

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

CUTTING TO THE CHASE

Matthew 22:34-46

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

34When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? 37He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He 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” ‘?*

45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

DIAGNOSIS: “Faking It”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : “Pretending”

The twenty-second chapter of Matthew is filled with conflict. Repeatedly Jesus’ enemies try to humiliate and discredit him. This is their third try. The Pharisees, whom Jesus has already accused of being hypocrites, pretending to be something they are not, send one of their legal experts to question Jesus. Feigning ignorance and pretending to seek some legal advice, he questions Jesus, “Which commandment of the law is the greatest?” This pious question covers his hidden agenda. But Jesus knows what is going on and for the moment plays along. He offers an answer that also sounds pious and traditional. He quotes the Shema, affirming love of God above everything else, and then links it with love of neighbor. Loving God and loving neighbor are inseparable, an assertion which reflected the best of the already existing Hebrew tradition.

But Jesus and this legal expert are mortal enemies, so what is really going on and why is there all this pretending? Jesus continues the pretending by returning the favor and asking him another typical Jewish schoolboy question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” Easy enough: “The Son of David,” an anointed king in the line of Israel’s first great king. But this question and answer game is too easy. We know that this is the calm before the storm. There has got to be trouble brewing beneath the surface.

How often does our search to do right mask our animosity toward others and our desire to be right at the expense of others? Sad to say, all too often. Sooner than later, more often than not, our true motives will be exposed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : “Desperate”

The Pharisees and their legalistic friends don't want to admit it but beneath their simple catechetical inquiry lays a quiet desperation, a fear, a gnawing doubt, that perhaps their massive legal system of 613 commandments, 365 prohibitions and 248 positive precepts doesn't work. And Jesus' two previous clever maneuvers earlier in this chapter reinforced this fear all the more. They didn't like the way he was cleverly dancing around their questions and sidestepping their traps. Jesus had to be discredited. Their very lives were based on the assumption that this system of moralisms worked. If it didn't, then the entire fabric of their lives would begin to unravel and the foundation of their existence would crumble. Then they would be unable to honor the God they wanted to please. That was not a pleasant prospect. This possibility terrified them. They may have appeared smug and confident, but underneath they were desperate, afraid that if Jesus was right, this life-long project of theirs might all be in vain. Their religious fervor provided cover for their quiet desperation and haunting fear. Their very persistence betrayed their insecurity.

The irony of our religious fervor is that it may be an expression of just the opposite of what it appears to be. Our zealous commitment to "religion" betrays our own desperate lack of faith and the haunting suspicion that God is still not pleased with us. But the harder we try, the more we reveal that we are stuck on the merry-go-round of unfaith.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"Cutting to the Chase: Exposed"*

But Jesus sees through it all. He cuts to the chase and exposes his critics for what they are: not only his enemies, but God's enemies. Initially he seems adept at playing their legalistic game and affirms the legitimacy of their system, able to successfully identify the two most important commandments in this massive legal system, thereby acknowledging its validity.

The Pharisees must have, at least for the moment, breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps Jesus had bought into their system after all. Jesus seems content to continue playing the game and makes his contribution to this catechetical contest by asking: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" The Pharisees were all too eager to tangle with Jesus in a game like this confident that they could win and quickly responded with the orthodox catechetical response: "The Son of David!" They were sure that they had scored a point. But then Jesus uses their own system to expose them for what they are: enemies of the David's Lord, David's God, the God who had sent Jesus, his beloved Son. Citing Psalm 110 Jesus points out how David (assumed by the tradition to be the author of the psalm) had addressed the Messiah not as his son but as his Lord, as his God! Therefore, to oppose him, Jesus, who was making messianic claims for himself, is to oppose God. That is dangerous!

Jesus knew what he was doing through this piece of clever exegesis. Implicit in his interpretation is his own messianic claim. For some time he had been asserting his own messianic claims. And if the claim was true, he was exposing the malice in the heart of the Pharisees for what it really was: that hatred of Jesus was not just hatred of another deluded messianic pretender but actually was also hatred of God. Such hatred made them enemies of God. And Psalm 110 warns that such enemies will not be tolerated. They will be stomped to death under the crushing feet of God. Jesus cuts to the chase and exposes the Pharisees for what they really are. Even though they pretend to be pious, their self-righteous piety exposed them as enemies of God. They neither love God nor their neighbors. Their loveless rejection of Jesus reveals them as breakers of the two greatest commandments in spite of their lip service to the contrary. And Psalm 110 promises that such enemies will be put under God's feet and stomped to death.

