

What Does God Really Want? (Part 5)

Practical Virtues

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As we begin this sermon, I want to turn once again to I Corinthians 4, where the apostle Paul wrote:

I Corinthians 4:1-2 Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

In the last sermon on "What Does God Really Want?" we focused on stewardship, and we found that a steward is a person entrusted with the care of what belongs to another. A steward, in other words, is an attendant, a manager, a guardian, a director, agent, or provider. His responsibilities may be narrowed down to any one of them, or all of them might be included.

We also found that though they themselves may have been given a great deal of authority to carry out their responsibilities, they are nonetheless always shown in the Bible as being under the authority of the real owner, and being judged, rewarded, or disciplined, depending on how well they did caring for and increasing what was given to them.

As applied to us, the reality is that we have been entrusted with the true riches that endure forever, and are valuable beyond our wildest estimates. We have knowledge of the true gospel. Our heritage is God, and to inherit the earth and all of its wealth. We have the forgiveness of sin. We have access to God and His Holy Spirit. As stewards of God, we have been entrusted with the most valuable wealth that can be given to any human being, and it is a weighty responsibility.

In the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus gives us two positive instructions toward success in carrying out our stewardship. The first is that we must labor, following the same principles the children of this world use to attain success in their worldly endeavors. And that is, laboring in the present with

energetic self-denial, persistence, endurance, and wisdom, always looking to the future good, and not making compromising accommodations to present circumstances.

The second principle fits hand-in-glove with the first, and that is there are two kinds of wealth. Neither is inherently bad or evil, but one is overwhelmingly better than the other, and that is the one that a faithful steward will focus his efforts toward.

The one of lesser value is called by Jesus in the Parable of the Unjust Steward three things, all synonyms of the other: 1) unrighteous mammon; 2) that which is least; and 3) that which is another's.

The second kind of wealth is referred to by Jesus, again, by three different terms: 1) that which is much; 2) true riches; and 3) that which is your own. This second category represents wealth that can be carried through the grave. It can be carried through the grave and into the Kingdom of God.

The other wealth, while it is also good, is transient. It is non-permanent, not lasting, because it is not really part of a person's heart.

There is a Spanish proverb which says, "[Burial] shrouds have no pockets." It is their version of, "You can't take it with you." We must never allow our efforts and focus in stewardship toward mammon to eclipse that toward true riches.

Making these choices is not easy, because life, it seems, is so demanding on a daily basis. We live in a nation in which mammon has been elevated to dizzying heights in people's minds, and almost everyone is caught up in worshipping this false god—mammon—so that it is very hard to resist being caught up in it because it is pushed so hard at us from every side. You turn on the television, and there it is. You turn on the radio, and there it is. You go to the store, and there it is. "Buy this." "Buy that." *Bow down* at this Baal called in the Bible "mammon."

So from every side of life it is pushed at us, and Jesus leaves us with the implication in the Parable of the Unjust Steward that it is better to be wise and poor than rich and foolish. Thus we are to make sure that we are bending

our efforts as stewards toward developing qualities of character that are eternal, everlasting values.

Jesus is saying, "Don't waste your time and energies on what doesn't matter in the long run, because God is going to supply our need anyway. That's the kind of God that He is." Thus stewardship is a single word, a term which describes our responsibilities in our relationship with God toward everything we have been entrusted with, including unrighteous mammon.

God requires proper stewardship of us given to mammon as well as to that which is spiritual, but He is teaching that the one is more valuable than the other. And so a Christian has to perform a masterful, sometimes very difficult, balancing act with how he uses his time and energy in life.

The fact is that the true riches are so much more valuable that there is no adequate comparison that can be made with the unrighteous mammon. We must understand that what is important is what is at the very substance of our heart. To God, what is important, is what we *are*, not what we have, because it is what we are that will pass through the grave, and therefore must be concentrated on before it is too late, and we die.

Turn to Psalm 49. We are going to read the entire psalm. The subject of this psalm is appropriate to a comparison between unrighteous mammon, which again is not inherently evil. In fact it can be considered also as "that which is good." But because of what we are, and what mammon is, it is very easy for us to make unrighteous mammon into something that is evil rather than good. So what we have here in Psalm 49 is a comparison between the true riches and mammon. If you want to make a study on your own, what you should do is coordinate this psalm with Psalm 73. They have the same basic subject, but each one is expressive in a little bit different way.

