



What Does the Lord Require?

SESSION 3

“Walking humbly with God” poetically expresses the lifelong relationship we are to share with God that provides all that is good and healthy for us and the world.

Introduction

In the last session, we began the exploration of the second of the Lord’s requirements in Micah 6:8 (“love kindness”), looking first at how the adjective *loyal* or *faithful* helps us to better understand the meaning of love in the Hebrew language. We then explored steadfast love as an attribute of God that the people depend on, especially in times of trouble. Finally, we turned to look at how we are to practice this loyal love using the commandments Jesus recites in the Gospels: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In today’s world, it may seem manipulative to say that we are *commanded* to give love. Isn’t love something that we can give only freely? Aren’t these primary commandments in direct conflict with free will? The answer is *yes and no*. Yes, in a world where all options of belief are available, the command to love a specific god and people would be a conflict with free will. The Bible, however, is directed to people who have already made their choice, and they have chosen the Lord as their sovereign king and God. This is seen at Mount Sinai, where God spoke these words to the people: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3). This text is often translated as the preamble and the first of the Ten Commandments, “you shall have no other gods,” but in Hebrew this first statement is a contract. If you believe that this is the God who saved you, then for you there are no other gods! Likewise when the people were about to



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enter the land God had promised, Joshua gathered all of the people together and said, “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, . . . but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:14–15). The command to love is given within the bounds of an already formed covenant between God and the person. If you choose this relationship with this god, then this will be the way you should live your life.

The discipline of loyal or steadfast love concerns three directives that are not to be separated: one to God, one to self, and one to neighbor. In session 2, we discussed love of God and love of self. Love of God is the first commandment, and the last session used stories to demonstrate the type of relationship God desires. The command is not to fear a vengeful God or to give lip service to a distant unfeeling God but to work at the relationship with God through good times and bad. To love God means that we enter into the mystery of God, accept God as God, and realize that we are humans,

the created ones. Relationship means standing firm even when the answers to life's problems are not clear but clinging to God even when doubts arise. Just like Sarah and Abraham, we too might even laugh at the implausibility of it all along the way. Also in session 2, we noted that this commandment to love also involves love of self. We love ourselves and know that God loves us, and that gives us the courage and the confidence to serve in God's kingdom on earth and to stand firm when love and justice require us to work for others against corrupt systems both in our neighborhoods and around the world.

Loyal Love of Neighbor

The third part of loyal love involves one's neighbor. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. This means that we are required to get involved. It was noted earlier that to love implies an attachment, often an intimate one. But attachment alone does not fulfill the requirement; doing loyal love involves not just a fond heart but decisive action. Love that is not demonstrated is not love at all. Jesus clarifies what this means with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The Samaritan got involved because he was filled with compassion (NRSV: pity). Likewise, Psalm 72:13 tells how God's servant is to treat others: "He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy." Just as with justice, the command to love requires us to be involved with all of those in need of our aid. A feeling of compassion in both of these texts means we will act for others in need.

But who is our neighbor? Again, the Bible gives us direction, and this Hebrew word can mean a close companion or someone from the same country, from your best friend to an acquaintance. We are to be concerned with and act for the good of the people we encounter each and every day. The Bible often speaks of the poor and needy. The words *poor* and *needy* often mean in a monetary sense, but they can also refer to anyone who is in need of care and restoration, whether the person is poor in resources or poor in spirit. We should not always look outside the doors of the church to find folks to love. There are those suffering who sit next to us each week, and we are called to get involved in their lives as well. We are called to love those who are usually self-sufficient, because everyone is in need of aid from others at times in their lives.

Also, both the Old and the New Testaments have expanded the definition of neighbor. The same command to love also refers to the stranger or alien in Leviticus 19:34. Likewise, Jesus expands the definition of neighbor in two texts. In Matthew 5:43–44 he declares, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." As noted previously in Luke 10:25–37, a young man recites the two great commandments and then asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which expands the definition of neighbor to a hated group of his day, the Samaritan people. Neither the ancient laws nor Jesus allows us to limit our definition of neighbor to our close circle of friends and relatives; indeed, both expand the definition to the very ones the society has taught its citizens to hate.

Expanding the definition of neighbor to all humans may very well be the hardest requirement of all. Loving God and loving yourself take work, but loving others, all others, seems one of those ideas that will be fulfilled only with the coming of Christ to set the world right. Certainly, for all humans to stop their grievances and violence and hate will take a decisive act of God, but as stated before, that is not an excuse to ignore this command. Just like the other parts of loyal love, loving neighbor is a discipline that needs to be actively practiced, for it is far too easy to follow the crowd and love only those who love us.

As individuals and certainly as Christians and citizens of the United States, we have real enemies who fly planes into buildings and sell fear like Madison Avenue sells soap. We also know that there are those for whom crime is their choice, and they have no respect for human life, their own or anyone else's. "Loving all others" is a great religious concept, and we can accept that Jesus said it, but practicing it in this violent world seems a bit unrealistic. Interestingly, the people of the biblical period were no different. During the time of Micah a more powerful Assyria destroyed much of both the northern and southern kingdoms, and thousands were either killed or exiled, so these folks knew real and violent enemies. They were well aware of the risk in loving the stranger. From Psalms, we also hear that enemies were not just foreign powers but also literally neighbors and friends (Ps. 55:12–14, 20–21). These

words were not penned in some idealistic world where violence was not an issue. The ancient ones knew just as we do how hard this commandment is to follow.

