

# Loving Mercy

## Living Upright in an Upside Down World (part 3)

*Summary:* Acting with and celebrating mercy, constant love, kindness and faithfulness is expected by God because it opens us up to the free, full and forever life, and prepares others for placing their faith in Jesus ... and because it is simply the right thing to do in an upside down world!

*Scripture:* Micah 6:6–8; James 2:1–19<sup>1</sup>

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### The Best Parties

Can you remember the best party you ever attended? Of course you can!

Where was it held? Was it the food, the music, or the company that stands out most to you? Probably an amalgam of all of these make up the fondness of your memory.

Let me guess: a pleasant wave of nostalgia flows over you whenever you go by the place the party was held, or see the foods served at the party on supermarket shelves, or catch a few notes from a song you danced to at that party. And you wonder to yourself, “I wish we could have a party like that again”.

Pleasant experiences remain in our memory for a long time and are associated with places, as much as with people, food and music.

How would you feel if that place was closed down? or that food discontinued? or that music fades into obscurity? or that host moves interstate? You would likely feel a twinge of regret because that experience will never be lived again. It will be forever out of reach.

American pastor and author Erwin McManus insists local churches should hold the best parties in their neighbourhood. And I agree 100%! Our church **SHOULD** hold the best parties in Narellan and the surrounding suburbs because such events provide a glimpse into the free, full and forever-party that is the Kingdom of God. They are an easy demonstration of our faith as it is meant to be lived and will be lived into eternity.

Equally important, holding the best parties in the neighbourhood is also a way for the Church to seek the common good. No one would deny parties and fellowship are good for the soul! What is less obvious is how they encourage others to hold their own parties. Parties promote social cohesion, thus turning a disparate neighbourhood into a community.

Holding a party, therefore, is a tool for seeking the common good and promoting mercy!

A corollary question is asked by Australian theologian Michael Frost: if your church should close its doors would anyone in the neighbourhood notice? Would they yearn nostalgically for the parties we used to hold, for the enthusiasm of our fellowship and worship gatherings, for the services we provided to the people of the neighbourhood, for the way our members and friends contributed to the well-being of the neighbourhood?

If the Church does not hold parties, then what kind of interactions between neighbours will be encouraged? All of the Christmas promotions already invading our public spaces are encouraging consumption and spending, rather than the real meaning of Christmas. How

will our neighbours know and experience the hope, love, peace and joy of Christmas if the only messages they receive result in the anxiety and loneliness of Christmas?

The story of God in the Bible describes how his people are exiles in a foreign land, living upright in an upside down world. As his people, the friends of Jesus are to seek the common good by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God in whatever circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is expected by God because it opens his people up to the free, full and forever life, AND it prepares others for placing their faith in Jesus ... AND because it is simply the right thing to do in an upside down world!

## Micah 6:6-8

Our current sermon series, *Living Upright in an Upside Down World*, first had us consider what was meant when God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and told the exiles to, “pursue the well-being of the city”<sup>2</sup> —in other words, to seek the common good. It is hard to do such when one feels as if an exile in a land not one’s own.

For wisdom on how to do so, let us turn to our Bible readings.

Our reading from *The Book of Micah* comes after the prophet described all that God had done for the people of Judah (and Israel). Naturally the people then asked what God expects in return —it was a covenant relationship, after all.

What should I bring before the LORD when I come to bow before God on high? Should I come before him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? Would the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousand streams of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my transgression, the offspring of my body for my own sin? (Micah 6:6–7)

In verses 6–7, we see how the people naturally presumed God expected worship and sacrifice from them;<sup>3</sup> however, they clearly did not know their god because they asked whether he would require child sacrifice of them. This is quite odd since they had the example of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac<sup>4</sup> and repeated confirmation from God that he detested the practice among the nations.<sup>5</sup>

Had their sin so corrupted their covenant with the Lord that their spirituality devolved into a *transactional relationship*, even to the point of offering the death of their own children as a sacrifice? A transactional relationship amounts to —God would do for them if they did for God or they would do for God if he did for them. Is that really how they thought the Almighty interacted with them?

Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the LORD requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

The answer the Lord provided changed the question.

Throughout their history, the Lord had made it clear he is more interested in the way his people live their everyday lives, having good moral qualities. He is not so concerned with their religious practices, even to the point of “hating” their superficial efforts of piety IF their lives are not dedicated to justice and righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

These verses, then, are a summary of the Law and the Prophets akin to Jesus’ summary of the Great Commandments as loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Basically,

everything we need to know about how to live upright in an upside down world is contained in this summary.

Last week, Kym explored what it means to “act justly”. Franz will explore “walk humbly with God” next week, and I will now treat the second clause, “love faithfulness”.

