pops his question expecting some species of response that he can belt out of the park. Instead Jesus fires back with the

one and only answer that brooks no disagreement or even discussion: "You shall love the Lord your God," etc. (v. 37). That's straight from the heart of Moses, of course (Deut. 6:4). No question either that it's the very thing that God will want above all else. So the lawyer gapes as the answer whizzes by, as will anyone else who imagines that Christ is soft, fuzzy, or trivial on questions of the law. He leaves us nothing to swing at, no argument to mount. Strike one.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Curve Ball. "Got a Heart for the Neighbor? Show Me!"

And to keep it that way Jesus throws another pitch before the lawyer or anyone else has had a chance to collect the wits scattered by the first. "A second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 39). This one surprises not only by the speed of its delivery but even more by the angle it comes from, not, that is, from the heart and center of Moses but from somewhere on the edges, Leviticus 19:18 to be precise, where it's nestled against a pair of statutes forbidding the wearing of blended fabrics and the planting of two crops in the same field. (Note to latter-day Levitical interpreters who claim that obscurity in one instance negates validity in the adjoining one: Jesus thinks otherwise, at least here he does.) But why the adding of the "second" to the already impressive heft of the "first and greatest"? For the simple reason that lawyers and all other sinners drawing breath are ever so adept at loving God in the abstract, or claiming to. Doesn't work that way, says Jesus. The first and greatest is kept only when the second is attended to, a point he'll reiterate from a somewhat different perspective in his end-time vision of the sheep and the goats (25:40, 45). But for now, even as this observation curves across the plate it surely dawns on our canny lawyer that the man he's trying to take down is among the neighbors he's commanded to love. Only he can't. He hasn't the heart for it. He flat out doesn't want to.

Really, does anyone? Strike two.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Knuckle Ball. "No Way You're Touching This One!"*

Comes the third and final pitch, the puzzle Jesus poses about David's son, a.k.a. the Messiah. They've been calling him that, the crowds, that is (21:9), and little children too (21:15). So suppose if only as an intellectual exercise that they're right. Suppose further that there's something to Jesus' question about Psalm 110 (vv. 44-45) with its suggestion that there's more to the ancestry of David's son than flesh and blood. But these, of course, are suppositions that our friend the lawyer and the Pharisees with him (v. 41) don't dare explore. If true it would mean that in hating Jesus they've been attacking God, not only by extension (Step 2 above) but head on, directly. No wonder they stand mute and helpless as Jesus' conundrum wobbles by. After that they stop talking to him at all (v. 46b)-though of course their silence comes far too late. They've already done the crime of crimes, that "first and greatest" of all commandments smashed to smithereens. As has anyone else who has ever seen fit in any way at all to brush Christ aside as annoying, incidental, and beside the point, a bother to dispense with for the sake of getting on with "real religion" or no religion at all if there is such a thing. Regardless, we've all got God to answer to for the shabby way we treat God's Son, and the depths to which we despise him. Though when answer time rolls around there's not one of us who won't stand mute and gaping just like the lawyer. Strike three. We're all out.

PROGNOSIS: Piling up the Runs

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Home Runs. What Jesus Hits.*

Yet suppose the conundrum of Psalm 110 is even greater than Jesus posits in the present text (v. 45). Suppose, that is, that

David's son, the Christ, is not only David's living Lord, but David's dead Lord, too? Dead because his enemies, rendered mute, turn from words to deeds in a furious effort to replace their silence with his. Dead because Jesus for his part loves all his neighbors so well, enemies included, that he lets them do this. Dead because the God and Father he loves with every last scrap of heart, soul and mind wants him to drink death's cup for the sake of those who hate him (cf. 26:39, 42). This of course is the very thing that now takes place. You might say that it's Jesus turn to bat; though instead of stepping up to the plate he gets nailed to it. And from that miserable, impossible position he swings away at God's commandments, both the first and greatest and the second that is like it. As Easter will bear witness, he hits home runs with both, emerging as the psalmist envisioned with "all authority in heaven and on earth" (28:18; cf. v. 44). And he uses that authority to decree a sort of reverse grand slam where those who on their own have struck out get to run the bases in his wake, at last crossing home plate to the joy and delight of God Almighty (cf. the parable of the wedding banquet, in particular 22:10).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Doubles. The Tag-Along Kind.*

Things happen in the heart when this promise sinks in. The lawyer-like hostility native to us all is not so much replaced as infiltrated with something new. Call it trust, as in the count-on-Jesus impulse that prompts Peter to take a swing one night at the challenge of walking on water (14:29). Sure, he doesn't get far before older heart-habits reassert themselves and leave him flailing, but even then he has the lingering good sense to look and talk to the right person for the rescue the moment demands (14:30). This pattern will repeat itself, not once or twice but over and over, and in Peter's case most vividly on that other bitter night when the umpire will use a

rooster's crow to holler, "You're out!" (26:74). God be praised at that point for the lingering double-heartedness that will get him on his way to Galilee per Jesus' Easter morning instructions (28:10); whereupon he'll take the lead in running those bases in Jesus' wake. As will a Pharisee (cf. v. 41), Saul of Tarsus, who had tried even harder than today's lawyer, to take Jesus down. Peter will later speak of "a new birth into a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3) and Saul-turned-Paul of "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The terms signal their inability to take any kind of credit for the trust they enjoy, a trust that by now has each of them passing second base and headed for third, eyes fixed with joy on Christ their God and neighbor who is waving madly at them from home plate, egging them on. Any chance that the lawyer in our present episode is running the bases with them? Crazier things have happened. Crazy, after all, is Jesus' specialty-crazy good, that is.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Singles. Lots of Them.*

Here's a glorious bit of crazy. When you catch a person trusting Jesus, you'll find that person loving God. She'll do that, you might say, of necessity, though a remarkably different necessity than the one that Moses pushes. "Do it and you will live," says Moses. "I live," she answers. "Therefore I do it." Or in her plainer way of speaking and with eyes and ears fixed on Jesus she'll put it this way: "What's not to love about a God who loves me like this?" Notice too how her loving of God tends less toward the abstract and propositional and much more to the concrete, as in the daily, dirty business of being kind, patient, and generous with neighbors of every sort, not only the ones she likes to help but also the others that she struggles to abide. She figures that if Jesus could love an enemy maybe she can too, so she gives it a whirl. And in the process she loves the Lord her God. Does she do that with all her heart, soul and

mind? Not yet. Her old heart, after all, still beats and in beating keeps pulling its standard tricks, now hating like the lawyer, perhaps, or panicking like Peter. But equipped with a new heart too she's all but done with squirming over this or lying about it. Instead she dares to confess it in the happy confidence that God's love for her in Christ is all she'll need to make it home. So tonight she rests in peace and on the morrow steps up to the plate to start poking away all over again as opportunities to love both God and neighbor either zing or float her way. Keep watching her. See how now and then she'll smack one of those balls a wee bit, just enough to make it on her own to first base, perhaps, though never any further. Not that she bothers to measure or keep score. She honors her Lord far too well for that, and you'll hear her insisting that all the glory of the base paths is his alone. This isn't fantasy, by the way. I know some people exactly like this. You know some too. In Jesus' name they bless the world. Praise to Christ for each of them and for them all.