

“The Golden Text”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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New Testament Reading: Mark 10:17-22

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Old Testament Reading: Micah 6:1-8

¹Hear 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?



Sermon: *“The Golden Text”*

Most of us have been taught “The Golden Rule” from the time we were tiny. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Well, my seminary Old Testament professor Sib Towner called this passage from Micah “The Golden Text” of the Old Testament. In these few words is summed up the entirety of what it meant to be the people of God. If you had to put the theology of the Old Testament on a bumper sticker, you’d be hard pressed to come up with something better than “Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.”

The prophet Micah was most likely writing at a time when the nation of Israel was languishing under foreign rule. Forced to pay tribute to the Assyrians, the people were paying the price for wandering from the path God had set for them. In this passage, Micah speaks both sides of a dialogue between God and the people of Israel.

God begins by pointing out all that God has done for Israel, but that they have responded to with ingratitude. God recounts first, the story of Moses and Aaron and Miriam who God sent to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. Then God reminds them of the time God handled the prophet Balaam who had been contracted by King Balak to prophesy against the Israelites as they traveled toward his country on their way to the promised land. King Balak hired Balaam to bring a curse against the Israelites, but God intervened, and Balaam instead spoke blessings on Israel.¹ God then recounts how, much like for Moses at the Red Sea, the waters of the River Jordan were parted for Joshua and he and the people were led across from Shittim into the promised land at Gilgal.² In all of this and more, God has been merciful, intervening in history to save the Israelites and gift them with a land of promise. How then can the Israelites persist in their disobedience?

God has done all that God promised and more. God has kept the covenant. Israel has not. Convicted by this, Micah speaks the people’s response, essentially admitting that a debt is owed to God. The people respond by asking “With what shall I

come before the Lord?" The question refers to the temple cultus; the ritual offerings of sacrifices that were thought to not only please God, but to appease God's anger and earn for the giver God's forgiveness and favor.

The cultic sacrifice of animals had been an important part of the worship of God earlier in Israel's history. The priests had to not only be familiar with the liturgy of the temple, but practically had to be butchers to properly kill and dress the animals brought as offerings to God. For every sin there was a certain sacrifice; for every economic level there was an appropriate number and type of animals to be burned on the altar of the Lord. Sometimes it was a bull or doves; at other times offerings of wine or wheat or oils were required. Here, the people are returning to those sacrificial traditions. Is this what God wants? How much can we sacrifice to make God happy?

And so the speaker asks if the burnt offering of a calf would suffice to settle accounts with God? And if not a single calf, then how about a thousand rams? That's a pretty big offering, but it's not without Biblical precedent. The book of First Chronicles reports that, on one occasion, David sacrificed to God a thousand bulls, a thousand rams, and a thousand lambs³ and in First Kings, Solomon is said to have regularly offered "a thousand burnt offerings."⁴ If the sins of the people were great enough, might God require of them the slaughter of a thousand rams? Or more? Would God be appeased by the gift of fine oils? Elsewhere in the Old Testament, oil is included as an offering to God, but in small quantities.⁵ Here the speaker suggests an unimaginable quantity; an entire *river* of oil...or more. Not just one river, but "tens of thousands of rivers of oil." It's an absurd amount and basically asks the question "would all the oil in the world make God happy? The suggested offerings escalate beyond imagination, but then the speaker crosses the threshold into the truly unthinkable: what about a child; the first born? Should the people be prepared to sacrifice their own children to appease God; to earn God's favor; to restore themselves to right relationship with God?

Child sacrifice was never allowed in Israel. Even though we remember the story of how God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac earlier in Genesis, but we also remember that God intervened before Abraham could follow through with the command.⁶ Abraham's *willingness* to sacrifice the child is seen as proof of his righteousness before God.⁷ But in spite of this story which is a cherished bit of Israel's heritage, God forbade the people from offering their children as sacrifices⁸ and even chastised people on the rare occasions when they tried.⁹

Here, the bargaining for God's favor has gone to truly ridiculous heights as Micah speaks for the people who are searching for *something* to give that will make them right with God. How much does God demand? But Micah responds on God's behalf saying simply this: "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?"

The problem is that the Israelites seem to want to buy off God's anger. They want to appease God with individual gifts. But what God wants is a relationship with God's people. This isn't about changing what they are willing to give up. It's about changing the way they live.

When I was a kid, shopping for my dad's birthday and Christmas presents was a real challenge. Part of the reason was because I had no money to buy him anything. But the bigger problem was that whenever I would ask him "Hey dad, what do you want for your birthday?" He would invariably answer: Oh, just good kids who behave themselves and do well in school." I was always frustrated by that because buying him a necktie or a new pair of socks would have been infinitely easier than giving him what he was asking of me. That necktie would only cost me some money. Being well-behaved and doing well in school; that would take everything I had. That would take my whole self. That would take effort every day.

Which is what God is telling the people through the prophet Micah. Their stuff; their wealth; even in the incomprehensible amounts that are being thrown about here, even their children would just be more things given to God when what God really wanted from them was their whole selves, given to and for each other. Which is why this is the Golden Text of the Old Testament. The Golden Rule says "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This Golden text teaches do unto others as you would do unto God.

