
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.
Micah 6:8 (NIV)

Last week, as I reflected on the theme 'lost', I mentioned a mother (a Christian) who had shared how she felt whilst doing dishes. She said, *"As I stared out the window washing dishes yet again, I couldn't help but feel as if I were marking time. Exactly how much time had I spent in front of the sink over the years with my hands in hot, soapy water, running circles over a plate with a rag or twisting it inside then outside a dirty cup? What else could I have accomplished in my life if I weren't cleaning up the kitchen multiple times a day? Even on that sunny afternoon, when there wasn't anything particular to cry about, a tear escaped from the corner of one eye."*

As she reflected on her own thoughts and feelings she said she felt hidden, unnoticed, and unseen. And then she said, *"As I stood with yet another tear making its way down the path of the first, I uttered an aching whisper to my heavenly Father. I told Him how I felt and asked Him to help. And then He reminded me. He reminded me about Hagar, who also felt hidden, unnoticed, unseen and forgotten. She had done the mundane work of being a servant girl and now felt tossed aside. (Genesis 16:6) She was alone when God spoke to her. And He told her that He saw her. He saw Ruth doing the mundane work of picking up the leftover grain in the field for a season (Ruth 2:2), and He reminded me how it prepared Ruth for her husband. He saw David doing the mundane work of shepherding sheep for a season (1 Samuel 16:19), and He reminded me how it prepared him to one day become King David. He saw Peter and other disciples doing the mundane work of casting nets in hopes of catching a bounty of fish (Matthew 4:19), and He reminded me how it prepared the disciples to be fishers of men. He tenderly reminded me that my work didn't define me but instead created character and beauty in my heart and home. He reminded me that even mundane work can be an act of worship. I was not lost at all. He saw me."*

For this person – who for a moment felt hidden, unseen and unnoticed – she was reorientated through God's Word. In our world today there are many people who are unnoticed, hidden and unseen.

In our world today there are more than 70 million people living in refugee camps. Hundreds of millions of people are affected by war, political violence, and political unrest. We may also speak about those affected by domestic violence or abuse of various kinds. And this is before we speak about physical and mental health issues that many people today are dealing with, so often unseen and unnoticed.

In this context we hear this word of God (as God also speaks of 'Blessing' today – Matthew 5:1-12) from Micah 6:8: *“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”*

At first we may say that the meaning is quite obvious: “Do the ‘right thing’, care for people, and have a reverential attitude of worship for God”. However, over the years, I have heard many different people from various groups quote Micah 6:8 in support of their cause’. Politicians on both sides of the political spectrum have quoted Micah 6:8 in terms of their policies and approaches. Various groups advocating various ‘rights’ have all referred to passages like Micah 6:8 is support of their ‘cause’.

In the end, one may get confused about what this exactly might mean.

At a simple level we may say, ‘Care for people around you in a real and practical way. Live the faith you claim to profess’. And this is true. The Apostle James says, “Faith without works is dead” (Jas.2:17).

But what does Micah 6:8 really mean? As I have pondered the many different ways people have advocated various ‘social causes’, and have employed passages such as Micah 6:8, there is one common denominator that I have found missing in many of those who promote such ‘social justice causes’: very few of these ‘causes’ speak of a ‘right faith’ toward God. This was Micah’s concern.

Micah was one of four great Hebrew prophets who lived and worked during the eighth century BC (the others being Amos, Hosea and Isaiah). Great challenge were associated with this period. Early in the period the Assyrian Empire rose to new strength. During Ahaz’s reign the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and made Judah a vassal state. Later, during the reign of Hezekiah, Judah was attacked by the Assyrians and Jerusalem besieged. For some reason not even clear in the Bible (2 Kings 18-19 and parallels) the Assyrian army retreated and left the small kingdom in peace (which they enjoyed for 40 years or so).

