

Prov 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,

when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.'

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine yield fresh.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Micah 6:8 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

15Sep2024 Micah 6:8

Today we heard the statement from Vestry on what we believe we should be working towards as a church. This is based on Micah 6:8 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

So I want to look seriously at what does the Lord require of each of us.

This comes after our church has looked seriously at ourselves, with trained help and much support, and much has been revealed. So what does the Lord require of us in the light of this?

What is it to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God, to do what is right, to put a priority on mercy, to be a person of humility centred on God putting him first rather than oneself in every circumstance?

It's probably easier for us to work this out in a practical example. How do we relate to the person we consider difficult? What is acting righteously towards someone we don't get on with involve? How do we show mercy towards them? How do we be humble and God referenced when confronted by someone who we feel makes our life difficult?

With all relationships at some time and particularly in every church this is an issue. God draws all sorts of people to himself. Some of those people are different from the people we might naturally be friends with. Some of them have experienced very different circumstances in their lives from our own. Some of them have really big problems that only God can begin to address as they come to him. Some of them will be challenging to us in all sorts of ways.

I'm sure you can immediately bring to mind people you find it difficult to relate with or even bear with. Yet the Bible tells us 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.' Romans 15:1

How do people typically deal with those others who make life difficult for them? I'll tell you what I have often seen. People speak of them in negative ways, complain about them, give their assessment of what is wrong with that person, give them a label which enables them to be put in some sort of category where they don't have to be shown the same sort of respect and care we might show others. People do what our second reading from James warns against: They use their tongue to spread gossip and slander about the difficult person, poison the surroundings with their negative words about what that person does or is, even though they are also made in the likeness of God. And people even feel justified in twisting the truth or inventing stories and lies about that difficult person so that others may truly identify with how difficult the speaker finds that person to be. And if that person walks away hurt – well it was only for the better of those left behind – that person could hardly be someone open to God's work in their lives or someone God was drawing to himself, could they? They didn't really belong or fit. They would be better off elsewhere. They weren't really committed to fitting in with the group. Have you noticed this?

But what does this verse say God requires us to do even in regard to the difficult person? To act justly – that is to do right by them – we all know we are to love each other as Christ loved us – even to the point of denying ourselves and taking up our cross as is mentioned in our gospel reading today. It will at times be difficult to love the person who is difficult – to give them all the respect and honour and benefits we might give ourselves or those who are naturally our friends. It may be really hard work at times – but probably not as hard as being crucified! We are to be merciful – to love mercy – to make mercy a priority. What is mercy? Compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding, generosity, leniency, forbearance, grace – these are actually what God has given to us and what he asks us to give to others, even those who don't seem to deserve it – hey – do any of us deserve it? Walking humbly with our God is about having the humility to realize that God gives us all this without any of us deserving it. That is the gospel, the good news. We have no right to withhold that mercy that God gives us from any others. We have no justification in treating even the most difficult person with anything other than grace.

And doing right by the difficult person may also involve sticking up for them when someone else does not act righteously towards them. It takes courage (denying oneself) to stick up for the person being spoken against or to challenge the lies spoken to pull someone else down. We may even end up being regarded as difficult ourselves if we do that. OR we may change the culture, change the atmosphere, so that others around us begin to behave more graciously, may learn to control their tongue, around us and others in the group.

So what do we do now? How do we make a commitment to doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with out God? We begin by doing what Jesus calls us to do continually – repenting and believing the good news of his Kingdom come – resolving to turn away from what we are convicted about and accepting that as we turn to God and his ways, as we confess our failure to love each other as he has loved us, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As part of that decision to turn away from wrongdoing we need to turn to obedience to what God requires. We can even be involved with God in building up the body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit by encouraging one another in doing good, in doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

But also there are consequences every time one does not act justly, and love mercy. There are people who are hurt – even people you find difficult do not deserve your bad behavior and are harmed by it. The hardest part of repentance is to make right where wrong has been done, to ask another for forgiveness and to express regret for having done something against another. Only then can their forgiveness of you restore the relationship.

The vestry, in commending this verse to us as something we are jointly to own and work towards as St Matthew's church is making a big ask. As we have been helped to reflect on ourselves as a church in the Parish Review and meetings, behaviours have been revealed that are contrary to what God says he requires in this verse. Will we take this on, or will you put this in the 'too hard' basket and say this is making life too difficult for the members of this church. It will involve change!

In our gospel passage today we heard Jesus bringing out the realities of what he faced to his disciples – and Peter rebuked him for it – too hard. Then Jesus brought out just how hard it really was for his followers too. I am only trying to bring out the realities of what this verse Micah wrote 6 centuries before implies for us in our situation today. I may not have expressed this perfectly but I believe these are the realities we face. That may make me a difficult person – too uncompromising, too challenging. I believe following Jesus is also challenging but it has eternal consequences.

I choose for working towards this goal as set out in Micah 6:8. You can choose as you will.

Let us pray.

Thank you that you call each one of us to walk with you, to live in the light and warmth of your love. Shine your light now on what each one of us needs to see. May we see ourselves as you see us. Reveal to each of us where you are at work in us, where we need to open up more to your transforming spirit, where we need to turn from what is not of you, face our own weakness and enable you to strengthen us in loving you, each other and all those you bring us alongside. Spirit of God, search our hearts.

Lord give us courage, inspiration, strength and enthusiasm for loving and obeying you in doing what you require of us, in doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with you each day. Strengthen your church, and involve us in your work of building up your body, that we may truly be a temple of your Holy Spirit. May we join your church across the world in shining your light into the darkness. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for your world, naming for ourselves all those countries and places we know of that are in need. May those who can make a difference be strengthened in wisdom and power to do what is right for those who are wronged. Lord...

We pray for and name now those we know who need your healing, comfort, and relief. Lord...

Those things, good Lord, that your children have prayed for, give us grace to work for, and in the purpose of your love, fulfill the prayers of your people as may be best for us and for your Kingdom. Grant us in this world to know your truth and in the world to come to see your glory. Amen.