

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Jan 30, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE?"

Micah 6:6-8

At the beginning of university or college courses, even some high school courses, students are given a list of course requirements, essays, assignments, exams. It outlines what students must do in order to pass the course and get the credit. And we apply this to much of life. "What do we have to do, what is required of us in order to get through, to pass, to make the grade?" We apply it to our spiritual life. "What must I do to be saved? What exam must I pass, what requirements must I meet in order to be accepted by God?" So we like these words of Micah 6:8, "He 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?" Good, we think, here's the list of requirements, the things we must do in order to get right with God. Now these are God's requirements, but they are not a test that we must pass in order to gain something from God. Rather they are what God requires from us in response to what God has already done for us.

Micah chapter 6. The Hebrew people were disobeying God and complaining that his ways were too onerous. So God calls the people to account. "Tell me, O people of Israel, what have I done to you? Tell me. Plead your case against me. How have I wearied you?" But there was no answer for the people knew that God had treated them with undeserved kindness. God told the people to remember how he had redeemed them from slavery and brought them into the Promised Land. And along the way God gave the Commandments to Israel not as a means of earning God's blessing, but as way of responding to the gift he had given them. Walking in God's way would result in blessing for Israel and mark them out as God's own people and a light for the nations. Even the sacrificial system did not earn God's grace for the people, for they already had God's grace. Now the sacrificial system was important. When the people brought a sacrifice to the temple, it was a sign that they were trusting in God to forgive their sins and to keep them in his covenant grace. But God makes it clear that the size of their offerings meant nothing. The people could not earn anything from God by their sacrifices because they already had everything they needed from the storehouse of his grace. What God required of them was not bigger sacrifices but to live in a way that honored God. "He has told you 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?"

Do you remember that magnificent movie set in World War 2 - Saving Private Ryan? It's the story of how eight American soldiers are sent by the Army Brass into Normandy to bring home a lost paratrooper - Private James Ryan. Ryan's three brothers had been killed, and the Army wanted to spare his mother the awful heartbreak of losing all her sons. So off they go on the mission, facing danger and enemy fire. Finally Private Ryan is rescued, though several soldiers lose their lives in the effort. As Captain Miller (played by Tom Hanks) lies dying at the end he pulls Ryan close and says to him, "Now earn this, James...earn this." Now of course, there was no way he could earn it. It was way beyond earning. And Ryan knew it. The Captain meant that Ryan should go home and live a life worthy of what had been done for him. At the end Ryan, now an elderly man, reveals that every day he tried to do that.

It's the same for God's people. This is the heart of Biblical faith from beginning to end. God is a God of grace, who acts first before we have done anything to earn his goodness and love. God has given everything, even his own dear Son to save us from perishing in our sin and to bring us to eternal life. There is no exam to pass, no course requirements to meet, no sacrifice we can possibly make, that will gain our freedom from sin and death, for God has done it all for us in Jesus. By grace God has acted to make us own forever. We simply accept God's act for ourselves by putting our faith in His Son. Even that faith is God's gift to us. And what God requires of us is that we go and live a life worthy of his grace. Here's how we do that. "He has showed 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."

God's first requirement is that we do justice. The word in Hebrew for justice refers to right and healthy relationships between people. Basically it means to live with a sense of fairness. Youngsters have a sense of justice. "It's not fair," they cry out, and often it's not only about themselves. But as we get older unfairness doesn't bother us as much. We just accept it.

It happened in Israel. Keeping the commandments ensured right relationships between God and the people and between the people themselves. But breaking the commandments always brought about injustice - idolatry, theft, exploitation. And there was plenty of injustice in Micah's time. Judges were taking bribes. The powerful burdened the poor with debt, then took their land when they could not pay back the loan. Workers were not paid full wages. Many people lived in luxury. God was not pleased with all this, so called on his people to "do justice," to do what was right in God's eyes. This would restore basic fairness and right relationships in Israel.

