

“Learning to Live: Getting Our Bearings”

What does the Lord require of you? That’s the question God asks through His prophet Micah. It is a question that has haunted many Christians over the years. I say “haunted” because whenever religious humans seem to raise this question, it comes out of a need to justify one’s own behaviors and choices. More often than not, we religious types want to know if what we are doing ... or just did ... or are contemplating doing, is going to have the approval of God. Commonly, when we are in the midst of the behavior, we have not previously raised this question; we just went ahead and did what we wanted. Then hindsight comes into play, and we start to worry, “*Is this going to be okay? Am I going to be okay?*” If we would but raise the question first and let the behavior follow, we might do much better.

How you answer that question, “*What does the Lord require?*” depends, in large measure, on your view of God. If God is to you an angry judge, ready and all-too-willing to zap you for every misstep, then His requirements are going to be severe. If God is a kindly old grandfather in the sky who could never bring Himself to be angry or even mildly upset with His grandchildren, on whom He dotes, then what you do will hardly matter.

As we listen to the prophet Micah lay out his covenant lawsuit (which is what is going on in chapter 6), we discover that both those views of God are not just inadequate, they are wrong, and we get a Biblical view of God. Like so many of the other covenant lawsuits issued by many of the Old Testament prophets, the picture we get of God is that of a jilted lover or an abandoned husband. Indeed, Jeremiah brings just those words: “***The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord***” [31:31-32].

God's is not mindless dotage; it is passionate love — this is the God who speaks through Micah. What He speaks is His dismay over how His loved ones are responding to His many acts of love: ***“In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery . . .” “ . . . remember now what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”*** The key word here is “remember” — that was the problem (that is always the problem when it comes to the human response to God): Israel had forgotten the covenant and all that God had done to rescue, empower, and prosper His people.

Consequently, their view of God became skewed. God became a demanding, overbearing, judgmental ogre who needs to be appeased. ***“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*** What will it take to get this angry, vengeful God off my back? Can I bribe Him? Pay Him off? Will it take human sacrifice?

Again, Micah replies with a Biblical view of God: ***“He has told you, O mortal, 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?”***

“Do justice” means to be in right relationships with others. This says that power cannot be the main ingredient in a right relationship; rather mutual surrender, sharing, caring for the other. Justice is, by definition, always reciprocal.

“Love kindness” is to treat others in mercy. The Hebrew word here is *chesed*, often translated as “loving-kindness” or “steadfast love.” It addresses the concept of “hanging in there” with the other, even when that is tough, or when it calls for a lot from you.

“walk humbly with your God,” is not a call to self-abasement. It is rather

a summons to recognize all that God has done and is doing in your life, and to use those gifts wisely, that is, to His purposes. True humility is not “*Aw shucks, I aint got nuthin’ and can’t do nuthin’ so I ain’t anything.*”

True humility is realizing who you are in Christ and what that can mean for living your life.

Which is what the Beatitudes are all about.

As we come to Jesus’ opening words of the Sermon on the Mount, we need to talk first about this word, “**Blessed.**” The Greek word is *μακάριος* [makarios] and it really has no English equivalent. Many modern versions prefer to translate this as “*Happy.*” What’s the opposite of “happy” — not “sad” but “hapless.” Who is hapless? Both the schlemiel and the schlimazel. What’s the difference? The schlemiel trips and spills the soup; the soup winds up in the schlimazel’s lap and they are both hapless schmucks. No, happy will not do as a substitute for *μακάριος*.

What’s wrong with “blessed”? It implies that something is yet to come — some kind of benefit — because one has the necessary quality. No, *μακάριος* defines a current condition, not a future hope. The root meaning of “hap” is “fortune” — so I had concluded that a good translation of *μακάριος* would be “fortunate.” After reading Kenneth Bailey’s rather technical and deep commentary on 1 Corinthians, in which he has once again alerted me to the need to read our texts in light of the culture in which they were written, I have come to a different translation. Middle eastern culture (also true of far eastern culture) is solidly “shame based.” One does not do things that would bring shame on self or family; you simply do not do them. When you avoid bringing shame, you bring the opposite, which is honor. So, many scholars are suggesting that the proper translation for *μακάριος* is “honorable” or “honored”.

No matter how you wind up thinking about that word *μακάριος*, we do need to focus on what Jesus is teaching us. The Beatitudes are familiar, and therein lies a potential danger: we think we know what they say, and fail to plumb the depths of Jesus’ intentions.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What does that mean: to be “poor in spirit”? One version translates this “spiritually poor,” as if somehow lacking something in the spiritual realm is something honorable. “Poor in spirit” has to do with the mindset of poverty — the realization that everything depends of God as resource. In the canticle in the LBW (17), the title gets it right: *“How Blest Are They Who Know Their Need of God.”* When you know that God is everything you need, you are solidly within the Kingdom Jesus came to establish.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Here’s where “blessed” for *μακάριοι* is most obviously inadequate: what kind of blessedness is to be found in mourning the death of a loved one (which is what the word *πενθεω*[*pentheo*] means)? “Honored” covers this, with the understanding that there is nothing shameful in grieving, and that God will come to us. We begin most funerals with the benediction: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation. He comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.”* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 [NRSV]).

