



HOME

LESSNESS

WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES

A 5-DAY
DEVOTIONAL
WHEN FACING
HOMELESSNESS

commongood

WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES

A 5-DAY DEVOTIONAL WHEN
FACING HOMELESSNESS

In Cape Town, we are all faced with homelessness, even if we ourselves are not sleeping rough. We may face it from the comfort of our home when someone rings the doorbell asking for food, or at the traffic lights or taxi rank when someone asks us for shelter money. We face it when we see people sleeping in doorways, under bridges or in makeshift shelters. Whilst it is heart wrenching to hear people's stories of homelessness and see people living without a home, we may well struggle to know what to do and need to ask the Lord: "How do you want me to respond to people who are homeless and ask me for help?" Micah 6:1-8 can guide us in our response.



Common Good, 2018

© 2018 by Common Good.
What the Lord requires. A 5-day devotional when facing homelessness

This work is made available and licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Day 1 – Knowing our identity

Recently I was in Stellenbosch, sitting on a bench finishing off my lunch-time sandwich when a thin young man carrying a chubby toddler approached me. He smiled shyly and asked if he could do a break-dance for me, in return for some food money for him, his son, and his wife - she was sitting a little way off with some bags in a baby's pushchair. I raised my hand in a little wave of acknowledgement, and she smiled back at me. "Oh Lord" I prayed a quick silent prayer "what should I do?"

Read: Micah 6:1-5

Explore: This is a heart-wrenching passage of scripture. In it, the prophet Micah gives expression to God's anger and disappointment with his people, the nation of Israel. Using the language of a legal dispute (accusation, case, charge) Micah appeals to nature to bear witness to God's complaint. Through the prophet, God reminds his people of his goodness towards them, how he redeemed them, gave them good leaders and protected them. He reminds them who they really are and the benefits they have received from him, something they seemed to have forgotten. Quite possibly, they felt secure and complacent in the knowledge that they were the chosen people of God.

As a Christ-follower, when someone asks me for help and I must decide how to respond, it should never be in a void or out of my own thinking or emotions in the moment (ref Eph 4:14; Prov 18:2). My response must be formed within the reality of my identity - that I am the witness, in that moment, for the Lord Jesus (ref Acts 1:8; Math 5:16). I am part of the people of God, blessed to be a blessing (ref Gen 12:2). And I have become such not through anything I could ever do but through his redemption and leadership and grace (ref Eph 2:8). This applies to me as the person being asked for help.

At the same time, the person asking me for help may well be my Christian brother or sister, a fellow believer living in difficult circumstances. The bible is full of verses about helping our brothers and sisters in Christ (ref Rom 15:1-3; Gal 6:10; John 15:12). And whatever their relationship to Jesus Christ, I can know that this person was created to bear the image of God (Gen 1:27) and Jesus desires a full and abundant life for him or her (John 10:10).

Pray: Lord, it is so easy to forget my real identity, especially when I am busy and life is going well for me, when I have adequate provision and protection. Equally, it is so easy for me to forget the identity of the person asking me for help. We stand before you on level ground. We are both created in your image and yet disfigured by sin. Sinners for whom you died and whom you seek to restore as your image bearers, by grace and through your loving kindness. I know, Lord, that a person asking me for help is someone you know and love, who is of inestimable worth to you. Help me to live actively in this knowledge.

Day 2 –What the Lord does not want

Faced with this young man and his chubby child, my first thought was to give him a few rand, to “get rid of him” and to not have to watch him perform a break-dance, there on the pavement, next to the university and beneath the leafy avenue of trees. I wanted to avoid a spectacle and for this interaction to be over as quickly as possible. I was keen to solve my immediate “problem” with my own resources, to give that which would not really cost me anything, and to move on with my own agenda.

Text: Micah 6:6-7

Explore: In response to God's complaint about his people, the prophet Micah asks what it is that he should offer for his sin. He suggests a number of things, starting with something relatively small - a burnt offering of a few young calves and steadily increases the offering – a thousand rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, his own firstborn child...

