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## *Ready to Rumble: Walking Through a Minefield* Matthew 22:15-46

I'm not much of an Academy Awards watcher. But I couldn't help but notice that *Hurt Locker* ran away with Best Picture and Best Director. *Hurt Locker* is a film about an elite bomb squad working in Iraq. Their treacherous job is to clear the ground of land mines.

When we come to the second half of Matthew 22, we find Jesus walking in a minefield. Three different attempts are made to trap him. All of these attacks come in the form of diabolical questions. The questioners are not interested in learning anything from Jesus. They are bent on destroying him.

As you have seen over the last few weeks, Jesus enters Jerusalem ready to rumble with the religious leaders. He is hailed as Messiah as he enters **their** city. He cleans out **their** temple and disrupts **their** commerce. And he tells three very unflattering parables...and they got the point. 21:45: ***“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. But they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.”***

In other words, the religious leaders felt their power and authority slipping away. The people loved this Jesus and things were getting desperate. So all his enemies join forces for a full-on, frontal counterattack, and they do it publicly to humiliate Jesus in front of his adoring crowds. Jesus has been on the attack. Now it's their turn. And it feels like a World Wrestling Federation tag team match—the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians on one side; Jesus on the other—and the crowds watching and eating it up.

It is a four round match. For the first three, the enemies are on the attack. In round 4, Jesus counterattacks and finishes them off. It will make better sense of this battle if we cover the entire section. But it means you need to buckle up. Ready? Read 15-22.

The Pharisees you know. They were the religious arch-conservatives; the fundamentalists of the time. They not only believed in all of the Old Testament, they also believed and followed the ancient teachings that interpreted the Old Testament. And they followed all of the **613** rules that the law required. The Pharisees hated the Romans because everything about their pagan culture was an offense to their scrupulous orthodoxy.

But there is another half to this tag team, isn't there? Who? The Herodians. Herod was the puppet king of Rome. He stayed in power because Rome **let** him stay in power. The Herodians were his toadies. What strange bedfellows! The Pharisees, the scrupulously religious Jewish leaders, and the Herodians, the Roman sycophants—suck ups! They despised each other. They normally had nothing to do with each other, but they hated Jesus more! And their common hatred brought them together for round one.

It was an ingenious attack. Every person in Palestine was required to pay a tax to Rome. It was a silver denarius especially minted for this purpose. On the coin was an image of the emperor with the words “Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the divine Augustus” printed around the circumference of the coin. In other words, this coin was a miniature idol proclaiming that Caesar was god. How offensive would **that** have been to the Jews? Everyone hated taxes. But the very payment of those taxes was an act of idolatry.

So they spring their trap: “Tell us, [Jesus]... is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” How diabolical! If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the tax,” the people will be angry. But if he says, “No, don't pay the tax,” then Rome will crash down upon him. However Jesus answers, he is trapped....or so they thought.

“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” He calls out the truth! “Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They hand him the coin. “Whose portrait is this? Whose inscription?” “Caesar's,” they reply. Something interesting

here... in the Greek, the form of the word “Caesar” is possessive. In other words, their response was, “It is the coin that belongs to Caesar. It is Caesar’s coin.” So Jesus responds. Our version says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” But that is a weak translation. Literally, Jesus says, “**give back** to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” If the coin belongs to him, give it **back** to him!

Brilliant! But Jesus goes on. “And give back to God what is God’s.” In other words, “This coin is made in the image of Caesar and belongs to him, so give it back to him. But you are made in the image of God and belong to God. So give what belongs to God—yourself—give **that** back to **him**.”

“When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.” The Pharisees and the Herodians got whipped. They leave the ring—embarrassed in front of everyone. Round one goes to Jesus! But the Sadducees are waiting right outside. They tag... and the next attack begins. (Read 23-33)

The Sadducees were the Jewish aristocrats. They had power and wealth and loved the good things. **And they controlled** the temple. If the Pharisees represented religious fundamentalism, the Sadducees were religious liberals. They believed only in the five books of the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—and nothing else. No prophets, no tradition. They had hardly anything in common with the fundamentalist Pharisees.