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Our problem here is our culturally-conditioned understanding of “meek,” which is something close to Caspar Milquetoast (for those of you old enough to recognize that allusion) or (more contemporary) Spongebob Squarepants. The Greek word is *πραῦς*[*praus*] another word for “humble” — again meaning having the right opinion of your self, neither too inflated nor too deflated. Every translation I know gets the second part wrong; *ἡ γῆ* does not mean “earth” (as in the planet); it means earth as in “land.” The promise to God’s people has always been that they would have a land of their own; Jesus is simply reiterating that ancient promise that God will provide for us a place.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” “Righteousness” is a good word; in Greek it is *δικαιοσύνη*

which is literally translated as “just-ness” (my name in Greek would be ἀδίκαιος) — so you should all hunger and thirst to become just like me (get it? pun! “Just like me”? You’re right; not worth it.) Pay serious attention to what Jesus is saying here; it is not enough to have a mild interest in justice and rightness; we need to heed the re-echoed call from Micah to “do justice.” The promise is that when we pursue justice we shall find it to the full.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” There is a significant difference between “mercy” and “sympathy” or even “pity.” Sympathy (from the Latin “to hurt together”) has come to mean that we get a tug at our heartstrings when we see the picture or watch the video, or serve as eyewitness to something that obviously is injurious to another human — we have an emotive response. Mercy involves not just taking note of the emotional reaction (“Gee, that’s too bad”); it means taking action to either stave off the harm or bring in the healing. The current *in vogue* word to use here is “empathy” which involves entering the wound of the other and helping to find the healing needed. It appears that Jesus is telling us that, if we help when others hurt, we can expect help when we hurt; that may in fact be a warranted expectation, but it is not what Jesus is saying here. His promise is that we will “*be mercied*” — whatever the need of the moment, God will provide the resource that can bring sufficient help.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” [katharos] means “clean” — and most of us would more than likely fit the self-description offered by Tallulah Bankhead: “*I’m as pure as the driven slush.*” (It’s why we begin most worship services with a rite of confession and absolution.) In the ancient world, the heart was seen as “the true self” — this not merely the avoidance of “impure thoughts” (e.g., sexual fantasies), but refers to the single-minded devotion to God. And the promise is that so doing you will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The Greek is literally “peace-doers” so it involves some kind of action,

some behaviors on our part to bring about peace. “Peace” (ἡ Εἰρήνη [eirene] in Greek; שְׁלוֹמִי [shalom] in Hebrew) has at its root meaning “wholeness” — so this means “work for the wholeness and well-being that God wills for a broken world.” Our politically correct use of “children” here makes us miss something of the promise; the Greek actually says “sons of God” which is an Old Testaments term for the angels. Wholeness-doers are likened to God’s ministering agents, caring for those who find it hard to care for themselves (which at one time or another implies every one of us).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I think Jesus is here alluding to His own situation, in which the justice He brought would be turned to injustice in His own death. To be that committed to God — to suffer such injustice in the service of justice — is indeed worthy of those who belong to the Kingdom of God.

Now, I have used the term “*the promise is*” several times here, and that can be misleading. Promise implies something that you expect you will receive because God said He was going to provide it. Luther is reputed to have said, “*When you pray, you need to take God by the throat and shake from Him what He has promised.*” I don’t think my prayer life is that robust, and I’m not sure I want it to be. What I should have said each time I used the phrase “*the promise is*” was “*the necessary outcome will be.*” The Beatitudes are not prescriptive; they are not telling us to do something — they are descriptive; they are Jesus telling us who we are as His children and followers.

Because you belong to Christ, you do not need to become poor in spirit, or merciful, or meek or any of the rest of them; you already are all of them! We do, each of us, grow into them, let them become the norm for what we do and who we are — but that is a matter of maturing, not of identity. Each of us is what Jesus tells us we are in these verses, and we will become better at living them out, but we will never be more “His” because we became more “persecuted” or “pure in heart”

This tells us that we need to learn how to live the life Christ has given us. Just as the tiny baby needs to learn to crawl, then walk, then run so that she may enjoy the fullness of life — and then needs also to benefit from the transition from mother’s milk to solid food to finally relishing a really good *duck comfit* and every other taste sensation . . . so every Christian needs to mature in the faith.

As Oswald Hoffman, long-time Lutheran Hour Speaker, often said, “*Become what you are.*” Or, as I have chosen to title this series of sermons, we need to be busy “Learning to Live” — and we will do so over the next several weeks. Amen.