

Sunday, October 26, 2014: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46;  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

## **We have, in fact, been given a simple code for living.**

by [Laurel Mathewson](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

When I was fresh out of college and chock-full of vocational angst, I was lucky enough to be invited into a book club composed primarily of working and retired pastors, therapists, and professors. One evening over tea and cookies, as this multigenerational group of women delved (somewhat) into the book and (more fully) into the issues of our lives, my angst spilled over into earnest whining: *But what are we to do? How are we to live? It's so complicated!*

The response that followed has lingered in my memory. A Catholic theologian in her sixties with short, curly hair looked at me. “Oh, but we *have* been given a simple code,” she said. “Love God, love your neighbor. When things get overwhelming for me, I repeat again and again: Love God, love your neighbor. Love God, love your neighbor. This is all that’s really asked of us.”

A few days later, I was taking a winter walk on the beach and came across the unlikely gift of a big and beautiful labyrinth a stranger had left in the sand. Still feeling pretty confused and tormented, I began to walk the labyrinth, repeating those words like a mantra: *Love God, love your neighbor*. Tellingly, I don’t remember exactly what “next step” emerged for me, but I do remember that as I prayed and walked, those simple words seemed to unlock a door. I left the beach with clarity and relief, the simplicity of the commandment releasing the weighty pressures of countless social codes and expectations.

This teaching of the two greatest commandments *is* Jesus’ gentle yoke. In Jesus’ time, a rabbi’s “yoke” was a set of teachings—that which was required of you under the law according to a particular teacher. The “easy and gentle” yoke of our Lord—who can often be read as quite demanding—makes most sense to me in light of this historical factoid and this week’s lesson: we yearn for clarity about what is

essential, and we long to be guided toward the things that really matter.

It is an aspect of the gospel so basic that it is easily overlooked by preachers. In my early-twenties vocational crisis, I was already a confirmed and hopeless church nerd. I'd heard lots of sermons, been to lots of Bible studies. Yet the liberating force of this basic discipleship teaching hit me like a fresh gust of wind on stagnant sails. Similar memories are scattered throughout my life: I realize that I have been surprised by the grace of this greatest-commandments gospel again and again. It is not the foundational gospel of resurrection and shouldn't replace it. But for all who are trying their darnedest in a world full of dubious codes for righteous living, this teaching remains good news.

Glennon Doyle Melton—author of *Carry On, Warrior* and the popular Momastery blog—wrote a post in August called “Give Me Gratitude or Give Me Debt.” After receiving unsolicited advice that she should update her kitchen, Melton aims to cultivate gratitude for the bounty of her North American life with new “perspectacles.” Talking about her microwave, she says, “This is the magical box in which I put *uncooked* stuff, push some buttons, and then a minute later—pull out *cooked stuff*. It is like the JETSONS up in here.”

Melton experiences gratitude as liberty from desire: “*I will not be a slave to the Tyranny of Trend any longer*. I am almost 40 years old and no catalog is the Boss of Me anymore.” The gospel offers all sorts of liberation to all sorts of people, and many seem weightier than middle-class psychological unburdening. But don't dismiss the liberation of those ensnared by consumerism. I've been there many times; if you haven't, count that a special grace from God. The powers of marketing are real. We need the Spirit's help and a good word to walk through a store with such a freedom intact. Melton offers a testimony many hunger for.

But what is the difference between this liberty born of gratitude and the liberty offered by the greatest commandments? They function similarly, yet ultimately a liberating code that includes the prayerful love of God and neighbor will be richer and more robust than thanksgiving alone—and more complicated. Simple does not mean easy, and simple commandments have complicated implications. Judging from the holiness code of Leviticus 19, this paradox has always been the case. What does it look like in 2014, in this place, to love your neighbor? To love God above all else? Whenever I think that these are tired old questions, I know I am not really paying attention.

How did I love my poor neighbor today? Did I even think about my poor neighbor? In what ways do I continue to defer to the ways and the will of the “successful” class? Paul knows that even proclaiming the gospel to new faces can be an occasion for greed and false flattery. Living by a different holiness code than the ones on offer from contemporary culture takes discernment. It also takes courage. We are freed from expectations we find onerous. But we also may be required to give up praise and positions that gladden our egos.