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Micah 6:3-8

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WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?

I grew up in a non-religious home; throughout my life I was agnostic and unaware of religion and of God. As a young man in graduate school, I accepted Jesus into my life as my Lord and Savior. Very early in my Christian walk, I faced a trial that deeply troubled me and forced me to ask some serious questions about my faith. You see, within a few months of becoming a believer, during my first year at Stanford, I was told that my mother was diagnosed with advanced stage cancer. This was the second bout of cancer she faced. The first bout with its chemo and radiation treatments had devastated her body.

Doctors held little hope for her with this resurgence of the dreaded illness. I dropped everything, took off from school, and returned to Los Angeles to spend 5 weeks with her and the rest of my family.

During those stressful and pivotal weeks, I prayed constantly for her, asking God for healing. When I heard no answer to my prayers, I began to “question” Him as to the purpose of this suffering. “I accepted you as my Lord, and this is what You give me? What’s the point of believing You if You’re just going to do nothing and let my mom die?” I finally asked Him what I had to do to have Him show mercy to my mother. I told Him, “I’m willing to give up my PhD degree, my future, whatever it’ll take! What do you require of me?” Silence. The deafening silence nearly drove me to give up on my newfound faith. It was only because of God’s grace and relentless pursuit of me through fellow believers that I remained committed to Him.

When we are faced with seemingly impossible situations, like cancer or like the devastation of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, we sometimes ask, “What do you want me to do, God?” And in our day to day living as workers, teachers, parents, students, we sometimes ask, “Is this all there is to be a believer?” We may ask God, “How do I live as a follower of Christ? What do you want me to do? What do you require of me?”

This question has been asked throughout the ages. The answer is, of course, given by God in the Scriptures. Throughout the Bible, we are given instruction on how to live, how to honor and please God. I will not attempt to fully answer this question today, but I will approach it by studying one simple, short verse from the Old Testament, to give one facet of Christian living. This verse is the well-known Micah 6:8.

“He has showed you, O man, 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 was a prophet of Judah, a contemporary of Isaiah; he prophesied to God’s people during 740 to 700 B.C. This period was a time of social injustice, political instability, and widespread corruption throughout Israel and Judah. Into this society of spiritual

wilderness, Micah spoke God’s words of condemnation and judgment as well as hope and salvation.

In the first five verses of Micah 6, the prophet presents the Lord’s case against the unfaithful Israel.

“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.”

God answers this rhetorical question:

“I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

God recounts His faithfulness to Israel, tracing His acts of mercy throughout history with the Exodus, the Promised Land, turning the curses of the Moabite king into blessings. However, God’s people rebelled against Him and turned to idolatry and repeatedly proved themselves unrighteous. The Lord proves Himself righteous by His very nature, giving them salvation not because of who they are or what they have done, but because of who He is. His charge is, “knowing My righteousness throughout history, how can you NOT display righteousness in your own walk? How can you live your life like this?”

Micah 6:6-7 presents the peoples’ response when charged with their unrighteousness.

“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

The people do admit that they have sinned; however, their response illustrates their spiritual blindness. They try to work themselves out of trouble by burnt offerings and meaningless rituals. They take sacrifices to the extreme, using hyperbole such as “thousands of rams” and “ten thousand rivers of oil” to buy forgiveness, depending on their own actions and efforts. They even go so far as adopting the despised pagan ritual of child sacrifice. However, offerings are meaningless because they are not accompanied with truly repentant hearts. Ritual with no heart is not pleasing to the Lord. God doesn’t need their rams or oil or burnt offerings; He wants their hearts. Remember how David said in Psalm 51:16-17, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

I look at the response of the Israelites, and I’m reminded of my own attitude when I asked God, “what do I need to give up for you

to heal my mother? My PhD degree? My career? What?” Just like the Israelites, I thought I could “buy” God, or manipulate Him to do my bidding by offering up some sacrifices. What does God want with my degree or my career? What is that to Him?

So what does God require from us? Let’s examine God’s answer in Micah 6:8:

“He has showed you, O man, 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.”

What God requires of us can be stated very simply in these three instructions. Let’s look at them individually, first in the context of Micah’s time, and then as they apply to us today.

The first instruction is “to act justly” or “to do justice.” The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*; it is a very prominent theme in the book of Micah. Justice means more than a ruling in a court of law; it refers to a proper running of society, where moral and ethical behavior creates harmony amongst the people. Recall that this period of time was characterized by great social injustice, with the rich violently exploiting the poor, the courts taking bribes and the priests worshipping idols; dishonesty and lying were commonplace. This is the opposite of *mishpat*, the opposite of true justice and righteousness.

So what is considered justice? God’s moral and ethical laws for proper functioning of His society were given clearly throughout Scripture. The Torah, the commandments, Leviticus, all taught the Israelites how to live a life set apart for God, to be holy before Him. But the people of Israel have forgotten these instructions. They embraced the injustice of the surrounding culture and became indistinguishable from it. God is urging them to lead a life that is different; that is ethical, moral, and just amidst a culture of corruption.

