

Intro: From the moment we are born we begin to learn that our lives are made up of a series of relationships. Some may be brief and shallow, but others, like that with a parent or a sibling, may be deep and lifelong. We also begin to learn that in every relationship there are expectations. Each side wants, or expects, something from the other. The midwife who has just delivered us wants us to breathe and may slap us on the backside if we don't, and we want her to stop hitting us!

In time we begin to learn that some relationships are more complex, and more important than others. We have a simple, clearly-defined relationship with the girl at the supermarket check-out. She wants our money, and we want our shopping. We each know exactly what is expected from us and things are usually brought to a swift conclusion that satisfies both sides.

Others can grow, and develop, and constantly change, over a lifetime. With my dad's advancing dementia and my mum's increasing frailty my relationships with them are being redefined all the time. People sometimes speak of the child becoming the parent, but while there is an element of truth in that the reality is *waaaaaaay* more complex!

Tell me what you want from me vv6-7: As we grow up we get into new relationships and it becomes harder to work out what is expected from us. Perhaps we have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, who may later become a spouse. Almost certainly we have a boss... and you don't need me to tell you they are very different relationships!

With these new relationships comes a growing realisation that we have to prioritise. Fulfilling the expectations of one relationship may sometimes mean sacrificing the wants or needs of another, and we learn to recognise what is more important. It's not always easy. I remember once being part of a choir that was singing at the Baptist Union of Scotland's annual assembly, which that year was being held in St. Brycedale's church in Kirkcaldy. The choirmaster, Jim Thomson, wanted us at the church for 7:00 one evening, but I was on day release at Kirkcaldy Technical College and my classes didn't end until 9:00. I asked Jim what I should do, and he said, "Be at the church at 7:00, but don't tell your boss." He *was* my boss at the time!

Sometimes balancing the needs of one relationship against another are difficult, and we need to learn where to make compromises. Sometimes even just discerning the needs of *one* relationship is harder than we might think. I'm sure we've all seen scenes on television, perhaps in a soap opera, where someone in the midst of a troubled relationship (and aren't they all in soap operas!?) cries in anguish, "Tell me what you want from me!".

Sometimes our relationship with God can be a bit like that. We try to live our lives according to His will, and we think we're doing what He wants, but then He doesn't do what we expect and we're thrown into confusion. Believe me, many times I've said to God, "Tell me what you want from me!".

Here Micah is in effect asking God the same thing. He has always been taught to offer sacrifices to the Lord, so perhaps that's the answer, and he offers some pretty extravagant ones. "Thousands of rams... ten thousand rivers of olive oil", even his firstborn child v7. But it is clear that sacrifice is not the answer, and Micah knows it. When he asks, "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?" v7 he knows already that the answer is no.

Putting God first: The first lesson we need to learn from this reading is that when we are trying to decide which relationship is most important and must be prioritised above all others, we need to learn *always to put God first*.

I know that's easier said than done, especially when we have deep relationships with a spouse, or with parents, or with children to consider. Sometimes it may even go against our instincts. But God doesn't do compromises, and he doesn't do second place.

When Micah offers his firstborn child he echoes the experience of Abraham. Remember how God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, whom God had promised to him, and for whom he had waited a lifetime. Only at the very last moment, literally as Abraham "took the knife to slay his son" *Gen. 22:10*, did God intervene and provide a ram instead *Gen. 22:13*. God needed to know Abraham's commitment to him was total and unreserved and he was willing to do whatever God asked of him. He expects the same from each of us, and there may come a time in our lives when he asks for a similarly costly sacrifice to show it.

I'll tell you what I want: Even as Micah offers his sacrifices, so over the top as to be ridiculous, he knows that is *not* what God wants from him. So what *does* God want from him, and from us?

This is the bit where, with apologies to the Spice Girls, God says to Micah, "I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want!"... and it's *not* to zig-a-zig ah! Even as Micah asks what the Lord requires of him, he already knows the answer is "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [his] God" v8.

Let's break that down...

Act justly: What does it mean to "*act justly*"? If you look up justice in a dictionary you'll see all kinds of things about fairness, morality and so on. When we feel we have been wronged we may go to court seeking justice, asking the law to put right what is wrong. Does that mean that in order to act justly we should all be dressing up in robes and curly wigs and acting like judges? Of course not!

