

***What Does the Lord Require?
Stewardship as a Way of Life***

Micah 6:6-8

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There was a man who was often getting in trouble with his wife because he had a hard time remembering significant dates. He would come home empty-handed on their anniversary, or he would fail to remember his wife's birthday. He even made plans for a business trip one time, without giving second thought that it would take him away from home on Valentine's day.

Finally he decided that he had incurred his wife's wrath one time too many, so he devised a plan to compensate for his forgetfulness. He went to the local florist, and he made arrangements to have flowers automatically sent to his wife whenever one of the significant dates came up. He gave the florist his credit card number and wrote down the correct dates for the florist; the florist would then take care of the rest of the details.

The man's plan worked very well. On his wife's birthday, he was greatly relieved when he walked into the house and found a lovely flower arrangement sitting on the kitchen counter, complete with a card that said, "Happy Birthday, from your loving husband." On Valentine's Day, another beautiful arrangement was sent. It was like clockwork.

His wife was thrilled by this new display of attention and all went well until one day, several bouquets later, when the husband came home, kissed his wife and said offhandedly, "Nice flowers, honey. What's the occasion?"

Sometimes when we fail to remember, we get in trouble, don't we? The truth is, that is what had happened to Israel and Judah by the time Micah came along – they had forgotten their God and everything that God had done for them. They had gone through a period of prosperity and power, and things had become easy for them.

It's easy to forget God when things are going well.

In our text this morning we have a call to return to God. It is a call that reminds us that God doesn't simply want people to go through the motions. It is a call that reminds us that what God wants are lives that are informed and transformed by our knowledge of God.

God wants something more than going through the motions. God wants us to do things for better reasons than "that's the way we've always done it." Every year at this time we practice the same ritual. We tolerate stewardship season as a necessary part of being responsible for the finances of the church. And so you dutifully listen to me preach three stewardship sermons, and after the third sermon you walk down the center aisle and deposit your pledge cards in the baskets in the front of the sanctuary. And then we have Thanksgiving, followed by Advent, so we can put Stewardship behind us. Every year we practice the same basic ritual.

But the prophet makes it clear that ritual is not what God wants. I like Eugene Peterson's translation: "How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God? Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil?"¹ The implied answer to those questions is that God doesn't simply want us to go through the motions. All the offerings in the world mean nothing if they don't represent what is in our hearts.

What, then, does the Lord require? The Lord requires that we act with justice, that we love mercy, and that we walk humbly with our God. In other words, what matters to God is the way we live our lives. What matters to God is that we live a life that reflects the character of the God we represent. And so we are to act with justice, which in the Bible refers to defending the down and out and fulfilling their needs. The people in the Bible who are in most need of justice are the poor, the oppressed, the widows and the orphans, the needy ones among us, the weak ones. To act justly is to champion the cause of those who have no one to champion their cause.

And we are to love mercy. There is considerable overlap between acting justly and loving mercy. Both have in mind the welfare of the other. Both are focused on offering to people the things they need, regardless of what they may deserve. One definition of biblical mercy that I especially appreciate likens mercy to the quickening that takes place in a mother's womb when one of her children is in trouble. In the same way, for God's people to love mercy is to view the world in such a way that our hearts are moved by the things that move the heart of God. Justice and mercy go hand in hand in the Bible.

What God really wants from you and me is that we live in such a way that we reflect his character to the world. What God wants is for us to live in a way that arises out of our knowledge of him. One author puts it like this:

To live as Christians in our world is to be a people shaped by a story. This story begins with a God who, for love and love alone, created the universe; who, for love and love alone, kept calling [his people] back as often as they wandered; and who, for love and love alone became one of us and showed us the shape of love by laying down his life for us, his friends. The kindness or compassion of God, always there throughout the story, is on display in the life of Jesus. Being a Christian is, quite simply and finally, to be one whose life is in a continuous process of being transformed by the compassion of Christ²

I wonder, What would the Christian faith look like if we all came before the Lord offering, not just our pocket change, but our very lives as living witness to his love? There's a movie that recently came to the theaters, by secular comedian Bill Maher. It's called *Religulous*. I have not seen the movie, but by most accounts it is a "mockumentary" that portrays all religions as either guilty of fomenting violence and atrocities, or promoting mindless faith in gods that don't exist. As it turns out, Maher is every bit as fundamentalist in his secular humanism as are the religious fundamentalists that he attacks in his movie.

But there is a kernel of truth in his premise, and that is that people, even Christians, have often failed in our efforts to put our faith into practice; through the centuries we have been guilty of using our faith in order to achieve violent or immoral or ignoble ends. It makes me wonder, if we were truly to live our lives shaped by the compassion and mercy of God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ--if we were to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with our God--would Bill Maher have enough material to make his movie?

What God wants from us, more than rituals, more than token offerings, is that we offer to him our lives. What God wants from us is that we engage in a way of life that faithfully reflects his character to the world.

And so this year during our traditional stewardship season, we are going to do something a bit non-traditional. Instead of routinely filling out a pledge card that states what we will give in the coming year, I have asked the session to endorse an approach that emphasizes the broader scope that true stewardship entails. Instead of the traditional pledge card, we are asking you to fill out a covenant between you and God, a covenant that covers multiple areas of your life. On Dedication Sunday, November 23, we want you to bring those covenant forms in sealed envelopes that have your name and address on them. We will not open those covenants--they will remain as an agreement between you and God. But we will send those covenants back to you in a few months, to give you an opportunity to evaluate how well you are fulfilling the commitments you have made to God.

I'm excited about this approach to stewardship. It is a challenge for each of us to grow in our faith. It is also a challenge for us to recognize that God expects the best from us, in all areas of our lives.

What does the Lord require of you? God wants you to recognize that you are a gift to the world in this time and place, and God wants you to live so that you make a difference in God's world and in God's name. And so in the coming weeks, I ask that you prayerfully consider the ways that you want to offer yourself in God's service, so that you might provide a faithful answer to the question, What does the Lord require of you. Amen.

¹ Micah 6:6-7, The Message

² Cynthia Campbell, "Follow the Leader," www.csec.org