**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MICAH-005. GOD'S REQUIREMENTS AND GOD'S GIFT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."*

*Micah 6:8*

This is the Prophet's answer to a question which he puts into the mouth of his hearers. They had the superstitious estimate of the worth of sacrifice, which conceives that the external offering is pleasing to God, and can satisfy for sin. Micah, like his great contemporary Isaiah, and the most of the prophets, wages war against that misconception of sacrifice, but does not thereby protest against its use. To suppose that he does so is to misunderstand his whole argument. Another misuse of the words of my text is by no means uncommon to-day. One has heard people say, We are plain men; we do not understand your theological subtleties; we do not quite see what you mean by "Repentance toward God, and faith in Jesus Christ." "To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with my God," that is my religion, and I leave all the rest to you. That is our religion too, but notice that word require. It is a harsh word, and if it is the last word to be said about God's relation to men, then a great shadow has fallen upon life.

But there is another word which Micah but dimly caught uttered amidst the thunders of Sinai, and which you and I have heard far more clearly. The Prophet read off rightly God's requirements, but he had not anything to say about God's gifts. So his word is a half-truth, and the more clearly it is seen, and the more earnestly a man tries to live up to the standard of the requirements laid down here, the more will he feel that there is something else needed, and the more will he see that the great central peculiarity and glory of Christianity is not that it reiterates or alters God's requirements, but that it brings into view God's gifts. To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God, is possible only through repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And if you suppose that these words of my text disclose the whole truth about God's relation to men, and men's to God, you have failed to apprehend the flaming centre of the Light that shines from heaven.

**I. So, then, the first thing that I wish to suggest is God's requirements.**

Now, I do not need to say more than just a word or two about the summing-up in my text of the plain, elementary duties of morality and religion. It covers substantially the same ground, in a condensed form, as does the Decalogue, only that Moses began with the deepest thing and worked outwards, as it were; laying the foundation in a true relation to God, which is the most important, and from which will follow the true relation to men. Micah begins at the other end, and starting with the lesser, the more external, the purely human, works his way inwards to that which is the centre and the source of all.

To do justly, that is elementary morality in two words. Whatever a man has a right to claim from you, give him; that is the sum of duty. And yet not altogether so, for we all know the difference between a righteous man and a good man, and how, if there is only rigidly righteous action, there is something wanting to the very righteousness of the action and to the completeness of the character. To do is not enough; we must get to the heart, and so love mercy. Justice is not all. If each man gets his deserts, as Shakespeare says, who of us shall scape whipping? There must be the mercy as well as the justice. In a very deep sense no man renders to his fellows all that his fellows have a right to expect of him, who does not render to them mercy. And so in a very deep sense, mercy is part of justice, and you have not given any poor creature all that that poor creature has a right to look for from you, unless you have given him all the gracious and gentle charities of heart and hand. Justice and mercy do, in the deepest view, run into one.

Then Micah goes deeper. And to walk humbly with thy God. Some people would say that this summary of the divine requirements is defective, because there is nothing in it about a man's duty to himself, which is as much a duty as his duty to his fellows, or his duty to God. But there is a good deal of my duty to myself crowded into that one word, humbly. For I suppose we might almost say that the basis of all our obligations to our own selves lies in this, that we shall take the right view--that is, the lowly view--of ourselves. But I pass that.

To walk humbly with thy God. Can two walk together unless they be agreed? For walking with God there must be communion, based in love, and resulting in imitation. And that communion must be constant, and run through all the life, like a golden thread through some web. So, then, here is the minimum of the divine requirements, to give everybody what he has a right to, including the mercy to which he has a right, to have a lowly estimate of myself, and to live continually grasping the hand of God, and conscious of His overshadowing wing at all moments, and of conformity to His will at every step of the road. That is the minimum; and the people who so glibly say, That is my religion, have little consciousness of how far-reaching and how deep-down-going the requirements of this text are. The requirements result from the very nature of God, and our relation to Him, and they are endorsed by our own consciences, for we all know that these, and nothing less than these are the duties that we owe to God. So much for God's requirements.

**II. Our failure.**

There is not one of us that has come up to the standard. Man after man may be conceived of as bringing in his hands the actions of his life, and laying them in the awful scales which God's hand holds. In the one are God's requirements, in the other my life; and in every case down goes the weight, and weighed in the balances we are altogether lighter than vanity. We stand before the great Master in the school, and one by one we take up our copybooks; and there is not one of them that is not black with blots and erasures and swarming with errors. The great cliff stands in front of us with the victor's prize on its topmost ledge, and man after man tries to climb, and falls bruised and broken at the base. There is none righteous, no, not one. Micah's requirements come to every man that will honestly take stock of his life and his character as the statement of an unreached and unreachable ideal to which he never has climbed nor ever can climb.

