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How To Be Perfect: One Church's Audacious Experiment in Living the Old Testament Book of Leviticus

Daniel M. Harrell
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This devoutly Christian book explores often unmentioned connections between spiritual salvation—granted at the Resurrection—and the complex set of Judaic commandments by which Jesus himself presumably lived. The author, a Protestant minister whose religious impulses tend towards the quixotic, persuades a stalwart band of volunteers to attempt, for one month, to live according to the 253 commandments decreed in Leviticus and blog about their experiences. Although there are a total of 613 *mitzvoth,* or laws, decreed in the Torah, Daniel Harrell approaches his project cautiously, aware that even questioning parishioners about why they eat pork when their Savior abstained is "about as welcome as a swarm of flies (which Leviticus prohibits eating—11:20)."

The earnestness of Harrell's experiment is leavened with such parenthetical comments that highlight genuine puzzlement about, for instance, the purpose prohibiting the consumption of some (but not all) insects and forbidding the presence of certain molds and mildews in one's home. At the same time, however, he clarifies the correlation between a rigorous hygienic discipline and spiritual purity virtually from scratch, when one might expect him to turn to contemporary Jewish observance as a guide. This enables him to remain within the framework of Christian faith while continuing to interrogate what he perceives as a too-comfortable acceptance of the notion that salvation means that one is free to sin or cheat in the many small details of daily living.

Grappling at length with the rigorous sacrificial system detailed in Leviticus, Harrell drives home the extent to which Jesus functions as a substitutionary sacrifice in Christianity, although he and his cohorts observe the laws of Leviticus haphazardly. They tour a kosher slaughterhouse to compensate for not being able to butcher any bulls, goats, or pigeons on their own. One volunteer constructs a makeshift *Sukkah* inside her small apartment in an effort to mimic what it might have felt like to cart the Ark of the Covenant around in the desert for forty years. When Harrell stands up during a concert to honor "elders," one senior citizen hisses at him to sit down and stop blocking her view!

Genial disingenuousness is Harrell's stylistic trademark, and it serves him in good stead in this searching exploration of the nature of faith that will compel thoughtful reading by readers of many faiths. Harrell has also written *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith.*

ELIZABETH BREAU (January 13, 2011)

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