

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Matt 22:34-40 "The Greatest Commandment"

How do we read Matt 22:34-40? The verses constitute about 80 words and we sense that they are important, maybe even relevant, but the content might seem distant. Let's try a more contemporary context and see where it leads us.

Jesus calls a press conference on Wall Street. Topic: "The temple is dead, but the Kingdom of God lives". If He spoke, would you listen? If you listen, would you hear? "The Golden Calf is dead, but the Kingdom of God lives." If He spoke, would you listen? If you listen, would you hear? For what, in fact, is the Greatest Commandment? Why should Jesus be asked to tell us? The One who calls God "Father", the Son of Humankind will be preaching on Wall Street. "The Temple is dead, but the Kingdom of God lives" If He spoke, would you listen? If you listen, would you hear? Hear through the ears of the marginalized! Hear through the ears of sick who cannot afford to seek care! Hear through the ears of the downtrodden! Hear through the ears of single Mom whose home has been foreclosed. Hear through the ears of the elderly whose life savings is lost. "The temple is dead, but the Kingdom of God lives." Jesus is preaching today on Wall Street.

Let's take a little time to examine what is really going on in Matt 22, focusing on

three aspects: WHERE?, WHO?, and WHAT?

*First*, the "WHERE"? We can readily discern the location, i.e., the Temple in Jerusalem.

TEMPLE: huge stone "bricks" were laid, some measuring 44.6 feet by 11 feet by 16.5 feet and weighing approximately 567 to 628 tons; 40+ years to build the temple and courts; 170+ feet from the platform to the top of the temple; white marble, gilded with gold; organized with many levels and step ways, providing from a distance about 1300 feet elevated view (equivalent to 60 story building).

COMMERCE: the Temple was a center of commerce for the temple priestly elite, the Roman empire, and people involved in trade. Recall that earlier in this week Jesus turns over the money-changing tables and empties the Temple of animals of sacrifice. According to Josephus (1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish historian), on festival days more than 500 bulls might be sold, bought, sacrificed, and processed in a single day. This was big business.

*Second*, the "WHO?" Who is there? the Pharisees (and likely Sadducees) are at the Temple, challenging Jesus of Nazareth.

*Third*, the "WHAT?" What is going on? Matthew informs us of the Pharisees challenging Jesus, one of the Pharisees who

is a legal expert (lawyer) is challenging his authority, his knowledge, and his powerful message. <sup>36</sup>"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Now we are at the heart of this colossal confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. Keep in mind the stakes, Jesus' life. We know from earlier that Jesus' message is threatening the Temple cult and the Sadducees, High Priest, and the Pharisees actively and aggressively are plotting to kill Jesus. First they must trap him, in public, through setting a trap for him. They challenge authority, knowledge, and message.

### THEN

**AUTHORITY:** Jesus is the One who calls God "Father". Jesus is the One who identifies Himself as the Son of Humankind. Jesus has been sent to do the work of the One who sent him, not his own work. These characterizations by Jesus of His own mission, coupled with those disciples, believers, and followers who affirm his divine powers shake the Temple to its foundation. The Pharisees would be happy to label Jesus, "just another prophet" and let it go at that. But Jesus' divinity shines through, provoking intense anxiety by the Pharisees.

**KNOWLEDGE:** This is not a simple Q/A exchange in progress. The stakes here are life or death for Jesus. What does this Galilean carpenter really know about the Law, the Torah, the Hebrew scriptures? The wrong answer here will undercut his authority and could cost Jesus his life.

<sup>36</sup>"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup>Jesus replied: " **'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'** <sup>38</sup>**This is the first and greatest commandment.**" Jesus spoke and we listen,

but do we hear? Do we hear in his message echoing the authority of the Torah. In Deuteronomy 6:5 we read, <sup>39</sup> "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Jesus continued his answer, <sup>39</sup> **And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'** <sup>40</sup> **All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.** Echoing the words of the prophet Jeremiah [Jer 31 :34], Jesus is proclaiming the Word of the Lord, "because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest". Listen and hear "from the least to the greatest", from the destitute to the affluent, from the powerless to the powerful, **THEY WILL ALL KNOW ME.**

