

Do, Love, and Walk

^{CEB} **Micah 6:3-4, 6-8** "My people, what did I ever do to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ I brought you up out of the land of Egypt; I redeemed you from the house of slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you.

⁶ With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? ⁸ He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

Isaiah 58:6-8 CEB Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? ⁷ Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? ⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

^{CEB} **1 John 2:1-6** My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you don't sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. ² He is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

³ This is how we know that we know him: if we keep his commandments. ⁴ The one who claims, "I know him," while not keeping his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in this person. ⁵ But the love of God is truly perfected in whoever keeps his word. This is how we know we are in him. ⁶ The one who claims to remain in him ought to live in the same way as he lived.

Do, Love, and Walk

It's sometimes suggested that each of us should have a few scripture texts that serve as guideposts for our life. A lot of people use John 3:16 that way. As a child I was taught to follow the Golden Rule. Some people have needle point and hanging on the wall with Joshua's famous declaration, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Micah chapter six, verse eight is another well-known verse. It has been called "the golden text of the Old Testament."

The prophet Micah lived in the eighth century before Christ and his name means, "Who is like God?" In Micah's time, the people had wandered away from God. They had forgotten their story and as a result had forgotten their God. In the previous chapters Micah talks about how the rich had coveted the fields of their neighbors, how houses had been seized, the Torah rules regarding the treatment of the poor, orphans, and widows had been ignored, and when the poor went to court, that justice was perverted. The poor were subjected to violence, political leaders took bribes and religious leaders were motivated by money.

Is today much different? Aren't some of the same things happening today? Neighborhoods are condemned so that shopping centers can be built on the land. The rich can send their children to private schools but the poor have underfunded and decaying public schools. When the poor go to court they have poorly paid and over loaded public defenders against the great law firms of the rich. We've seen suspects shot in the back. The wealth of corporations has been unleashed in elections and lobbyists with bulging pockets roam the halls of legislatures at all levels of government. And televangelists, the priests of the airwaves, promise prosperity and healing if you will just

send enough money. Like the Israelites of Micah's time, we too, have forgotten all the things God has done for us, through us, in us, and most often, in spite of us.

We'd expect righteous anger on God's part, but instead we hear words of heartfelt bewilderment and pleading from God. "What did I ever do to you? How have I wearied you?" And then God calls on them to remember how they had been rescued from slavery, how they had been sent great leaders such as Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and other righteous acts with which they had been blessed. As adopted children of Abraham, this is our history, as well. And we've been additionally blessed by the presence of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. But we overlook that much of the time.

The people, confronted with the chasm that separates them from God, propose sacrifices that increase in cost and quantity. Year old calves, thousands of rams, floods of oil, and then, first born children. What level of sacrifice will pay for their sins? How much worship is required? It's striking that human sacrifice is even mentioned as a possibility, because that is repeatedly condemned by God. For example, in Deuteronomy 12:31 we read, "Don't act (like they did) toward the LORD your God because they did things for their gods that are detestable to the LORD, which he hates. They even burned their own sons and daughters with fire for their gods!"

The people are offering worship as a way to restore their relationship with God, but the prophets bring a harsh message from God. Amos says, "I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. ²² If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food-- I won't be pleased; I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals. ²³ Take away the noise of your songs; I won't listen to the melody of your harps." (5:21-23) Isaiah delivers a message from God saying, (Isaiah 1:14) "I hate your new moons and your festivals. They've become a burden that I'm tired of bearing." The people offer ritual and ceremony.

We do much the same thing. We offer grand worship on Easter and Christmas. We focus on floral decorations, banners, and correct colors for the paraments on the table and the pulpit. We expect God to be pleased by our special celebrations, our tall steeples and grand sanctuaries, our public prayers, Christian flags, and Ten Commandment monuments on courthouse lawns. But God isn't impressed or amused. Amos said, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Isaiah declared, ¹⁷ "learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." Micah reports that God has already told us what is required. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Talking the talk in worship - without walking the walk outside of worship - is hypocritical and irritates God. Religion IS NOT simply a matter of worshipping "correctly." God is more interested in how people live their everyday lives.

"Do justice." Justice is something that one does. It's action, not just belief. When we think of justice we think of our legal system. Crime requires punishment in order for justice to prevail. Justice isn't served until the criminal is caught, tried, convicted, and pays the penalty in fines and/or time in jail or prison. There is no justice if there's no penalty for committing the crime. Justice requires retribution for the wrong that's been done.

The second thing required of us is to love kindness, to love mercy. Being in a position to show mercy means that you have been wronged. You have "the right" to extract a price. Doing justice and loving mercy are at odds with each other if you think

in terms of retributive justice, justice that requires retribution, justice that requires punishment. But often, justice that isn't modified by love will create a downward spiral of anger, hate, and brutality. Very often, the penalty isn't seen as appropriately in balance with the offense. And so there is retaliation in response to what one side sees as excessive punishment – and the endless cycle of retaliation begins. Hate will not eliminate hate. Darkness will not vanquish darkness. Israelis and Palestinians both see their actions as appropriate response to offenses committed. Without mercy, without kindness, the downward spiral is inevitable.

Justice in scripture is often **not** about punishment, at all. Justice is about fairness, about establishing or restoring community. “The LORD's word came to Zechariah: ⁹ The LORD of heavenly forces proclaims: Make just and faithful decisions; show kindness and compassion to each other! ¹⁰ Don't oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; don't plan evil against each other!” (Zec 7:8-12 CEB) This is distributive justice, justice that provides the equitable distribution of goods, benefits, and burdens of a community. Justice is working for fairness and equality for all, especially the weak and powerless who get exploited by others.

The requirement to love kindness, to show mercy in this passage involves the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means steadfast love, loyal love, faithfulness. *Hesed* is active, social, and enduring. It's an act of loving-kindness for others even when they don't “deserve” it. This isn't about being nice to others out of a sense of duty or because we fear punishment if we aren't kind. No, when we remember and recognize the blessings we've received, but not earned, then we respond to God's love by sharing it with others. Acts of *hesed* begat other acts of *hesed*.

The third requirement is to walk humbly with God. This is a phrase that is rich with meaning. In Hebrew, the word used for ethics is *Halacha*, which literally means “walking.” That's not as strange as it might seem at first. We use the word “walk” to refer to how we live our lives. This is about our total outlook on life and our ethical values. We talk about “walking the walk.” We talk about “walking the straight and narrow.” Jesus invited people to “follow me.” This is about walking with Jesus, living as he lived. This wasn't an invitation to believe, but an invitation to a way of life. Walking humbly involves living carefully, thoughtfully, wisely. It means living in awareness of the undeserved grace, mercy, and call that we have been given by God. Walking humbly with God includes realizing that we do not have all the answers - that a bit of self doubt will guard us from self-righteousness.

Walking with God is a metaphor for one who is right with God, one who has been graced by God's presence and partnership in life. We walk with God, not out of fear of punishment, but in joyful realization of how deeply we are loved. The whole orientation of our life is to walk in step with our Lord. This is to be at one with our God, to live in the state of atonement. Amen.

Do justice tempered with mercy.
Steadfastly love kindness.
Humbly walk with God.
Walk in atonement.