

SCRIPTURES

Micah 6:6-8

⁶ “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?

⁷ 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?”

⁸ 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?

Psalm 15

¹ O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your Holy Hill?

² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;

³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;

⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the Lord;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

⁵ who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Matthew 5:1-12

⁵ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon: Rejoice and be glad

¹ O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your Holy Hill?

This question that opens Psalm 15, really is **the** question, it’s the only question. Dwelling on the Holy Hill and abiding in God’s Tent, these are both ways of describing being with God. Who can be in God’s presence, and how do we enter in?

The Psalmist places the bar pretty high:

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;

³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.

Those who keep their word even when it costs them,
who do not take a bribe, nor lend money at interest.

This sounds like a challenging list of behaviours. I think I can do most of them, most of the time – the doing no evil to friends, that should be fairly easy. Speaking truth and keeping our word is usually not too hard, as long as we keep a rein on our tongues.

Bribing - most of us are not in positions where people are offering us briefcases full of money, but I would suggest to you that voting for someone who promises us a rebate on our new electric car or a ‘refund’ of a portion of our hydro bill using some one else’s money is essentially the same thing. Receiving something that we haven’t earned and are not entitled to in exchange for our complicity is, I believe, the very definition of a bribe.

Lending money at interest is also a stumbling block for most of us. We generally don’t charge our friends interest, but some time ago we moved from a production based economy to an interest based economy – if we have any savings or investments at all then we are guilty of lending money at interest.

We seem to do ok at many of the personal requirements of the psalm – speaking truth, not slandering, not causing trouble with our neighbours. But some of these things, like bribery and lending money at interest, are baked right into society. There doesn't seem to be a way around them – I've yet to meet a politician who hasn't made wild promises, and few, if any, of us get to choose how our pensions are invested.

Does this then bar us from being in the presence of God? Does the fact that our economy and culture is based on a prohibited practice exclude us all? Are we all automatically out of God's Tent and off the Holy Hill? That's an important question.

Micah similarly asks 'With what shall I come before the Lord?'

If we draw back from our small reading this morning and look at the wider context we find that what's going on is that the people of God are on trial. They stand accused of turning away from God, of forgetting who God is and therefore who they are. They are no longer acting as God's people – they are acting just like all the other nations around them – squabbling and scrambling for advantage – seeing other people as resources to be exploited rather than fellow human beings created and loved by God – just like them.

When the people hear God's accusation they of course miss the point. 'Do you want more sacrifices, God?' they ask – 'Burnt offerings and yearling calves?' They don't see that their behaviour is self-destructive, they are viewing this as a legal issue. They think they merely have to pay a penalty so they can continue what they were doing. With what shall I come before the Lord? What do you want? How much will it take to just make this go away?

Then they start to get sarcastic. 'Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?' They are insinuating that God is demanding of them something that they cannot provide, that God's requirements are too high.

Eventually they become downright offensive, saying 'shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'

In Micah, God doesn't respond to his insolent and mocking children with a list of sacrifices or penalties. Essentially he says one thing – Have some compassion. Act with justice, practice kindness, stop trying to elevate yourself and realize that you're already awesome because I made you and you live in my presence. Stop kicking other people off my Holy Hill. Try a little tenderness.

So we see a bit of a progression from one reading to the next. Psalm 15 is thought to originate early in King David's reign, as he brought the Ark to Zion – the Holy Hill. Transporting the Ark was serious and dangerous business, so it was natural to ask what sort of person could approach God on his hill.

The answer was a fairly detailed description of a person of purity – a description that only one man in history has ever fully fit, and it isn't any of us here today.

Some centuries later in Micah's time the same question was asked about who can approach God and how they are to do it. This answer gives us much more hope than the first. We don't have to be fully righteous, but we do have to be seeking after justice, kindness, love, compassion, and humility. This is encouraging – on most days I can see myself in this description.

Now we're ready to move on to Jesus, sitting on a holy mountain, teaching his followers and everyone else who had gathered to listen.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
the merciful,
the pure in heart,
the peacemakers,
those who are persecuted.

Are we now moving backwards? Is Jesus giving us a list of attributes that we must attain in order to gain God's blessing and join him on his hillside? Is this yet another purity code that I won't be able to live up to?

And who wants to be meek, mournful, poor in spirit, or persecuted anyway? Could this be a passage intended to comfort those whom society has passed by? Opiate for the masses?

I spent some time wrestling with this – lots of tossing and turning in bed. What did Jesus mean? Was he talking about present reality or a future reality? The way things are, or the way they should be? Am I supposed to try to be mournful to get a blessing or is the blessing a consolation for those who are already in mourning?

As I contended with this passage I kept asking if Jesus' speech was descriptive or prescriptive – indicative or imperative – then it occurred to me to turn the whole thing on its head and ask the opposite question.

Jesus said blessed are the poor in spirit, the mournful, and the merciful. What are we if we are none of these things? The simple answer that came shocked me.

If we are not at least a little poor in spirit, merciful, mournful, peacemakers, or pure in heart, then we are either dead or damned.

It sounds harsh, and it is. But I don't think that makes it less true.

What do we say about somebody who is unable to feel mercy? Someone who has no empathy at all for someone else's suffering? Are they a psychopath? A monster? Certainly we would consider such a soul to be lacking one of the essential things that makes us human.

What about someone who doesn't hunger after righteousness? I know we can be selective about our vision and application of righteousness, but if we have no regard for righteousness in any form, what kind of a hell must we be living in?

I don't think Jesus' list is some kind of purity code that we aspire to in order to gain favour. Nor is it meant as an empty comfort to placate those who have been trampled down by the world. Jesus is saying something much more important here. He is answering the question of who can be on his Holy Hill.

He is saying, you are already blessed because in as much as you experience mercy and mourning, poverty of spirit and humility, of persecution for being a peacemaker, you already dwell on the Holy Hill – the kingdom is within you.

Let me explain this a little more. Let's take mourning as an example. We're all familiar with the feeling of losing someone we love. Their absence rips a hole into our very being; we feel that things are not the way they should be. That's mourning.

But mourning is not limited to only losing someone we treasure. Jeremiah was called the mourning prophet. Not because people kept dying on him, but because he was tormented by the disparity between what he knew God's kingdom to be and what he saw around him. It's that same feeling of 'things are not the way they should be' but writ large.

But the only way we could know the way things should be is if we already have one foot in God's kingdom. That's the blessing. We don't have to wait to be blessed in some abstract future way – in as much as we experience anything of mercy, or mourning, or peacemaking, or humility we are experiencing the Kingdom.

This kingdom presence within us will do nothing but grow as long as we let it. Especially if we heed what we learned in the Psalm; 'Don't slag on other people, don't take advantage of them, mind your words.' And the words of God spoken through Micah; 'Try a little tenderness. Seek justice and kindness, and don't get a swelled head if you seem to be doing well.'

So then, ultimately the Beatitudes are our assurance as we approach God; they are Jesus' final answer to the question

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your Holy Hill?

Look around you. Are you not already on a hillside with God? Are your hearts not burning within you? Does the Spirit not already move you with compassion and empathy, and the desire to do right?

Blessed are you.

You've already got one foot in the Kingdom, you are already welcomed into God's holy tent. Rejoice and be glad, for yours is the Kingdom of God!