

What does it mean to be human?

Passages: 1 Samuel 15:1-23
Mark 12:28-34

Let's pray.

What does it mean to be human? As I understand it, human beings were created by God to reflect the three basic human qualities outlined in Micah 6:8—“**What does the Lord require of you (what does God expect of all human beings), but to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.**” In this one verse are (what I believe to be) the three key *relational* qualities that make you fully human:

Acting justly- that means knowing the difference between good and evil. Shunning /opposing evil and doing what is good.

Loving mercy- that means having compassion for the lost, broken, hurting; standing up for the weak, poor, disempowered; offering your own resources to help others.

Walking Humbly with God- that means recognising that all *you have* and all *you are* is from God.

These 3 qualities must have surely flourished in Adam and Eve as they lived inside the Garden of Eden—their humility before God resulted in perfect justice and mercy towards each other.

Of course, once Adam and Eve lost their humility before God (when they began to challenge God's goodness), they soon began to lose those other two qualities: justice and mercy. In other words, they became **less than human**! Indeed, I would suggest that the entire OT can be read as a sad indictment of how far the human race has fallen from those three *ideal human* qualities!

Having said that, let me quickly point out that **the OT does offer a glimmer of hope** that a *true humanity* will, once again, be raised up on this earth! In fact, we find this glimmer of hope in the book of 1 Samuel. You see, I'm convinced that this is what **the king of Israel** was meant to be—he **was called and equipped by God to be a model of true humanity**.

Empowered by God's Spirit, the King of Israel was meant to have (and to display in every aspect of his life) these three qualities of **humility, justice and mercy**.

If you remember the time before there was a king in Israel, the Bible says that “**everyone did what was right in their own eyes**”—it was a free-for-

all! Because very few people lived *humbly before God*, it meant that very few really knew what true *justice* and *mercy* were all about! And so, when we come to the book of 1 Samuel and read how God gave in to Israel's demands for a king, we are suddenly faced with an interesting proposition: **God is going to use Israel's demand for a king as a way of raising up a man...a man so endowed with the Spirit of God that he will live as *the ideal image of humanity!***

Moreover, this king will be such a powerful force in Israel that his humanity will gradually rub off on the people ...spreading out like a good infection... a vaccination against evil...until the entire nation is restored in this true humanity. This, I believe, is the central reason why God agreed to give Israel a king! By modelling these qualities of *humility, justice and mercy*, everyone who was **connected** to this king would gradually become more human...more alive-- restored to the image of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden! (This follows the Hebrew idea of group collectivity; where the 'head' ultimately determines what the 'body' will be like!)

That's why I tried so hard last week to show you *the good side of King Saul!* Despite all the negative commentaries about him, the fact is that he displayed these three qualities.

Look, for example, at the end of **1 Samuel 10**. As you may remember from last week, Saul was dramatically anointed by the Spirit of God and, as a result, he began to prophesy. Soon after this, Samuel stands before all of Israel and publicly declares Saul as king. But look now at the last two verses of chapter 10.

26 Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched.²⁷ But some scoundrels said, "How can this fellow save us?" They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.

Here, we see Saul's genuine humility before God. He keeps silent... even when other, more arrogant men, would speak up and make a fuss!

Now, turn to **chapter 11!** When the Ammonites besiege the city of Jabesh Gilead and attempt to bring disgrace on Israel by gouging out the right eye of every man in town, all the men of Israel can do is weep and carry on. It is Saul alone who acts with a divine sense of justice: Listen to **verses 6 and 11.**

6 When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger...¹¹ The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

Now, you may not like the gruesome fact that Saul led in this slaughter of human life-- neither do I! And you may have theological objections to war, as I do! But one thing that you cannot deny is that Saul was led *by the Spirit of God* and by that Spirit he was transformed into a warrior...a champion for justice! His actions liberated the town of Jabesh Gilead, setting the humiliated prisoners free! Regardless of our 21st century sensibilities to war and slaughter, Saul is portrayed here in a very positive light-- as a true human being, acting according to a divine sense of justice in the power of God's Spirit! (Indeed, the only way we can accept Saul's genocidal action is to see it in the light of a God who will ultimately eradicate all evil from this planet and return it to the pristine state of pre-Fall humanity. Saul was acting as a divine instrument of this plan, under the inspiration of God's Spirit.)

