

Radicalized

By [John W. Vest](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Vest's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

In my [Century lectionary column for this week](#), I mention [Scot McKnight's](#) description of the dual love commandment in Mark 12:28-33 (and synoptic parallels) as the "Jesus Creed"—which also happens to be the title of [his popular book](#) on the subject and the name of [his blog](#).

My sense is that our lectionary readings from the Leviticus holiness code and the Sermon on the Mount are *summae* of the gospel. In my work with youth, especially confirmation, I find such summations to be immensely helpful—not because they reduce the gospel to simplistic formulas but because they are manageable nuggets of spiritual wisdom that young people might hold on to long after other elements of their religious education have faded away.

I find McKnight's understanding of the Jesus Creed especially compelling. I often use this video in ministry:

If the Jesus Creed is well suited for an introductory level course in the gospel, the Sermon on the Mount is a more advanced take on the same theme of loving God with our entire beings and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

My first New Testament professor, Werner Kelber, referred to this section of the Sermon on the Mount as "Torah radicalization." (I'm not sure if he borrowed this

term from someone else or came up with it himself.) Jesus takes key elements of Jewish law and amplifies them by insisting that it is not only our actions that matter but also our inner attitudes and feelings. He takes spiritual practices like non-retaliation and loving others to the next level, making them even more comprehensive and totalizing.

What would it look like to radicalize our faith in this way? How many of us are willing to advance beyond intro-level Christianity and internalize the gospel message as Jesus suggests? Might this bring us closer to the seemingly impossible expectation of “perfection” that Jesus asks of us here?

As I suggest in my magazine column, I don’t know if any of us is actually capable of perfection. But perhaps we are called to practice these things and see what happens. Maybe we could start this week with turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, or loving our enemies.

For many of us—myself included—a conscious effort to do this would be a radical move indeed.