In the Christian Standard Bible translation, the second clause is “love faithfulness”. According to commentators,

“Faithfulness” translates a Hebrew word (*hesed*) that is very common in the Bible, but its meaning can hardly be conveyed by any single English word. It has to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness. It can be used to describe the key element in relationships, whether in marriage or between human friends or between God and humanity. It is not enough to maintain covenant faithfulness (whether on the human level or between humans and God) out of duty or fear of punishment.<sup>8</sup>

Faithfulness, then, is a positive attribute that holds any and all relationships together.

Other English translations translate this word as “mercy” or “kindness” or “to show constant love”. I prefer the translation, “love mercy”, so that is how I will refer to this clause from here on.

Despite the question about what the Lord requires of his people, the answer the Lord gives through the prophet completely ignores the sacrificial system. This verse is a high point of the Bible, for it expresses God’s will in moral terms rather than ceremonial. Our outward religion must reflect an inner moral relationship with God. An intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. If we are merely ‘going through the motions’ of ritual observance, our efforts are useless and we really do not have a relationship with our God; yet, how easily we fall into this trap!

While the context behind the question<sup>9</sup> was the failure of the people to keep their covenantal obligations, the constant love/faithfulness/kindness/mercy indicated here is both to God and to our neighbours. While acting justly and walking humbly are more direct clauses, this second clause demonstrates the necessary link between them—in other words, how can we say we love God if we don’t love our neighbour and vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

These key verses from Micah are about lifestyle, one’s total outlook on life, and one’s ethical values. They reject the simplistic notion there is one thing anyone need do to make things right with God, ritually or otherwise, that all he is interested in is his people keeping him happy with sacrifices and, after that, they can do as they please.

No, to love mercy is to be merciful, faithful, kind and loving toward one’s neighbour AND toward our Creator. This clause is about what God expects of his people in our relationship with him and in our relationships with others. Our Creator wants humans to love being loving toward each other. This is his will for us and always has been!

## James 2:1-19

Our reading from **The Epistle of James** expresses Micah’s prophecy another way.

For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, if you look with favor on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor person, “Stand over there,” or “Sit

here on the floor by my footstool,” haven’t you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:2–4)

This brother of Jesus became an early Church leader and with this letter instructed the friends of Jesus to not show favouritism in their faith community, for this is to become “a judge with evil thoughts”.<sup>11</sup> To show favouritism toward one person is to judge others as less than the one you favour, and that is evil, by the Lord’s reckoning.

Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, **Love your neighbour as yourself**, you are doing well. (James 2:8)

Instead, following Jesus’ command to love your neighbour as yourself is to “do well”<sup>12</sup> —this is a clear echoing of Micah.

James continued by explaining how keeping the Law is not enough, nor is believing all the correct things.<sup>13</sup>

If, however, you show favouritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all. (James 2:9–10)

One can keep all the commands of God but to not love our neighbour is as if to break all the commands of God.<sup>14</sup> That is how important loving mercy is for the friends of Jesus, it is equal with acting justly and walking humbly with our God.

Speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom. (James 2:12)

Yet, we are to show mercy because we are free, not because we are following a command.<sup>15</sup> There will no mercy for those who do not show mercy.<sup>16</sup>

Showing favouritism in our community is just one example of how not to love mercy. An even more egregious example is, dare I say, how our Australian culture values the ‘fair go for all’ with ‘lip service’ yet does not practice it at all.

Favouritism abounds. Who you know is much more important than what you know. That is our upside down world!

The friends of Jesus are to live upright in this upside down world. To not show favouritism to anyone, for any reason, is easy advice. The history of the Church, though, took this clause even further, to its credit.

## Examples of Loving Mercy

### The Early Church During the Plagues

According to sociologist Rodney Stark,

In the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security.

Foremost was the Christian duty to alleviate want and suffering.<sup>17</sup>

This Christian commitment to love mercy was in stark contrast to the “pagan world, and especially among the philosophers, [where] mercy was regarded as a character defect and pity as a pathological emotion because mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it is contrary to justice” (emphasis original).

In the year 165, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. During its 15 year terror, whatever the disease, a quarter to a third of population probably died from it.

Then, a century later, another great plague struck. Family, friends and neighbours died horribly for no one knew how to treat the stricken.

During the first plague, the famous physician Galen actually fled Rom for his country estate, where he stayed until the danger passed. This was not the exception but the norm, as the elite and those who could afford to, just abandoned their kith and kin to avoid becoming diseased themselves. They at least understood the disease was contagious.

Where neither pagan religion nor Greco-Roman philosophy had any useful answers for the victims, Christians claimed to have answers and took appropriate action. Christians met the obligation to care for the sick rather than desert them, and thereby saved an enormous number of lives.

Toward the end of the second plague, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote a pastoral letter to his members commending those who had nursed the sick:

Most of our brothers showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.<sup>18</sup>

Besides their prayers, Christians cared for one another and their neighbours with food, water, cleansing and company. According to historian William H. McNeill, even

quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably.<sup>19</sup>

According to Stark, “it is entirely plausible that Christian nursing would have reduced mortality by as much as two-thirds!”