In a similar way, we can apply this instruction to ourselves in today’s world. We are often surrounded by injustice, selfish greed, and unethical behavior in the world. To obey this instruction from God, we are to adhere to a higher standard of conduct, an absolute ethical standard of justice.

We are called to live life differently, so that we may be “... blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Phil 2:15-16). This first instruction teaches us how to live in society at large, among a culture and population that does not follow the Lord; we are to be light and salt. For example, given the tax season we are facing, are we being truthful on our tax forms? At work, are we humble and ethical with our co-workers? Do we own up to our mistakes when appropriate, give credit to others to be an encouragement? In the home, workplace, and neighborhood, we ought to be “blameless and pure” in all that we do, so that we can be good examples to others.

The second instruction is “to love mercy.” The word used here for mercy is *hesed*. You may know that *hesed* has a much richer meaning than ‘mercy’, as it is often translated into English. It denotes a covenant love, one which binds one party to another with an enduring transcending bond. It is used 248 times throughout Scripture, variously translated as lovingkindness, loyal love, faithfulness, and favor in addition to mercy. *Hesed* is the covenant love that underlies

everything that God does for His people, a covenant based on His character of faithfulness that never changes.

In view of this covenant, God is instructing His people to treat each other with a similar devotion and costly love. His people are bound to each other by this similar covenant. Faithfulness and loyalty ought to characterize their commitment to each other. When one tribe is under attack, all the other tribes must come to its defense. When one family is in trouble, other families pitch in to help. This is covenant love and is the standard that the people of God are to live by in community.

This exhortation is well summarized by 1 John 4:7-8, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

I see so many examples of this *hesed* love here at PBCC. We have a Need Fund that you generously contribute to, in order to help each other. Many of you serve each other through the Community Café each week. You help with your labor, skills, and servant heart, ministering to each other in body in Sunday school, fellowships, over conversations and prayer. What a blessing this *hesed* covenant love is when expressed in God’s family!

The third instruction is “to walk humbly with your God.” Two important concepts are included in this instruction. First is the term “to walk.” This word means much more than its literal translation of “walking,” as it refers to living with and in the presence of God. The English translation has a similar connotation, as your “walk” refers to how you live your life in relation to God. The first three instances of this walk in the Bible are used of Adam, of Enoch, and of Noah. (Adam “walked” with God in the garden, and he died. Enoch “walked” with God and he did not die. Noah “walked” with God, and everyone else died!) To walk with God means to live in a different way, following the “beat of a different drum,” constantly aware of His presence.

The second term is *hatznea*. It means modest, lowly, submissive. It is used in only one other place in the Old Testament, in Proverbs 11:2, which states, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” Walking humbly means you do not count on your own understanding or efforts, but rather trust in God’s timing and outcome. The connection between humility and wisdom is captured clearly in Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” This is a lesson I needed to learn: I needed to accept God’s timing and outcome for my mother’s cancer, not rely on my own understanding and desires.

So there we have it, three simple instructions of what God requires of man, and what each means in the context of that culture and time. Now how do we apply these instructions to our own life today, here in Silicon Valley?

I would like to offer my applications on Micah 6:8 in reverse, starting with our walk with God, then our relationship within the family of God, and finally our behavior in our society. These three arenas form a structure of a pyramid, of which the pinnacle is our relationship with God.

How is my walk with God? It’s a rather uncomfortable question. Does a walk with God encompass more than saying grace before meals? Does it go beyond Christian ministry and visible “religious

activity”? Am I aware of God’s presence in every aspect of my life? The answer for me is an embarrassed “no.”

I once read a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a compilation of letters and conversations with Brother Lawrence, a humble, 17th century lay brother that worked in the kitchen of a monastery. Brother Lawrence exemplified a humble walk with God in two ways. First, he saw God’s presence in everything he did. Every “common business,” no matter how mundane or routine, was the medium of God’s love. The issue was not the sacredness or worldly status of the task but the motivation behind it. For this humble man, God permeated every activity in which he was engaged, from peeling potatoes to mending sandals to morning prayers.

Brother Lawrence said, “Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God...doing our common business without any view of pleasing people but purely for the love of God... We ought not to grow tired of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.”

This work was an inspiration for me. I confess that I do not walk with God in such an intentional, sensitive way. Each day I go to work and put on my “engineer” hat, depend on my technical abilities to solve problems, develop algorithms and make products. God seldom enters into the equation. Through Micah 6:8, God is telling us that we need to view every circumstance in light of God using us, every encounter as a divine appointment.

In addition, Brother Lawrence also exhorts us to be practicing the presence of God in constant conversation with Him through prayer.

“There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God... We should establish ourselves in a sense of God’s presence by continually conversing with Him. In continuing the practice of conversing with God throughout each day, and quickly seeking His forgiveness when I fell or strayed, His presence has become as easy and natural to me now as it once was difficult to attain.”¹

So we ought to pray about the technical challenges, the interactions with colleagues, the chance encounters throughout the day. We want to walk with God as if our very life depends on it, because it does.

It is out of this intimate vertical relationship that our other relationships can function properly. Because of God’s *hesed* love for us, we are inspired to live life extravagantly with one another as well. There is no better illustration of this covenant love than the ministry of the Deacons here at PBCC.

