

WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES OF US

An Exposition of Micah 6.8

One verse from the Bible “stands as the motto in the alcove of religion in the reading room of the Congressional Library in Washington” DC. This verse has been admired for over 2500 years. Modern scholars have said that it “is the quintessence of the commandments as the prophets understood them,” and that it is “the finest summary of the content of practical religion found in the Old Testament,” and that “the rabbis who commented on this verse in the early centuries of the Christian era called it a one line summary of the whole Law” (NAC 20.113). This great verse we have in mind for the sermon today is Micah 6.8, which reads,

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
And what doth the LORD require of thee,
But to do justly, and to love mercy,
And to walk humbly with thy God?

It is a beautiful statement in beautiful translation, bound to make a deep impression on every sensitive soul. I would ask and start to answer two questions about it today: “What does it mean?” and “What must we do in response?”

I suspect many people hearing it would interpret it something like this: “Well, here we are told that God wants us to be good people who lead good lives. I am basically a good person, and I lead a pretty good life, basically, though I probably can do better if I try harder. I’ll admit that maybe I could do better, and as long as I try my best and do fairly well, morally speaking, the Lord will accept me as I am, and welcome me into heaven when I die.” This verse theoretically could be seen as the ultimate religious self-help advice, saying, “Here is something you can do to improve your life and to improve society.” I am persuaded that something like this would probably be the most popular view if people were asked to explain this verse.

What would you think if I told you right up front that this common understanding is not only all wrong, but that thinking along these lines endangers your very soul both for this life and for all eternity? Would it shock you to hear that this is how some of the worst people who ever lived have thought? Could you entertain the possibility, even for a moment, that if you think this way, it is an ugly symptom of your own personal pride and depravity?

That actually is the position I am taking in this sermon. The common interpretation that I have come to loathe by the grace of God alone fails to appreciate the holy height of this verse as a standard of righteousness, as well as our complete failure to live up to it. It also ignores God’s provision of a perfect righteousness that can become ours as a free gift through faith in the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. Now I ask you, please consider carefully what I have to say to you from Scripture.

The more of the context of this verse we can see and understand, the clearer its true meaning. So let me read some of the preceding verses to you, starting with Micah 6.1.

¹ Hear ye now what the LORD saith; Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. ² Hear ye, O mountains, the LORD’s controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for the LORD hath a controversy with his

people, and he will plead with Israel. ³ O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me. ⁴ For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that ye may know the righteousness of the LORD. ⁶ Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or 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? ⁸ He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

God's Case against Sinners (vv. 1-5)

This passage makes it perfectly plain that Micah 6.8 was not an “attaboy” for a people of high morality in Micah’s day. Nor was it advice just to try harder and do better. The Lord arraigns a mob of sinners, like a violent gang standing before a judge in a courtroom. “This public hearing shall now come to order!” is the sense of verse one. You can almost hear the loud wham of the gavel. Then the Judge says, “The LORD has a controversy with His people” (verse two). The word used here means a dispute. Almighty God says in effect, “I have a big problem with you people and you’re going to hear about it now!” He is convicting His people of their wretched sins despite all that He had done for them in His mercy and grace through many centuries of their history. But there is also a tender side to His words. He says “He will plead with Israel” in verse two. While the word can have the sense of contending with them, that is, bringing a case against them, the context suggests it is more than this. He brings their sins to their attention because He loves them, and so that they will repent and escape the punishment they deserve, and not perish in His righteous wrath. Verse three sounds more like the plea of a jilted lover than an angry judge: “O my people [an emotional appeal to them as belonging to Him by a special covenant], what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me.” The possibility and desire for their reconciliation is strongly implied. Verses four and five quickly mention major events in Israel’s history familiar to them which illustrate how God, in His faithful love and mercy, had kept His covenant with them for their good. And yet, despite all this, His people are found living like immoral pagans! Oh, what an outrage! They were trampling on God’s goodness and long-suffering mercy, and all they deserved was punishment! They had no defense against these charges!

The Sinners' Excuses for Themselves (vv. 6, 7)

So what do they have to say for themselves? Two things are implied here starting in verse six. First, they pleaded ignorance of God’s will. Second, they complained that their religious worship was never enough for God to remove His chastening rod. “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God?” This is like saying, “Look, we know the Lord is angry with us. All His prophets tell us this and our social ills are painful reminders of it. But really, what does God want from us? We just don’t know how to please Him! Whatever we do, it is not enough!” This is the complaint that stubborn sinners often

make, as if the fault is somehow God's that we are being judged. It is an echo of wicked Cain, when he heard of the curse upon him for murder, and Cain said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" (Gen 4.13). People estranged from God have the audacity to think He is a meanie and that He has mistreated them in some way.