Psalm 49:1 Hear this, all you people; give ear, all you inhabitants of the world.

This is something that is of special interest to you and me, but it is applicable to everybody in the world, and so it has very broad instruction for everybody.

Psalm 49:2-3 Both low and high, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak wisdom, and the meditation of my heart shall give understanding [or enlightenment].

He is going to talk about a proper application of something. That is what wisdom is. He says, "I'm going to enlighten you regarding something very important to life."

Psalm 49:4 I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will disclose my dark saying [or in Hebrew it can actually be translated *riddle*] on the harp.

That is an instruction for the person who is going to give this. In reality, this was supposed to be given with a musical background, perhaps to add to the impact of what was going to be said.

Psalm 49:5 Why should I fear in the days of evil, when the iniquity at my heels surrounds me?

If you look in a modern translation, that word *heels* in "the iniquity of my heels" will sometimes be translated "supplanter." You remember when Jacob came out of the womb, he had hold of Esau's heel, and so Jacob was named *supplanter*. What is a supplanter? A supplanter is somebody who takes the place of somebody else, or a supplanter is somebody who takes advantage of somebody else, and in taking advantage, he oppresses.

What you are going to find here is something that you are very well aware of, and that is that people of wealth have a proclivity to take advantage of the poor. That is what he is talking about. It almost seems to go with the territory. If a person has wealth, he either got the wealth because he took advantage of other people, or once he gets the wealth, he uses the power of money to take advantage of people. That is unfortunately a historical fact. The rich and powerful take advantage of the poor and weak. The rich do get richer, and the poor get poorer very frequently because the rich are taking advantage of them.

This author said that he is not going to fear in the days of evil because those who would deprive us of our rights cannot really get to him. Now the author of this psalm was a man of faith, and so he was not concerned about the rich taking advantage of him, but in life we know that the rich will take advantage of the poor.

Psalm 49:6 Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches.

This explains who "the iniquity of my heels" is. It is "they that trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches."

Now, what is the problem with mammon? We are beginning to see it now. It is very clear. Mammon has a very powerful influence on those who have a great deal of it, that their trust, their security, their hopes, their power is in money. It is in wealth. There is the problem with wealth. It creates security in those who have it. That is not good in a relationship with God, because our security ought to be in God. Our hope ought to be in Him. He is to be our Defender. Remember what I said: It is better to be a wise and poor person than it is to be rich and foolish. The rich have a very difficult time not getting foolish about their riches.

Psalm 49:7 None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.

Can money save a person in the day of his death? Can money buy a person away from death? Impossible. But unfortunately that is what mammon has the power to create in people—it creates a false hope, a false faith that is not going to carry through the grave, because the trust is in the wrong thing. "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him."

Psalm 49:8 For the redemption of their soul is costly . . .

This means "beyond the means of wealth." Nobody can buy his way into the Kingdom of God. Money does not buy character. Money cannot buy a pure spirit, a clean nature, a clean heart.

Psalm 49:8-9 For the redemption of their soul is costly, and it shall cease forever—[That is, at the grave.] That he should continue to live eternally, and not see the Pit.

This is kind of a concluding statement. We are about halfway through, and he is already saying that mammon is useless.

Psalm 49:10 For he sees wise men die, likewise the fool and the senseless person perish, and leave their wealth to others.

The author is saying that it is so obvious that anybody can see this. It does not matter whether you are wise, poor, rich, or whatever—everybody dies. The thought is, the way to have wisdom is to prepare for that death. It is coming.

Psalm 49:11 Their [the wealthy person] inner thought is that their houses shall last forever, their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names.

He is saying here that this is the wealthy and the powerful person's consolation—their source of encouragement—because they believe before they die that their name is going to continue forever, because after all, they named this building as a memorial to them. They named this piece of land for them. They named this street after themselves, and they have children, and so their name is going to continue forever through their children. The author of the psalm is saying this is foolish. The only way for a person's name to continue forever is to carry into the grave the right heart, the true character, whatever is pleasing in God's eye. Money cannot do it.

Psalm 49:12 Nevertheless man, though in honor, does not remain [He doesn't continue.]; he is like the beasts that perish.

