

Minimum Requirements

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Micah 6: 1-8
Luke 6: 17-26

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Micah 6: 1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

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?

Luke 6:17-26

[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude

you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.



There are minimum requirements for just about everything in this world.

I remember when I was a kid fidgetingly standing in line to ride the amusements on the Ocean City boardwalk – was I tall enough this year to ride the roller coaster? Minimum height requirement – “You must be taller than this line to ride this ride.” (I’m barely tall enough for some of them now!)

Earlier this week, I spent some time helping a friend with computer problems. It was necessary to check the minimum requirements for before installing a particular program – Windows 98 or better, Pentium 100Mhz Processor; 32MB RAM; 25MB free disk space.

Open a bank account – minimum required deposit. Get a mortgage – minimum required down payment. Start kindergarten – minimum required age as of September 1. Go to college – minimum required GPA to stay there. Want a job – minimum required educational degree.

But are there minimum requirements for being a full human being? Perhaps.

That's not to say that you must be physically complete to be human – though the world sometimes acts as if that's the case. I remember my dad couldn't belong to a particular fraternal organization because it required members to be physically complete and he was missing a leg – so he had to join a different organization. And that's not to say that one must be as mentally complete as every other person to be fully human – if so, that leaves people like my daughter Lindsay outside the minimum requirements, and I know for a fact that's not the case.

But there are minimum requirements of a sort, says Micah, for one to be a faithful child of God – a full human being. What does God require of you? What does it mean to do justice? To love kindness (mercy)? To walk humbly with God?

To do justice ...

Dr. David Hilfiker (*The Other Side*, Sept-Oct 2000), wonders if our love of kindness (or mercy) sometimes “chokes out our ability to act justly.” In the 1980s Hilfiker worked as a doctor with poor people in the inner city in Washington, D.C., beginning at a small church-sponsored clinic and at a thirty-four-bed medical recovery shelter for homeless men. He later founded Joseph's House, a ten-bed community for homeless men with AIDS.

“I have begun to see some ‘side effects’ to the kind of work I do,” he wrote 10 years into the program, “and they concern the important difference between justice and charity. Justice has to do with fairness, with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. Charity has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people's good will and can be withdrawn whenever they choose.”

We can, and should, have a personal commitment to justice – commitment to fairness, to making sure people have what any of us deserve. We can be committed to ending homelessness, hunger, infant mortality, inadequate health care. We can yearn for justice

and believe that we are working toward it, but what we actually *do* might not be doing what we *think* it does.

The practice of justice, either by God or God's people, as Micah understood it, is to rectify the inequities of a society that allowed some people to be oppressed to the point where they were deprived of the basic needs that allow them to function as part of the community. The community into which Micah prophesied understood the very nature of God as a God of justice. For Micah's audience in the mid-700s BCE, doing justice demanded a commitment to the poor and oppressed, the powerless in society, people who have no voice of their own by which to redress the injustices that marginalize them as human beings. That meant courageously being in conflict with the oppressors who perpetrate the injustice. And it means the very same thing today.

I try to make this point often in my preaching and teaching. It is important in my understanding of living out my faith, that I focus on justice. We can send our money to wherever the cause of the season might be – earthquake relief in Haiti – and that's evidence of loving kindness – but we must also be demanding that “the world's rich” surrender its control of the world's resources so that the poor have the chance they deserve to avoid these kinds of natural disasters. Warning systems; decent, sturdy housing; medication; rapid communication and response systems – all of these which we take for granted as a part of our system of privilege are items of justice that we rich have and the poor need.

Dr. Hilfiker working with the poor and homeless and those with AIDS in Washington, DC, said that what he does as a physician is offer help to poor people and though it's what he believes God calls him to do he could leave at any time. “The poor people I have served over the past ... years have had no ‘right’ to what I was giving them. While I believe in justice for the poor and in challenging the structures of our society that deprive them of that justice, in fact I have offered charity.”

There is a difference between charity and justice.

“I was reminded of this recently,” continues Dr. Hilfiker, “when I attended a Walk for the Homeless in Washington, one of those many good and important efforts to raise money for Joseph's House and similar organizations. Before we began to walk, a nationally known sports star gave a little pep talk, exhorting the walkers to ‘go out and *do your part* to end homelessness.’ I have nothing against the walk, and I suspect the sports star did not really intend the implication. But walking five kilometers on a beautiful Saturday morning is not ‘doing your part to end homelessness.’”

The minimum requirements for being a full human being, the minimum requirements for being a true child of God, are to do justice, to love kindness/mercy, and to walk humbly. The minimum requirements are to do and be all three, not just choose one or the other.

It is important to walk or run or roll the 5K for homelessness – or AIDS or breast cancer or MS – or whatever it takes to help others who need our help. Charitable kindness is indeed a requirement of God. But that is not to the exclusion of doing justice – demanding changes in legislation, working to change inequities in social services, buying from companies that pay a fair wage, breaking the cycle of violence in your own neighborhood, recognizing racism and your own white privilege.

Working for justice – doing justice – is messier and far less rewarding than loving kindness. There are no quick fixes to injustice and it’s tempting to quit when discouraged. But we have no choice. God requires it of us – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. It is the minimum requirement of our faith.

To love kindness ...