Jesus' rough treatment of his critics exposes our greatest fear: that there is finally nothing we can do to please God and that we too will not be able to escape the final and eternally deadly consequences of our plight. God will not rest until his "enemies are your footstool," and that means us!

PROGNOSIS: "Truthing It"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"Cutting to the Chase: Covered"*

But cutting to the chase is also wonderful good news. Getting to the heart of the matter, that Jesus really is who he claims to be, is good news considering what will happen to him. Soon Jesus will be crucified. He will force the hand of his critics and expose them for the enemies that they actually are. They despise him and everything he stands for. Because of who Jesus actually is, these supposed lovers of God are exposed as enemies of God. And so are we. The cross also exposes us for the enemies of God that we are.

But then Jesus stuns his enemies and reverses everything by announcing from the cross, the very focal point of his enemies' animosity: forgiveness of his enemies. Because Jesus really is David's Lord and God, this truly is a reversal of fortune for enemies who deserve to suffer eternally for their rejection of God's Messiah. In the midst of all the lies and deceptions, finally someone cuts to the chase and tells the truth. Good Friday and Easter reveal that these brutal confrontations of Matthew 22 and the cross need not end in eternal death and destruction. God himself through his Messiah announces his forgiveness for his enemies, ("Father, forgive them . . . ") including us, and raises Jesus "on the third day" to confirm the validity of that startling announcement from the cross. Enemies like us, Pharisees who have been exposed as sinners and enemies of God, are now covered. Ironically the very feet that we

thought would crush us are now the ones that cover us and spare us from our deadly fate. The conflict that had been building for years (for a lifetime, for an eternity!), is now ended because the ultimate victim of this conflict (Matthew 22 is littered with the debris of this conflict), Jesus, announces from the cross and from the other side of the empty tomb that his enemies are his friends. And in addition, because he is not only “the son of David” but also David’s Lord, it is God who has declared that his enemies are now his friends. Friends no longer need to fear exposure. They are covered with Christ and, therefore, can stand tall, unafraid. Jesus has cut to the chase and revealed the heart of the matter. This is the truth, “honest to God!” God is determined to love his enemies. This love will not be thwarted.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : “Honest to God”

The deception and pretending now can end. We no longer fear not being good enough. We can be honest to God, honest about our sin and animosity because we trust that the word of forgiveness from the cross from this Messiah is not just the pious opinion of a messianic pretender but veritable Word of Almighty God. Therefore, finally, at last, we can trust God in a way that previously had never been possible.

When the Pharisees left Jesus and walked off in stunned silence, no one “dare(d) to ask him any more questions.” No one dared to acknowledge the truth. No one could face the truth. Neither can we dare to acknowledge our sins. We cannot afford to acknowledge our animosity. It is too great a risk to take unless we know we are covered. But covered with Christ, the conspiracy of silence can end. We can dare to tell the truth, to speak honestly to God of our sin and animosity toward him and our neighbors because we trust even more that his last word to us will always be mercy. Finally we can “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : “True Love”

When Jesus correctly identified the two greatest commandments in response to the lawyer’s question, he was not faking it. He truly did believe in keeping these two great commandments. And he did all the way to the bitter end on the cross. And because of him it is also possible for us to keep these two great commandments. True love of God and love of neighbor are possible . . . and inseparable. But the first commandment is love of God and not love of neighbor. It is possible to keep the second commandment because Jesus has first made it possible for us to love God and keep the first commandment. Because Jesus is the crucified and risen son and Lord of David, we can be absolutely sure, without a doubt, always and forever, that God loves us. Swept off our feet by the loving proposals of our suitor, we can’t help ourselves. This is true love. And at last it is possible to give God what had been previously impossible: all the love of our heart, our soul, and our mind.

And because we now love God, we are freed from the selfish obsession to always get it right. We now can “love your neighbor as yourself” unencumbered by some ulterior motive of having to get it right and win some sort of heavenly brownie point. We get to transform our enemies and God’s enemies into our friends and God’s friends through the ministry of forgiveness. We too are now “sons (and daughters) of David.” We too as Jesus brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters of God, get to love our enemies and remind them that, despite their foolish pretending and persistent animosity, they are the beloved of God.

At last we can be honest. At last we can get to the heart of the matter. At last we can cut to the chase. God’s love will not be thwarted; instead God chooses to deliver that love to the world through us.