



What Does the Lord Require?

SESSION 2

God's second requirement is to love deeply so that our relationships with God, ourselves, and one another move beyond thought and into action.

Introduction

Session 2 continues the in-depth study of the three requirements in Micah 6:8. This text is understood by many as a central biblical principle for how to live as one of God's own. This session focuses on the second phrase, translated in the NRSV as "to love kindness." This phrase, however, is difficult to express in a single phrase, as other translations illustrate; the NIV translates the phrase "to love mercy," and the Tanakh (the Jewish Publication Society English version) reads "to love goodness." Just as with "doing justice," this phrase has a multitude of meanings in Hebrew. This session explores these multiple meanings in an effort to enhance our understanding and show the ways we can apply them to our daily lives. Also, the requirement to love has a threefold focus; we will begin the discussion of this focus in this session and finish it in session 3.

As noted previously, translating this phrase is not a simple task, as there are both grammar problems and multiple meanings of the words. The grammar of this verse is debated, and some scholars believe the verb "to do or make" is to be used as the verb here also. Hebrew poetry often uses a single verb for multiple lines of text. If this is the case, the phrase would read, "to do justice and faithful love." This reading is more accurate than the traditional one and reinforces the understanding that these requirements are to be practiced actively throughout one's life. To do faithful love, one must move beyond thought and into action.



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What Does Love Mean?

The second word in this phrase is the Hebrew word for love. Unlike other languages, such as Greek, there is only one word for love in the Hebrew, *hesed*. The word is used to describe the relationship between God and humans (Deut. 4:37; 10:15, 18, 19; Ps. 37:28; 47:4; Hos. 11:1) and humans and God (Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; Josh. 22:5; 1 Kgs. 3:3). It is also used for family relationships (Gen. 22:2; 25:28; 1 Sam. 1:5) and other human relationships; self and neighbor (Lev. 19:18); strangers (Deut. 10:19); and friends (1 Sam. 20:17). A person can also love things: food (Gen. 27:14); violence (Ps. 11:5); the Lord's house (Ps. 26:8); righteousness (Ps. 145:7); and money (Eccl. 5:10). The verb "to love" indicates all types of relationships and attachments. A person can love things that are good or evil. "To love" in Hebrew has much the same range of meaning as in English, and

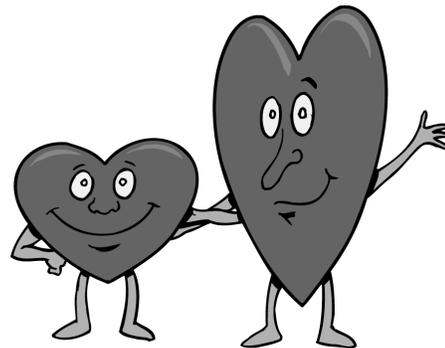
it can be good and nourishing or evil and destructive. It can also be fleeting or a lifelong commitment. It is a general term that the next section will help to clarify.

What Does *Hesed* Mean?

Scholar Katharine Doob Sakenfeld has written on this Hebrew word, *hesed*, and notes that it is very difficult to translate the full meaning of the word.¹ Indeed, since 1927, three books have been written on the meaning of this word alone! However, the ways this word is used in the Old Testament can provide insight into ways *hesed* can be part of life.

Like the Hebrew word for justice, this Hebrew word is also first and foremost an attribute of God and is often translated as “steadfast love.” This word appears in four texts that are ancient descriptions of who God is (Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Ps. 145:8, and Jonah 4:2). While each is a bit different, all reflect the same ideas seen in Exodus 34:6: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” God’s nature is steadfast love, and this is not a fleeting attraction but an eternal bond. In Isaiah 54:10, God tells the people, “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you.” The apostle Paul states it in this way, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 38–39). God’s love is loyal love.

Other texts demonstrate this trust in difficult situations. Approximately 57 of the 150 psalms are prayers for help, or laments. These are emotional cries to God from individuals or the community spoken in times of desperation (see, for example, Pss. 13, 44, 51, and 89). In 23 of these 57 psalms the one(s) praying calls upon God to give steadfast love as aid. Twenty-two additional psalms offer praise for God’s steadfast love, and Psalm 136 tells of the great works of the Lord with the refrain “for his steadfast love endures forever” in each of twenty-six verses. God’s steadfast love, like justice, is an attribute of God that we can depend on. God’s love is cried for in the times when we are the weakest and most at risk. God’s love supports us when we are



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vulnerable, so like justice it is both an attribute of and a gift from God.

Also like justice, steadfast love is part of God and is given by God. Since we humans are not God, we of course cannot have the same character of love either for God or for one another. We will know complete *hesed* only when we sit at God’s great banquet table, yet that is not an excuse for ignoring this requirement. It is a kingdom value. We are called to act as God’s images in this world, even if in the midst of sin; our efforts are not perfected. We must learn to practice steadfast love, mercy, and loyalty to God and to one another.

There are many things said in the Bible about how we are to live, but none is given more weight than love. A Sadducee asked Jesus a question to test him, and Jesus gave his response:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Matthew 22:36–40

Jesus is not inventing a new way to live but reiterating an old one. God incarnate is saying again what God has said all along: it is about love of God, self, and neighbor. Just as with justice, it is easy to say, but doing it is quite another matter. As Jesus noted in the Matthew text, this commandment to love has a threefold focus: on God, self, and neighbor. Often in modern contexts,

a discussion of the Micah text concentrates only on love of neighbor, but all three must be a part of Christian discipline for a full and balanced life.

