

Sunday, February 23, 2014: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

by [John W. Vest](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue

What does God require of us? We tend to like Jesus' most famous answer, what Scot McKnight calls the Jesus Creed: to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But what about the answer we find in the holiness code of Leviticus and the Sermon on the Mount? Are we really ready to sign up for a program of holiness and perfection? Sure, it's simple and to the point. But what chance do we have of living up to these radical standards?

There is much here to guide our personal lives and social priorities. We hear about provision for the poor and resident aliens; prohibitions against stealing, deceit and unjust business practices; fair treatment of workers; injunctions against mistreating those with disabilities or special needs; justice and fairness regardless of social status; avoidance of hatred, grudges or vengeance; loving our enemies, turning the other cheek and going the extra mile.

Are these attainable goals for individuals or for a society? Human history doesn't inspire much hope in this regard. Self-interest often seems to win out in the battle for the hearts and minds of both the faithful and the nonreligious. In the peculiar social and political experiment known as the United States of America, neither an emphasis on personal responsibility nor a preference for governmental legislation has produced a society that can claim holiness or perfection by the standards set in these sacred texts.

Perhaps it is enough to suggest that these commandments are more aspirational than absolute. Maybe God just wants us to try hard and give it our best shot. God can't really expect holiness and perfection! How could God impose such impossible demands on God's children?

This approach gets us off the hook but doesn't inspire change in the way that Jesus invites us to do as participants in the emergence of God's kingdom. We preachers are always tempted to soften passages like these, fearful that our flock will balk at God's lofty demands and walk out. Lowering the bar is a great church growth

strategy but not an investment in spiritual vitality.

Most preachers also don't want to set themselves up as hypocrites. They don't want to be on this hook any more than the people in the pews.

But there's a different approach. What would happen if we imitated A. J. Jacobs in his mischievously funny book *The Year of Living Biblically* ? What would happen if we took the Bible at face value and practiced the things God expects of us?

I work at an active church in a busy downtown neighborhood. Every day I pass by or am approached by people asking for money or food. Every single day I hear Jesus' teaching, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." I am put on the spot and feel the eyes of God taking note of my response.

One time a man came to me and claimed that he had worked for years as a mob enforcer, doing many bad things—things he couldn't talk about. That very day he had decided to leave the mob and start his life over. But in the process of making his break, he had stolen a car from his partner. He was convinced that the mob was after him and that he needed to get out of the city as soon as possible. He hoped to reconnect with his long-estranged son.

He needed money. He had no cash, no credit cards and no identification. I told him that if he could come back in an hour, I could help him out. I consulted with some of my colleagues. We had all heard similar stories, all told with the detail, passion and conviction of truth. Common sense told them that this man was a grifter, a con man. But what if his story was true, and this was his only chance at redemption?

When the man returned, I gave him an envelope with a little money, a bus pass and directions to the bus station. The man hugged me and said he would pay me back. I've never heard from him.

Was my act one of holiness? Did it bring me closer to the perfection of God's love embodied in the way of Jesus?

The staff of our church maintains a policy of not giving money out of our pockets to solicitors, a policy that I knowingly broke. This policy is a matter of practicality—if it became known that we handed out money, we'd be overwhelmed with people looking for help. Plus, we have a robust social service center that provides help in

various ways for those on the margins, so we direct people there.

But what would happen if I ignored that policy on a regular basis and gave money to everyone who asked me—not just to a random person here and there but to everyone? What if I did this for an entire month, like an athletic training program? Would my attitudes and perceptions change? Would I think differently about poverty and what we can do to help change the world? Would I become more holy?

Perhaps the Levitical commandment to be holy and Jesus' commandment to be perfect are opportunities to practice spiritual disciplines that will draw us closer to the heart of what God wants for the world and expects from us. Maybe we need to practice holiness and perfection in order to achieve them. In the end we may never be holy or perfect, but are any of us bold enough to give it a shot?