It's true for us, too. Doing justice means doing what is right, and not taking unfair advantage or exploiting another. Did you hear about the man who had been given \$100,000 by a bank in Stouffville rather than the \$10,000 he had come in for. He tried to keep it all, claiming it was the bank's mistake, which it was. Yet basic fairness and the law itself required him to return \$90,000, which he finally did a year later. Two bank employees were fired which might not have happened if he had not dragged it out and acted justly at the beginning.

Now the ancient sources of injustice are still with us. There is still robbery and exploitation. The judicial system is "fair" but often more "fair" to those who have money and power. The gap between rich and poor is very wide. There are many injustices in the world, some of which we know the reason for and others we don't. Yes, there is going to be a great reversal in the age to come, when God sets all things right. But God calls his people to do justice now in advance of his final act. God's people cannot be comfortable if some have warm, safe homes and clean drinking water while others lack these things. Now the reasons for poverty are complex, and we can't take all the blame on ourselves. But we can act in a way that brings basic justice to others.

A lecturer came to a college and spoke about helping to feed the people of Africa. He listed several good reasons for doing so - more people would be employed, there would be better relationships between nations, and we would be in the good graces of the African people and governments. During the informal discussions which followed, someone asked, "But don't you think maybe we ought to feed them just because they're hungry?"

We can't do everything. God knows that. But we can do something. God requires that we "do justice" in response to his magnificent outpouring of grace.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" **Then God requires us to love kindness.** The Hebrew word implies kindness, mercy, faithfulness. It sounds so simple, but kindness is a very powerful virtue. Our world and our relationships would be turned upside down by simple kindness. Someone once said, "Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone is fighting some kind of battle."

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that the Old Testament presents a hard, unyielding God, and the New Testament a God of mercy and forgiveness. It's there in both Testaments. If God had not shown mercy and kindness towards Israel where would they have been? When God requires his people to love kindness, he is calling them to reflect God's own character. Do you remember the kindness of the Good Samaritan who stopped unexpectedly to help the wounded man on the Jericho road, putting himself at risk and even paying the

cost for the man's care? And do you recall that great story in John's Gospel where some men were about to stone a woman caught in adultery? Jesus didn't dismiss the seriousness of adultery but he said, "Whoever among you is without sin, you cast the first stone." One by one they all dropped their stones and walked away. Then Jesus told the woman, "Go and sin no more."

Jesus loved kindness and died to pour out God's kindness for all of us. Love kindness, for that what God requires of you. Show kindness to others because you need it yourself and because God has been kind towards you. And when you love kindness you are being like God himself, for the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" **Finally, God requires that we walk humbly with him.**

God is God and we are his children. We do not tell God what to do; day by day we seek his presence and his counsel. We submit ourselves to God, trusting that his word and His Holy Spirit will guide us in the right direction, and that God will provide for us along the way. The Scripture that Jesus "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death upon the Cross; therefore God has highly exalted him..." If Jesus humbled himself in his earthly journey and obeyed the Father in all things, then how much more should we.

I am not bragging about myself, but I recall the day I started theological college. I had quit my job and was embarking on three years of study with basically no income and not knowing what lay ahead of me. And that morning before I set out, I got down on my knees by my bed and said, "Father, I know you've called me to this and I don't know where all this will lead, but I just ask that you will guide me and help me along the way." I bowed before God and walked humbly with him. Now I have not always done that perfectly or consistently, not by any stretch. But I hope it has at least been my general attitude. Yes, there have been and are many challenges along the way. But overall, it has worked out at least as well as I could have imagined for myself and my family and I hope for those whom God has given me to serve.

Day by day, step by step, walking with God, putting yourself under his direction, trusting in His Word, seeking his help. The humble walk is what God requires of us and it really does lead to blessings beyond our imagining. Ultimately it was true for Jesus, and it's true for us.

What does God require - that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with Him. May God grant us grace to do these things.