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What comes first—your actions or your beliefs? Here's Paul's answer: neither one. What comes first is the love of God.

by [Joann H. Lee](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

In his book *The Year of Living Biblically*, A. J. Jacobs shares his experience of trying to adhere to all the Bible's laws and rules for one full year. He tries to follow the major, well-known rules—such as the Ten Commandments—but also the more obscure ones, like this command from Leviticus 19:19: “Nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” What emerges is a humorous yet poignant story of an impossible quest.

“Here’s my plan,” Jacobs writes during the first month of his experiment:

In college, I learned about the theory of cognitive dissonance. This says, in part, if you behave in a certain way, your beliefs will eventually change to conform to your behavior. So that’s what I’m trying to do. If I act like I’m faithful and God loving for several months, then maybe I’ll become faithful and God loving. If I pray every day, then maybe I’ll start to believe in the Being to whom I’m praying.

Over the course of the year, Jacobs finds that in some ways this theory holds true. His outward behavior has an effect on his inward beliefs and attitudes. For example, saying a mandatory prayer of thanksgiving each day does help him to feel more gratitude. He wonders, what comes first—one’s actions or one’s beliefs?

Here’s Paul’s answer: neither one. Action doesn’t come first, nor does belief. What comes first is the love of God.

In my tradition, we baptize infants. I love this practice. I choke up every time I have the privilege to take part in the sacrament. That’s because to me infant baptism is a bold, unfettered affirmation that what comes first is the love of God. It proclaims

that even before we can utter the word *God*, God claims us. God comes to us—not because of our own faith, not because of our own beliefs or actions, but simply because God loves us.

Our life of faith is more than just a set of rules and regulations to be followed. It is not just about what we do, although what we do is indeed important. Furthermore, our life of faith is more than just a set of beliefs and doctrines to be declared. It is not just about what we believe, although what we believe is important as well.

Our life of faith is ultimately found in the radical and inclusive love of God. For Christians, it is found in Jesus the Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection model for us a love that breaks down barriers and fulfills the whole of the law.

This passage from Romans seems to make it easier for people who, like Jacobs, would seek to follow all the rules of the Bible. “The commandments,” says Paul, “are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” We are not bound to a strict, legalistic, or literal following of the law. We fulfill the law by choosing love.

On the surface, this seems easy. We can break free from all the rules and regulations! Indeed, there is freedom in our life of faith, for perhaps what was once impermissible is now allowed. Living by a rule of love rather than a rule of law is liberating.

It is not, however, necessarily easier. In fact, living by a rule of love involves a lot more intentionality and critical engagement. There is no script to follow indiscriminately. Easy answers are harder to come by. Former dichotomies of right and wrong are brought into question as we consider instead, What is most loving? Each encounter with another human being, each new situation that arises, asks to be considered through this lens of love. That can be a challenge, for it requires us to trust God in the midst of a fluid and contextualized faith. And it requires us to listen for the Spirit of God as she speaks today.

This paradigm of love transcends any rules we may set up to contain it, and it breaks through any regulations that try to hold it. It is much easier to follow a set of rules than it is to love each person we meet. Love requires vulnerability, hospitality, forgiveness, risk, and trust. Love is hard, and it asks us to do hard things. It asks us to live in community with people who are not just like us; it asks us to share our lives with those with whom we do not always agree; it requires us to forgive one

another's wrongs. Love asks us to do hard things, but it also envelopes us in light, showing us what it means to be fully known and fully loved.

We are not asked to love without knowing what it means to be loved. We are not asked to forgive without knowing what it means to be forgiven. We are not asked to live in mystery without being fully known by the God of mystery.

The God of Love awakens us to a new day. It is a day that holds tension and uncertainty, but it is also a day held up by a love that knows no end. It is a day greeted with love, a day that starts with love. As we fill ourselves with that love, it can overflow to all whom we encounter.