

# “The Hard Questions of Lent: 4) What Does God Expect of Us?”

a sermon by

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Text: “He has told you, O man, 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?” (Micah 6:8).

One of the struggles that always seem to trouble the churches is the effective use of the media. Sometimes what we expect and what the media expects are very different. I was reminded of that this past Sunday when a reporter for The Charlotte Observer interviewed me after church. We had published in FirstNEWS, our weekly newsletter, a report about the necessity of removing one of the old oak trees in the front yard. The reporter wanted to do a story about the tree and gauge different reactions to the loss of the tree. The result was a beautiful picture of the church yard in the Observer on Monday, along with a brief article about the tree.

As I reflected on this event, I could not help but wonder what it is about an old tree that seems to capture such attention. After all, there are so many things that our church does that do not get reported on. Every Monday and Tuesday night during the winter season members of our congregation spend the night assisting homeless people in our Room in the Inn program. Each week our Loaves and Fishes pantry serves a hundred families in need. I wondered to myself why these things never get reported?

Over the week there were a number of news crews from local television stations who stopped by to get a look at the tree removal. One of them was present one morning when Jim Miller came to work. They asked Jim if he were one of the ministers of the church. He acknowledged he was. Then they asked him if he would do an on-camera interview. Jim said that he would be glad to do so, but he did want the reporter to know what he was prepared to say. He was prepared to say that given the choice between a dead tree and live children, the church

would always choose the latter. The second thing he was prepared to say was that it must be a slow news day if this was the best story they could come up with.

They decided not to do the interview.

## I.

One of the most pressing questions in the life of faith is the question “What does God require of us?” That is certainly the question that is at stake in this passage from Micah. The text this morning is one of the most familiar in the Old Testament and is part of one of the famous “trial scenes” that compose a part of the prophetic literature. In this section of Scripture there is a dispute--a controversy--between God and his people. In the first five verses God is called to the witness stand to give an account of himself. He recalls what he was done for Israel. He brought them out of slavery in Egypt and delivered them to the Promised Land. He gave them leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. In short, he saved them.

In verse six, however, there is a shift. Now the question shifts from what God has done to the haunting question of what God expects from me:

“With what shall I come before the Lord?  
and bow down before God on high?” (Micah 6:6).

For the prophet Micah there was a proscribed way to answer this question. Israel’s cultic system was built on an intricate system of sacrificial offerings. If one did something to offend God, then a person could make a sacrifice to make amends. In fact, that is what the prophet does. He gives a comprehensive list of some of the possibilities that were open to his people. There were burnt offerings in which calves and rams were consumed by fire and offered up to God. Would that satisfy God? How about a thousand rams? That is what King Solomon sacrificed on one occasion. Or ten thousand rivers of costly oil and anointments? Or, God forbid--should I sacrifice one of my own children--the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul.

What does God expect of me? I believe that this question is more important than most of us are willing to admit. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, wrestled with this question. He was haunted by the question of how a sinful person could stand in the presence of a righteous God. Luther tried every available avenue of the medieval church. He entered the monastery. He fasted for weeks on end. He prayed night and day. He confessed his sins. But he was haunted with the question as to whether he had done enough. It was only through the study of Scripture that he discovered the gospel itself--the “just shall live by faith.”

Today, there are not many people who are aware of their guilt before God. Our culture precludes that possibility. But most people with whom I come into contact have a gnawing sense that something is not right in their lives. They feel guilty that they are not better parents. They feel guilty because they have not been as financially successful as they could have been. They feel guilty because they are not socially accepted.

Those of us in the church are not immune to that. We feel guilty because the church is not what it is supposed to be. So then, the question becomes: “How are we supposed to live?”

## II.

In the first place, as Christians we are called to live in light of a higher righteousness. The prophet Micah calls us “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.” In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commanded his disciples “to be perfect as their father in heaven was perfect.” But the command to be perfect must always be placed alongside the promise of forgiveness. A minister once asked his congregation if there was anyone present who was perfect, and if so, for that person to raise his hand. Of course, no hand was raised. Then, the minister asked if there was anyone present who knew someone who was perfect. This time the minister got a response from a member of the congregation who had married a widow: “My wife’s first husband.”

