

**Hospitality**  
**Dan McCoig | New Stone | May 31, 2009**

1.

What if you spent one year following literally every single rule in the Bible?

Journalist A.J. Jacobs did, and the results are fascinating.

More on that later.

The thought of rules got me to thinking as to when the last time was that I preached from the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus, after all, is the book of the Bible with list after list of rules regulating everything imaginable.

The answer – I couldn't remember, which means it has been a very long time.

One reason that I avoid Leviticus is the interest-boredom factor.

Reading a list of laws and rules and regulations for the morning lesson is, if we are honest, less than interesting.

Three or four "thou shalt's" in and eyes would begin to roll and mouths to yawn.

When people vow to read the Bible through, they usually get bogged down somewhere in Leviticus.

Leviticus is the book of the Bible that is perhaps the most problematic for persons who claim to take the Bible literally in all of its parts.

2.

A. J. Jacobs is a writer who is known for chronicling year-long experiments.

One of his experiments was to read through the Encyclopedia Britannica in a year.

His latest experiment an attempt to live the Bible literally for one year.

He chronicles this experiment in a humble and humorous book entitled The Year of Living Biblically.

For five hours a day for four straight weeks, Jacobs read through the entire Bible.

As he read, he compiled a list of every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice from both the Old and New Testaments.

After having read the entire Bible, his list ran 72 pages with more than 700 rules.

Jacobs noted that some of the rules would be good for him – for example, things like telling the truth, not coveting, not stealing, loving his neighbors.

But, he also noted there were things that didn't seem to contribute to his spiritual well-being or that of his neighbors at all.

Many of these things came from Leviticus.

For example, things like not eating fruit from a tree planted less than five years ago or paying the wages of a worker every day instead of say weekly or monthly.

Jacobs also ran into things in the Bible that are illegal today.

For example, things like killing magicians and sacrificing oxen ritualistically.

Given this range of rules, Jacobs established some criteria for which ones he would actually follow.

He consulted Biblical scholars and developed some interpretative guidelines.

Some rules he deemed figurative and symbolic, like removing ones eye or hand in service of avoiding sin and honoring God.

After Jacobs culled his list, he then began to abide by it as literally as he possibly could. He grew out his hair and his beard.

He dressed in white [Eccl. 9] and wore not clothing of mixed fibers [Lev. 19].

He walked around with money banded to his hand [Deut. 14]

He allowed himself to watch television but would always have someone else turn it on for him lest he make a graven image on the screen through the act of turning the set on.

He "stoned" an admitted adulterer on a park bench, meaning he tossed small pebbles at a friend on a park bench – the Bible did not specify the size of stones to be used.

Jacobs book, for the most part, is entertaining.

That was his intent.

He succeeded.

However, there is some serious learning going on in Jacobs' book.

According to one reviewer, "One of the more interesting observations that Jacobs makes in the book is that while many religious literalists scoff at the idea of a 'cafeteria' style of religion — picking and choosing what rules to follow and what to leave out — the truth is that there's really no such thing as a true biblical literalist.

Even fundamentalists have to browse the scriptural salad bar and can't heap every biblical rule onto their plate."

"Otherwise," says Jacobs, "they'd ... boot out men for talking about the Tennessee Titans ('make no mention of the names of other gods...' 'do not invoke the names of other gods...' — Exodus 23:13)." Jacobs, a self-proclaimed agnostic, went about as far as anyone can in adopting a literal biblical lifestyle, but even then he couldn't literally or legally follow all the rules.

Religions and rules cannot all be completely static.

The Amish, whom Jacob visited as part of his project, have evolved with the times, even if to a very small degree.

He was shocked to find, for example, an Amish woman using a gas-powered leaf blower and an Amish teen rollerblading down a country road.

For Jacobs, the most important lesson was this — He writes, "There's nothing wrong with choosing.

Cafeterias aren't bad per se.

I've had some great meals at cafeterias.

I've also had some turkey tetrazzini that gave me the dry heaves for 16 hours.

The key is in choosing the right dishes.

You need to pick the nurturing ones (compassion), the healthy ones (love thy neighbor), not the bitter ones.

Religious leaders don't know everything about every food, but maybe the good ones can guide you to what is fresh.

