

How Should I live?

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[0 : 00] Now, we turn to read together from God's Word, and we have two Bible readings this morning. The first from the Old Testament, from the book of the prophet Micah, and we'll read from chapter 6, and the verses marked 1 to 9.

This is the Word of God. Hear what the Lord says. Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth. For the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel.

O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me. For 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. O my people, remember what Balak, king of Moab, devised, and what Balaam, the son of Beor, answered him.

[1 : 17] And what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of God. With what shall I come before the Lord, and by myself before God on high?

What shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of ram, with tens of 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 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.

And then our second reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew chapter 5, the beginning of the famous sermon on the mount.

[2 : 25] Matthew chapter 5, reading from the beginning of the chapter. Matthew chapter 5, reading from the beginning of the chapter.

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[5 : 00] Jeremiah said that. Jeremiah said that. Why God was a stranger in the land in Scotland. Because Jeremiah said he was a stranger in ancient Israel because the irreligious had no time for God.

And the religious people had no heart for God. And the leaders had no zeal for God.

And even committed believers had no thirst for God. And of course, of course, of course, of course, of course, of course, of course, of course.

And of course, that description of that land then is a description that could fit many lands at many times through history when we think of how it is.

But into the situation in Israel at one stage comes the prophet Micah. And he comes really with a message that says, look, God is a stranger in these days because the people are practicing idolatry.

[6 : 20] And bribery and corruption, the people are being oppressed by the rich.

The religious leaders are career diplomats just supporting the status quo because it's in their interests.

And then it's now commercial interests. Money was the first commandment. It was what ruled in all things. And Micah comes into this situation and this scene where God seems to be a stranger.

And he brings a message from God. And the message from God is there will be judgment. There will be destruction.

There will be ruin and exile. But he brings a message of hope as well. Because he said, look, if you will just listen to God, if you will listen to God, he will actually bring deliverance to you.

[7 : 41] Deliverance from those armies of neighboring nations that are ready to invade you. He'll spare you that. He will actually bring blessings.

And he will send a savior who will be born in the city of David in Bethlehem. This is what God will do.

But you have to listen to him. You have to set your hearts to obey and to follow and to serve him.

You have to change your behavior and live as God requires. And if you do that, the future will not be one of darkness and destruction and ruin.

And so in verses 6 and 7 that we read, eventually, I'm sorry about that. But the people were talking to Micah and they were saying, well, look, what have we got to do?

[8 : 44] Okay, we're with you. Yeah, we forgot what God had done for us in the past. All his mighty acts and how good he was. We forgot all that.

But what have we got to do? Have we got to bring, you know, burnt offerings? Will that please God? Will we, you know, will we sacrifice thousands of rams?

Would that do? Or what about, will we even offer up our firstborn children? Is that what God wants? And Micah comes and in those famous words that I'm sure maybe nearly all of us must know and have heard about, he says, no, look, you already know.

You know, the scriptures, there are so many different places where God has made it clear what he wants. He's told you what he wants. You're to do justly.

You're to love mercy. And you're to walk humbly with your God. Simple, but not easy.

[9 : 52] Clear, not confusing. On Wednesday, those of us who were here at our New Year's Day service, our minister, Corey, was reminding us that this is a good time.

For people to have a checkup on their health. Or maybe to have a checkup on their finances that everything is okay.

But it's also a very good time for a spiritual checkup, isn't it? You know, the old year is past and God has promised to leave that in the past.

The new year is coming. So how is it going to be with us? We read what Jesus said about the character of his followers at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

But there's a sense in which these few verses in Micah, they're just that bit clear. They're very basic, aren't they?

[10 : 56] To the Christian life as we've been taught it. We are to do justly. We are to love mercy. And we're to walk humbly.

We're to do justly. That just simply means, doesn't it, we are to live rightly with integrity. The scriptures teach us again and again that our God is a God of love.

And it is righteousness that he loves. He is a righteous God. His ways are righteous. Always, always have been. And he wants his people to live righteously.

The prophet Habakkuk says, look, God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He hates that which is wrong, which is evil, which is wicked.

And doing justly, it just means, doesn't it, living rightly, honestly. Not lying, not deceiving, not stealing, not taking advantage of other people.

[12 : 08] But living in a way that's upright, that's fair, that's just, that's honest. Keeping your word. Now, we can all see that that's not happening in the world as it is at the minute.

We can all see that. We can all see how other people aren't doing justly. They're not living rightly. You know, politicians, estate agents, second-hand car salesmen, they've become a stereotype, haven't they, for people who are crooks, who are not doing right.

Now, not all of them are like that. But we've just got used to thinking in that way, they're not going to be straight with you. You know, and people talk about spin nowadays.