But their greatest point of disagreement was over the resurrection. They didn’t believe in it because there was nothing to be resurrected to. There was no heaven, no after-life, no angels...none of that stuff. When you died, you died...and rotted. Period. Part of the reason that they **rejected** the doctrine of the resurrection is that was not taught in the Pentateuch...the only books they believed in.

So when the Sadducees—who do not believe in resurrection—come to Jesus with a question about the after-life it is obviously meant to humiliate and trap him. There was a Jewish law that if a husband died and left his wife childless, his brother would marry her so she’d be provided for. That’s what happens in this story...seven times! This was the original black widow! If I was, ohhhhh, brother number four, I think I would say, “You know...I don’t care **WHAT** the law says, I ain’t marrying that woman!” Anyhow...with seven husbands in heaven, which one will she be married to? That is their cynical question intended to make Jesus look stupid!

But Jesus barely even answers the question. Instead, he goes on to do something quite remarkable. **He proves the resurrection from a part of the scriptures that no one had ever used before.** He quotes God on Mt. Sinai saying, “I am (present tense) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God said these words to Moses 500 years after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had died. He didn’t say, “I **WAS** the God of those guys.” Nor could he mean, “I **AM** the God of their dead corpses.” The only way it makes sense for God to say that he **IS** the God of those guys...is if they are alive with him in heaven.

Now... this argument may seem a little thick to us...but against the Sadducees it was brilliant. And do you know what was **MOST** brilliant about it? **Jesus quotes from Exodus**...one of only five books they claimed to believe in. The Pharisees had never been able to find a reference to the resurrection in the Pentateuch as hard as they had looked. But Jesus, in his brilliance, turns the Sadducees own scriptures back on themselves to prove his point...and in the process, prove himself smarter than all of the Pharisees!

“When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.” You can hear them cheering, and laughing, as the Sadducees crawl out of the ring, whipped. Round two - Jesus! (Read 34-40.)

So, Jesus smacks the Sadducees around. They crawl back out of the ring...and slap the Pharisee’s hands. Tag! Your turn again. But now you can tell they are losing steam. It is hard to keep getting knocked down. And their next question isn’t nearly so clever. But they are still hoping it will trip him up.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” We know this isn’t a sincere question. Verse 35 has the same Greek word: “trap!” They were trying to trap him again. Jesus replies with the most famous Jewish text. “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. **And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**” This was the most important command in Judaism. It was the first verse that Jewish children

memorized. It was the verse that was placed inside of the prayer boxes that Jewish men tied to their foreheads. The greatest commandment, Jesus says...you know what it is! Love God with everything you have.

But he doesn't stop there. He fuses it with another passage from Leviticus. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love God. Love your neighbor. They are inextricably tied together. And every other law hangs on these two," Jesus says.

Three nasty questions. Three traps. And three times, Jesus knocks his opponents off their feet. The Pharisees crawl back out of the ring. They cry uncle. They want to run home to mommy. But Jesus is not done! Now it's **His** turn to ask a question. (Read 41-46)

I don't have the time to exposit this passage. Let me sum it up this way. The Jews were waiting for the Messiah. (That's what "Christ" means in Greek.) The greatest thing they could say about the Messiah was that he would be a descendant of their greatest king-David—the Son of David. But here Jesus says, "The Messiah is **greater** than David... greater than your religion... greater than your traditions... the Son of David is also David's Lord! **And...he is your Lord, too.** David predicted this 1500 years ago.

Now you may be too blind to see it, but your Messiah—your Lord... David's Lord—is here. It is I. You ask me, by what authority I say and do the things I do? Here's my answer. I am the Messiah, and I am the Lord... of all.

Notice verse 46: "No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."

