

WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES

Do you ever think about Judgment Day?

Do you ever imagine yourself standing before Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and your Creator, and being asked to give an account of your life?

If so, do you ever speculate about what questions God will ask, what kind of test God might give to see if you have lived up to God's standards?

Do you ever worry about whether you'll be able to pass whatever test God gives?

So, what kind of questions might God ask us at the end of our lives? Will God ask bluntly, "Why should I let you into my kingdom? What did you do during your time on earth? What good did you accomplish on my behalf?" Or maybe, "What kind of life did you live? And was it worthy of your identity as one of my children?" Perhaps God will ask, "What did you do with the gifts and blessings I bestowed on you?" As well as, "Did you love enough? . . . Care enough? . . . Give enough? . . . forgive enough?"

We believe that our God is a God of love. It's a cornerstone of our faith. But the thing is, God is also a God of justice. God loves us, but God also detests sin. God is merciful and forgiving, but God is also holy and righteousness.

Can you feel the tension that exists between those two sides of God?

Our hope, a hope that is founded on our faith in Jesus Christ, is that God will be gracious and compassionate, and understand that we're only human; and God will realize that human beings like us are imperfect creatures who seem to be programmed, or hardwired, to make mistakes and bad choices and sometimes do not-so-nice things, even when we really don't want to do them.

But the Bible makes it clear that even a God of love has limits, and despite our human tendency to be imperfect, God can grow frustrated and angry with us because of our mistakes and bad choices and not-so-nice actions; especially when we repeat the same wrongdoings over and over again.

It's a terrifying image to hold in our minds: the image of an angry God. A God whose patience with humankind has run out after so many years of hurtfulness and abuse and callous disregard that people have inflicted on each another and on this marvelous earth that God created to be our home. A God whose tolerance has been tested so extensively that God just can't take it

anymore, and God finally cries out in exasperation, “That’s it! I’ve had it! Enough is enough!”

According to the prophet Micah, this was the kind of frustration God felt toward Israel, God’s own cherished and beloved people. God had been unfailingly faithful to the covenant that was made with Israel, but Israel had broken its part of the covenant time and time again. So now God was close to losing it. And God’s countenance changed from a loving Creator to an irate, strict judge.

“Stand up, plead my case before the mountains!” God commanded. “Let the hills hear what you have to say! Hear, you mountains, the Lord’s accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the Lord has a case against His people; He is lodging a charge against Israel.”

Do you recognize the image Micah is envisioning?

God was taking Israel to court, calling the nation to answer for its sins and unfaithfulness. And the earth itself would bear witness to God’s judgment.

It’s clear that God was furious; but I believe God was also weary and tired. And if we listen closely, we can even imagine that God was close to tears—much like a loving parent who feels that it’s necessary to punish his or her child for a wrongdoing, but tells the child, “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” Listen to the pain in God’s voice, as God reminded Israel about how deeply God loved them and how much God had done for them in the past.

“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me! I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.”

God might well have added, “And this is how you repay me: with blatant unfaithfulness and unrighteous behavior?”

I remember learning in one of my seminary classes that anger is a secondary emotion. That was a huge revelation to me. There’s always a prior, primary emotion that’s the catalyst for anger. And the most common primary emotion that morphs into anger is hurt. God had been hurt by Israel. God had been wounded by Israel’s infidelity and disloyalty. And God’s hurt was so deep, and God’s broken heart was so excruciating, that God became angry.

The ironic thing is, if God didn’t love Israel so much, God wouldn’t have felt such agonizing pain. God had put God’s heart out there and became vulnerable, and Israel stomped all over it. As a result, God felt immense pain. Then God grew angry, and in that anger God contemplated what to do with the stiff-necked people who had repeatedly failed to be faithful to the One True God who loved them.

Israel, of course, didn't want to be on God's wrong side. They feared being put on God's "Enemies List"—and with good reason. There was nothing more dangerous, more threatening to Israel's health and wellbeing, than being confronted by a very hurt and angry God. Especially when Israel had caused that hurt. So, Israel wanted to make amends. God's people wanted to express their regret and repentance to the Lord. And, not surprisingly, they turned to the usual, time-honored ritual that Israel had been using since God first called them to be God's people: a sacrifice.