You know, where you turn the facts around so that they're not absolutely the way they should be presented, but they're presented in a way that helps you.

You know, and it's almost become the norm that it's all right to cut corners in your work.

[13 : 28] You know, it's kind of all right, you know, to run other people down and be critical of them. You know what, look, the smart fellow, the guy who gets away with things.

There's kind of, you know, a wee bit of grudging respect. An American told me not so long ago about the President-elect, Donald Trump, how he'd actually got away with not paying tax for a while.

And I said, well, gosh, you know, I thought that would be kind of a bit strange. You know, I think in Britain, we maybe wouldn't elect somebody who, you know, evaded tax or tax.

Oh, but he said, a lot of folk in America think that's a great idea, and they would do it if they could. You know, now, you know, Americans are no worse than us.

It just, it's pervasive, this lack of righteousness and integrity. But we see it so easily in others. But what about us?

[14 : 38] Are we absolutely honest and upright, totally just in all of our dealings? You know, because it's very easy to be tainted by the world's standards.

And honesty and integrity isn't the common virtue that it used to be. I'm sure some of you will remember the story. I think it was August or September last year, the man who found a bag with £10,000 in used banknotes on the London Underground.

And the story became national news because he actually returned it. And that was so unusual.

People would not expect that to happen. But what about God? We know how we ought to act with our relations, with our families, with the people we work with, with our neighbours, the people in church.

But, you know, we have a good idea about that. But, you know, Micah is challenging the people here because they're going against God. They're living in a way that is offending and hurting the living God.

[15 : 57] And God himself says to them, Look, what have I done to you, my people? What have I done? You know, how have I worried you? You know, they weren't living for him.

And you and I have a relationship with God if we're Christians. And are we being honest with God every day, every week? Do we act justly towards him?

You see, we've all made vows, haven't we? When we come to communion, we're making vows. When we become members of a congregation like St. Columbus, we make vows.

And when we marry, when we're baptised as adults, or we confirm our baptismal vows. You know, all of those things, you know, we make these vows.

And God warns us in his word, the wise man in Ecclesiastes, When thou vows to a vow unto God, Defer not to pay it, for God has no pleasure in fools.

[17 : 06] We have to honour those vows to God. And, you know, it's by righteousness that we will one day be judged when we stand before God.

Let's not be like those people. John Calvin talked about the people who attended his church in Geneva. And he said, All of them have a vague general reverence for God.

But not all of them truly love him. C.S. Lewis, he talked about people who were semi-believers. You know, they believed enough to come to church and sing hymns and that, but it didn't go really very deep.

Do justly. Let's think about doing justly in this new year. Love mercy. Ours is a religion of the forgiven.

Somebody has written that. And our God is a God of mercy, a God of forgiveness. Mercy, forgiveness is the bedrock of our faith.

[18 : 20] And we are Christians because we have been forgiven by a merciful God. And the word that Micah uses here, it's a word, Corey's explained it to us quite a few times, a Hebrew word, *chesed*.

And it really means, you know, loving kindness. Faithful loving kindness. Always being honest and faithful. And it embraces compassion as well.

You know, and we're told here not just to show mercy, but to love mercy. You know, and that means, that means being glad, being willing, being delighted to reach out in forgiveness to people who've done us wrong.

To reach out in compassion to people who are in need. You know, not just to forgive, in a way, grudgingly, or with a bad grace, or feeling, well, it's my duty, I have to do it.

That's not what God requires of us. He wants us to love mercy. And it's not so much the action as the attitude.

[19 : 40] And again, it comes from the heart. True forgiveness, true mercy comes from the heart. But listen, it is not easy.

For natural men and women, in fact, it's impossible. But even for those of us who are Christians, it is very hard. And the Jewish theologian, Dr. Jonathan Sachs, he has a book called *To Heal a Fractured World*.

And in it, he says, forgiveness or mercy is so difficult because of justice. And he's right, isn't he? You know, when we're told we've got to forgive somebody, they've been, ah, but yeah, but look what they did to me.

You know, and that's the difficulty. They should be punished, not forgiven. But for those of us who've been forgiven by Jesus, it should be part of our life.

It should flow from our hearts because He is Lord of our lives now. In Mark 3, there was awful words, you know, that Jesus, it said He was grieved.

[20 : 54] What was He grieved on? When He saw the Pharisees, He was grieved at the hardness of their hearts. You know, a hard-hearted, an unforgiving Christian is a contradiction in terms.

There isn't any such thing. There just isn't. And again and again in the Gospels, we read of Jesus reaching out in compassion, you know, to those who were in need and those who were neglected by others.