But there's also a compassionate aspect of Saul's character that we see here. Look at vv 12-13.

12 The people then said to Samuel, "Who was it that asked, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death."¹³ But Saul said, "No one will be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel."

Saul could have got even with these men. He certainly had the authority to put them to death...but he didn't. He chose mercy. And so, before all of Israel, this new king displays the qualities of a truly *human* being—he walks humbly with God and, therefore, acts justly and loves mercy! As a result of this, the entire nation of Israel becomes more *humane*. Just look at how chapter 11 ends:

14 Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there

renew the kingship.”¹⁵ So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.”

Do you see? All of Israel is united around the throne of God in celebration. Everyone who is connected to this humble, just and merciful king has been touched and transformed by the glory of his true humanity...a glory that flows from God.

And this is not a one-off situation either! This same three-fold pattern of *humility, justice and mercy* is repeated in **chapter 14**. Take a look! The story starts out with Saul’s son, Jonathan, finding a way into the Philistine outpost at Michmash and bringing the entire Philistine army into panic and disarray. Not only does Jonathan, like his father, *walk humbly before his God*, but he sees himself (with his father) as an agent of God’s justice.

Soon, Saul and his army join in and totally destroy the enemy.

But the story doesn’t end there. In the heat of the battle, Saul makes his troops pledge an oath to him that no one will eat anything until the battle is completely won, saying, **“Cursed be any man who eats food today!”** It is a rash thing to say, especially as Saul’s son, Jonathan, is unaware of Saul’s curse and ends up eating some wild honey in order to regain his strength. Later on, many of the troops are so hungry that they eat meat with the blood still in it, a serious offense in Israel! In other words, Saul has made a mess of things by uttering this curse over his men and his own son!

And here’s where Saul’s mercy shines through. When a man points out to Saul that the men of Israel are eating blood and thus sinning against the Lord, Saul quickly builds an altar on which the meat may first be sacrificed and the blood drained out. Saul has mercy on his men and serves them, thus getting them out of the trouble that his hasty words have caused. But that’s not all—when he finds out that Jonathan has contravened his command not to eat anything and thus deserves death, Saul calls the curse down on his own head—**“may God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan.”** Some see this as a cruel thing to say to your own son, but if you think about it, Saul is actually showing mercy to Jonathan by pronouncing the only way of resolution-- *He calls the curse upon himself* and allows the soldiers to rescue Jonathan. The end of verse 45 says, **“So**

the men rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death.” That’s mercy! It’s because these three qualities (humility, justice and mercy) are present in the king that **Israel lives in peace**. They benefit from Saul’s humanity to such an extent that chapter 14 ends with this wonderful exultation of King Saul:

⁴⁷ After Saul had assumed rule over Israel, he fought against their enemies on every side: Moab, the Ammonites, Edom, the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines. Wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment on them. ⁴⁸ He fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them.”

And yet... the sad truth of these two chapters (11 and 14) is that Saul’s life as a model of *true humanity* was only seen in sporadic bursts! These qualities of *humility, justice and mercy* so often were exchanged for *arrogance, injustice and a lack of any compassion*. This is what we find in chapters, **13 and 15**.

In **chapter 13**, for example, Saul rallies the troops against the Philistines. It looks like a good start—Saul looks like he’s taking the lead in the area of justice. But look what happens next! When Samuel doesn’t show up to bless the troops by making sacrifice, Saul takes it into his own hands. He may even believe he is doing God a favour, so convinced of this that, when Samuel arrives moments later, Saul dares to blame him, saying, *“When I saw that you did not come,... I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.”* Why did Saul feel compelled? Could it be that this battle was more about his own pride than it was about God’s justice? And where was his compassion for his troops given that they were ‘quaking with fear’? It seems that both justice and mercy are crumbling under Saul’s pride!