God commands us to be perfect as parents, as husbands and wives, as citizens of our community, but God also provides us forgiveness as parents, husbands and wives, and citizens of our community.

Therefore, we have to keep striving after perfection without the illusion of having obtained it. We have to hunger and thirst after righteousness, but always with the poverty of spirit that acknowledges our own shortcomings.

## III.

We are, however, not only a people who live in the tension between the demand for perfection and the necessity of forgiveness; we are also a people who are commanded to follow in the way of Christ.

John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* defined the Christian life in terms of “denying oneself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus.” In the contemporary church there is not much word about this. Religion today is being marketed as simply one more way to find reward and contentment in life. Little is said today about the “cost of discipleship.”

That is certainly the thrust of Micah’s words. God’s demand of us is that we “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.”

So often in the Lenten season we focus on what it is that we are giving up for Lent. For many it is a thing. We give up some habit, some luxury, and some delicacy-- some something. But that misses the point. We are not called to give up some thing. We are called to give up our selves.

In the Fourth Century of the church there was a remarkable Monk in the East whose name was Telemachus. For many years he had lived the life of an ascetic in the desert, devoting himself to a life of prayer, contemplation, and privation. One day he resolved that if he were to serve God, he would have to do so in the presence of other people. So Telemachus headed to

Rome, the great center of the Roman Empire. By this time Rome was officially Christian. There were magnificent churches, filled with people who worshipped amidst great pomp and circumstance.

There was, however, at least one vestige of Rome's pagan past that lived into its present. In the center of the city was the great arena, where on any given weekend eighty thousand people would gather to participate in the gladiatorial games where men fought and killed one another to the crowd's delight.

One day Telemachus visited the arena. With the other onlookers he watched as the gladiators entered the arena with their greeting, "Hail Caesar! We who are about to die salute you." Then the games began. Telemachus watched in horror as the killing continued. Finally, he jumped the barrier that separated participants from onlookers. He entered the arena and stood between two of the gladiators. For a moment the crowd was still. Then the people roared, "Let the games continue." So they pushed this old man aside. But again he positioned himself between two of the gladiators. The crowd began to roar and to throw stones at this old man in his hermit robes. Finally they urged the gladiators to kill him and get him out of the way. The commander of the games gave an order; a gladiator's sword rose and flashed; and Telemachus lay dead.

Suddenly, the crowds were silent. There seemed to be a mass awareness that something had gone terribly wrong. The games ended abruptly that day--and never really began again. Telemachus, by his losing his life, had ended them. The historian Edward Gibbon observed that Telemachus in his death had done something that he could have never done in his life.

#### IV.

As Christians, we live in knowledge of the good news that is given to us in Jesus Christ. We are a people who are bought with a price. As Paul put it in his letter to the church at Rome, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" But as those who have been bought with a price, we also acknowledge that God holds before us the cost of discipleship by which God demands not that we give up things, but that we give ourselves totally and completely to him.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed that "when Christ calls a person, he calls that person to come and die." Sometimes the gospel leads to martyrdom, which is the refusal to maintain life at the expense of life's meaning. Some prices are too high to pay for physical life itself, to say nothing of business, political or social success.

Some years ago Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner, spoke at this church as part of a program we called "Voices of Conscience." In the time before he spoke in our sanctuary, he spent some time in my study. What I remember the most about that conversation was his great fear that one day the holocaust would be forgotten--particularly as those survivors such as himself began to die off. He was afraid that some day there would be those who would say it didn't happen--the six million Jews did not die.

I thought of Elie Wiesel recently when I heard the President of Iran, Mr. Ahmadinejad, speak to a conference on Iran arguing that the Holocaust was an invention of the Americans and Europeans. One of the themes that pervade Elie Wiesel's work is his attack on "indifference." Indifference is what happens when good surrenders to evil.

Long ago the prophet Micah reminded us of what indeed the Lord requires of us--"to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

Surely nothing is more critical in the living of these days than the lives of those who, realizing that life is a gift of God, return it gladly in service to the one who gave his life for us.

Amen!