

Community Church of Issaquah

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Following God's Instructions

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As I begin today's message, let me share again some verses from the book of Prophet Micah, chapter 6, verses 6 through 8:

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of me? It is a question that I suspect we all have asked, at one time or another. How can we not? We believe in God. We are followers of Jesus. We want to be good, faithful disciples and Christians. We want to do God's will. We pray as Jesus prayed, “not my will, but thy will be done.” But what does that mean? When it comes right down to it, what **does** the Lord require of us? It isn't what does the Lord “request” of us as if asking our permission. It is what God “requires” of us believers. Micah knew the answer to that question: *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

What does the Lord require of us? Three things are given to us in this verse. That's all, just 3 things. To do justice. To love kindness. And to walk humbly with your God. But these three things give us a framework to hang all of our Lord's teachings on. All of the Beatitudes can be summed up by this simple passage from Micah. So, let me offer just a few thoughts on each of these three things for my sermon today.

Walk Humbly with Your God

I'll go in reverse order and start with the last one. What does the Lord require of you? To walk humbly with your God. It starts there, doesn't it? With a personal relationship with God. With knowing in our heart of hearts that we are loved by God, and with wanting nothing more than returning that love. Humbly. Simply. So, we walk humbly with our God.

We spend time with our God. In prayer. In our daily devotions with God's Word. Reading our Bibles. Here in worship. We look forward to those times when we are simply with God. But we do this humbly. Not proudly. Not as though we deserve to be with God. But recognizing that we don't deserve it. It is a gift. It is what God wants. How can we be less than humble about that?

When Jesus begins his beatitudes, he begins with this very same theme. And it's obviously important. The beatitudes themselves have sometimes been described as a description of what the Lord requires of us. And the very first one is: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed, in other words, are those who know they need God. Blessed are we when we are aware of how much we need Jesus in our life. Why? Because then we truly have Jesus in our life. He is in our life always, of course. Sometimes we know it, and sometimes we don't. He is with us either way. But when we are poor in spirit, we open ourselves to him. We let him into our life. We follow him. We sit with him. We listen to him. We walk humbly with him. And when we do that, how can we be anything else but blessed?

Love Kindness

So, we start there. By being poor in spirit. By walking humbly with our God. But we don't end there. That brings us to the second requirement. What does the Lord require of you? To love kindness. God doesn't want us to be alone. It is not good for us to be alone, God said. We are meant to be in relationship, not just with God, but with one another. But not just any kind of relationship. A relationship built on love and kindness. And how important this is for us to remember, because our world so often forgets it. Our words, our actions, they are always planting seeds. But what kind of seeds? Seeds of discontent? Of judgment? Of ridicule, or hatred, or division? Or seeds of kindness? Of love and unconditional acceptance? Seeds born out of a desire to listen, and to learn, and to understand those around us? I love the Prayer of St. Francis, because it describes this in a beautiful way:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where

there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

That is what it means to love kindness. And few, other than Jesus, showed this more beautifully than St. Francis.

Do Justice

St. Francis walked humbly with his God. And he loved kindness. But he also exemplified the third aspect of what the Lord requires: To do justice. It's not enough to love God and to love our neighbor. We also must work toward justice for our neighbors who are being treated unfairly; who are being discriminated against; who are being judged and condemned, simply because of what they look like, or where they are born or anything else.

But here's the thing about doing justice: It's messy. It's complicated. And good, faithful Christians can disagree about how to create a more just society. We can disagree about what issues are most pressing. And we can disagree about how to approach these issues. Justice work is messy. And because of that, we can be tempted to ignore it altogether. But we can't. Because the Lord requires it. The Lord requires us to do justice.

And what I think doing justice boils down to is simply that we care about people that most others don't. We care about

the “least of these,” as Jesus called them. We see in them “Christ in distressing disguise,” as Mother Teresa put it. And we work toward creating a society where none are forgotten, where all are treated justly. Doing this might mean something as simple as giving to the food bank, or helping with our backpack program that we did, or with Meals on Wheels, or with our lunch kits for the food bank. It might mean volunteering to help at some community program. It doesn’t mean we have to run for office or start attending rallies at the state capital. But it does mean that we care about those that are too often forgotten in our world.

Doing justice means that we can’t just love people who look like us, and live like us. We are called to love all people, and we can’t do that faithfully until we are working toward justice for all. This is what the Lord requires of us. To do justice, but also to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Which Is Most Important for You?

Now, I want to get a little practical with you here. I want you to think about which one of these you are doing well. And which one of these might need a little more of your time and attention. Are you doing justice well, for example, but not always loving kindness? This is something that Martin Luther King Jr. fought against. He was an avid seeker of justice, as we all know, but not at the expense of love. As he famously put it:

I’m concerned about a better world. I’m concerned about justice; I’m concerned about brotherhood; I’m concerned about truth. [But] darkness cannot put out darkness;

only light can do that. And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go ... If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love.

Such powerful words about the need to do justice, but also to love kindness. But let's not stop there. Maybe you are doing both of these well. You are actively seeking to make our world a more just place. You are loving and kind in all of your relationships. But perhaps you have neglected the third aspect of what the Lord requires of you. You are not walking humbly with your God. Perhaps you might not be spending alone time with God in prayer. Perhaps you aren't feeding your souls. If you do that, you will almost certainly burn out. We can't do justice and love kindness without also walking humbly with God. Jesus is a good example of that. He spent time alone with God throughout his ministry. And if it was important for Jesus, how much more important is it for us?

Closing

None of these three things that the Lord requires are any less important than any others. They all need each other and feed each other. Spending a lot of time alone with God but not with others leads to a selfish spirituality. Spending time loving others without being alone with God leads to a frustrated, resentful love. Spending time with God and with one another without considering the needs of the poor leads to an insulated life with our heads in the sand, rather than focusing on the needs of the least of these, as Jesus called them.

God didn't require all three of these to make life more challenging. God required all three because they depend on each other. And when we are doing all three of these, we find the beatitudes – those beautiful blessings that Jesus shares with us coming alive. For we are being poor in spirit; we are mourning and being meek; we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness; we are being merciful, and pure in heart; we are being peacemakers; and we might sometimes even find ourselves being reviled and persecuted.

But we are doing what the Lord requires. So, we are blessed. We can rejoice and be glad. Because we are doing what the Lord requires. And because it turns out that doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God are not just what the Lord requires; they offer us a path to a meaningful and blessed life. The only life that is truly worth living. Thanks be to God.