

“What Does the Lord Require?”

Reading: Psalm 50:1-15; Micah 6:6-8; Galatians 3:23-28

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There was some recent archaeological news related to this passage of Micah that you may not have heard about. It's a very timely discovery; it's very lucky for me that scholars made this discovery just in time for me to preach this sermon. It's probably something you haven't heard of, though, and in fact this is probably the only place you'll hear this announced, but scholars have recently discovered some variant versions of this passage of the book of Micah. They do that from time to time; occasionally they'll find some fragment of ancient papyrus that will have a slightly different version of a biblical text that will give us some insight into how ancient peoples understood a passage.

It's very interesting, though, because this particular discovery (that I'm making up) apparently came from a group of ancient people who lo and behold must have been kind of like some Wesleyans have been from time to time. Because in this particular version of Micah, some people have changed the answer to the question, “What does the Lord require of us?” Instead of “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God,” this group of people seemed to be of the impression that God required different things from them, things like “do not own a television set,” and “women must wear skirts and have long hair,” and “no dancing.” It appears as though this group of people, I'm sure with the best of intentions, must have read Micah and assumed that no, God can't just require us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly, and so they added some requirements to the list to help God out, and amazingly, some of their requirements looked an awful lot like the hang-ups that Wesleyans have had in the past, hang-ups that now look like legalism to us. And I bet if those archaeologists kept digging, I'd bet they could find some other scraps of text with some of the hang-ups your churches may have had, too. Maybe some of those other variant readings would have God requiring that you sing only a certain type of song in worship, or you do not move a certain piece of church furniture that was donated by great-aunt Millie, or you make sure you look very put-together and in-control before you come to church, and for goodness' sake you do not act like anything but a perfect saint.

It's really only natural, isn't it? “Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” are not very specific instructions. How do I know when I've fulfilled that requirement? And if I'm serious about theological questions — and let's face it, regardless of what our world tells us, theological questions are some of the most important questions there are — if I'm serious about theological questions, I want to know exactly what is required of me. I want to know how to fulfill God's requirements. I don't want gray areas; I want to know precisely what I have to do to make God happy.

The people of God have always done that. We ask God what He wants, and when He gives us an answer, we want more. What if this happens? What about that exception? God says, “Do not kill,” so we ask, “What if it's an accident?” That's how our brains work, and that's how they've always worked. It's just natural, because we're so fallible. We want to know exactly where the line is. Exactly how many times a year counts as regular church attendance? Exactly how much of my income do I have to give to be generous? Sometimes it's because we want to know how much we can get away with before we're in trouble, but sometimes it's because we honestly don't want to cross the line.

Just imagine what it would be like if our legislators one day decided to simplify things by condensing all of our thousands upon thousands of laws down to “act justly, love mercy, and walk

humbly.” Isn’t that just inviting people to wiggle their way out of accountability? Imagine the field day lawyers would have trying to come up with justifications for why their clients were actually acting justly. And so we need specific laws, and lots of them. That’s what the people of God did, too. God gave Moses over six hundred laws to guide the peoples’ behavior. By the time of Jesus, some groups had expanded those hundreds of laws into thousands of guidelines to spell out exactly what they all meant in just about every conceivable situation. Jesus called those people hypocrites, blind guides, children of hell, whitewashed tombs, snakes, because they tie up heavy burdens for people and shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in their faces.

There are two problems here, I think. The first is that Micah is giving us instructions on what type of person to be more than he’s giving us specific laws to follow, and we would much rather have a list of minimum requirements. It’s so much easier and clearer to have a checklist of rules to follow, even if it’s a long list, than it is to live a life that is characterized by certain virtues. How do I know when I’ve loved mercy? How often do I have to love mercy in order to complete that task? If I adopt a kitten from the humane society, is that showing enough mercy? What counts as loving justice? Some people consider revenge just, so does it fulfill God’s requirement if I give as good as I get? So the first problem is that we’d much rather have a list of minimum requirements than a description of what type of person to be.