Their pride in their things avails them zilch. Zero. Nothing. This is what that verse means.

Psalm 49:13 This is the way of those who are foolish, . . .

It is better to be poor and wise than rich and foolish. You wonder where that came from. This is where it came from. It is right in the Book. The folly of the rich man is to put his trust in money.

Psalm 49:13 . . . and of their posterity who approve their sayings.
Selah

Do you know what this means? It means, "Like father, like son;" "Like mother, like daughter," that their posterity—the children—adopt the same attitude as their parents have. Ooh! That is a sobering one. And so what happens is the wealthy pass on the attitude and approach and way to their children, and their children come along and do the same thing, only it is very like they are going to magnify it.

Psalm 49:14-15 Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright [the victims of the wealthy] shall have dominion over them in the morning [when light comes. Does that not indicate a resurrection? It is certainly implied there.]; and their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me. Selah [Think about this.]

Psalm 49:17 For when he [the rich man] dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him.

You cannot take it with you. Shrouds have no pockets.

Psalm 49:18-19 Though while he lived he blesses himself [He really pampered himself.] (for men will praise you [self-congratulation] when you do well for yourself), he shall go to the generation of his fathers [those who have died before him]; they shall never see light.

Why? Let us change the word a little bit. "They shall never see the glory." They will never see the glory that the wealthy man took into the grave. Why? Because they are dead! They are in their graves sleeping.

Psalm 49:20 A man who is in honor, yet does not understand, is like the beasts that perish.

That is, honor in this world, because it cannot be taken through the grave.

Once you understand a psalm like this, you can understand why Jesus said what He said in the Parable of the Unjust Steward. The true riches consist of those things that can be carried through the grave and into the Kingdom of God, and this has to have the greater weight in our lives. Thus, this psalm is teaching that it is careful attention to our responsibility as stewards, focused in the right direction, that will enable us to come to the end of our lives having produced the right things.

It is what we have **done** with what we have received. It is what we have done with that which has been given by God that counts, and God is looking for people that can be trusted.

What is required of stewards? That they be faithful, that they can be trusted. God is looking for people who can be depended upon. And if we cannot be depended upon as good stewards of what God has put into our care as a human, how can we possibly be given the true heavenly riches—the possession of our inheritance in the Kingdom for us from the foundation of the world?

So, we can understand that faithful use of the world helps us to the possession of God to character and to His Kingdom. It is good to remember that all the things of the world—wealth and poverty, sickness or health, events and circumstances—are to be understood by us as nothing more than scaffolding for the building of character fit for the Kingdom of God.

All of these things that occurred to us are meant to help make us mature. If we faithfully and wisely use all of these externals with the recognition that ultimately their source is God, without cleaving to them as the true goal, but

knowing that they are intended to help make us more like God and Christ, then I think we can be faithful stewards. But if the world fills our hearts, where are we? We go into the grave having only that which is transient, that which is passing away with our death—and it is gone.

Now, what God is doing with us ... is not this pattern the same as that which is used by craftsmen whenever they are training someone new to the craft, and therefore less skilled? I am talking about an apprenticeship here. The skilled craftsman sets his apprentices to small tasks, to simple matters that can be scrapped without much loss should a complete failure occur in what they are doing. But as the apprentice becomes more adept in using that which is least, and skills being developed and ingrained in him, he is entrusted with greater responsibility with things of greater value.

I went through this in my own life when I took my apprenticeship. They started me out on things that I could hardly hurt, and even if I did hurt it, they could throw it away, and very little was lost. But as I gained skill, then they kept putting me on more and more difficult jobs and things that would have been much more costly had I destroyed them by not doing a good job.

That is what God is doing. He has us involved in things that can be scrapped if we mess up, but He will continue to work with us, and as our skills in living and relationships develop, He will entrust us with greater responsibilities.

There is something that is good to know, and that is that both faithfulness to God, and unfaithfulness toward God, will form character that could be eternal, and so the force of Jesus' teaching in the Parable of the Unjust Steward is to make sure that the character that is formed is good and godly. Can you—can we—be trusted to serve God and His purpose and plan above all other things that come up in our lives?