The early Church encouraged and equipped Christians to love mercy beyond their own community and to do so at great risk to themselves. Some died, but some lived, and far more lived than would have if the Church did not respond in those times of great need. Their acts of justice and mercy did not go unnoticed. It lent undoubtable credibility to Christian “miracle working”.

## **The Church and Civil Rights in America**

A more recent example is the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

According to the Stanford Freedom Project, many ignore the significance of Christianity to the Civil Rights Movement and the incredible role the Bible played in the movement, not to mention the thought and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>20</sup>

From the publication of *The Declaration of Independence* and the ratification of *The Constitution*, political freedom in the US was denied to Black men and women. The unjust remnants of slavery ran rampant. The nation supported the enduring problem of racial injustice through segregation, discrimination, poverty and domestic exile.

By the 1950s, Black Americans claimed freedom for themselves by organising and engaging with the government.

The Black Church provided much of the rationale and motivation for the liberation activities. Countless Black preachers claimed that the Bible, especially the Gospels, called Christians to work for the betterment of African Americans. They preached that true Christianity demanded attention to and effort toward the liberation of oppressed peoples and the recognition of our innate equality in God's eyes, as beings created in his image. Martin Luther King Jr. even proclaimed that

Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spirituality moribund religion.<sup>21</sup>

Church members were convicted to become activists not in spite of their religion but because of it.

Though King was convinced of nonviolence by the philosophy and accomplishments of Mahatma Gandhi in India, this can really be traced back to the New Testament. *The Gospel of Matthew* recounts Jesus teaching this very philosophy: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."<sup>22</sup>

King saw this connection between the biblical ethic and Gandhi's philosophy,

Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love, for Gandhi, was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking.<sup>23</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr, Black churches and individual Black persons in the US rose above their struggle for freedom and civil rights because the Bible told them it should be so! They faced the taunts, the slaps, the dogs and the water cannons, and did not respond in kind. They faced violence with nonviolence because they believed the Holy Spirit could work through them to change hearts and minds, not just in individual White Americans but in the social and political systems of their country.

Like the early Church that showed mercy in tending to their sick neighbours, the Civil Rights Movement showed mercy by not retaliating, so as to demonstrate a better way for White and Black Americans to be in relationship with each other and with their God.

## Conclusion

Acting with and celebrating mercy, constant love, kindness or faithfulness —call it what you want— this is expected of us by God because it opens us up to the free, full and forever life, AND it prepares our neighbours for placing their faith in Jesus AND encourages the social and economic and political systems of our culture to be more equitable.

You may think there is nothing you can do, you are too small, too insignificant to make a difference. Be that as it may, even random kindness and senseless acts of beauty change hearts!

God wants us to follow the example of Jesus. So take your relationships, and how you interact with others, seriously. Show mercy, loyalty, kindness and faithfulness for your part, as if to the Lord. Following the Law of Reciprocity, the other person will be more inclined to respond with kindness, loyalty, mercy and faithfulness.

The same goes for the systems of our world. Interacting with the social, justice and political systems with kindness and mercy is significantly harder, but we can use our resources, positions and influence to steer the systems of our culture toward equity and fair. Then Australia just might become the egalitarian society it purports to be. It starts with us!

Live upright in an upside down world and do not count the cost to yourself ... because it is simply the right thing to do and will encourage others to do the same!

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Jeremiah 29.
- 3 These verses sound very much like an entrance liturgy, similar to Psalms 15 and 24.
- 4 Genesis 22.
- 5 See Deut 12:31; 18:10; Jer 19:5; Ezek 16:20.
- 6 Am 5:21-24.
- 7 Mt 22:36-40.
- 8 Daniel J. Simundson, "The Book of Micah," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004), 580.
- 9 Mic 6:3-5.
- 10 Mt 22:36-40.
- 11 Jam 2:2-4.
- 12 Jam 2:8.
- 13 Jam 2:19.
- 14 Jam 2:9-10.
- 15 Jam 2:12.
- 16 Jam 2:13.
- 17 Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York, NY, USA: HarperCollins, 2011), pg 112.
- 18 Dionysius, *Festival Letters*, in Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 7.22.
- 19 William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY, USA: Doubleday, 1976), pg 108.
- 20 Measha Ferguson-Smith, "A Christian Movement: Civil Rights in America", *The Stanford Freedom Project*, <https://replug.link/dcf7abe0> (accessed 9-Nov-2022).
- 21 Martin Luther King Jr, "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence", 1-Sept-1958, *Stanford University*, <https://replug.link/59243c40> (accessed 10-Nov-2022).
- 22 Mt 5:38-39.
- 23 Martin Luther King Jr, *ibid*.