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A teen preparing for the first driver's test read through the manual that listed all the rules of the road. There were so many; it felt overwhelming. Shapes and colors of traffic signs, distance to follow another vehicle, procedures on how to change lanes, what to do if an accident occurs, what to do if you hear an emergency siren. When arriving on the day of the test, the student exclaimed, "There are so many rules to remember. Can't they just sum up everything in one or two rules?"

The driving instructor replied, "Here are two basic rules: First, go slow and don't run into anyone. And second, drive like your mom is sitting in the front seat of your car next to you."

Sometimes we may find ourselves overwhelmed with all the rules of life, and the religious leaders of Jesus' day used that idea to try and trap Jesus by asking, "What is the most important rule in following God?"

They knew it would be tricky to answer, for they had 613 laws. If Jesus pointed to a specific dietary law about the proper food to eat, they could point to the business laws. If Jesus emphasized the rules

about marriage, they could point to the laws about forbidden sexual relationships. If Jesus pointed to the laws about caring for the poor, they could point to laws about court and legal procedures. They had laws about clothing, tithes and taxes, sacrifices and sacred objects, prayers and holy days, and more. How would it be possible to pick only one?

If Jesus replied, "I don't know; I can't pick just one," they could accuse him of not knowing the law. If he picked one, they could point out the importance of another one. There was no way he could win. They had him trapped.

Just imagine the crowd listening to the conversation, hanging onto every word, wondering how Jesus would reply. They also may have wondered how to sort through all the laws to the most important ones, for following the rules would have been a challenge.

Eighteen years ago A. J. Jacobs decided to see what it would be like to follow all 613 laws for a year. He kept a journal, documenting his journey, which resulted in the book *The Year of Living Biblically*. He discovered the challenge was not easy,

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for some laws were difficult to follow. Others were baffling. He realized that no one could follow every law, not even fundamentalists who interpret the Bible literally.

I imagine those living in Jesus' day encountered a similar difficulty, feeling burdened with troublesome laws that religious leaders proclaimed even if they were difficult to understand or follow. With the religious leader's question to Jesus, the crowd may have felt themselves hanging with anticipation, wondering what Jesus would say.

I sometimes wonder how long it took Jesus to reply. Was he quick with an answer? Did he ponder his reply for several minutes, time that may have felt like hours to the crowd?

And then the answer came in a two-part reply: First, love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. Second, love your neighbor as yourself.

I imagine a pause at this point in the conversation, when listeners felt themselves hanging, when religious leaders felt unable to reply.

Where did Jesus come up with this reply?

Left Hanging
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Rev. Dr. Douglas Cripe
Central Christian Church, Elkhart & First Christian Church, Mishawaka

For the first answer about loving God, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Listeners would have been familiar with this passage of scripture, for they took the words about remembering to love God literally by hanging on the doorframes of their homes a small box, called a mezuzah, which contained the words about loving God. Every time they passed through the door, they would see that small box and remember the importance of loving God.

Even today, Jewish homes post the words near their doors. Loving God with heart, soul, and mind refers to one's entire being—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. I sometimes wonder how

Matthew 22:34-40

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we as Christians could remember such an important teaching each time we exit or enter our homes.

Jesus' second reply came from Leviticus 19:

¹⁸You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

(Pause) Do you feel yourself hanging, wondering how to love God? Wondering, how to love your neighbor as yourself?

If we have safe places in which to live, does that mean we should invite someone who is homeless into a safe place? If we have enough to eat, does loving others mean we provide food for those who are hungry? If we have medical insurance for health care, should we ensure that others have it as well?

By Jesus focusing on loving God and loving one another, he cut through all the red tape, narrowing the legalistic following of laws to the essential practice of loving others. Rather than pointing to

someone's behavior that you don't approve of, love the person. Rather than blaming someone for being poor, offer a helping hand.

It's so tempting to point to certain behaviors that we don't like in others and condemn them for breaking one of God's laws. Pick your favorite one. As you do so, you're breaking one of Jesus' teachings listed in Matthew's Gospel: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get" (7:1).

Since it's not realistic to follow all 613 laws every day, God hasn't left us hanging wondering if we're good enough, for God offers us grace, God's forgiveness, which we can then offer to one another. Maybe that's the point of all the laws—to recognize we can't be perfect, that we need God's grace. I close with a blessing from Kate Bowler's book *The Lives We Actually Live* on "finding grace for others (and ourselves)" (p. 114-15).