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Do Justice

Bottom Line: The Christian life must be marked by a love for the world that seeks to correct oppression and injustice.

What is an example you can think of where somebody totally “missed the point?” (Could be an example from your own life, a movie/book/television show, a news story, etc.)

On the surface, the Christian life can seem pretty simple and if you were to ask most Christians what their Christian life consists of, you may get pretty similar answers from most people: go to church, read your Bible, give your tithe, etc. And these things are certainly true of the Christian life—we should go to church, read our Bibles, and give our tithes. But is that *all* that the Christian life is? Is that all that’s required of Christians? The prophet Micah would argue “no” and that if that’s all we amount the Christian life to, then we’ve totally missed the point.

Read Micah 6:1-5.

Here, the Lord is bringing an indictment against the people of Israel. Their sins have grieved the Lord and the Lord asks them, “what have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” The Israelites were acting as though the Lord’s commands and His law were too much to bear, so instead of keeping His law, they broke it. But God reminds Israel that He hasn’t wearied them, He has brought them rest. He “brought them up from the land of Egypt and redeemed [them] from the house of slavery” (v. 4a). He gave them good leaders like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (v. 4b). In verse 5, God is recounting to the Israelites how he turned Balak’s curse against Israel into a blessing (Deuteronomy 23:3-6), and how He helped them miraculously cross the Jordan river (Joshua 3-4). He has not burdened them, He has done nothing but help them.

With this being the case, how could the Israelites have mistaken serving God as being a burden rather than a blessing? What are some ways that we make this same mistake?

Read Micah 6:6-7.

This is Micah’s response back to the Lord where he is trying to figure out how to respond to God’s indictment. What Micah quickly realizes is the futility of religious activity to atone for Israel’s sins. Rituals and sacrifices are commanded by God, but they aren’t meant to be done solely as a cheap means of clearing our conscious. They were meant to be done in faith, not obligation, trusting not in the sacrifices themselves, but in the God who promised to receive the sacrifices. Therefore the faith involved in the rituals and sacrifices terminates not on the rites themselves, but on God. Merely engaging in religious activity is not enough to please God, our hearts must be devoted to him in a deeper way.

How do we fall into the same trap of thinking we can restore our relationship to God by doing more?

Read Micah 6:8. How do you think the rituals and sacrifices of the Old Testament were designed to point us toward these “requirements”?



Let's concentrate on the first requirement: "to do justice." What does this mean?

In Hebrew, there are two words for justice. The one used here is *mishpat* which means "giving people what is due." A lot of times we think that this only applies to punishment, but this kind of justice also means giving people what they deserve for doing good, as well as just offering to all people the basic respect and dignity that they deserve as human beings made in the image of God.

This kind of justice is primarily outward focused. The idea is that what God requires of the Israelites, and by extension us today, is that they seek to make what's wrong in the world right again.

Does your heart naturally gravitate towards compassion for those who are unfairly treated or disadvantaged? If not, what does this say about your heart? How can we cultivate a desire to see justice in the world?

What injustices in the world most burden you? (Abortion, poverty, foster care, etc.) What injustices are you aware of in your community? If God *requires* justice—and that's a strong word—what does that look like for us individually? What about as a family? As a small group? As a church?

The Israelites "missed the point" of what God wanted them to do. They were doing religious activities for religion's sake, but God clarified: *what I have actually told you to do is to act justly*. God could care less about the Israelites' sacrifices and devotion to Him if they were not also devoted to the plight of their neighbor (cf. Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 5:23-24; Luke 10:25-37). The message for us is clear: the Christian life must be marked by a love for the world that seeks to correct oppression and injustice.

Is it possible that we've "missed the point" in what God requires of us? What are some signs that this could be the case?

Reflection: Read these aloud, using your discretion about which questions should be pondered and which questions should be discussed.

The issue of justice is one that is incredibly important for us to understand because justice is a crucial aspect of God's character and nature. God will *always* give people what is due to them: either punishment or reward. The Bible tells us that this will happen on Judgment Day. What will you receive from God on that day? Will God's justice entitle you to punishment or reward? The simple way to determine this is to ask yourself: are you saved? For those who have repented of their sin and placed their faith in Christ's life and death for them, they will stand before God perfectly righteous, and justice will require that they receive reward. But for those who do not have the righteousness of Christ credited to them, they will stand before God on their own merits, and justice will require eternal punishment. What will justice require for you on that day?

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What steps will you take to “do justice?” This is an individual expectation, it’s not something that you can outsource to “the missions team” or charities, etc. Doing justice doesn’t necessarily entail giving money (although that shouldn’t entirely be discounted). Justice can be done in the everyday normal parts of life. How do you treat your family? Your co-workers/bosses/employees? How do you treat the impoverished and disadvantaged? Even if it’s a change of heart, there are steps for you to take. What will you do?