The same tragic pattern is seen in **chapter 15**. In the opening verses, Samuel instructs Saul to fight against the Amalekites. When Saul accepts the challenge, it seems as if divine justice is forefront on Saul’s mind... except for this one small detail: Although we’re told that Saul’s army won a great victory that day, Samuel had explicitly instructed Saul to destroy everything that was in the possession of the Amalekites. In verse 9, however, we’re told: *“But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves”* ^[HYPERLINK] *“<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20sam>*

2015:9&version=NIV" \l "fen-NIV-7570a" \o "See footnote a" a] and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.”

Now, to some eyes, Saul’s actions here may not seem like such a big deal! After all, Saul had won the battle—divine justice had been meted out. Isn’t that what God wanted? Moreover, Saul was being merciful! Here was king Agag, spared! Here were the best sheep and cattle, spared...to become food for the hungry soldiers of Israel! But the truth is that the essential quality of **humility** was absent! Note, for example, how in verse 12 we are told that Saul proceeded to build a monument in his own honour! As a result of his humility before God being absent, the other two qualities of justice and mercy ended up being distorted; even misused. Saul thought that his way was the best way! He thought his style of justice and mercy was better than God’s! But the fact is that **only God can see the whole picture!** Only God knew the full story of why the Amalekites needed to be utterly destroyed. Only God, therefore, was able to objectively guide and motivate Saul’s acts of justice and mercy! In the end, Saul’s subjective sense of justice and mercy was totally out of touch with God’s purposes...and that’s basically because Saul had lost his humility – (he wasn’t walking humbly with his God).

In the course of four chapters, Saul is on a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs. At one point, he looks like the perfect man—humble before God, acting justly and loving mercy. But then his halo slips and he’s just like the rest of us...quenching the Spirit and doing whatever he subjectively thinks is best; often for personal gain and often with an attitude of pride, quickly blaming others for his mistakes.

This is clearly this reason why Saul was dismissed as Israel’s king. Clearly, it had nothing to do with one or two misdemeanours. Saul wasn’t simply guilty of a misguided action or a selfish sin. As Samuel says to him in verse 23- ***“You have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you as King over Israel.”*** In other words, Saul had failed to be what a king was meant to be—namely, God’s model of *humility, justice and mercy* for the nation; for the world! This is the reason why someone else had to be raised up in his place.

Of course, that “someone else” will be the shepherd boy, David. As we shall see next week, David is the model of *true humanity* for Israel. In his

humility before God, true justice and mercy will flow... and Israel will grow to be more human.

Nevertheless, the fact is that David too shall fail (although not to the same degree that Saul failed), meaning that **another King even greater than David** will eventually need to come to Israel... someone who will be so filled with the Holy Spirit that, consistently throughout His life, the whole world will see a true human being—a man in whom *humility, justice and mercy* will flow in abundant proportions.

It will be **this new king, Jesus**, who will wage a valiant war, not to annihilate peoples or nations (to the abhorrent destruction of human life; of women and children) but against (and for the annihilation of) the true enemy of all humanity, namely the devil! Jesus will turn the full force of His perfect justice to ultimately defeat the evil one by his cross and resurrection!

At the same time, this same king will have so much mercy on fallen humanity that he will call the curse of humanity's sin down upon his own head, even though he remains sinless. As the Scripture says, ***“Cursed is anyone who dies on a tree.”*** Of course, no other king before or after him will display the same degree of mercy and compassion as Jesus does—so merciful, in fact, that He will say to us all from the cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”*

Moreover, it will be in this King, Jesus Christ, that a whole new nation will be infected with the good virus of his perfect humanity, causing a future multitude of men and women to live in the ways of Micah 6:8—***“What does the Lord require of you (what does God expect of all human beings), but to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”***

What does it mean to be truly human? [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer) Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well in his letters from prison: **“To be conformed with the Incarnate One, that is to be truly human.”**

Let's pray.