Now, you know, the people that Jesus reached out to, some were suffering and it was their own fault. And some were suffering and it wasn't their own fault.

But it didn't matter to him. He reached out to them. And, you know, you, you would be very unusual if you've never been wronged.

You know, if someone has never lied about you, if someone has never taken advantage of you. And, certainly as a Christian in these days, you're bound to have been mocked or sneered at or have your views misrepresented.

[22 : 11] I mean, that, that, that, that just all happens. But the amazing thing about grace that we, we sing about it being amazing, the amazing thing about it is that the grace of God, when it transforms our hearts, makes us able, if we're walking closely enough with God, it makes us able to forgive and to show compassion.

And, by the way, that's a, that's a, a, a big, big part of evangelism, of reaching out to folk in our families or our work or whatever who are not Christians.

because it is a fact. It is Christians with large hearts that God uses in large measure to move people in large measure.

Compassion. There's so much gratuitous cruelty and wickedness in the world. if we will just love mercy and show it what a difference that can make, what a witness that can be.

And finally, walk humbly with your God. Now, you know enough to know, I'm sure, that humility doesn't mean thinking that you're no good, that you're useless, you won't ever be able to do anything to please God.

[23 : 46] That's not what humility is. Humility is having a realistic view of yourself, an honest view of what you're like. A sinner, yes, but a sinner who has had their heart and life transformed by God.

The Puritan John Flavel helps us to understand. He wrote on one occasion, he says, they that know God will be humble and they that know themselves will not be proud.

And the book of Proverbs helps us also to understand it by contrasting it. You know, the man or woman who is modest, humble, careful in the way they live is contrasted with people who are arrogant, presumptuous, and full of themselves.

lives. And, you know, Micah speaks here about walking humbly, walking carefully with your God. And he always has in mind here people who already have a faith.

You know, people who have already been touched by the grace of God and had their lives transformed. And he's talking about a life of ongoing communion and fellowship with God.

[25 : 10] Look, we have to have a realistic take on ourselves. And when we weep and mourn for the wrong that we've done, the psalmist promises, a broken and a contrite heart, the Lord will not despise.

Jesus tells us, blessed are the poor in spirit, those who realize, those of us who realize that we need the grace of God and the help of God.

And blessed are the merciful. You know, those who show mercy will get mercy. But on this, you know, these are days, it's difficult. And let me tell you, as you get older, you know, it's not so easy listening to all that goes on in the world.

Not that our generations were any better than any others, but things changed so much. When we were growing up, you know, and Billy Graham and others will tell you, you know, children, we were seen and not heard.

Our opinions didn't count. You know, nobody in school, nobody wanted to hear what you thought about Henry VIII and his wife. You know, you were told what to think.

[26 : 28] Now, it's a good thing that young minds are made to be critical and thinking. But along with that has come with self-promotion and entitlement, you know, and everybody wants to organize the world to suit themselves, to suit them.

That's not how we should be. That's not how we should be. Vanity is not a good thing. It is good to have a realistic view of yourself.

There's a wonderful historical parable about it. In the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the emperors were buried in a little friary way outside the city.

And when the emperor died, after a great service in the cathedral, a great procession would make its way down out of the city to this little friary, the grand duke would wrap on the door, a little window would open, and who is it?

Oh, Franz Ferdinand, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and whatever. We don't know him, and it would close.

[27 : 50] And then the duke would wrap again, and who is it? Oh, Franz Ferdinand, electoral, of the Pope, Margrave of Hungary, and we don't know him.

And a third time, he would wrap on the window would open. Who is it? Franz Ferdinand, a wretched sinner who looks for somewhere to lay his bones.

Only in death were those great emperors divested of their vanity. For us as Christians, we should be going through this world remembering that we are just sinners, saved by grace.

We've finished an old year, and we're beginning a new year. I'm sure you've reflected on it, however young or old you are, and you remember that God's been good to you.

He has been good. God's been good to you and how in his providence he's taken care of you and brought you to the start of this new year. And you can't doubt his love for you in giving Jesus to be your saviour.

[29 : 07] So what do you do in return? What do we do to show our gratitude to our loving God? Well, we do what he's asked us to do. You know, we do justly.

We live with integrity in a fallen world, whatever it costs. We show mercy. We reach out with compassion to everyone because there's so little of it about.

And we walk humbly with our God, never forgetting that we are just sinners saved by grace. That's what he wants.

Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, help us to seal your words in our hearts and to go into this new year knowing the grace of God in our hearts and in our lives and seeking, Lord, above all other things to honour you by doing justly, by loving mercy, and by walking humbly.

in Jesus name we pray this Amen