And the second problem is that God has never been very impressed with fulfilling the minimum requirements. Fulfilling the letter of the law simply does not satisfy God, because He can see right through you. Micah gives us a clue to the fact that God’s people were at that time hoping to bribe God by fulfilling the letter of the law, but there’s another prophet that I think says it even better. God says this through the prophet Amos: “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Hypocrites. Whitewashed tombs. Snakes.

And the reason this matters to us as pastors and leaders and members of churches is because we’ve always been really good at telling people what the Lord requires of us, and only sometimes does our list look like Micah’s. We get so caught up in our music and our potlucks and our church politics that we add all of these things that we think the Lord requires of us. And make no mistake, I love church music, and I *really* love church food, and I even have very strong opinions about church politics, but all the potlucks in the world have nothing to do with the kingdom of heaven unless we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Your church has probably had a different list of requirements than mine, but I bet you’ve had them, or maybe you still do.

And you know what? I think people know that, even if they know very little about the kingdom of God. I think the world can tell when we’re constructing barriers that don’t really get to the heart of the gospel. I think people can tell when we get ingrown to the point of caring less about following God than we do about following our own rules and ideas of godliness. Maybe not everyone can tell, but I think over time people will notice when our behavior as a church doesn’t line up with the core of the message of a God who came to save.

So what does this have to do with a service of prayer for Christian unity? Micah's message is not really best heard by individuals. It's not even really best heard by a congregation, I think. We all, as gathered representatives of the larger church, need to hear Micah's sermon. One of the nuances of what he's saying that gets lost in translation is that the word that usually gets translated as "require" or "demand" really has more of a sense of "looking for" or "expecting to find." It's very subtle, but "require" has that connotation of, well, fulfilling requirements, when really the sense of the word is, "what does God want to find when He looks among His people?" What does He hope to see in us? It's not a requirement that you can just check off the list when it's done, it's a quality that needs to be manifest in the whole for it to be meaningful. God's not looking so much for an individual action, He wants a collective virtue, the quality of a community of people who have been so transformed that they as a body then transform the whole.

What does the Lord require of us? What does the Lord *require* of us? Let me say it again, because I don't know that we've got it yet: what does the Lord require? Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. It's offensive to us what Micah leaves off of that list. I'm not saying that doctrinal and theological differences are not important; come over to my house sometime and I'll put on a pot of strong coffee and I'll happily argue the finer points of whatever theology you want. It matters. I'm not saying that personal acts of faith and individual spiritual formation are not important; the Wesleyan tradition was launched on the transforming power of individuals committed to spiritual devotion. But we need to be offended by Micah's list of requirements. We need to grab him by the arm and ask him, "What about all these other things that are important to us? Where are they on your list? Does God require them?"

In spite of all of our differences as congregations and church traditions, we are united by that claim Paul makes in Galatians 3: that we have clothed ourselves in Christ, and we are heirs together of His promise. We are united in our goals, because we follow the same Lord, and we are all being formed into His likeness, and we are all on the mission of His kingdom. Sometimes we're more successful and looking like Him than others, and sometimes we're better at remembering our mission than others. And when we're at our best, we remember what the Lord requires of us.

We are called to proclaim justice for the weak. In our culture, justice has the sense of retribution: we make the wrongdoer suffer for their crimes. But in the Old Testament, justice has more of a sense of salvation for the one who has been wronged. It might involve a penalty for the wrongdoer, but the goal is to make things right for the one who has been wronged. And that's what Micah calls us to, to set things right and strive for justice for those who need salvation from their enemies and oppressors. We are called to love mercy, not just to remember the grace that has been shown to us and be gracious to others out of a sense of obligation, but to be gracious and grateful because we *love* it, because we're eager to be merciful. And we're called to walk humbly, not stiff-necked, not high-handed, not seeking our own gain or glory, but humbly before our God.

This is what the Lord requires of us. And as we are faithful to that calling, we will be faithful as the church, and God's kingdom will be blessed. What does the Lord require of us? Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly before your God.



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