Loving God

First and foremost, God's people are to love God. This should be a slam dunk, right? Unfortunately, the Bible is full of stories of people turning away from God to follow their own or another's guidance. Remember, this text begins with God's anguish over the people's abandonment. The type of love *hesed* defines is loyal and true. It survives the good and the bad and involves work—real work on both sides. We are called to work on our relationship with God, and for many modern folks this is a new idea. Somehow, somewhere, a lot of relationships with God get stuck. For some who heard that God was a tyrant to be feared, love is given out of fear of going to hell and so cannot blossom into a real, trusting relationship. Others were taught to respect God, to be polite, and to bring only their happy, unquestioning, smiling Christian faces to God. For them, relationship cannot grow, for they cannot show their true selves to God. It is here that the stories of the Bible show us what it means to be in a real relationship with God. These stories define what loyal love means.

It begins with Abraham. God makes a promise, and Abraham and Sarah wait and wait. When God comes again and makes the same promise, Abraham is no shrinking violet. He stands right up and challenges God's words (Gen. 15:1–6). Then he waits some more until God comes and makes the promise again, and Abraham is so amused he “fell on his face and laughed” (17:17). Later, Sarah also laughs (18:12). God does not reprimand them or call them faithless. Indeed, the child of the promise is named Isaac, meaning “laughter” in Hebrew, as a constant reminder of Abraham and Sarah's response to God. They did not cower in fear or hide their skepticism; when God announced the impossible, they laughed at God and the implausibility of it all.

The struggle of relationship is seen again in the stories of God and Moses. In Exodus 3, Moses encounters God in the burning bush. One would think the bush would be enough to impress and prompt Moses into doing whatever God asks, but the back-and-forth conversation spans two chapters (3–4). God tell Moses what he is to do, and Moses has a reason why God's idea will



To love God loyally means to work at the relationship by praising and praying but also by crying and complaining. God is not to be held at arm's length but held tightly in times of plenty and times of pain.

not work. God solves Moses' problem, and Moses balks again and again. Even after his staff turns into a snake and back again (4:1–5), Moses remains unconvinced! Around and around they go, not only in chapters 3 and 4 but through the entire book of Exodus.

After the escape from Egypt, the people also enter into a relationship with God, and they too doubt and test the bounds of their relationship with both God and Moses (e.g., Exod. 16). Later, in Exodus 32, Moses stands up to God on behalf of the people. The people, left alone, had turned away from God while Moses was with God on the mountain. God then tells Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation” (9–10). To Moses' credit, he does not take God up on the offer and instead pleads for the people (11–13), and God does change God's mind! In another text, Moses has had it with his job and tells God exactly what he thinks: “Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? . . . If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery” (Num. 11:11–15). Moses is fed up and tells God exactly what he is thinking without mincing words!

These examples show what a real relationship with God means. Moses argues with, pleads with, and even complains to God! He does not treat God as fragile or as mean but as a great confidant and friend. God and Abraham and Sarah and Moses demonstrate a long-term, growing relationship, and theirs is but one of the relationships found in the Bible. God desires a true relationship with humans, and *hesed* describes that loyal, long-term commitment. To love God loyally means to

work at the relationship by praising and praying but also by crying and complaining. In other words, we should, like Moses, bring our whole selves before God and fight for the relationship. God is not to be feared but respected. God is not to be held at arm's length but held tightly in times of plenty and times of pain. To truly love God is to fully engage God and to live each day in full communion with the Lord. This is what it means to love God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul.

Loving Self

This part of loyal love is often overlooked, but the commandment that Jesus quotes from, Leviticus 19:18, states, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You cannot love your neighbor as yourself unless you love yourself! Often Christians are taught that any self-love is wrong and a sin, but to deny a love of self violates this commandment. God loves each of us and wants the best for us. Psalm 8:5 declares that the Lord made us a little lower than God and crowned us with glory and honor. Psalm 8 also begins and ends by declaring that the Lord is our sovereign. Love and care of self is not a sin unless that love of self exceeds the love of God and others. The previous stories demonstrate the type of self-love that God desires. Moses was at first a reluctant spokesperson for God, but as the story develops Moses grows both in his leadership skills and in his relationship with God. God makes Moses into a great leader. To stand before Pharaoh and the people in the wilderness took confidence as well as faith! Moses cared enough about the people to stand up to God to save them. Moses cared enough about God to bring his whole self before God and have an honest, open relationship. Self-love does not mean to put ourselves first, but it does not mean to deny ourselves either. Moses grew into a leader because his relationship with God gave him confidence.

Moses learned along the way. In Exodus 18, he accepts advice from his father-in-law concerning his leadership. The troubles and disputes of the people were taking a toll on him. Jethro suggests that Moses needed to

appoint other trustworthy persons to help him with this work. Moses had enough self-love and confidence to listen to the wise advice of another. One who has no love for oneself will doubt and be afraid of others. Moses shows us here what it means to listen and learn both from God and from other people. Moses did not become a leader overnight; he grew and sometimes failed and sometimes doubted. He was not extraordinary until God helped him to live as God created him to be. God's love of him and his love of God and of himself enabled this ordinary person to do extraordinary things.

In today's world, the Holy Spirit continues to guide us to become what God created us to be. We are to love God and ourselves. We are to practice loyal love and work on our relationship with God, which in turn helps us to clarify who we are and how we are to love ourselves in positive life-affirming ways. We are sometimes called upon to perform difficult tasks as Christians, such as voting on decisions concerning moral issues in the church, making tough financial choices when church or family budgets are tight, and doing the jobs we do each day with love and justice. None of these tasks is easy, and it will take prayer and strength and all of the intelligence and creativity that God gifted to each one of us to stand in these places and do the best thing for God's world. In these situations, if we have no love for ourselves or do not have a deep, honest relationship with God and do not see ourselves as one created and gifted by God, how can we do what is best for God's people? Love of God and of self is another important Christian discipline that takes time and work to develop but will give us fuller and happier lives.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in the Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 2–3.