

**The Kernel of Truth that Matters Most**  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46

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You know what scaffolding is, don't you? We use it sometimes on our Kentucky mission trips when we have high exterior walls. Scaffolding is a temporary platform used to work normally on the outside of a building. The scaffolding we use in Kentucky is made of metal poles and wooden or metal planks that allow us to put up siding or put in windows or do other work that is high off the ground. Sometimes the scaffolding will cover an entire side of a house, allowing us to walk from one end to the other. It's very convenient, and most of us prefer using it over ladders.

However, scaffolding is not the house. It is not essential to the house. It is simply a tool to aid in construction.

Religion has scaffolding, those tools that aid us in building our religion. The scaffolding is not bad. It's not wrong. In fact, scaffolding is good and helpful, but it is not the religion. Buildings, we have learned during this shutdown, are scaffolding. We can practice our faith without buildings. Clergy are scaffolding. Sorry, Madison. I know you're just starting out, but it's true. We are not essential to our people's faith. When I stand back and look at all the institutional stuff that has built up around our faith, I realize that we have a lot of scaffolding. Here's our challenge. We must look beyond all the scaffolding in order to see our "house." A religion is in there, and we must not mistake the scaffolding for the religion. So, today I want to try to break down the scaffolding, all the magnificent buildings, the paid professionals, creeds, the programs, all the institutional stuff that has built up through the years. When we take away the scaffolding, what is left? Deep inside our house, what is the kernel of truth that matters most?

You have heard me preach and teach for over twenty years now, and you know that I have some thoughts about faith that are outside traditional orthodoxy. In some of our sister Baptist churches, I might be considered a radical. Don't smile because many of you would be too! And here's what tends to happen. The orthodox crowd tries to control the unorthodox crowd,

reeling us back into the fold. One of my orthodox colleagues tried to convince me a few years ago that his way of thinking about a certain matter was better than my way. I generally do not like these kinds of conversations finally backed out of this one by saying, “If you freely choose your beliefs, I honor you and them. If you examine scripture and then examine your conscience and that’s where you freely come out, I gladly honor that. However, if you feel pressured, expected, to embrace some predetermined position—by your church, by your tradition, by your upbringing—if you give in to that pressure and ignore evidence to the contrary, then I feel sorry for you.”

Strip away all those expectations, take away all the stuff—all the creeds, all the buildings, all the expectations—and what’s left? What is that kernel of truth that will not go away, that which matters most?

That is what Jesus was trying to identify in our text from Matthew 22. He was a radical, challenging heartless legalism, stripping away dry as dust righteousness, and reaching in to touch the essence of faith. No wonder they killed him. No wonder they tried to trip him up at every turn, like in our text for today.

Matthew says this was a “test,” a gotcha question from one of their religious leaders, a Pharisee.

“Teacher,” he wanted to know, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Here’s what went unsaid. The Pharisees recognized 613 commandments in the law. Two hundred forty-eight of these were positive commands, a number that supposedly corresponded to the number of parts in the human body. Then there were 365 negative commands, corresponding to the number of days in a year. All 613 commandments were binding, but, for the sake of debate, they made a distinction between “heavier” and “lighter” laws. The heavier laws were the most demanding and required the most attention.

So, this question was an attempt to pull Jesus into this futile debate. Jesus, of all the 613 commandments in the law, which do you think is the heaviest? Strip away all the scaffolding, Jesus, and tell us what’s left.

Interestingly, Jesus' response was not original. He did not wow this inquisitor with some creative, wise saying. He quoted him his own scripture, the *shema*, a passage spoken daily by every devout Jew: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." The inquisitor asked for the greatest, but Jesus gave him two. The second comes from the book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's it, Jesus said. On these two commandments "hang" all the rest of the 613 commandments.

That is it. That's the kernel of truth that matters most. We are to love God, and we are to love our neighbor. Now, here's the most dangerous part: what does that mean? It's dangerous because it's right here that we begin to add commandments to that kernel of truth. If we're not careful, we'll have 613 or more commandments on top of that kernel of truth. So, I want to try to be as simple as possible. What does it mean to love God? Does it mean that we attend church faithfully? Sing in the choir? Give a tithe of our income? Take a meal to someone? One theologian puts it this way: "To love God is to exist for (God)... to place oneself under (God's) lordship, to value above all else the realization of this relationship (Stauffer, *agapao*, TDNT, vol. I, p. 45).

We must strip the word "love" of any romantic or sentimental connotations. When we speak of loving someone, we normally have images of cupids, hearts, and warm fuzzies. Or sometimes we speak of loving ice cream or Paris or college football. These uses of love would have been foreign to Jesus. To love God meant to exist for God. Period. It meant that God was at the center of one's life, the One around whom our life revolves. Earlier in this gospel Jesus challenged a crowd to seek *first* the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. Some of you grew up with the Westminster Confession of faith. You know the answer to this question. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That is what it means to love God. That, according to Jesus, is a kernel of truth that matters most.

The second is like it, he said. We must love our neighbor. The same Greek word is used for love here. Again, it is not romantic or sentimental. It means to will the good of another. Inherent in it is a commitment to action. To love a neighbor means to want and work toward his or her good. It is the opposite of revenge, where you want and work toward someone's harm. So, to love our neighbor, we work toward his good, even if we don't

feel warm fuzzies about him, even if we are angry with him, even if we don't like him. Jesus even said to love our enemies.

Last year some of us went with our friends from Church Street Cumberland Presbyterian Church to Montgomery to visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, informally known as the Lynching Memorial. If you have not visited, I highly commend it, when we are able to do such things safely again. But be warned. It is deeply moving. It is upsetting. I found myself standing elbow to elbow with an African American man while both of us stared at pictures of lifeless African American men hanging from tree limbs and bridges. To say that I was uncomfortable is a gross understatement. If I could have snapped my fingers and become invisible, I would have done so. I didn't do this, but this thought entered my mind. I wanted to say to the man at my side, "Sir, why don't you hate us?"

I know the answer to that question. A power greater than hate exists. It is love, love of neighbor, even if you secretly harbor feelings of anger or distrust. Love of neighbor that wills good for another.

In 1957, during the heart of the Civil Rights struggle, Dr. Martin Luther King preached a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, which we also visited on that trip. The sermon was titled, "Loving Your Enemies." He, of course, had many "enemies," those who wished him harm. They bombed his house. Threatened him and his family. And finally assassinated him. Yes, he had enemies. Here's what he said in that sermon.

*When the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it. There will come a time, in many instances, when the person who hates you most, the person who has misused you most, the person who has gossiped about you most, the person who has spread false rumors about you most, there will come a time when you will have an opportunity to defeat that person. It might be in terms of a recommendation for a job; it might be in terms of helping that person to make some move in life. That's the time you must do it. That is the meaning of love. In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk*

*about. It's not merely an emotional something. Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all men.*

Take away all the scaffolding, all the cathedrals and publishing houses and creeds and seminaries and all the rest. Take away all that and expose the kernel of Christianity, and that is what we see. Love God and love your neighbor. Exist for God and work for the good of your neighbor. That is a faith that is worthy of our belief. That is a faith I'm willing to give my life to. What about you?

### Closing Prayer

Shape us, Lord. Shape us until our love of you and our neighbors is pure. Amen.