It was almost an unthinking habit to Israel: they sin against God, then they make amends for it by making a burnt offering of an unblemished calf; or they take a ram and sacrifice it on the altar. Or they break out the valuable and sacred oil as an act of remorse and ask God for mercy and forgiveness. Such sacrifices to God had worked before, so why shouldn't they work again? The people of Israel were confident that the Lord would once more receive their offering as an act of atonement, God would be appeased, and the relationship between God and Israel would go back to the warm and fuzzy way it was before they transgressed against God.

But Israel was wrong.

This time, according to the prophet Micah, God wanted more than just shallow, superficial sacrifices—sacrifices that merely placed a Band-Aid over the gaping wound of Israel's unfaithfulness. This time, if Israel truly wanted to satisfy God and soothe God's anger, the people would have to change—not just on the surface, mind you, with halfhearted sacrificial acts, but on the inside, too. The hearts and minds of God's people needed to be transformed renewed, purified.

But how could they accomplish this? What did God want Israel to do?

God, speaking through Micah, said the answer was obvious, a no-brainer; and they, God's people, already knew what they needed to do. "[God] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Let's reflect on those three things God requires, one at a time.

To "act justly" means no more cheating and dishonest business practices, which seemed to be a common thing in Israel back then. The Lord said through Micah later on in the sixth chapter, "Am I still to forget your ill-gotten treasures, you wicked house, and the short measurement, which is accursed? Shall I pardon someone who uses dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights? Your rich people are violent; your inhabitants are liars, and their tongues speak deceitfully. Therefore, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins."

God was saying, in effect, "You want to make amends? You want me to

calm down and not be angry? Then start living a just and righteous life. Don't cheat and take advantage of unsuspecting people. Don't enrich yourself at the expense of others. Don't brutalize and hurt one another."

But God didn't stop there. Justice was just the beginning. Israel also had to be merciful.

To "love mercy," or as some Bible translations put it, to "love kindness," meant treating others with dignity and respect, and being gentle and loving toward them. And in particular, be kind and merciful toward the people God has a special affinity for—the poor and the disabled, the weak and the ailing, and the strangers in our midst: the immigrants and refugees from other lands. That was one of the laws Moses had handed down to the Israelites and was recorded in the book of Deuteronomy: "You are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."

I believe those words are especially relevant to us today, because it seems that our country, a nation established and substantially built thanks to the sweat and energy of millions of yesterday's immigrants and refugees, is seeking to erect barriers to keep out today's immigrants and refugees who are looking to come over here to start new and better lives for themselves.

Finally, along with justice and mercy, God called on Israel to be a more humble and respectful people.

To "walk humbly with God" means understanding our place in the divine-human relationship. That can be defined in various ways, but one way we walk humbly with God is to not try to do God's job, and leave certain responsibilities in God's hands.

One responsibility we frequently try to take over for God is judging other people as though we know the motives of their hearts and their eternal destiny. But is any human being actually wise and capable enough to pass judgment on another person and discern whether they're saved or condemned? I think not.

Walking humbly with God means, among other things, leaving the job of judging others to God, who is the only one qualified and capable enough to discern the true intentions of a person's heart and separate the wheat from the chaff.

Jesus himself sternly warned against trying to do God's job of judging other human beings. In Matthew's Gospel our Lord said, "Do not judge, or you will be judged. For you will be judged with the same judgment you pronounce; and the measure you use to judge will be used to measure you."

That's a pretty frightening statement, don't you think?

If I were to think back to the last time I made a judgment against someone

else, and then ask myself, “What if God took the same standard I used to judge that person and used it to judge me?” I can’t say it would be a very good thing. In fact, my goose would be cooked. So clearly it’s in my own interest to act with restraint and make every effort to “love mercy” when judging another human being.

My friends, imagine what our church, our society, our nation and our world would be like if everyone lived according to God’s word as spoken to the prophet Micah? Imagine if we chose to live our lives striving to do what the Lord requires of us.

“To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with [our] God.”

Would it solve all of the world’s problems? Maybe not.

But this much I’m confident of: if we did live according to those three divine precepts recorded by Micah, it would go a long way toward making the earth a much better, more habitable, more peaceful place to live.

Of course, we can’t control what others do and force them to live a more godly life. The only thing we can do is what’s in our own power to do, which is to make the ways of justice, mercy and humility the guiding principles we live our lives by, and be an example for others to emulate.

In other words, let there be justice, peace and humility on earth, and let it begin with us. Today. Right now. And we will be doing what God requires of us. And hopefully other people will see how we’re living our lives and be inspired to do what God requires, as well.

May the Lord help us to do that. Amen.