But to love kindness is no small task either. To love mercy or kindness in Micah’s words is the Hebrew term *hesed* (or *chesed*, pronounced with a hard **ch**) which has a depth of meaning hard to capture in English translation. Covenant faithfulness, compassion, loyal love, loving devotion, and steadfast love are all attempts to

translate this term. It is often used to describe God’s faithful actions throughout history on behalf of God’s people, such as what God did through the Exodus. But the term can also be used of what God expects us to do in response to God’s faithfulness. We are to maintain a steadfast loyalty and love that reflects the compassion and grace that God always demonstrates to us.

Hesed is a relationship term. It is not a warm-fuzzy-feeling kind of love. It is a commitment and steadfast dependability that arises from mutual relationship. To love *hesed* is to be committed not only to God who has demonstrated *hesed* to the people of God but it is also to live in community in such a way that *hesed* marks our life together as God’s people. To love *hesed* is to be committed to a quality of life that is governed by mutual respect, helpfulness, and loving concern. (Dennis Bratcher, 2004; The Voice: Christian Resource Institute.)

Hear this story written by Eddie Ogan, a story of *hesed*. It was Emailed to me recently by a friend. It’s kind of long, but bear with me:

I’ll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12 and my older sister Darlene was 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money. By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When we got home we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn’t listen to the radio, we’d save money on that month’s electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone

we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so we figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church! On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly, I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich.

When the sacrificial offering was taken we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill and each of us kids put in a \$20 bill. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled eggs with our fried potatoes!

Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. My Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash.

We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our mom and dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor. That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor.

I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed, I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time.

We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed.

All that week we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing but no one joined in and she only sang one verse. At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun-dried bricks, but they need money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said,

"Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She gave it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our little church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the

missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor. I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.”

To love kindness is to sacrifice simply because God has blessed you. To love kindness is to turn your love toward the community – toward someone you don't even know without expectation of a return gesture. To love kindness is to fail to see your own poverty when God calls you to serve those in your community – in God's family – who are literally short-changed by the injustice perpetuated by others in that same family.

“Blessed are the poor,” says Jesus, “Blessed are the hungry ... those who weep ...” And “blessed are the merciful,” Matthew adds in his Sermon on the Mount – those who honor the requirement of God to love mercy and kindness. Blessed are they who follow the requirements of God – to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.

To walk humbly ...

“Walking a path” is a common metaphor for living a certain kind of lifestyle – “You can talk the talk but do you walk the walk?” All through Hebrew scripture the people are called to walk in the path of *torah*. And we as modern Christians often assume this is a regimen of legal obedience, but following *torah* is not simply obeying a set of legal requirements. It is about how to live a life surrendered to God – a much more intense understanding of walking in God's ways than one might typically imagine.

Walking humbly with God is a call to do more than to come to God with offerings thinking to buy favor, but to live life with God at the center in every aspect of life. It implies sensitivity to the things of God – to allow our heart to be broken by the things that break the heart of God said one writer. It is a deep desire to see the

world through the eyes of God, to act in the world as God would act.

Does it not break the heart of God when human beings march 1.5 million other human beings to their death in the ovens of Auschwitz? Does it not break the heart of God when one group of human beings drops thousands of tons of explosives on the heads of other human beings? Does it not break the heart of God to know that one child dies of starvation in a nation like ours so full of obesity? It would – and it does.

The past 3 weeks we have sung a hymn written in response to the earthquake in Haiti. It's that song that reminds us:

*A woman sifts through rubble, a man has lost his home,
A hungry, orphaned toddler sobs, for she is now alone.
Where are you, Lord, when thousands die –
the rich, the poorest poor?
Were you the very first to cry for all that is no more?*

It breaks God's heart wherever and whenever any of us suffer, God cries whenever any one of us cries.

And it should break our heart as well whenever we see anything happening contrary to how we know – *we know* – God would have us live. To turn our back on any injustice, any unkindness, is to not journey the path God points us on.

I spent some time on retreat recently with some clergy colleagues with whom I study Bible. One person brought a small, handheld labyrinth which I picked up and jokingly traced with the stylus quickly saying “Done!” when I reached the center – as if it was a puzzle maze from a *Highlights* magazine.

The labyrinth has been used by Christians for centuries – particularly Celtic Christians – as a way to meditate on the ways of God. To journey through the labyrinth is not to find your way out of a puzzle, but to wind yourself deeper into the way of God, to

focus your walk on God's walk. Try it sometime – find a handheld one at the mall or stop in at a church which has a full size one which you can actually walk. Walk the walk of God. Walk humbly with God and see where the journey takes you.

When this journey into God's heart is placed alongside the first two requirements, walking with God becomes synonymous with having a heart for justice and compassion. The journey with God is actually the overarching category for doing justice and loving *hesed*. They cannot be separated, for walking humbly with God, living all of life under God and in relationship to God, will result in both.

Minimum requirements. Yes, there are even minimum requirements for being a true child of God. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. Failure to follow the minimum doesn't bring down God's vengeance on your head – our God is a loving and awesome God, not a vengeful God.

But failure to follow the minimum requirements surely causes God's heart to cry out in anguish for we who have failed and for those whom we have failed. Meeting the requirements, though, – and God knows we *want* to meet them – causes great joy in the heart of God. Let us then go from this place and live our lives with God at the center, let us *do* justice, *love* kindness, and *journey* forward humbly with God.

Amen.