You know, the Laodiceans are losing that battle, even though to all outward appearances they seem to be solidly in the church. But from the description that is given by Jesus in Revelation 3, they are standing on the precipice of the tribulation, blindly unaware that the focus and judgment of their lives has been diverted into that which is of lesser importance. They are rich, they are increased with goods, but they say they need nothing. That is a dead

giveaway that they are putting the emphasis on the wrong things, because they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. They do not have the right things in mind.

We are going to go to three very familiar scriptures. The first is Romans 8, where I want to emphasize this point that everything in life is given to us for the purpose of building character.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good [but only to a special group of people] to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

All the events of life, all of the things that come within our possession, and as part of our responsibility, are given to us for the sake of good. They are given to us so that through them the right things can be carried through the grave. This includes what we might consider bad things. Even things like poor health can be a good thing in terms of what God is doing with us, even though on the outside it looks like it is bad. If God is in your life, then even that sickness (though we might consider it bad), is good. It is part of the scaffolding for building character.

The amount of money that we have and the wealth that we have been given, we had better begin to think of this in a little bit different category. It is not necessarily what we have *earned* by our skill and hard work and so forth, but rather what has been *given* by God. Turn the thing around, and that becomes part of the stewardship responsibility, because it has been given. All wealth belongs to God.

All of life, including all the events and circumstances of those called into this stewardship, is intended for the building, the forming, the shaping of godly character, and the wealth and the true riches—that which is your own, so that they will pass through the grave. So, for the called, all of life is in preparation for the Kingdom of God.

Turn now to Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:1-2 And you [Christians] He made alive, who were dead [spiritually dead] in trespasses and sins, in which [before

being converted] you once walked [you lived your life] according to the course [the way] of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.

The proper stewardship and creation of this true wealth is not possible in the fullest sense until one is called by God, because until God chooses to give us knowledge of the gospel and of Himself, we are helplessly enslaved to the ruler of this world and his spirit. That enslavement must be broken, and our calling gives us the opportunity to see life from an entirely different perspective. In one sense, all of what one does with life turns one's perspective.

Perspective is the way we perceive the events and circumstances of life, and this thus greatly affects the way we deal with them. The world calls *perspective* "our world view." Holding that in mind, let us go back to the Old Testament to another familiar scripture in Isaiah 55.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

I think it can be honestly stated that these two verses succinctly describe mankind—**our** problem—in a nutshell: We do not think the same way God does. We do not see life and its events the same way that God does. We do not have the same perspective as God does. We do not have the same world view that God does.

I remember being helped greatly to understand this by a young man who was in the North Hollywood Graduate Club. This young fellow also happened to be a very good photographer, and he showed with a couple of clever illustrations in a speech how a photographer's perspective—the point from which he took his picture—subtly changed what appeared in the photograph, and thus its impact on those who saw the picture. His purpose in the speech was that until we see things from God's perspective, our chances of reaching

right conclusions to life's problems or understanding God's will and therefore making right choices, is greatly diminished, because we do not really "get the picture."

I think this is simply and clearly illustrated in Genesis 3 in that episode in the Garden. Neither Satan, Adam, nor Eve saw the event in the same way that God did, and so what happened? Wrong choices were made, and sin—falling short of the glory of God—as a fact in man's life began. Mankind has never recovered from what Adam and Eve began, because we all do the same thing. What happened there was typical of what anyone of us would have done in the same situation. I am speaking most specifically of before conversion, because they were not converted. They did not see things the same way God did. They did not have His perspective, and thus they made wrong choices.

Another broad conclusion concerning what God really wants can thus be reached: All of life is devoted to coming to see things from God's perspective. These last two-mentioned purposes—all of life is devoted to coming to see life from God's perspective, and all of life is for the building of godly character—are inextricably linked, because they outline our stewardship responsibilities. If we do not see things from God's perspective, we are probably going to make wrong choices. If we do not see that all of life is designed by God for the building of character, we will probably make wrong choices and our stewardship will be destroyed on both counts.

What does God really want? He wants us to see things from His point of view, and then He wants us to make the right choices because we are consciously striving to build character, to be in His image. That is what all of life is for.

Let us go back to Psalm 90—the psalm that began this whole series on what God really wants—and let us read once again verses 10 through 12. This is really one of the most significant psalms in the entire book. This is where this whole series of five sermons began.