They can be like a helpful lunch lady who — okay, I've taken the metaphor too far."

3.

A key point Jacobs raises in his book is the whole matter of biblical authority.

No matter ones theological bent, it is indeed possible to commit idolatry on the Bible itself, worshiping the words instead of understanding the times and embracing the spirit in which the words were written.

As Christians, in Jesus Christ we have been given a model of thought and behavior that transcends written rules.

If we are looking to be literal at anything, we should be most literal in modeling our lives after his.

4.

This brings us to our Bible passage for the morning.

Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Matthew 10 were designed to prepare them for the missionary journeys they would undertake both during their time with Jesus and especially after his ascension.

Jesus' disciples were not to be people merely bound by rules and simply dressing the part of the righteous (that was Jesus' critique of the Pharisees, after all).

Instead, they were to act as Jesus' own representatives by reflecting his character, mission and message to the world.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me," said Jesus (Matthew 10:40).

Like ambassadors in a foreign country, the disciples were to be the embodiment of Jesus and, by association, of God, to those they would meet and live among.

That association would cause the disciples a lot of grief in the form of persecution (10:16-20), alienation from family (10:21, 35-37), and even martyrdom (10:28).

People steeped in their own rules, regulations and worldviews have a hard time seeing an alternative, which was precisely what Jesus was offering — a view of God's kingdom that would upset the status quo, turning over human power structures and ushering in God's rule of justice, love and peace.

Taken literally, the disciples' mission would be dangerous, but the results would be world-changing.

In the midst of their mission of representing Christ, the disciples were to concentrate their best and most literal efforts on modeling him in their relationships, starting with each other.

There's some debate among commentators about the role of "prophets," the "righteous" and "little ones" in Matthew's community (10:41-42).

Perhaps the first two were specific role definitions, while "little ones" refers to what we might call the "laity" today.

Whatever the role, representatives of Jesus were to welcome one another and care for one another literally and liberally with the love of Christ.

5.

Jesus said that *showing hospitality* would result in "rewards" for those who modeled him. What's that look like?

When we do good deeds, follow the rules, we often expect to get something in return.

Some might look at this passage and deduce that being nice to others earns you a heavenly "reward" to be cashed in when one dies and, in popular parlance, goes to heaven.

But perhaps there's a more immediate context here.

The word for "reward" in Greek can also be translated as "wages due."

Being a "prophet," for example, was no easy task.

In fact, Matthew sees the prophetic ministry as being somewhat problematic, with prophets experiencing persecution (5:12), being unwelcome (13:57), and facing death at the hand of those who don't want to hear the message they bring (23:30-37).

In that context, a "prophet's reward" may be a kind of backhanded compliment.

If the prophet, representing Jesus, gets maligned by others, it's a sign that he (or she) is probably doing it right and earning the proper wage.

By contrast, the wages of a righteous person in Matthew's gospel are paid in receiving the kingdom (13:43, 49; 25:34-40) and in "eternal life" (25:46).

If you're really modeling Jesus and taking him literally at his word, you're going to receive "rewards" that reflect the very same things he experienced.

We can't truly represent Jesus without experiencing both persecution and suffering on the one hand and the power of resurrection on the other.

In other words, there's no crown without a cross (10:38).

Of all the items on the biblical rotisserie we can grab and be nourished on, however, perhaps the most important one is *compassion*.

Giving a "cup of cold water" is a simple act, but it's those simple acts of kindness, compassion and obedience that best represent Jesus in our everyday lives (10:42).

In our quest to be "people of the Book," we have to realize that we can never be outside the rules when we lead with love.

6.

A.J. Jacobs learned from his year-long experiment that even as an agnostic there was a lot he could learn from taking on the character and lifestyle of a biblically based person.

Says Jacobs, "The experience changed me in big ways and small ways. There's a lot about gratefulness in the Bible, and I would say I'm more thankful. I focus on the hundred little things that go right in a day, instead of the three or four things that go wrong. And I love the Sabbath. There's something I really like about a forced day of rest ... I also really liked what one of my spiritual advisers said, which was that you can view life as a series of rights and entitlements, or a series of responsibilities. I like seeing my life as a series of responsibilities. It's sort of, 'Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God.'" Imagine living like that not for just a year — but for the rest of our lives. Amen.