Most of Micah’s prophecies appear to have been delivered in Jerusalem, where he criticised the exploitation of the people by unscrupulous traders. People are left in no doubt that God is not impressed by correct and fancy ritual when accompanied by injustice and abuse in other areas of life. In the face of injustice, and worship without meaning, Micah asked the question: “what does the Lord require of you? The response was: “To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”.

These words are simple, but what do they mean? To understand them further we need to keep in mind what has preceded these words. Just prior to this verse God ‘contended’ with His people, calling heaven and earth as His witness, that whilst the ‘outward acts of religion’ may appear ‘good’ to some, they were done with sinful hearts: hearts not focused on the Lord Himself.

God asks His people, "How have I wearied you?" And God looks at their self-absorbed (and sinful) actions and essentially asks, "What will atone for all this? Will thousands of animal sacrifices...? Even human sacrifice...?" Here, of course, Micah is using hyperbole. Human sacrifice was expressly forbidden. People would have been shocked to here such words. But Micah wanted to wake people from their spiritual apathy and indifference and call them back to a meaningful focus on God.

At one level this is about the way we, as God's people, are to operate in the world'. What God requires is equated here to what is "good" (Heb: *tob*). As in the creation narratives in Genesis 1, this term means "appropriate for a purpose." This, then, asks a question, "Are you doing what God wants you to do?"

God then speaks about 'doing (or practice justice". And the Hebrew here (*mishpat*) moves far beyond the requirements of 'law'. In our modern thinking "justice" is largely a legal term. In Hebrew thought 'justice' involved the basic needs, requirements, or even rights of people living together in community. To 'do justice' (which could also be translated, 'to act righteously' or 'in a right way'). This involves 'doing the right thing' toward God and other people (cf. 10 Commandments).

Flowing from this is 'loving mercy' (or kindness). The Hebrew term here is *hesed* which has a depth of meaning hard to capture in English translation. 'Covenant faithfulness', 'compassion', 'loyal love', 'loving devotion', and 'steadfast love', are all attempts to translate this term. It is often used to describe God's faithful actions throughout history on behalf of His people. But the term can also be used of people.

In covenantal contexts people were expected to respond, and *Hesed*, then, is a relationship term. It is not a warm-fuzzy-feeling kind of love, but is a commitment and steadfast dependability that arises from mutual relationship.

And flowing from this (or undergirding it all) is 'walking humbly with God'. This is a call to do more than to come to God with offerings thinking to buy His favour. This is spending time 'walking with', and 'living life with', God – and acting prudently.

Therefore, what you seek to 'do' in life is important... But there is another dimension to 'experiencing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God'. And it comes when we focus on the cross of Jesus.

The main thrust of this passage is a call to examine what lies behind the offerings, what lies behind the façade of 'religion' (that is, what we 'do' as Christians). While the language is not used here, this passage is a passage of the heart. As one writer said, "it is not so much what is in our hands as what is in our hearts." And the reality is that we all have broken and sinful hearts that need to be made new by Jesus.

Meeting the needs of a hurting world in physical acts of justice and mercy are important. The Apostle James says (Jas.1:27): “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” ‘Religion’ is about what you ‘do; and what you ‘do’ is important to God, and Micah was concerned that the people be truly ‘religious’. But Micah had a deeper concern; he was concerned for the ‘faith’ of his people (that is, their relationship with God). ‘Faith’ is more than ‘being religious’ (that is, what you do’). Faith is trust in God, and His wonderful saving love in Jesus.

Our Lord Jesus said (Matt.9:13) “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” God is merciful to us – as sinners. It is Jesus who has truly ‘done justice, brought us loving kindness, and opened the door to ‘walking humbly with God’.

Christ who makes us ‘perfect’ in the sight of God. And that is why the Holy Spirit can use broken people to share hope to a broken world. Jesus gave His life for you. We live ‘in Him’ as we focus on the justice, mercy and humility He gives. Let us focus on His justice, loving kindness, and walking with God, now and always. Amen.