Oh, brethren! if these words are all the words that are to be said about God and me, then I know not what lies before the enlightened conscience except shuddering despair, and a paralysing consciousness of inevitable failure. I beseech you, take these words, and go apart with them, and test your daily life by them. God requires me to do justly. Does there not rise before my memory many an act in which, in regard to persons and in regard to circumstances, I have fallen beneath that requirement? He requires me to love mercy. He requires me to walk humbly, and I have often been inflated and self-conceited and presumptuous. He requires me to walk with Himself, and I have shaken away His hand from me, and passed whole days without ever thinking of Him, and the God in whose hands my breath is, and whose are all my ways, I have not glorified. I cannot hammer this truth into your consciences. You have to do it for yourselves. But I beseech you, recognise the fact that you are implicated in the universal failure, and that God's requirement is God's condemnation of each of us.

If, then, that is true, that all have come short of the requirement, then there should follow a universal sense of guilt, for there is the universal fact of guilt, whether there be the sense of it or not. There must follow, too, consequences resulting from the failure of each of us to comply with these divine requirements, consequences very alarming, very fatal; and there must follow a darkening of the thought of God. I knew thee that thou wert an austere man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not straw. That is the God of all the people who take my text as the last word of their religion--God requires of me. The blessed sun in the heavens becomes a lurid ball of fire when it is seen through the mist of such a conception of the divine character, and its relation to men. There is nothing that so drapes the sky in darkness, and hides out the great light of God, as the thought of His requirements as the last thought we cherish concerning Him.

There follows, too, upon this conception, and the failure that results to fulfil the requirements, a hopelessness as to ever accomplishing that which is demanded of us. Who amongst us is there that, looking back upon his past in so far as it has been shaped by his own effort and his own unaided strength, can look forward to a future with any hope that it will mend the past? Brethren! experience teaches us that we have not fulfilled, and cannot fulfil, what remains our plain duty, notwithstanding our inability to discharge it--viz., To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. To think of God's requirements, and of my own failure, is the sure way to paralyse all activity; just as that man in the parable who said, Thou art an austere man, went away and hid his talent in the earth. To think of God's requirements and my own failures, if heaven has nothing more to say to me than this stern Thou shalt, is the short way to despair. And that is why most of us prefer to be immersed in the trivialities of daily life rather than to think of God, and of what He asks from us. For the only way by which some of us can keep our equanimity and our cheerfulness is by ignoring Him and forgetting what He demands, and never taking stock of our own lives.

**III. Lastly, my text leads us to think of God's gift.**

I said it is a half-truth, for it only tells us of what He desires us to be, and does not tell us of how we may be it. It is meant, like the law of which it is a condensation, to be the pedagogue, to lead the child to Jesus Christ, the true Master, and the true Gift of God.

God requires. Yes, and He requires, in order that we should say to Him, Lord, Thou hast a right to ask this, and it is my blessedness to give it, but I cannot. Do Thou give me what Thou dost require, and then I can.

The gift of God is Jesus Christ, and that gift meets all our failures. I have spoken of the sense of guilt that rises from the consciousness of failure to keep the requirements of the divine law; and the gift of God deals with that. It comes to us as we lie wounded, bruised, conscious of failure, alarmed for results, sensible of guilt, and dreading the penalties, and it says to us, Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. God requires of thee what thou hast not done. Trust yourselves to Me, and all iniquity is passed from your souls.

I spoke of the hopelessness of future performance, which results from experience of past failures; and the gift of God deals with that. You cannot meet the requirements. Christ will put His Spirit into your spirits, if you will trust yourselves to Him, and then you will meet them, for the things which are impossible with men are possible with God. So, if led by Micah, we pass from God's requirements to His gifts, look at the change in the aspect which God bears to us. He is no longer standing strict to mark, and stern to judge and condemn: but bending down graciously to help. His last word to us is not Thou shalt do but I will give. His utterance in the Gospel is not do, but it is take; and the vision of God, which shines out upon us from the life and from the Cross of Jesus Christ, is not that of a great Taskmaster, but that of Him who helps all our weakness, and makes it strength. A God who requires paralyses men, shuts men out from hope and joy and fellowship; a God who gives draws men to His heart, and makes them diligent in fulfilling all His blessed requirements.

Think of the difference which the conception of God as giving makes to the spirit in which we work. No longer, like the Israelites in Egypt, do we try to make bricks without straw, and break our hearts over our failures, or desperately abandon the attempt, and live in neglect of God and His will; but joyfully, with the clear confidence that our labour is not in vain in the Lord, we seek to keep the commandments which we have learned to be the expressions of His love. One of the Fathers puts all in one lovely sentence: Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.

Think, too, of the difference which this conception of the giving rather than of the requiring God brings into what we have to do. We have not to begin with effort, we have to begin with faith. The fountain must be filled from the spring before it can send up its crystal pillar flashing in the sunlight; and we must receive by our trust the power to will and to do. First fill the lamp with oil, and let the Master light it, and then let its blaze beam forth. First, we have to go to the giving God, with thanks unto Him for His unspeakable gift; and then we have to say to Him, Thou hast given me Thy Son. What dost Thou desire that I shall give to Thee? We have first to accept the gift, and then, moved by the mercy of God, to ask, Lord I what wilt Thou have me to do?