Psalm 90:10 The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet is their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Remember Psalm 49. If the life is soon to be cut off, what should we be paying attention to? So Moses goes on:

Psalm 90:11-12 Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

This psalm is about the transitory character of our existence. Moses is saying that life is brief, and it passes by quickly; therefore, we do not want to foolishly and carelessly let it pass, focusing on the wrong things.

I began this series because I was concerned that because of the calendar issue too many people were getting their minds focused on a technical issue, that from the larger view of God's purpose in practical application, is a minor issue being blown all out of proportion.

What I want to do in the remainder of this sermon is to arrange some broad areas that I have given in this sermon and in previous sermons in this series, in a more specific 1, 2, 3 order, because that is what Moses said. He said, "Help us to put things in order." I will touch on each one of these points briefly, and as a disclaimer, I am not saying that this list is the last word. You and others might put things in a different order. But if I could say what the main point is in the calendar series, it is number one on my list right here.

Point #1: Faith

Faith is of supreme importance in all of life, because it is faith where it all begins in terms of practical application. God's way is no good at all to anybody if it is not applied, and nobody will apply it unless they believe Him.

Turn to Hebrews 11, just to touch on something that should be well understood by this time.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Faith stands *under* . It is the foundation. It is the assurance of all that we hope for in giving our lives to this endeavor of serving God.

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him [Here is the reason], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

As I said, we are not going to spend a great deal of time on this because other sermons have been given to these things in much more detail previously.

Brethren, it is the lack of faith that is the cause of this world being as it is. Do we understand that? It began when Adam and Eve did not believe God. They believed Satan instead, and they acted on their belief in Satan and their own feelings rather than trusting God. They did not believe Him. If the lack of faith is the basic cause of why this horrible world is the way it is, with all of its pain and disease, all of its pain in warfare, all of its pain in fear, all of its pain in upset conditions in people's minds (the mental illness), you look at the problem, because if people believed God, this would never happen.

If the lack of faith is the cause, then the exercising of faith is the solution. There is nothing hard about that. Using faith is *the* solution. What does that mean in practical fact? It means when God says something, we do it regardless of how it looks to our eyes. We do it because we believe God. It is not complicated. If Adam and Eve had done that, things might have turned out a great deal differently.

II Corinthians 5:7 For we [Christians] walk [live] by faith, not by sight.

To me the important thing here is this—ultimately, this is what differentiates us from all other men: *We believe God.*

Many of the unconverted are religious, but the reality is that even though they are religious, they do not believe God, and so they go about establishing their own forms of righteousness. Rather than seeking the righteousness of God, they do not believe Him. It shows up that they do not believe Him

when they keep Sunday, even though the commandment clearly says to "Remember the Sabbath." The human mind twists that to say, "One day in seven, rather than the Sabbath."

It does the same thing with the other commandments as well. It will twist them into something that is suitable to them rather than simply believing what God says. And so this is what separates the righteous from the unrighteous. The righteous believe what God says.

The eyes, the ears, the nose, the skin, whatever, may be telling us something that is not right, but those who believe God will follow what He says rather than believing their own feelings. That is what separates those who have a godly perspective from those that do not have. They walk by faith, and when we come to understand it brethren, *this*—this very fact that you believe God—is **the great miracle** that has occurred in your life. That revealing of God by His Spirit is what has separated you and all other true Christians from the rest of the world. We believe God. It is not a matter of being religious. It is a matter of faith. Those who have faith are truly religious. Faith is to be the driving force of the converted's life. Faith is what gives him his perspective of the events of life and motivates him to act in accordance with what he believes.

Let us go back to the book of Hebrews again. It is really a sobering warning from Paul.

Hebrews 3:12-19 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence [our faith, our boldness] steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

Hebrews 4:1-2 Therefore since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

So this very stern warning is to all who are on this pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. Those who hardened themselves to not listen will not believe. Failure to believe and use what faith they had is what caused Israel to fail to reach the goal. Faith must be used. It is of supreme importance, because without it there will never ever be any love.

