

Come be a fool (a.k.a. "What does the Lord require?")
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Micah 6:1-8
Matt 5:1-12

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

It sounds like simple. "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God," no problem, I can do that. I'm all for justice and kindness, who isn't? As for walking humbly with God, sure thing no problem, be glad to do that.

If that is as close as we get to this passage, then it will seem quite easy indeed. It is only when we start looking closely that it becomes more difficult. What does it mean to "do justice"? Does "do justice" mean that we need more police on the streets, bigger prisons, tougher sentences?

Perhaps "justice" is just another word for "fairness" which is something we always want, at least for those who deserve it, those who have worked hard deserve to get ahead, that's fair, that's just. After all, God helps those who helps themselves, right?

As catchy as that saying may be, Bible does not say that God helps those who helps themselves. The Bible repeatedly says that God helps those who cannot help themselves. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." If you believe that your own strength is enough to get you through, it is unlikely that you will see any need for God's help. Quite often we only realize our need for God when we have seen our own efforts fail.

How many times have we seen people in prison for terrible crimes suddenly embrace God? It took an extreme circumstance for them to turn to God. The sincerity of these conversions is not for us to decide, the lesson can be seen elsewhere as well.

When we hit bottom and find ourselves helpless, friendless, hopeless, that is when - hopefully - we realize our need for God's help. Those who have turned from God, run from God, or ignored God finally break down and call on God's name for help, hoping that when everyone else has abandoned that God will remain. The good news is that God will be there, for God is merciful to us. Justice is very often spoken in the same sentence as mercy, which leads us to the second part of the verse from Micah, to "love kindness." The word which is translated as "kindness" is one of those words which is difficult to translate into English. It could also be translated as mercy, steadfast love, loving-kindness, loyalty, constant love, love, unfailing love, or faithfulness.

Whatever the translation, it sounds like a good idea. Do justice and love mercy; sounds easy enough. But if it sounds easy, have we really thought about what it means? It is easy to be merciful or kind to our friends, but being kind to some people is very difficult. Are we only to be kind to our friends? Jesus told us that "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?" Everyone loves the people who love them! Jesus called us to do more than that! And Jesus did more than just talk: He

did it Himself. On the cross He said cried for mercy for those who had put Him to death - Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

That is loving mercy. That is the mercy which we are called to live out; the difficult mercy, the challenging mercy, the mercy that the world would call foolish. Don't turn the other cheek, fight back! Don't pray to God for your enemies, you ask God to strike them down with a bolt of lightning!

Micah reminds us that we must love mercy. We must love mercy more than revenge, more than punishment. We are called to love our enemies; to see all people as children of God, and to treat all people as children of God - not just those who treat us well, and not just those who seem to deserve it, and not just those who make it easy.

This is the narrow path. This is the difficult road where many stumble. How can we seriously talk about loving mercy? How can we talk about loving our enemies? Maybe we can talk about justice, as long as it is the justice which we define. As long as this talk about mercy doesn't spill over into real-life situations. We want justice - at least justice for others. We want justice for those who commit violent crimes. We want justice for those whose sins are so grievous that we know beyond a shadow of doubt that they deserves punishment. 'Don't talk to me about mercy when I see the murderers and the rapists and the child-molesters. Talk about justice, talk about punishment, talk about an eye for an eye, talk about reaping what they sow and talk about getting what they deserve.'

One year ago this week, an abortion clinic was bombed. It was a horrible act of hatred and violence that could never be justified, could never be supported by anything which claims to be Christian. Undeniably a wicked and sinful act, no matter what cause the perpetrator thought he was defending. Last week, they showed a woman on TV who had been a victim of the explosion. Through video-tape we saw something of what her life has been like in the past year: we saw her in the hospital, bruised and bandaged. We saw her taking her first painful steps. They showed her today, physically recovered but mentally still in severe pain. The interviewer asked her what she would do if the accused was ever caught and sentenced to death and she said, "Show me the switch, I want to be there, front row, center seat, let me throw the switch myself."

I cannot imagine what she has gone through, and I do not hope to ever know. A few minutes on television cannot ever give us real insight into what it has meant for her this past year to live day in and day out with the pain this man caused her, but I can say that in her position I might very well feel the same way. If that was my wife, if that was my daughter, and I was the one who found the man who did it he might not ever make it to trial...

It is at these times when we want to forget mercy and focus on justice. It is easier to talk about justice than mercy, especially when justice really means vengeance. It is easy to condemn those who sin is so large that they obviously should be put to death, they should get what's coming to them. There is something in us that is satisfied when the bad guy gets what is coming to him, I do not deny that, even in myself. But what is that inside of us which celebrates the "justice" of that? Is it the voice of Jesus? Is it the voice that reminds us that we have been forgiven? Or is it the voice that says, "His sins

are worse than my sins, he deserves whatever he gets” ? I pray that I never get what I deserve. I pray that none of us ever get what we deserve. I pray that we receive that which we do not deserve, the grace and the love of the Father who loved us so much that He took what we deserved, and gave us life instead. Can we do justice while loving mercy? Can we punish with the hope of repentance rather than punishing as an end in itself?

Justice and mercy continually appear together in the story of how God has dealt with humanity. Time after time, God’s mercy has overwhelmed God’s judgement. God has brought punishment upon the people, but the punishment is not an end in itself. The punishment has always been in the hope that repentance would come about.

Our fifth-grade Logos class learned this a few weeks ago while studying the story of Jonah. Jonah was mad because he wanted the people of Ninevah to be punished. He didn’t want them to repent, he didn’t want them to be forgiven. When they did repent, he yelled at God, “See! I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”

Jonah had prayed for God’s mercy when he was in the belly of the big fish. He wanted the mercy of God for himself, but for those people??? Those people need a good dose of justice. Are we like Jonah, wanting mercy for ourselves and justice for others?

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

We must remember the justice and the mercy of God when we find ourselves wanting to exact punishment on others, when we take delight in the sufferings of others, or, more often, when we turn a blind eye to the sufferings of others. We must remember that God has called us to treat each other as God has treated us. We are called to love our enemies because God loved us when we made ourselves

God’s enemies through our sin. We should pray for their repentance and that they will see the mercy and love of God. Only in that light can we truly walk humbly with our God. We do not walk humbly when we consider ourselves worthy of the blessings that God has showered on us, we walk proudly. We do not walk humbly when we see ourselves in a good light compared to those around us, we walk proudly. We do not walk proudly when we realize the justice of our God who has helped us when we could not help ourselves. We do not walk proudly when we realize the mercy that has been shown to us. Only then do we walk humbly. It is not a matter of sitting in a mound of ashes crying “woe is me for I am so terrible.” God does not want us to wallow in self-pity, God wants us to walk humbly with Him, being led by His will over our will, even when it is difficult -- especially when it is difficult.

We have been called to life by different rules than the world teaches, rules that the world considers foolish. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

We are called to be fools, at least fools by the standards of the world. We are told that the meek shall inherit the earth, when the world tells us that only the strong will survive. We are told “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” The world by conventional wisdom would call that foolish. Hear (again) what Paul has to say about the wisdom of the world:

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God...

God made flesh and dwelling among us? Foolish, unbelievable. Jesus submitting to the cross, dying for the sins of others? Jesus knew justice, but Jesus loved mercy and walked humbly, accepting death, death on a cross. God’s foolishness is wiser than our wisdom.