Well, these sinners being convicted had an idea that they were supposed to worship God according to the rituals set forth in the law of Moses. The Scripture had required them to appear in Jerusalem with animals for sacrificing to the Lord, and with other offerings like the firstfruits of their crops, including some of the olive oil they produced. But they had kept up to some degree this kind of religious activity, and still God was finding fault with them! The language of verse seven is very impudent and irreverent. "Thousands of rams" and "ten thousands of rivers of oil" and even their firstborn children did not seem to be enough for God! It is implied that God's demands were horribly unreasonable, and that was the problem in their relationship with Him. It is not that the people had no sense of guilt. They speak about "transgression" and "the sin of their soul." But it is a grudging confession, full of despair and bitter complaint against God!

In speaking this way, the sinners in view utterly failed to defend themselves, but only condemned themselves further. They did not love God; in fact, they resented Him. They were not deeply grateful to Him for His mercies to their nation in the past. They also prided themselves on how hard they had tried to appease Him, and if He was still angry, they thought it was His fault.

This is the context of Micah 6 verse 8, which is meant both to convict them further of their sins, and to inspire their hope in God's mercy. They actually had very little idea how deep were the crimson stains of their guilty souls, and they also disbelieved the profound love and grace of God. And this I can confidently say about all of us. However sinful we think we are and however guilty in ourselves, the ugly reality in God's sight is much worse than we can possibly imagine. Also, whatever notions we have of God's love and grace are far, far below the reality of His incomprehensible goodness! In a book of very spiritual prayers, someone wrote this to God, "Searcher of hearts, it is a good day when thou givest me a glimpse of myself; sin is my greatest evil, but thou art my greatest good; I have cause to loathe myself, and not to seek self-honour, for no one desires to commend his own dunghill. My country, family, church fare worse because of my sins, for sinners bring judgment in thinking sins are small, or that God is not angry with them" (*Valley of Vision*, "Self-Knowledge").

The Reasonable Righteous Standard that Condemns (v. 8)

With this lead-up to the four lines of verse eight, we can be delivered from twisting it into advice for a religion of self-help. The first two lines praise the publicly-known and reasonable standard of righteousness they had failed to meet. The second two lines summarize that standard very beautifully.

The moral will of God for their lives was no secret. Even Gentiles without the Scriptures have God's moral law ingrained in their consciences, as the apostle Paul taught (Rom 2.14, 15). When they do something morally good in itself, they have a sense that it is good, and when they sin, deep down, they tend to feel guilty. But God's chosen people have more than a conscience. We have the Word of God which spells out in plain language God's

“thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” This the prophet Micah insists upon in verse eight by writing, “He has shown you, O man, what is good,” that is, “what the LORD requires of you.” The original word translated “require” means to demand, to claim as due or just. One of the things to remember about God’s moral law is that the righteousness of it is not optional for us. It is laid upon us by God Himself as our profound moral obligation. He gave us Ten Commandments, not Ten Suggestions or Ten Principles for a Better Life.

You know what He requires of all of us. The Ten Commandments are one of the most important summaries of morality in the entire Bible. They teach us that we must worship God alone. Worship Him His way, not ours. Only speak of Him and holy things with deepest reverence. Keep the Lord’s Day sacred among all the days of the week. Honor your parents and others in authority over you. Neither kill nor hate your neighbor in your heart, but do everything you can to promote his life and well-being. Practice strict chastity whether single or married. Do not steal but work hard to provide for yourself if you can and to have the means to help others in their distress. Be completely truthful at all times and be careful to preserve your neighbor’s good reputation in love. And remain perfectly content with such things as God provides for you, without coveting your neighbor’s stuff.

Micah 6.8 is another summary of God’s revealed will, no different in substance from the Ten Commandments, but much shorter and easier to remember. It has only three elements: “Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” If we had time to dissect it in detail, I would love to do that, but here is a helpful paraphrase instead: “You must treat people fairly. You must love others faithfully. And you must be very careful to live the way your God wants you to” (NIRV).

Now as we think about this beautiful summary of true morality and religion, let me ask you a couple of straightforward questions. First, do you see and admit the excellence of this moral standard? Would you be so arrogant as to find fault with it? Surely your conscience is not so hardened that you cannot admire these words of sanctified beauty! Let me ask you further, how well does the Lord require us to keep this perfect standard? Can you imagine for a moment that He grades on a curve, and that sins against His righteous law are no big deal? If so, think again. God Most Holy condemns *all* sins, not just the ones that offend us. God requires 100% conformity to His righteous law if you would be justified by your obedience to it. The New Testament says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law” (Jas 2.10, 11). In other words, *you* have become a transgressor of the law. When God’s law is presented to us as a covenant of works, it promises life only to those who keep it personally, perfectly, and perpetually. None of us can be declared righteous before God on the basis of our moral performance, dear people! We are sinners! We all stand condemned by God’s righteous, reasonable requirements like these found in Micah 6.8! None of us lives up to this standard! You have mistreated people and so have I! You have not perfectly practiced faithful love as you should have! Even if you are very religious, you are not always, every moment of every day, very careful to live the way God wants you to live!

These sad truths about us are very humbling. If we take them to heart, then they will lead us to give up completely on any idea that we could ever be good enough, or do enough

good works, to deserve God's favor. Rather, our many and despicable sins against God have provoked His holy wrath against us, and eternal hell is the punishment we deserve for them.