Love Mercy

Bottom Line: The Christian life must be marked by a love for one another that is distinct from the way the world understands love.

When is a time in your life when you were shown mercy?

Mercy is the withholding of punishment that someone actually deserves. If someone does something wrong, to have mercy on them means to refuse to enact the penalty their actions require. From the outset, we see how this command sets itself against the previous one: to do justice. God tells us both to enact justice, to give people what they deserve, but also to love mercy, to *not* give people what they deserve.

How do we make sense of this? How do we balance being both just and merciful?

This is a difficult question but consider again what all is entailed in the term *justice*. We tend to think of justice as primarily punishment for wrongdoing, but that's only half of it. Justice is giving people what they deserve, whether it's punishment OR reward. There is a positive aspect of justice that means we treat people fairly and equitably. Essentially, to do justice means to do no wrong to anyone. When understood this way, the balance between mercy and justice becomes a little clearer: justice informs how we respond to injustice toward others, while mercy informs how we respond to injustice toward ourselves. If we are to love mercy, then we must be a people that are much quicker to forgive than to demand retribution.

Do you think people (in general) are quicker to demand justice or to show mercy? Why do you think this is? What would be the consequences if society NEVER carried out justice and only showed mercy? What would be the consequences if society NEVER showed mercy and only carried out justice?

In Micah's day, the nation of Israel, God's people, were treating each other horribly. They were swindling each other out of land and possessions (Micah 2:1-2), their leaders were being corrupted through bribes and conspiracy (3:1-3, 9-11; 7:3), and the religious teachers were extorting money from their own kinsman (3:11). The threat to Israel's well-being didn't come from other nations trying to conquer them, it came from within; they were devouring one another. This is the context into which God was speaking when He told the Israelites that He required them to "love mercy." The word used for "mercy" here is *hesed* which means "faithful covenant love." The Israelites were in covenant with God, and therefore in covenant with one another. They were making a mockery of the commitment they had made to God and to each other by the way they were treating one another, and by telling them to love mercy, God was requiring of the Israelites that they love one another.

God told Israel to do justice for those outside of Israel and to love mercy for those inside Israel. How are both of these, justice toward outsiders and love toward insiders, evangelistic? (See John 13:35)

Who are you in covenant with? What does being in covenant with that person (or people) require of you as far as mercy goes?



In the New Testament, local churches are consistently characterized as covenant communities, meaning that the local church is an assembly of people who have been brought into covenant with God (Hebrews 8:6; cf. Matthew 26:28), and what we all share in common is that covenant. This covenant that we have with God contains obligations for how we should treat one another. And these obligations to one another are sometimes different than our obligations to those who are not in covenant with God (Galatians 6:10). In fact, the majority of the New Testament letters that Paul wrote were written to churches to instruct them how to treat one another better. Because like we saw in John 13:35, the world will know that we are disciples of Jesus by the way we love one another. The love of mercy that God requires of us is primarily illustrated in showing covenant love, forgiveness, and kindness to those who are of the household of faith.

Read 1 John 3:11-18.7. What are the practical takeaways that we can glean from this passage? Look again at verse 18. How do we love one another in word and talk? What about deed? What about truth? How serious have you taken YOUR responsibility to love those at FBCnl in these ways? Does your ministry to those at FBCnl extend beyond generational, cultural, and affinity lines? Or do you only interact with those who are the same age as you, same values as you, and same interests as you? What steps can you take to branch out and love someone at FBCnl that falls outside your immediate niche?

According to Hebrews 10:25, one of the reasons for our gatherings, whether it's Sunday services, small groups, Wednesday nights, etc., is to encourage one another. Will you make a commitment to try and encourage someone every time we gather?

Reflection: Read these aloud, using your discretion about which questions should be pondered and which questions should be discussed.

We just read in 1 John that “we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.” So the question is simple: do you love the brothers (the church, other believers)? Do you crave fellowship with other Christians? Do you have compassion and mercy on other believers? Do you pray for the people in your small group/church? Are any of these affections increasing in your life? If none of these are realities in your life, then consider whether you have truly been born again.

John also says, “if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” The implication John is making is that the love of God does NOT abide in that person. Are you aware of any needs in the church? Are you capable of meeting that need or at least contributing? John says that closed hands, closed wallets, closed schedules, closed mouths, etc., are a sign of a closed heart. What can you “open up” to your brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need? Can you give time? Can you give your talents? Can you give encouragement? Can you give resources? Can you give hope? Can you give prayer? The emphasis is not necessarily on *how* you help, but that you *want* to help. How will you help?

**MOVING
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Is there anybody in our church/small group who has offended or hurt you that you need to have mercy on and forgive? Take stock of how merciful you are as a person. Now think of how merciful God has been to you. If God were as merciful to you as you are to others, how secure would you feel before God?