God sees us all, as we should see each other. The Lord did not bring us "out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" [Exod 20:2] to locate us in a new condition of slavery, of unequal human value- in which some are valued more than "others". Rather Jesus speaks to us of a wholly new world of loving God, loving one's self, and extending that love (God's love) to love of the "other", the prototypic neighbor/stranger/"other". Leviticus [19: 18] informs us "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD". Yes, the words of Jesus echo back through Deuteronomy, through Leviticus, to creation. From Genesis Jesus appropriates the creation of humankind, through our ancestral parents. From Adam's perspective, he was created first, he was "self"; Eve might have been thus considered "other". But the Lord created all humankind, in His likeness. From Genesis 1:27 we hear, "And so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". The 2nd commandment captures the love of all, we all in the likeness of God.

**MESSAGE:** The message that Jesus offers the Pharisee is thus not new, but rather is a scholarly and deeply informed reading of the

Hebrew scripture. Jesus is showing the Pharisees his first hand knowledge and has carefully discerned the central, core message. The Law in the Jewish faith is largely contained in the book of Leviticus, a compendium of >600 individual laws and commandments. Jesus selects just one, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD". It is love of thy neighbor, the stranger, the "other" that Jesus extracts from all of Levitical law. **QI:** Why does this threaten the very foundations of the Temple? **AI:** because it undercuts the Temple structure, priestly authority, Roman Empire authority with its simple message: we should love thy neighbor.

### NOW (2008)

**AUTHORITY:** Unlike the Pharisees in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, we now benefit from almost 2 millennia of human history in which our appreciation of the authority of Jesus has grown. Jesus Christ is the one who call God "Father". Jesus Christ is the one who is the Son of Humankind. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, the one who died on the cross for us. There can be no question on the authority of Jesus.

**KNOWLEDGE:** Our Bible is an untamable text, precious, sacred text, the bedrock of our faith in God and his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. What years of careful, devoted study of the Bible often reveals to us all is greater appreciation of the clear divinity in the thoughts, actions, parables, and ministry of Jesus. For nearly 2000 years, Jesus informs us in ways that guide us, sustain us, and redeem us.

**MESSAGE:** So what is the message of Jesus as written in Matthew 22?

Truly Jesus informed the Pharisees, using Torah scripture to lens from 1<sup>st</sup> century

Palestine back to creation. We need to listen and to hear what Jesus said,... love of God, love neighbor as oneself. **There is no "other"**. Our sick, our destitute, our downtrodden, our homeless, all are "self". **There is no "other"**. We need to transform ourselves, embracing our common "likeness". **There is no "other"**. There have been sharp words in the media lately offering up the least of us, as the "other", as the perpetrators in the fall of Wall Street. These news sources would have us believe that those who simply sought affordable mortgages in fact are responsible for what some economic analyst see as a \$5 trillion debacle. There are those who will encourage us to see the "otherness" in our fellow humankind. In times of crises, we can be easily coaxed into finding someone else to label as "other". **There is no "other"**.

**CONCLUSION:** We must push back this threat, the naming of "otherness", and find our humanity in our shared "likeness". We are of "all". **We are of God. We are of one "self". There is no "other"**.

**It is not in God's will for such social injustice to persist. Jesus calls all of us to seek justice.**

Then seek justice for all, love thy neighbor. As sphere of "self" expands, "otherness" dissolves, "in betweenness" dissolves. We who are formed in the image of God, we all share the struggle for justice for our fellow humankind. Jesus calls a press conference on Wall Street. Topic: "The temple is dead, but the Kingdom of God lives". If He spoke, would you listen? If you listen, would you hear? The Golden Calf is dead; but the Kingdom of God lives collectively in our hearts, souls and mind. Find your locale and expand your sphere, your heart, and your commitment to justice for all.

**LET US PRAY:**

God, We so often seek thee when our hearts

are heavy, and forget that thou art with us.  
We seek refuge from unprecedented  
financial stresses, and forget that Your love  
for us is boundless.

We can be willful in our searching for  
someone to label "other", and forget that  
there is no "other".

We need Thy love and support ourselves,  
but somehow forget those who share our  
likeness in You.

Therefore, we come to Thee O Lord and ask  
for thy help to encourage us to the needs of  
our greater family of humankind.

Help us to seek social justice for all, for our  
fellow humankind, as Jesus taught us.

This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our  
Savior and Lord. Amen