At its most basic to act justly simply means doing *what is right*. That should be what is in accordance with the law and what is moral, but more specifically it means being *obedient to God's law* in all our dealings *with him and with others*. Sometimes these days in the media we hear the phrase "bad actors" used of those who set out to break the law and to act immorally or maliciously (though it always brings to my mind an image of some thespian hamming it up like a pantomime villain!)... we are commanded, rather, to be *good* actors.

Generally that will mean keeping the law of the land we live in, but sometimes it may mean making a choice, and if that law conflicts with God's law then his must take precedence. When Jesus was asked a question about paying taxes, he told the Pharisees to give Caesar what was his (*Matt. 22:21*)... in other words, to obey the law of the land

But when Daniel, for example, faced a law that made it illegal for him to pray to God (*Dan. 6*), or when his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told the law required them to worship a statue (*Dan. 3*), clearly those laws were at odds with God's law, and they rightly chose obedience to God's law over obedience to the law of the land.

We are unlikely to have to make that kind of choice, because our law is broadly based on Christian principles. But we always have a responsibility, if we call ourselves Christians, to ensure that our actions are in keeping with God's laws. God gave his people a set of ten commandments (*Exodus 20:1-17*) to govern their relationships with one another and with him. Jesus summed up the spirit of those commandments in two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbour as yourself", saying that "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (*Matt. 22:37-40*).

So that's the first thing the Lord requires: obedience to His law.

Love mercy: The second thing God requires is to *love mercy*. Anyone who has ever read or seen Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* will probably remember Portia's famous speech. She is pleading with the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who is seeking to exact a penalty under law from Antonio for his failure to repay a loan, to show mercy, and says:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.

Act IV, Scene i, 182ff.

She later says "It is an attribute to God himself" (*ibid.*, 193). There is a clear demonstration of how obedience to *God's* law may go beyond simply following the law of the land. According to the law and the terms of his contract Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, and he plans to get it by cutting out Antonio's heart.

Portia's appeal is to a higher law. Mercy is an attribute of God. But we are made in His image and able to show that same quality. We may think of it in terms of compassion, and that is certainly part of its meaning, but when the bible uses the term of God it would usually be better translated as "constant love." We read in scripture, "Because of the LORD'S great love [KJV has "mercies"] we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning: great is your faithfulness." (*Lamentations 3:22-23*)

The Lord has shown His mercy, or His love, to us countless times, forgiving us time and time again for our sins and even sending His son to die in our place. That kind of love is constant and unchanging, not there one day and gone the next, and it is selfless.

When Micah tells us the Lord requires us to love mercy, what he means is that we should *show* mercy, that we should love others as he has loved us... and sometimes love means looking beyond what the law requires.

Walk humbly with your God: Thirdly Micah says we should *walk humbly with our God*.

As we grow up we often have heroes, perhaps from films or comics, perhaps sporting figures or pop stars. Years ago when I was pastor of Cardenden Baptist Church we used to have an overhead transparency that said "Jesus - more heroic than Batman!" A bit of fun, yes, but surely true as well! We may dream of meeting our heroes, though most of us never get the chance, and wanting to be like them. Jesus should be our greatest hero, and we can meet him, and because of him we can be with God the Father.

Would you be humble in the presence of your hero? How much more humble should we be then in the presence of God! Paul warns us that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought (*Romans 12:3*), or in other words that we should be humble before God. It is mind-blowing that the God who made the universe itself has time for us, and even welcomes us into his presence. But we need to remember that is a privilege, not a right, and act accordingly. We need to beware of thinking that simply because God allows us into his presence we are somehow His equal or anywhere remotely near it!

Walk with Him, yes, but do it in *humility*. He is God and we are his children, and we should behave accordingly with respect and humility. Remember the example of Jesus, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" and "humbled himself and became obedient to death" (*Philippians 2:6,8*). If even Jesus showed that much humility before God we are on *very* thin ice if we do not do likewise!

And what does it mean to walk with Him? To be with him is not just a question of physical presence, but of identifying ourselves as belonging to him and choosing to adopt his values and follow His ways. It's like being a gang member, it demands our total allegiance. Once again, it comes back to being obedient to His word.

Conclusion: So that's what the Lord requires of us: "to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him." He has given us all the laws and all the examples we need to follow. Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God: we can say it in seconds, but to do it is going to take a lifetime of practice, and like a stick of rock that has the word "Blackpool" all the way through it, those principles should pervade every aspect of our lives.