Is our church/our small group a place where you feel loved, accepted, and where you feel you can find mercy? If so, who has made you feel that way? How can you thank that person? If not, instead of expecting other people to create this kind of environment, what will YOU do to help make our church/small group a loving, accepting, merciful place?



Walk Humbly with Your God

Bottom Line: The Christian life must be marked by a humble and consistent commitment to commune with God.

What is something that you strive to do every day? Why is this so important to you?

So to recap, God has told the Israelites what He requires of them: 1) to do justice, dictating how they interact with the world, 2) to love mercy, dictating how they should interact with each other, and now 3) to walk humbly with God, dictating how they should interact with God.

Read Ephesians 2:2 and Colossians 3:5-7. Compare these with Galatians 5:16 and Romans 8:4. Taking a clue from these verses, what do you think it means to “walk humbly with God?”

When the Bible speaks of walking in this way, it often refers to a lifestyle. And that’s certainly the point of what God is saying in Micah 6:8. He is desiring His people to live a lifestyle of communion with Him—obeying Him, pursuing Him, loving Him, and glorifying Him. They are to do so “humbly”, meaning that they are to take great care to remain contrite and reverent before Him.

So the question before us is a simple, but profound one: how do we commune with God?

You may have said things like prayer, Bible study, fasting, etc. And these are correct answers. We call these the “spiritual disciplines.” The disciplines are activities that we engage in that allow us to commune with God in a deep and special way. It’s through engaging in the spiritual disciplines that we are able to get the most out of our “walk” with God.

What comes to your mind when you think of the word “discipline?”

It’s unfortunate that the word “discipline” has such a negative connotation in our society today. We immediately think of discipline as boring, lifeless routine. But when we understand exactly what the outcome of the spiritual disciplines is, we realize this is far from the truth.

Discuss this quote from Elisabeth Elliott: “Freedom and discipline have come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, when in fact freedom is not at all the opposite, but the final *reward* of discipline.” Do you agree?

Discipline may be thought of as punishment. It may also be thought of as persistent commitment. But do you ever connect the word discipline with “freedom?” The biblical understanding of freedom is a bit different than the world’s. According to Scripture, true freedom is not found in being able to do whatever you want to do, true freedom is doing only the things that bring you the most joy. And the overwhelming consensus of the Bible is that enjoying the glory of God is what will secure our greatest joy (Psalm 37:4; Jeremiah 2:12-13; Mark 8:34-35; Romans 8:17-18). We were made to reflect the glory of God in the world (Isaiah 43:7), so when we put all this together we understand that it is godliness, or being like God, that truly fulfills us.

Read 1 Timothy 4:7. According to this verse, what is the intended result of our discipline?

MOVING FORWARD

together

The intended result of our discipline (or our “training”) is godliness. Through engaging in the disciplines, we come to see more of the glory of God. Through Bible reading we see the glory of God illustrated for us in the Old Testament narratives, the life of Jesus, and the wisdom of Paul’s letters. Through prayer and meditation we see the glory of God through contemplation of His attributes and His faithfulness to answer our prayers. Through fasting we see the glory of God in His ability to satisfy and sustain us in a way that nothing in this world can. Through godly stewardship of our resources we see the glory of God in His ability to provide for us and keep our desires on Him rather than the fading pleasures of the world. And through all of this, we are becoming more like Him: through “beholding the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to the next” (2 Corinthians 3:18). When we understand the outcome of the disciplines, that they are meant to transform us, to make us *glorious*, then their value becomes more apparent.

Discuss the value of the following disciplines. How do they help you see the glory of the Lord? How prominent of a role do they play in your life?

- Worship
- Evangelism
- Serving
- Silence and Solitude

Which of these disciplines do you need to grow in? How will you make them a more important part of your life?

Reflection: Read these aloud, using your discretion about which questions should be pondered and which questions should be discussed.

It is impossible to walk with God if you are separated from Him by your sin (Isaiah 59:2). Although at times believers can feel distant from God, there is no genuine communion that an unsaved person can have with God. How fulfilling is your walk with God? Do you feel seen, heard, and loved by Him? Although this shouldn’t be taken as an absolute indicator of your position before God, feelings of distance and separation from God could be indicative of a lack of reconciliation with God. Search your heart and be honest with yourself. Have you truly repented of your sin, placed your faith in Christ, and been restored to a right relationship with God?

Are godliness, righteousness, holiness, and Christlikeness appealing goals to you? If not, why? Again, a lack of desire for these things could indicate some very serious spiritual issues. If they are, then what is one area of your life that you feel is preventing you from growing in godliness? What will you do to remove that hurdle? Is there a discipline we’ve discussed that you need to be more diligent to engage in? What steps will you take to incorporate that discipline into your daily, weekly, monthly routine?