I know at times I fall into the trap of thinking that God wants me to give materially or adhere to certain religious conventions in order to find favour with him and to receive his blessings. I don't think this consciously, and feel ashamed to admit it. But when I examine my thoughts and actions, I see this lie - that the goodness and acceptance of the Lord comes in response to something that I do - at work in my life.

There are many times in the story of God's people in the Old Testament when we see people giving the Lord what he does not want. In Isaiah 58 God, speaking through Isaiah, rejects the people's religious acts (fasting) because of their economic exploitation of people (vs 3). We see this again, for example, in Amos 4 & 5.

The New Testament makes it quite clear that our actions and works follow on from our salvation, freely received, and in no way help us secure salvation or favour with God. Good works are the fruit of the completed work of salvation, and one of the reasons for which we are redeemed (ref Eph 2:8-10; Rom 11:6). As the writer Philip Yancey says: “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do that can make God love us less”.

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for thinking that I must 'give' you something that I see as mine in order to secure your favour. Forgive me for the times that I have given out of a sense of duty or superstition or religious observation to win greater favour and acceptance from you. Show me when I have given you what you do not want. Forgive me for doing this, and help me learn what it is you really want from me. Today, remind me that there is no amount of giving that can repay you for what you have done and continue to do for me.

Day 3 – Acting justly in the face of homelessness

Convicted in the moment about my desire to move on quickly from this young man, his wife and child and to get on with my own plans, the thought dropped into my mind... I wonder what his story is, why is he here? So I smiled and told him my name and asked him his. I told him I was a student at the university. I asked him where he was from and why he was trying to get money in this way. He said he and his wife and child had left their home in Ceres to try and find work. But things had not gone as hoped and now they were living "in the bush". He said there was a room they could rent in Khayamandi for R300 per month plus deposit, if he could just get the money together... I asked about shelters... he said "They don't take children and we want to stay together".

Text: Micah 6:8 "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly..."

Explore: Having said what the Lord does not require, Micah now asks the question "So then what does the Lord require of me?", a question he proceeds to answer. In the first place, he tells the people of God that the Lord requires them to act justly. This should have come as no surprise to his listeners. Throughout the Old Testament we see God identifying himself as a God of justice (e.g. Ps 89:40; Ps 27:28) and therefore his people, his image bearers, must also be people of justice. In addition, their God and our God is an equity (fairness) seeking God (Ps 75 & 96; Prov 2:8-10) rather than a distant and legalistic judge.

Acting justly often starts with hearing someone's story. Once we know what someone has been through, we are more likely to give a just judgement. It is the basic approach of any fair court case to allow someone to "tell their side of the story", to make known the extenuating circumstances for the actions that are being questioned. Justice calls us to act in a way that seeks equity and does not further abuse anyone. Our ability to act justly often arises from within the story of injustice that we hear and our righteous anger or discontent that flows from it.

Shane Claiborne, a Christian writer and social activist, says "The great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor, but when they do, poverty will come to an end."

Pray: Help me to know that my own story is also one of injustice, as one who benefited from injustice to others, rather than as one who has suffered from injustice. Let me see that I am connected in many ways to the story of joblessness, homelessness and inequality for some and excess for others. Help me to hear with your ears the stories of others and the injustice they and their families have suffered and give me your heart for love-based equity.

Day 4 – Loving mercy in the face of homelessness

Knowing this young man's story - hearing his desire to keep his family together and to earn a living - my heart softened. I felt an uprising of compassion in the face of this family's situation. It seemed that there really was no easy way forward for them in the absence of getting work, finding accommodation and starting to move out of poverty. And this I knew was not easy with an unemployment rate in the city of about 28%. There was rain forecast for later in the day. Where would they go? How would the little one stay warm and dry? And their immediate need they said was for food...

Text: Micah 6:8 "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? ...To love mercy..."

Explore: The words "love mercy" come from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means "loving-kindness." Our God is a God who sees what is really going on and then seeks not only love-based equity, but also extends love-based kindness. That is, he extends mercy, and this most often through his people. Psalm 34:18 says: "The LORD is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" and "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory" (Mat 12:20).