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When we hear the word “justice,” we tend to think of the law and courts. We tend to think of people getting what they deserve. But justice is a biblical concept that goes beyond our system of laws and courts. At its heart, the concept of justice is about people getting *that to which they have a right*. For Micah, justice is not just a concept, but an action; justice is something we *do*. Old Testament scholar James Limburgh writes that “to do justice means to work for the establishment of equity for all, especially the powerless.”¹⁰

And doing kindness means more than simply being nice to other people. The Hebrew word used here is “*hesed*” which is often used to describe the steadfast love of God. “When used [to describe] human relationships, it means love with a strong element of loyalty, such as that between a husband and a wife or between two friends.”¹¹ Think about the work you put into your marriage, to be patient, and kind, and honest and compassionate, every day. That’s the kind of effort God calls us to put into all our relationships.

And the third of God’s requirements is to walk humbly with God. We often hear folks say that you can’t just talk the talk; you have to walk the walk. And Christians especially speak of “walking with God.” But I think that concept gets watered down when we take it to mean that we simply align ourselves with God. Since today is Super Bowl Sunday, I’ll put it in football terms. Walking with God doesn’t just mean putting on a replica team jersey and watching the game from the comfort of our well-appointed living rooms. It means getting out onto the field and hitting somebody!!!! It means showing up for practice every day. It means working out in the weight room, watching film, studying the play book, eating right, *every day*. For those players in the Super Bowl, football isn’t just something they do on Sundays. Football is their whole life.

Walking with God means orienting one’s whole life toward God’s will; being led by God to do the things God would have us do and to go into the places where God would have us go. When we hear this call to “walk with God,” we should immediately remember Christ’s call to the disciples to “come and follow me.” It is an invitation to deny the self; to not just to be associated with God, but to live every day for God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote “To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and [not ourselves], to see only Him who goes before and [not] the road which is too hard for us.”¹²

You see, this passage is a warning for those who have set a limit as to how far they are willing to go. And we sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that giving an hour a week of our time is sufficient; or that writing a check once a week is sufficient; that spending time in prayer or reading our Bibles every now and then is sufficient, or that being kind once in a while is enough. But what Micah speaks to the people of Israel is also true for us: that God is less interested in the things we do as periodic acts of devotion *to* God than God is interested in the things we do *to* and *for* each other every day. Which might actually be more difficult.

Fred Craddock was a well-loved, well-respected minister and professor who taught preachers how to preach. One of his best images is one that I repeat a lot and I’ll repeat here. He says that “We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’ But the reality for most of us is that [God] sends us to the bank to cash in that \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. ...Usually giving our life to Christ ... [is] done [not once in some grand gesture but over and over] in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.”¹³

You see, when we give ourselves to God; when we make our commitments to follow Christ, I honestly believe that we are making a commitment to run through walls if that’s what God asked us to do; we intend to climb the tallest mountains, swim the widest seas; and give our lives for the glory of God if we have to. But no one is asking you to do that.

When we think of people who gave their lives to God we think of names like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Theresa. But the fact is, you will probably never be required to risk your life taking a stand against the Nazis like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or put yourself in jeopardy leading a movement for equality like Martin Luther King; or give your life serving the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, like Mother Theresa. But God does require that you do equity, love loyally and daily go where God sends you, doing what God calls you to do. Will that mean making life altering sacrifices? Maybe... but probably not.

You will probably never be asked to quit your job and become a minister or a missionary. But it might require you to teach a Sunday school class or keep the nursery or move away from your social group at church to invest in the spiritual growth of our children.

You will probably never be asked to sell all that you own and give the money to the poor as a requirement to following Jesus. But you will be asked to pick up an extra bag of groceries when you go shopping to help struggling families have enough to eat or to give up a day helping to feed hungry people at Hoge Memorial or the YWCA Family Shelter.

You will most likely never have to sacrifice yourself in order to obey God's command to follow, but you will be asked to let go of prejudices and pre-conceived ideas about other people; to forgive past wrongs and release old grudges. You will be challenged to be patient and kind, to rejoice in the truth, to be gentle and compassionate, and to try to understand the struggles and situations of other people.

I know that sounds like a lot. It would better if we could just buy God a tie. But when you hold it up against all that God has done for us, it's really not too much to ask. This is what it means to be the people of God: not that we give big extravagant gifts to God, but that we glorify God by giving so much for the betterment and well-being of God's people every day.

What does the Lord require of you? Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Numbers 22-24, NRSV

² Joshua 3-4, NRSV

³ 1st Chronicles 29:21, NRSV

⁴ 1st Kings 3:4, NRSV

⁵ Exodus 29:40, Numbers 15:9, NRSV

⁶ Genesis 22:1-19, NRSV

⁷ Romans 4:3, James 2:21-23, NRSV

⁸ Leviticus 18:21, 20:1-5, Deuteronomy 12:29-32

⁹ Ezekiel 16:1-2, 20, Jeremiah 7:30-34, NRSV

¹⁰ Limburgh, James. "The Book of Micah." *Hosea - Micah*. Ed. James L. Mays. Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1988. 192. Print. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.

¹¹ Limburgh, pg. 192

¹² "The Cost of Discipleship." *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Collier Books, 1963, p. 97.

¹³ Craddock, Fred B. *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*. Ed. Craig Brian. Larson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993. 200. Print.