

A Bible verse on a stick

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A number of years ago, we had a ministry fair at the start of our program year (sometimes called Rally Day), where all of the groups set up booths or tables, advertising their specialties. The prayer shawl ministry had shawls; the quilters had sample quilts; the Sunday School had registration tables; the Adult Choir had a tape of their music; the book club showed some of the titles we had read and a free bookmark showing some of the upcoming books. The social justice group had what I thought was a particularly clever idea: free "Bible Verses on a Stick" to take home. Our local state fair advertises nearly everything on-a-stick, so why not Bible verses?

The verse they chose? Micah 6:8, of course. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

It is the kind of verse you might want on a plaque, or a stick, especially if you were a peace-and-justice-loving type. It is easy to understand. It is easy to remember. It could be the kind of verse that might animate and inspire your imagination for your whole life.

Do justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly.

Seems simple, doesn't it? How can you argue with a verse like this?

I will confess that I have loved this verse, but not often preached on it. I mean (I thought), what can you say? Do justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly. Just do it.

A friend of mine, who pays more attention to verbs than I do, apparently, once remarked that though this verse instructs us to "Do justice and Love Kindness," we more often have it backwards. We love justice, but do random acts of kindness, which is much easier than creating justice. It is much easier to go to the soup kitchen and ladle soup than it is to address the causes of hunger. It is much easier to pay for the hamburger of the person who is coming after you in the drive through or chip in a few dollars when the person in front of you at the grocery store can't quite pay her bill.

Not that there is anything wrong with that.

But maybe we pay too much attention to the different verbs. Maybe we are meant to both do and love both justice and kindness. There are other questions to ask about this Bible verse, which is so easy to put on a stick, so easy to understand and remember, but perhaps not so easy in other ways.

When I read the seven verses before the famous one, I notice that there is a conversation going on, a conversation between God and Israel. Well, actually it is more like an argument, with God sounding a little like a jilted lover. After all God has done for Israel, what has happened to their relationship? Israel seems to be tired of God, tired of being the chosen people. They are not paying attention. They have put their fingers in their ears and they are saying, "la la la." What happened? God wants to know.

When the people reply, they seem to have heard God's plea. They are asking, "What do you want from us?" And they have some examples: exaggerated, over the top.

"What do you want from us, God?" do you want thousands of rams? Rivers of oil? My first born-child? Would that satisfy you?

And it seems like such an odd reply, really. Not just because of the exaggeration, but because of the assumptions: what would God want with thousands of rams? How would all of that oil satisfy God? Can God be satisfied? It sounds like they are trying to get God off their backs, buy God off with ridiculous sums.

But here's another thing I wondered, almost wistfully: do we even ask that question any more?

"What do you want from us, God?" I wonder. Have we stopped asking God, "What do you want?" I have been thinking about that. Because if we ask, here is what God wants, something so simple, but not easy. You can understand it. You can memorize it. You can put it on a stick.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

So simple. But if you think it is easy, you have never tried it. One thing is: it's never done. You can't be kind once, and then you have met your kindness obligation. You can't shovel one person's driveway and then you can check mercy off your list. And doing justice: well, all you can do is make progress, fail, step back, go forward, fail

again. Sometimes you think you have done justice, and later you realize that you just made things a worse mess. But you get up and try again. I suppose that is where humility comes in.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.

"What do you want from us God?"

And the true and terrifying answer, the true and only answer, the true and life-giving answer is this: I don't want anything from you. I just want you.

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