

Christ the King

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 23, 2020.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions (Matthew 22:41–46).¹

Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees tried to entrap Jesus in his words. They failed. To think that the living Word of God could err in word is to not understand, or to refuse to believe, who he truly is. Despite their failure, Jesus will not leave them without revelation.

He who was questioned becomes the questioner, asking pointedly, “What do you think about the Christ?” Before we consider the rest of his inquiry, let’s not miss the significance of this question. Why does Jesus ask them about the Christ?

Jesus pierces all the way through to the intent of all their questions. They do not believe that he is the long-awaited, anticipated Jewish Messiah (or Christ, as it is translated from the Greek). Their questioning was not motivated by a sincere desire to know and understand. Rather, they wanted to see him stumble in front of the crowds, presumably revealing Jesus to be an imposter. It never happened. Instead, he who is Truth reveals the truth about the supposed truth-seekers.

Therefore, Jesus’ line of questioning seeks not only to confront their malicious intent but to reveal their inadequate understanding of the Christ. What do they believe about the Christ? What have they missed? If they have missed something, how has it distorted what they believe? Does Jesus fit their understanding of the Christ? Or more importantly, does he fulfill what Scripture reveals?

A Son

Jesus begins with a question about the Messiah’s lineage: “whose son is [the Christ]?” The Pharisees quickly respond with the answer that every good Hebrew knew: The Christ is the son of David. Meaning, the Messiah would be a royal descendent of King David.

The source of this understanding is God’s covenant with David, in which God promised, “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12-13). The promise clearly speaks not merely of the lineage of kings but of one, unique son of David, whose reign

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

will continue forever. It was a promise to be fulfilled, anticipated by Israel from generation to generation.

God's promise to David is reinforced throughout the psalms and the prophets. For example, Ethan the Ezrahite sings to God in the psalms, "You have said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: 'I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations'" (Ps. 89:3-4). And, Jeremiah prophesied, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as a king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer. 23:5). These were familiar passages to those who awaited their Messiah, the *anointed One* to come as a son of David in covenant fulfillment.

Ironically, the Pharisees could clearly see in Scripture that the Christ would be the son of David, but they could not see that he stood before them. Readers of Matthew's Gospel will remember that it begins with these words: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David" (Matt. 1:1). Likewise, Luke's Gospel includes a genealogy of Jesus. Both accounts include that Jesus is the legitimate son of David.

But the Pharisees' blindness has far less to do with genealogies and far more to do with their hearts. They had heard John the Baptist's testimony. They had heard Jesus' teaching and witnessed his miracles. And yet, they still did not believe. They did not consider him to be the prophesied Savior of his people, but rather a threat to be eliminated.

Let us remember what was true then is true today, what was true after the Fall will be true until Christ's return: You can give all of the factual evidence about Jesus in the world, but apart from the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit no one will believe. Saving faith in Jesus Christ *is* based on factual information, but it is not its cause. I think sometimes in our apologetics we forget that you cannot convince, argue, or will someone into the kingdom of heaven. It is only by God's grace that anyone believes. Blinded by the darkness of their hearts, the Pharisees could not see Jesus for who he is, not only a Son but a Sovereign.

A Sovereign

Despite their unbelief, Jesus does not leave the Pharisees in their simple yet inadequate understanding. He takes them to a familiar passage in a familiar psalm of David. Jesus asks, if the Christ is the son of David, "How is it that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" Listen carefully to their response: *Silence*. They aren't merely withholding their answer; "no one was able to answer him a word."

Why are they stumped? Was it because they did not consider the psalm to be the Word of God? Jesus introduces the quotation emphasizing that David is writing "in the Spirit," meaning that David is writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Peter describes it, "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Do the Pharisees believe the psalm to be less

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than the prophetic Word? No, unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees shared Jesus' understanding of Scripture, the inspiration of the Word, and the inclusion of the psalms.

Were they unable to respond because they had missed something in the psalm? Had they not been meticulous enough in their study, an academic oversight? It's unlikely. Although the Pharisees' faults were many, a high view of Scripture and diligent study of it were not on the list. Not having an answer does not mean they missed something, but it could mean they ignored it.

To believe Scripture to be the inspired Word of God is a necessity. To study it diligently is a worthy endeavor. To articulate doctrines from God's Word is a right practice of Christian discipleship. But as we formulate our doctrine, we must be careful to consistently submit it to the scrutiny of God's Word. Scripture is the primary commentary of Scripture. And as we humbly consider the whole counsel of God, we must submit ourselves to what it says, even if we do not fully understand it, even if it exceeds our comprehension, even if it obliterates our prior conclusions. It is, after all, the *Word of God*.

The Pharisees had developed a doctrine of the Messiah, the Christ. Through careful study they had determined he would be a royal son of David. They knew that he would come from David's royal city, Bethlehem. They had determined that he would come and establish his kingdom. What they added was an entire socio-political interpretation that included the overthrow of the Roman government and the re-establishment of the theocracy of Israel.

In contrast, consider the essence of John the Baptist's preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Or consider the message of Jesus' first recorded sermon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). It was a simple and consistent message. In all of his teaching, not once did Jesus propose political reform; not once did he seek to rally the zealots against Rome. No, he did not come to fulfill the Pharisees' misguided doctrine. And because they read the Scriptures through their interpretive bias, they could not see that the son of David is also the Son of God, and the prophesied king is also the King of glory.

David could call his son, "Lord," because he is. He is the second Person of the Godhead, the eternally-begotten Son of God. Indeed, he humbled himself in his incarnation, becoming the son of David, but did not give up his divinity as the Son of God. And though there was nothing in his physical appearance that would reveal his divine identity, as he stood before the Pharisees, he was no less God.

The Pharisees would dismiss the son of David as the Christ, even murdering the heir to the throne of Israel. But all they did was participate in the King's inauguration. He who died on the third day arose from the dead. And he who arose from the dead ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-11). And he who ascended to heaven was exalted at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33). And he who was exalted at the right hand of his Father formally received his promised kingdom (Acts 2:36).

He is the rightful heir of David in fulfillment of the covenant. He is the promised king of the eternal kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. He is David's Lord, for he is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14). And, he is the Savior of all who trust in him.

A Savior

The eternal Son of God was born of a virgin, the son of David. Yet, unlike his mother and unlike his ancestor David, he never sinned. He lived in perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed. Despite his sinless perfection, he was falsely accused, illegally tried, and executed on a Roman instrument of tortuous death. Yet, it was his heavenly Father's will that he die, for in death he took upon himself the just penalty for our sin. So, in his death our sin was judged, in his death our death was defeated. For as he arose from the dead, so we have life through faith in him. His life is ours eternally.

Having conquered his enemies of sin and death, they are but a footstool for his glory, as Christ our King has won the victory.

Humbled for a season
to receive a name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom he came,
faithfully he bore it
spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious,
when from death he passed.

In your hearts enthrone him;
there let him subdue
all that is not holy,
all that is not true:
crown him as your [Sovereign]
in temptation's hour:
let his will enfold you
in its light and pow'r.²

² "At the Name of Jesus," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 163.