If you think I am over the top on this, surely you either have not read Scripture or do not believe it. Here is an example of what I mean from the Bible's next to last chapter: "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev 21.8). Are you sometimes cowardly, unbelieving, or hateful? Do you ever have a sexually immoral thought or ever do something shameful? Have you been a liar, making up all kinds of excuses for it? If the Lord is judging us by our actual hearts and lives according to the standard of His righteous law, I can tell you for sure that we all stand condemned. If He left us to ourselves, we would have no hope whatsoever of salvation. As Paul wrote in Romans, "By the deeds of the law there shall be no flesh justified in God's sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3.20).

The Only Righteousness that Saves Sinners Like Us

Since we have no righteousness of our own, the only way that we can be declared righteous by the Judge of all the earth is if He Himself should be our justifying righteousness, and give Himself to us who deserve no such thing.

The perfectly righteous person would be one who was born without sin, whose very soul was and remained immaculate through his whole life, who never ever transgressed any of God's commandments in thought, word, or deed, but instead kept them every moment from his heart for the glory of God and the good of his neighbor. A perfect man would be one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and who loves his neighbor as himself. He always practices the Golden Rule, doing unto others as he would have done unto him. In the words of Micah, this man would be the epitome of one who does justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with his God—and that to the highest degree and with perfect consistency. Do you know anybody like this? Not living in this world now, you don't.

Let me tell you the best ever good news. He lived among us 2000 years ago. Scripture calls Him our Lord Jesus Christ. He could honestly say, "I always do those things that please" the Father in heaven (John 8.29). He looked around at His bitterest enemies and challenged them publicly, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8.46). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, called Jesus "the Just One," that is, the Righteous One. The psalms foretold His coming into the world and saying, "I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Psa 40.8).

Our perfectly loving and righteous Lord, Jesus Christ, kept all God's commandments perfectly throughout His whole life. He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4.15). Then, at the appointed time, He was suspended between heaven and earth, spiked upon a cross of wood, to shed His precious blood as an atoning sacrifice for all the guilty sinners chosen by God for salvation before the foundation of the world. As the prophet Isaiah foretold centuries beforehand, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have

turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53.4-6). Anyone who boasts of his own righteousness is saying he has no need of this Savior Jesus. The Lord plainly said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5.32).

Now the Scriptures make it plain that any sinner, no matter how sinful or how guilty and unworthy they may feel, can have this Jesus to be their Savior by believing this gospel and trusting in Him. When we are believing in Christ, His God-approved righteousness becomes our righteousness by gracious imputation. In other words, God sees the believer as united to Christ, and as He was punished for our sins, so we are justified by His righteousness credited to us as a free gift of the grace of God. So many biblical passages proclaim and explain this good news, but consider Romans 5.19, comparing and contrasting Adam, the first man on trial for all humanity, with Jesus, the second great spiritual representative of people. It reads, “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of [the] one [man, i.e., Jesus] shall many be made righteous.” As Isaiah said earlier, “the righteous one shall make many to be accounted righteous” (Isa 53.11). What the Lord requires of us, He provides for us! He worked out a perfect righteousness in Himself and then gives Himself to us for our own righteousness—the perfect righteousness that God approves and will approve on Judgment Day. Jesus’ resurrection proves that God accepted His life and sacrifice.

To quote Micah again, “What does the Lord require of us?” The biblical answer is, “He requires of us the righteousness of Christ!” Only by having His righteousness credited to us can we satisfy His requirement.

Saul the Pharisee, before he was Paul the apostle, was a very religious and self-righteous man. Once he received Christ, he understood the gospel and gave up everything to have Christ as his justifying righteousness. Paul wrote that he wanted to be “found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil 3.9 ESV). Listen, I know this sounds too good to be true, but those trusting in Christ are forgiven all our sins and secure in the gracious favor of God for all eternity. Are you trusting in Christ alone for your salvation? Then I’m glad to tell you for sure, in the name of God, that your sins are forgiven once and for all for His name’s sake! Praise the Lord.

Does this mean we have no duty to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? Of course not! But as Christians, we are crucified with Christ, nevertheless we live, yet not us, but Christ lives in us, and the life which we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us, and gave Himself for us (Gal 2.20). Our justification comes through Christ living FOR us and dying FOR us. Our purification comes through Christ living IN us. All the virtue and true spirituality a true Christian has and experiences is not from ourselves, but it is the evidence of our vital, spiritual union by faith with the risen, righteous Lord, Jesus Christ. Now the morality and piety of Micah 6.8 is not a standard to condemn us, but a promise of our complete transformation one day to be like the Lord Jesus Christ in His moral loveliness!

In closing, I beg every one of you to own your sin and guilt before God, to repudiate any hope of self-justification, and to flee to Christ as your only hope for acceptance with God. Close with Him by faith and enjoy the assurance of eternal life by the sheer grace of

God. May the Lord mercifully grant you, every one of you, a new heart of humility and implicit faith in the Lord Jesus. Amen.