Point #2 : Seek First The Kingdom

Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

Here is the broad overall direction our faith is to be exerted toward—to seek first, above all things in life, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. So important are these twin objectives that Jesus says that we are to take no anxious thought about any of the physical aspects of life. This does not mean we are not to work or anything like that. Certainly we are to work. We are to do our part in that, and we are to do it faithfully and loyally to our employer as if we were working for Christ, but that is not where our heart is. That is not the true direction of life. It is the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

I am sure that you have noticed from reading the Bible and listening to sermons that Israel zigzagged through the wilderness. We have to ask, "Why?" Well, we just read why, because they always did not exercise faith. See, that is at the bottom of it. They grew dissatisfied with what God provided. They murmured, and on a couple of occasions wanted to go back to Egypt. That is why they zigzagged. I am saying this because we follow the same general pattern. Humanly, we have the tendency to go off the beam left, right, whatever, just like God shows Israel did in the wilderness, and we wander in the wilderness rather than going straight to the Kingdom of God.

So, in this sense, we are following the path of our ancestors. The cause of it is our faith is not steady and stable. It goes up. It goes down. Sometimes maybe it leaves us almost completely, and we really go into the tank, as it were. When we do that, we usually start murmuring, griping, complaining about what God has (we think) failed to provide.

But you see, God *will* provide. He has provided. He has provided a calendar, because it is not in His nature not to provide. He provided Israel with everything they needed in the wilderness. We should understand that. If He did it for them, He is going to do the same thing for us. He does not change. He has already given us a calendar. We do not have to worry about it. Just keep going toward the Kingdom of God.

It is right here that much of the instruction from the Parable of the Unjust Steward applies, because it shows the approach that we are to bend our efforts toward in achieving these things—the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. We are to prepare for the future in the present, using the same principles of wisdom, diligence, and discipline the unconverted use to achieve success in their worldly endeavors today.

Point #3 : Love

Point #3 is actually a subset of Point #2. It gives a more specific summary to the practical aspects of Point #2. I John 5:3 is key scripture here.

I John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

We have got to keep His commandments, and love in the strictest biblical sense is an action. It is accompanied by feeling, but it is the action that dominates. It is keeping, observing, doing the commandments; not merely having warm and tender thoughts toward one another.

As we saw through Jesus' response to the questions in both the Parable of The Good Samaritan, and then combined with this was the encounter He had with the rich young man in Matthew 19, what these two (the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the encounter with the rich young man) show is that

love has two sides to it. The one side is a *re* straining of oneself to not do something; the other side is the *con* straining of oneself to do acts of thoughtful, kind, and merciful service.

Let us go back to the book of Micah where we are given one of the best known and best loved verses in all of the Old Testament.

Micah 6:6-8 With shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, 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? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you [yes, what does God want? What does He really want?], but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Brethren, Micah 6:8 is just as much a commandment as "You shall not steal," or "You shall not commit adultery," and it is for many of us on many occasions far more difficult to do. What Micah 6:8 says is difficult for us to do because we are so self-centeredly focused on what we are doing that we do not have time to perform these things, so we just pass by like the Levite and the priest did in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus did not say that they were evil men. The thing that was wrong was that they were not *merciful* men. Rather than sacrifice their time to be kind to care for this person, to be merciful, they had other things to do.

Let us get a little background in this chapter because it is kind of interesting. We will not go all the way back, but Micah 6 begins, and a courtroom trial is under way, and the people are arraigned before God. Accusations are leveled against them because of their conduct. Hearing the charges against them, they respond with a series of questions of God—questions that are voiced though by Micah—questions that are aimed at discovering what their responsibilities before this Great High Majestic God are.

The implication is that they want to know what will reach Him, what will please Him, what will satisfy Him, what will cause Him to respond favorably

to their appeals. Is this not what we want to know? How can we reach God? How can we get Him to respond? And then what follows is a series of suggestions as though, with Micah speaking then, they go all the way to the place where they ask God the unthinkable: "Would you be pleased if we sacrificed our firstborn in the fires of Molech to You?"

So Micah's reply then is, "No. That's not what He wants." Micah replies that God is not seeking your substance. He is seeking your spirit. He is not seeking rams and goats. He is seeking your heart. He will know He has your heart by how you act toward each other, because He will see Himself reflected in you. And so He says, "Do judgment [or justice, or justly]." This simply means to treat each other fairly, not only in your acts, but even, brethren, in your thoughts toward each other, because we can be so different on the outside compared to what we are thinking in our heart.

With our eyes we can look at a person, but in our heart there is unspoken criticism, anger, malice, envy, jealousy. The problem with this is that the heart has a way of motivating action. You can put in your notes Matthew 15: 17-20, because Jesus said that "Out of the heart proceeds murders, adulteries, fornication," and so forth.

