

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
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It's Really Not Complicated

(Third in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? -Micah 6:8- (Supporting Text – Matthew 25:31-45)

Our memory verse this morning is from the book of the Old Testament prophet Micah who lived about 700 hundred years before Christ. Perhaps we don't often think of it this way, but many prophetic pronouncements in ancient Israel were in essence an interpretation of history as much as a commentary on present circumstances. The prophets understood even the rise and fall of nations to be the result of supernatural engineering based upon moral imperatives. A civilization was blessed with prosperity and security as long as it practiced justice and kindness among its own people and with its neighbors.

If one understands history to be an expression of divine activity then it is not a great stretch to think that the future will be determined in the same way. Thus the prophets often proclaimed a message of trouble still coming for ancient Israel because of its ethical degradation. The people would often respond something to the effect of, *No, it won't happen, we still worship Yahweh (the Lord). Yahweh is our God and will not let anything happen to us.* But the prophets would respond with some variation of, *You know, it's not what you say, it's what you do.* Or as Micah put it in our memory verse this morning, *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.* In the final analysis, that's what matters, Micah said. The way to please God is by treating other people with fairness and compassion and that will lead to individual success as well as for society. In the final analysis, to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God is what Jesus said matters the most too.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats might be understood as a parable of the final analysis. You don't get much more final than the last judgment at the end of time. In the parable a scene is depicted of the next life where there will be a final reckoning of things. God separates all the people that ever lived into two groups, sheep and goats. The real people of God are the sheep, all others are the goats. Note that the parable states that

all the nations of the world are gathered before God at this time, not just Jews, not just Christians, all the nations. In the final analysis, all the people of the world are judged according to the same standard and it is not their theology. It is not their Christology; who they think Jesus is. In the final analysis, the people of God will not be identified by what they say they believe about God at all. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats declares that God will draw a distinction between people of religious form only and those of religious substance, between real believers and pretenders, between people of what might be called true religion and people of false religion, no matter what religion people profess or if they profess no religion at all. In the final analysis a person's religion doesn't seem to matter much to God.

What the parable says that does matter to God ought not surprise us. There is an expectation in so much of what Jesus said that his followers be actively engaged in acts of compassion of one form or another. St. Paul develops the idea that people of genuine Christian faith are almost irresistibly moved toward caring for people in need. When a person is in companionship with God there is an appetite for outreaching kindness. As Paul once explained about his own servant ministry, *The love of Christ constrains us. (II Corinthians 5:14)*

Another thing that might be striking to us about the parable is that the risen Christ declares that anyone who has compassionately cared for anyone else has also done it to Christ. When the sheep are told that they have done this they are dumbfounded. *When Lord, did we do that to you?* Jesus responds that when they did it to the least powerful, the least attractive, and the least important person according to social status, they did it also to Christ. The implication is that the sheep did not reach out in kindness toward others so that it would look well for them on Judgment Day. It seems a fair assumption to make that they didn't even do it because they thought it pleased God. They certainly didn't bring it with them to the last judgment to wave in front of the judge and say, *look what we did!* They just did it, like it was natural for them, like breathing. Dare we say like God was in them, like their souls were saved? On the other hand I think we do need to be intentional sometimes about how we relate to others. Sometimes in order to be really helpful we need to carefully think through what we do. The point here is that for truly religious people compassion is also something that is deeply felt.

One more thought, the old King James English renders the memory verse, *to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.* Modern English translations use the word kindness rather than mercy. Scholars suggest that the ancient Hebrew word implies the meaning of both concepts. So in order to rightly understand the verse we need to include the concept of mercy in our idea of kindness. Mercy is, of course, a critical concept in religion. What chance would any of us have without it? Our dependence upon mercy for our salvation is our only hope. The great big protestant idea is that we can not earn the forgiveness of God, indeed if we could earn it, it would not be forgiveness at all. We are saved by grace through faith said Martin Luther. To show

mercy to others is only to extend to them what has already been extended to us. To include mercy in our kindness to others would be to help them even when their trouble seems in part or on the whole to be their own fault. On the one hand it is important that we maintain a strong sense of personal responsibility. Goodness knows we need more of that in all quarters of life. But really, one of the most significant principles of the Christian gospel, and the reason it is the world's great hope, is that it proclaims the acceptance and forgiveness and help of God for all of us even when our troubles are our own fault. That is the meaning of the cross. That is what the good news is. *While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)* The sheep extend themselves in acts of kindness not just of justice and peace but of mercy as well. Compassion is not prejudiced; it reaches out to everyone no matter what.

In spite of all the volumes of theology and religion ever published, indeed all the churches in East Hartford packed stem to stern might not be able to contain them, in the final analysis, it's really not complicated. *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8.*