People may require mercy because of systemic injustices or because of their own actions. Certainly actions have consequences, whether they are actions of our own or those of others. And yet through it all God seeks to extend hope, new beginnings, restoration "of the year eaten by the locust" (Joel 2:25). It is not enough to talk about what is wrong with the world and to have good theories about what will make the world a better place, what might solve the problem of homelessness if "they" just did this or that. Whilst seeking sustainable solutions within the complexity that is homelessness, we are also, like our God, to love mercy for those in difficult circumstances. 1 John 3:18 reminds us: "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." And in James 2:14-17 we read: "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." It is in this way that we bring "pleasing sacrifices" (Heb 13:16) to our God who has shown us great mercy.

Pray: Lord, save me from a hard and cold heart. Save me from growing weary of doing good. Let me know the great privilege I have of being your hands, Jesus, in this time and place and with the people you lead me to help. Let me know that as I am doing this, it is as if I were doing it for you. Let me see my acts of mercy as love acts offered to you.

Day 5 – Walking humbly in the face of homelessness

I knew now that I had to do something... but what? A thought dropped into my mind... tell him you are a Christ follower, ask if you can pray for him and his family. So this is what I did. His face lit up – “I am a Christian too,” he said. “I will pray for you also. What can I pray for you?” I asked him to pray for the academic paper I was struggling to write... So we prayed very briefly for each other. Then I needed to go, I wanted to move on from the intensity of this pavement interaction. I did give him some money. Not a lot. Just enough for a meal for him and his family. As we walked off in different directions, me to the library and him to the corner cafe., I felt... humbled, but very much with God in that moment.

Text: Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? ... To walk humbly with your God.”

Explore: Humility holds the key to both acting justly and loving mercy. As I recognize how much God has shown mercy to me, humility empowers me to act justly toward others. Apart from God's grace, I have nothing. I love offering mercy because I realize how much I need it! In humility, I remember that I am on level ground with the person asking me for help.

It can be really difficult, amidst so many conflicting voices, to know what we should do and not do when asked for help. There are no ready answers that can be easily and consistently applied in all circumstances. Each case must be heard and weighed before the Lord.

The power to walk humbly with God, to love mercy, and to act justly comes from the Holy Spirit — God Himself. God invites us, by his power, to join him in his work, his mission. What an awesome privilege God gives us when he calls us to demonstrate to a confused world what acting justly and loving mercy really looks like.

God does not offer us easy answers in the face of pain and suffering. He offers us himself, inviting us to walk in bold humility with him. Not for our own gain or to satisfy some religious need, but in order that we might act justly and really love mercy. Our God is a God who sees and cares. We are told that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without him knowing about it (Mat 10:29). In Psalm 34:18 we read: “The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit”.

Pray: Lord, save me from my own bright ideas and impulsive actions or inactivity in the face of injustice. Teach me that acting justly and loving mercy is only possible from a place of humility, with you, and in the steady regularity of a walk. Thank you God for my discomfort, for my lack of easy answers. Thank you that I can follow you on your mission, birthed in love and leading to reconciliation with you and with others.

Postscript

On reflection, I know I am richer for my interaction with that young man, my brother in Christ. I also have more knowledge and understanding of the injustices that led him and his family onto the streets, and their struggles as they seek to make a home somewhere and to be a family. As I write this devotional, and remember the young family whose path I was fortunate to cross, I pray that Psalm 16 will be true for them:

Save me, O God, because I have come to you for refuge. I said to him, "You are my Lord; I have no other help but yours." I want the company of the godly men and women in the land; they are the true nobility. Those choosing other gods shall all be filled with sorrow; I will not offer the sacrifices they do or even speak the names of their gods.

The Lord himself is my inheritance, my prize. He is my food and drink, my highest joy! He guards all that is mine. He sees that I am given pleasant brooks and meadows as my share! What a wonderful inheritance! I will bless the Lord who counsels me; he gives me wisdom in the night. He tells me what to do. I am always thinking of the Lord; and because he is so near, I never need to stumble or fall.

Heart, body, and soul are filled with joy. For you will not leave me among the dead; you will not allow your beloved one to rot in the grave. You have let me experience the joys of life and the exquisite pleasures of your own eternal presence.

commongood

www.commongood.org.za