Are our judgments of each other fair? Are they kind? Are they gentle? Are they clean? Are they upright? What do you want people to think of **you**? In effect, what Micah is saying here is *The Golden Rule*—"Do unto others as you want others to do unto you." That will make your judgments much more balanced. To show mercy is to freely and willingly do acts of kindness.

Is it not interesting that when God is asked to reply, "What is it that you want?" that almost everything—two out of three things that are given here through Micah—have to do with our relationships with each other? Do you know that it says in I John 4:20 that if a man does not love his brother, he does not love God either? That is pretty sobering.

You see, brethren, this is the direction that faith is to be bent into. We are looking here at one of the major reasons why the church is scattered all over the place, and I am talking about those who essentially believe the same doctrine. I am talking about those people who are in United, those people in Living, those people in Global, those people in Philadelphia, and those

people who are in the Church of the Great God. A great deal of the problem now is that we do not really love one another. A lot of this begins in the heart in the thinking about each other, because what is in the heart eventually comes out. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

If we are ever going to come together, it is going to be partly because we have solved the love problem, and we will begin doing what is encompassed in this word *mercy*, because what is encompassed in this word *mercy* is I Corinthians 13. So in our relationship with God, He demands humility. Again, this means in practical application, always living in a conscious fellowship with Him in every area of life so that every event of life is seen as though it was seen through His eyes, from His perspective, thus allowing His truth to be the guide for all we choose to do.

Point #4: Faithfulness

This is the fourth and final one for this sermon, and it is one that overlaps all of our stewardship responsibilities.

I Corinthians 4:2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

Faith is believing God. Faithfulness is faith in action. A faithful person is one who is loyal, true, constant, devoted, dedicated, steadfast, trustworthy, reliable, accurate, dutiful, responsible, conscientious, careful, staunch, scrupulous.

Luke 12:35-40 Let your waist be girded, and your lamps burning, and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched

and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect.

You can compare this parable here with the one in Matthew 24:45-51, and just parallel those two. Both of these parables apply to everybody, because everyone of us is a steward of what we have received. What God wants of a steward is succinctly encapsulated in this instruction for us at the end time.

In the parable, the master of the house is away from home. He is in heaven. He has left His servants with the responsibility to carry out things while He has been gone. That is us. We are stewards. The first thing that He mentions is that He wants them to be alert to His return.

Now how ready? What illustrations does He give? "With waists girded." That means, "Ready for action!" "Urgent!"

"Lights burning." Do you know what that means? It means essentially the same thing, except the illustration takes one inside the house, as it were. What happens when the sun goes down? You turn on the lights.

What He is implying here, when it is linked together with "loins girded," is that darkness does not stop you from working. Instead, when the darkness comes, you turn the lights on, and you keep right on working. So He says, "Be ready for action, and be working right up until the time you go to bed." He is implying that being ready for His return is an all-day, all-time operation. And so we are to live with one ear, as it were, cocked to the times that we live in.

We need to ask ourselves, "Will His coming be like a thief in the night, catching us unprepared?" And so the second thing He mentions is that He will find those faithful servants occupied with the business that He left for them to do, or He will find them taking advantage of what they think is a delay, and therefore wasting time, spoiling their opportunities, showing themselves to be no better than the worldly. And thus He divides His servants into two categories: 1) those He finds awake, and 2) those He finds asleep. Those who are asleep are unprepared. Those engaged in faithful service are shown to be ready for His return.

I could go on with this, and maybe I will in another sermon, but let me just succinctly close this off by saying it this way: What is it that God is concerned about? It comes down to simple statements. He is concerned about whether we believe Him, because if we really believe Him, we will do what He says. He is concerned about how we manage what we have received, because how we manage what we have received, both in terms of spiritual things like doctrine and gifts and functions within His body, and also includes the unrighteous mammon as well, and all of these things will be used by those who are faithful stewards to the building of character for His Kingdom.

And third, He is looking for the way that we treat each other: keeping the commandments in restraint; keeping the commandments in constraint—doing acts of kindness and all that is included within that word "mercy," which encapsulates I Corinthians 13. Finally, He expects us to be urgent about what we are doing, and this covers the whole gamut of the other three.