I love hearing how our Deacons love on the body in this way. Did you know the deacons perform 20-30 projects every single month? From visits to hospitals and homes to fixing toilets, cleaning yards, repairing houses, sharing communion, moving furniture, and many more. Another example is the loving care poured out for Jim and Bunnie Ziegler over the past months. There have been 5 teams of folks that rotate to take care of that dear family. The extravagant, loving care is an inspiration to us and to the Ziegler’s neighbors. Are you willing to give of yourself for your brother or sister in Christ? Are you showing *hesed* love to each other?

Our final exhortation pertains to our relationship with the society around us. We are told to act justly, to uphold God’s moral and ethical standards in an otherwise unjust world. Do we as Christians exemplify social justice in our interactions with others? The answer has often been “no.” We don’t need to go far to find disturbing

examples of social injustice done in God’s name. Just last month, the San Jose Mercury News carried two stories that illustrate sharply contrasting views of “justice” portrayed by “Christians.”

In the first story, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that anti-gay protesters who picket the funerals of U.S. soldiers cannot be sued. This decision refers to Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka, Kansas who had gained national attention for staging protests with anti-gay and anti-military messages. This group invades solemn occasions everywhere, including Stanford University and Gunn High School this past year. If you go to the website of that church, you’ll find it to be filled with hatred and bigotry, interspersed with Scripture. Is this “justice”? Is this how God intends us to live in this world?

On the same day, the Mercury News also reported on the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti in Pakistan. Bhatti was a Christian politician, Pakistan’s Minister for Minorities. As the only Christian minister in a country buffeted by extremism and violence, he fought for the rights of Christians, Hindus and other minorities. He paid the ultimate price with his brutal assassination that he himself had predicted. “These Taliban threaten me,” he said in a videotaped message recorded four months ago. “But I am a follower of the cross. I am living for the suffering of my people, and I am ready to die for them.”²

Two stories, two Christians, one day. Which of these two lives illustrate social justice and ethical behavior? With whom should we identify?

Jesus our King has taught us how we are to live among non-Christians and express social justice with our lives. Through so many parables and exhortations, by His life and death He taught us to love our neighbors, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to be the good Samaritan. The New Testament letters further explain that we are to be the light of the gospel to the world, winning people for the kingdom by love, not by force, using the fruit of the Spirit, not the weapons of the world. When we are faced with injustice, do we respond with lawsuits, with demonstrations and pickets?

Instead, let us exhibit “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22) and win the world with our example. Paul continues in Galatians, chapters 5 & 6: “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit... Let us not become weary in doing good... as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.”

Just last week, I spent 6 days as a volunteer chaperone for our local middle school for a Yosemite Trip. I poured my energy and my life into 12 teenage kids whom I’d never met before, and I pray that the Lord will use that encounter as they face their high school years. You, too, can share that love in your world. Volunteer at Community Pregnancy Centers, help the neighborhood with A Beautiful Day, love your neighbor with a pumpkin pie, play hoops with the kids on your street who need an adult model. Give of your life and sow seeds. “For the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit he will reap eternal life.” (Gal 6:8).

There we have it, three simple instructions from Micah on what the Lord requires of us. The instructions all have to do with relationships. First, we focus on the vertical relationship with God; we walk a walk that is humble and trusting, practicing the “presence of the Lord” in our ordinary daily tasks. We then learn to show *hesed* love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We live thoughtfully, passionately, and sacrificially for the family of God. Finally, we walk

in the world in a way that exhibits social justice, and moral and ethical standards which reflect the justice of God.

When my mother was fighting cancer, I thought that God required me to offer sacrifices before He would hear my requests. I thought that I had to give up something or to perform some good deeds, or be a better person in order to manipulate Him. God's answer to my pleas was, "No." My mother died that summer. There are many lessons I learned through that ordeal, which I can share with you in the future. For today, I've learned that it's not what I do that matters, but who I am in relationships. And the most important relationship is that I walk with Him, trusting His timing and His answers. It's a simple truth, but it takes a lifetime to put into practice.

I want to close with a quote from someone who also learned this simple truth. This passage is from the book *Decision Points* by ex-president George W. Bush, in which he recounts the simple but life-changing lesson he learned from Billy Graham.

"... (I) shared my thought that reading the Bible could make me a better person. In his gentle, loving way, Billy began to deepen my shallow understanding of faith. There's nothing wrong with using the Bible as a guide to self-improvement, he said. Jesus' life provides a powerful example for our own. But self-improvement is not really the point of the Bible. The center of Christianity is not the self. It is Christ.

Billy explained that we are all sinners, and that we cannot earn God's love through good deeds. He made clear that the path to salvation is through the grace of God. And the way to find that grace is to embrace Christ as the risen Lord – the son of a God so powerful and loving that He gave His only son to conquer death and defeat sin."³

May this truth set you free today to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

¹ <http://www.practicegodspresence.com/reflections/words-br-lawrence.html>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/02/shahbaz-bhatti-shot-dead>

³ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, (Crown Publishers, NY, 2010), p. 31.