Do you know the Shakespearean phrase, "Hoist with their own petard?" A petard was a crude bomb with an unreliable fuse. When the person who was setting the bomb accidentally blew himself into the air, he was "hoist with his own petard." In other words, he was trapped by his own trap. The Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians were hoist with their own petard. The mines they laid for Jesus blew up in their faces.

So if you want to choose one point to make from this text, how about this one: **Don't argue with Jesus! Don't fight with Jesus! You will always lose!** Now you might say, "How foolish! How stupid could those Pharisees... those Sadducees... those Herodians be? Trying to win an argument with Jesus! Ridiculous."

Well let's not be too cocky, because there are all kinds of folks seated here this morning who are trying to do the same thing... win an argument with Jesus. Fight with Jesus. Every time we choose to live in a way that disagrees with how Jesus tells us to live... aren't we arguing with Jesus? Aren't we saying, "I know you have told me how I ought to live my life, but I know better. I know better than you. I'm going to live my life the way I want to live my life. And you can't convince me otherwise."

There are many examples of this that I could raise up. I will choose one... because it is a serious issue of growing concern in our church right now. **I am aware of at least 13 different families that are being torn apart by infidelity.** Thirteen families where husbands or wives are breaking their wedding vows, cheating with another person, betraying their spouse, destroying their family and, what is worse, bringing shame upon the Jesus they claim to follow. This behavior scars children permanently and gives them permission to be adulterers when they grow up. And it gives Jesus a horrible reputation. Obviously, Jesus doesn't **really** change lives since Christians behave the same way that pagans do when it comes to their sexual lives.

I know... in every single situation, you have a good excuse. A good excuse as to why you are cheating. A good excuse as to why Jesus' standards don't apply to you; why Jesus words don't apply to you. A good excuse about why this won't wound your children, your grandchildren, your friends, your family, your church, your Lord. In other words... you are arguing with Jesus. Telling him he is wrong and you are right!

Let me tell you this as clearly as I know how to say it: **You will never win this argument with Jesus...ever!** If you insist on fighting with him and living your own way, it will destroy you and damage those nearest to you. Jesus knows best, and when we live differently than he tells us to live it kills us and it kills people we love... people precious to Jesus! **Listen, beloved:** it's even killing our communities, our nation. Adultery is killing us—we were not made for this.

I have only this to say to you. Stop it! Repent! Give yourself **back** to Jesus—you were joined to him in your conversion. Stop giving yourself to someone who does not belong to you, and give yourself back to him. Turn back to Jesus; obey his words and his ways. If you do not...it will only mean pain and brokenness...and, yes, judgment.

And for the rest of us who are tsk-tsk-tsking these 13 families, be careful! If you are stingy and stealing your tithe from the Lord's work...if you are mistreating your employees...if you are fornicating with someone who is not your spouse...if you are eating your way into an early grave...if you are working so hard that you ignore your children...you are arguing with Jesus, too! And you will not win that fight, either!

We must repent. The whole lot of us. Whatever you are arguing with Jesus about, you will lose. And it will cost you. Repentance is the only way to salvation and life and health. And so...I call you...I call us...I call myself to repentance and confession and holiness. I call us to the way of Jesus. Let's give ourselves back to God.

Benediction

Need help? Call us.

The session has called us to a 24 hour vigil of prayer of repentance and confession and pleading for God's mercy upon marriages and families. I will share more details as we get them. But in the meantime, I invite you to pray for God's mercy upon us all.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Up until now, Jesus has been on the attack. Now comes the counter-attack. Who are the attackers? Can you sum up their different political and religious positions?
2. The sermon title is, "Walking Through a Minefield." Where are the mines in these stories? What language in the text suggests the intentions of his attackers?
3. The three questions deal with church/state, life after death, and true obedience to God. Which of these three do you find to be the biggest area of challenge in your own discipleship? Why?
4. Jesus turns the tables on them once more and ends with a question of his own. After this account, they stop asking him questions. Why did this question silence them? Why is it the most important of the four?
5. What does this passage teach you about the power of the right question? What situation in your life right now would benefit from you asking the right questions instead of making pronouncements?