So what are we to do? The command to love our enemies seems impossible or even dangerous. But if we are honest, the other commandments aren't easy to follow either, and we forsake our relationship with God and sacrifice the very things that would be good for us for things that are destructive. We do not always love God and ourselves either. Just as with justice, we are to actively seek to love God, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbors. We—yes, all of us—are to work toward reconciling the world. How we do this is what makes the matter complex. Certainly there are many ways to work toward good for all. As with justice, different groups of Christians disagree about what is love of neighbor and what is not. Just as with doing justice, the path may be difficult, but that is no excuse for giving up. The prophets and those who wrote the psalms did not give up hope or cease trying to live up to these commandments, even though it was difficult and often appeared to be a useless endeavor. To love and pray for our enemies is a discipline. As we pray even for those we cannot yet forgive, we grow in faith and patience by becoming more of the persons God created us to be.

Walking Humbly with Your God

The last phrase of this verse helps us to see yet again that these requirements are lifelong and enduring. As with the previous phrases, this one also is problematic from a translation standpoint. We will begin with a discussion of the part of the phrase that is clear and move to the problematic word.

What is easy to translate are the words “to walk with your God.” Walking was the only way of moving from place to place in the ancient world. Today, we have engines that propel us to work or even around the world, but the ancients moved around by putting one foot in front of the other. So at its base sense, this word represents both what one does each and every day for the necessities of life, walking to get water or food, and what one does on extraordinary days, walking to great religious festivals or to a new village to start another chapter of life. In other words, all of the tasks of life involved walking somewhere. This act covers all aspects of life, both great and small. This phrase, then, represents all those physi-



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cal trips one takes in the course of daily life. “To walk” also has a metaphorical sense that means movement through life (Gen. 5:22; Ps. 15:2; 23:4; Prov. 15:21; Isa. 33:15). “To walk” here represents both our daily tasks and our life’s journey from cradle to grave, and both are to be done with God. The other aspect is that we are to walk “with God.” This means that we are to walk beside God and not venture forth into our own paths, where we risk being lost and injured. By God’s side, we can grow and become the people we were created to be; separated from God, we are alone and at risk of harm.

The NRSV and NIV translate this phrase “to walk humbly with your God,” while the Tanakh uses “modestly.” The actual word that modifies the way we are to walk appears only here in the Hebrew text. Unfortunately, the ancient writers of the Bible did not leave behind a dictionary. The only way we have of knowing what a word means is to study it within the context where it appears, to study other similar ancient languages, and to look at later translations of the Hebrew text into other languages such as Aramaic and Greek. “Humbly” is a traditional translation that goes back at least as far as the King James Version in 1611. Older, non-English translations preferred “carefully” or “prudently,” and this meaning is supported by many scholars. Both meanings of “humbly” and “carefully” or “attentively” are possible, and just like the other Hebrew words in this study, it probably means both of these instead of one or the other. We are to “walk humbly,” so we realize that we are above neither God nor the others whom God loves as well. To think of “walking humbly” keeps human self-centeredness and arrogance away and offers a life that is balanced and fulfilling. We can love God and ourselves in a healthy way. We can look at both neighbor and stranger and see them as an equal, not in the social stratification our culture often attaches to people.

This study has also shown that each of these tasks is to be done with intention. “To walk attentively” reminds us that it is all too easy to ignore the proactive position these tasks require. We must be vigilant and attentive each and every day, for it is easy to ignore these requirements when our lives and the lives of the ones we love are going well. We must be attentive to these relationships each day or they will wither and we will suffer from the alienation of God, self, and neighbor.

What Does the Lord Require?

In the last three sessions, we have explored what the Bible teaches us about these requirements. Much of the discussion concerned not laws but stories—stories of people and their relationship with God and with others. What is clear in these biblical texts is the intentionality required to do these disciplines. These ways of acting are not automatic. They take prayer and dedication. They also require a plan: a plan to learn of places in need of justice and love, a plan to act in those places based on reflection and prayer, and a plan to do what God is directing even if others do not agree. These important practices are disciplines; it takes time and effort to keep them before us and to keep us from ignoring them when we are busy doing other things.

These requirements to do justice and practice loyal love and walk humbly and attentively with God are requirements that each one can do regardless of age, social position, or income. We can serve God by practicing these requirements in small and great ways, locally and globally, in church and in all avenues of life. But this Micah text also reminds us that to act in these ways requires us to get involved with the world. Just like our relationship with God, involvement with humans and human systems will cost us something, and at times it will break our hearts. In those times of disenchantment, we can remember that we are to spend our lives walking with God. We are not solely responsible for the condition of the world. We cannot fix what is broken either alone or with a whole host of like-minded people. Ultimately, we are all made to be a part of God’s great kingdom and to live our lives as God has asked us to live. If we live according to these requirements, we can enjoy the full and active lives God intends for us.

About the Writer

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